

In the Midnight Hour

Patti O'Shea

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everything a paranormal should be."

—**Sherrilyn Kenyon**

In the
**Midnight
Hour**

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tor paranormal romance

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IN THE MIDNIGHT HOUR

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For Lucienne Diver. Thank you for believing.

Thank you to Melissa Lynn Copeland, Theresa Monsey,
Marie Churchey (Jillian Beane), my mom and dad, and
especially Anna Genoese.

In the
**Midnight
Hour**

1

CHAPTER

VERNAL EQUINOX NEW MOON

Ryne received the assignment just past full dark. She muttered a curse as she yanked on her ankle boots, but it lacked heat. The timing sucked, but what else was new?

She shrugged into a jean jacket. The denim wasn't warm enough for March, but she couldn't risk being impeded by a heavy coat. Not when she never knew what she'd be facing till she was up close and personal with it. After drawing a few deep breaths to center herself, she chanted the spell to open a transit.

The gateway shimmered, but it was more mirror than window; she couldn't see what waited on the other side. She stepped through the portal, and with a wave of her fingers, closed it behind her.

Icy wind slapped at her and she jammed her hands in the pockets of her jacket as she studied her surroundings. Crap, a cemetery. That just figured. Why did the uninitiated always feel the need to conduct black magic rituals inside graveyards?

She sensed a presence immediately, but he was one of theirs and not who she hunted. Her focus shifted. The cemetery gates were closed, the wrought iron seeming vaguely threatening in the muted glow of the streetlights. Fog hung thickly in the air,

blocking her view inside the fenced grounds, but she couldn't tell if it was natural or magical. She hoped for natural.

Satisfied that there was nothing out here to concern her, she stepped from the darkness and toward the gate. Another figure separated itself from the shadows and met her.

Zane Conners was enough to get any woman's heart pumping faster. As she watched the wind tease his shoulder-length tawny hair, she tried to recall why she'd never accepted an invitation to go out with him. "Hey, Zane."

"Ryne. About time you got your ass here. You know, just because you're some damn troubleshooter doesn't mean your time is more important than mine."

Now she remembered. The bitterness. Most of the time he was a nice guy, but every now and then hostility seeped out. No man, no matter how attractive, was worth this bullshit. "I got the call less than five minutes ago. Don't bitch at me about tardiness, talk to the council."

"Sorry," Zane said gruffly. "It's been more than two hours since I sent the request." The roar of a jumbo jet taking off drowned out the final word, but she read his lips. She snuggled deeper into her jacket as she waited for the plane to pass.

"Tell me what you know," she said when it became quieter.

For a moment, it looked as if he were going to continue with the I'm-sorry speech, but he nodded and said, "Kid went in there ten minutes before the gates closed. He had a book with him, looked like one of the old ones, but it was hard to tell. It's been eerily still since then. He wasn't strong, but if he's calling up things that are, you might be in for a rough night."

"One of the perks of being a *damn troubleshooter*. Anything else?" she asked quickly, cutting off another apology.

"That's all I have."

She nodded, and with a silent incantation, walked through the barred gate as easily as if it were open. Within a few steps, she was engulfed by fog, making the night darker. Ryne paused and cast a quick spell to aid her vision. Another gust of sharp wind clawed at her as she spoke the final words. Why the hell couldn't he have picked the summer solstice for this?

Row after row of neat, white headstones lined the ground in military order and the precision allowed her to walk without worrying about falling over a grave marker. She skidded across a

patch of ice and bit back a curse after she caught her balance. The spring thaw made traversing the grounds dangerous enough.

A few more steps and she cleared the fog. That meant it was magical. Not a good sign. She couldn't hear the sound of planes from the airport any longer either, another indication it was conjured. It acted like a wall, cutting off the cemetery from the outside world. She kept moving, being more cautious now.

Only moments later, the first wisps of power reached her and she stopped to identify them. A shiver went through her that had nothing to do with the temperature. Yeah, the kid was messing with the dark forces. Some damned powerful ones, too.

She zeroed in on his location and reinforced her protection spells. This was going to be ugly—she knew it. With a quick entreaty for luck, she crept forward, carefully avoiding the places covered with crunchy ice. There wasn't much cover, but then if this thing was as strong as she suspected, there was no incantation, no physical object, that would hide her presence for long. Dread rose, but she pushed it aside. This was her job, what she'd trained for years to do. She'd handle it.

The kid stood beneath one of the few lights in the cemetery. He looked to be about seventeen, and he used the marble wall that encircled the flagpole like an altar. She noticed the black pillar candles first. They weren't lit, but it was evidence of dark magic. A book was open between the candles and the pages fluttered in the breeze. A glint caught her eye and she focused on the athame. Seeing a ritual blade in this situation was bad news. Ryne edged closer to hear what the boy was chanting.

It wasn't English.

It wasn't any language she'd heard spoken before.

Which meant only one thing—something was inside the kid. Whether or not the teenager was alive was anyone's guess; she wouldn't know until she forced whatever inhabited his body out into the open. Staying deep in the shadows of a nearby tree, she let her senses probe, trying to discover what she'd be facing.

She couldn't read a thing.

That made it tough to come up with a plan of action.

Ryne ran through what she knew and made a guess. The boy was a dormant and had probably always had an interest in the arcane. When he'd found the book, he'd started fooling around

with it—and he'd called forth something that wasn't playing. Something strong enough to compel the kid to this cemetery.

Whatever it was, it must be confined to the grounds. For now. No doubt the teen had been summoned to change the situation and it was up to her to prevent it from getting loose.

The conjecture, however, didn't give her any idea of how to handle the task. Lots of things that operated on the dark side would behave this way. The chanting stopped abruptly.

"I see our guest is here."

It was the boy's mouth moving, but it was evil speaking. The voice made her feel as if she'd fallen into a pit with rotting corpses, but she shook off the revulsion and concentrated on the situation. The kid, or rather whatever was in the kid, stared directly at her. So much for the element of surprise.

She didn't have time to brace herself before he attempted to force her to the altar. The push was strong, the energy fetid, and it gave her a feel for what she'd be facing. Whatever this was, it was old, experienced, and corrupt, but she didn't think it realized what she was. Not yet.

Ryne shifted, balancing her weight evenly, and prepared herself for another prod. It came immediately and was much more potent, but it didn't affect her. She smirked, trying to piss the thing off. The idea was to goad him to attack and hope he gave something away, since she still didn't know what was inside the boy.

Although she'd expected a probe, she thought it would come head-on. He surprised her by using a more roundabout path. She blocked it at once, but it was too late. Stupid, stupid mistake.

"Gineal." The word came out more breath than substance, but she heard it and would bet he'd had a run-in with another enforcer.

A rock flew at her, hurled with such velocity that she barely managed to leap clear. It showed her, though, that he had telekinetic ability and that he was drawing on outside power. She couldn't pinpoint the source, but she needed to cut it off.

She was at a distinct disadvantage. Because the thing was using the teen as a vessel, she was limited in how much force she could use. She didn't want to hurt the kid if he were still alive, but it meant there wasn't much she could do until the boy was freed. Sometimes it sucked to be the good guy.

Ryne blocked another missile—a large tree branch—and started searching for what he used to bolster his strength. To give herself time, she called on fire, encircling the boy's body in a prison of flame. She added a containment spell, but doubted it would stay in place. It would take a full-fledged binding ritual to hold him and there wasn't time for that.

The text. It emitted energy. That could be the outside source. Too bad she couldn't destroy it, but it had its own protective shield. Ryne checked, saw that the wall of fire continued to keep him captive, and started toward the altar.

She gasped when she was picked up and pitched backward. The landing knocked the wind from her, but Ryne immediately scrambled up. He'd bypassed her spells. She had to get the book.

Her second approach was more cautious, but every bit as quick. There was no time to waste. The field she'd thrown was weakening and he'd be free in moments.

It ended up being more like an instant.

Ryne hit the asphalt, narrowly avoiding an arc of flame. She scraped her palms, but the burning was a minor irritation. What pissed her off was that he'd used *her* fire. Rolling to her feet, she sent out her own burst. Not enough to harm the kid's body, but enough to demonstrate she wasn't defenseless.

"You are weak, Gineal," the creature said.

She wasn't going to exchange insults. It was nothing but an attempt to distract her. A creak of metal captured her attention and she saw one of the flagpoles sway. She diverted it, but it crashed down damn close. Crap. What the hell was she up against?

It took a lot of energy to maintain a possession. If she could reach that book, he'd have to leave the kid's body, then she could fight instead of dancing around, dodging the assault.

He started walking toward her, his gait unsteady. *Not used to having a body, are you?* That narrowed her list of suspects, but demons were fought differently than ghosts.

She felt him mentally pick her up. Despite the quick spell she muttered, she was unable to break his grip. He threw her again and her back slammed into a tree.

The buffer she'd thrust between her body and the trunk kept her from being incapacitated, but she'd hit hard enough to hurt.

It had been a hell of a long time since she'd faced anything this strong. She struggled to stand, wincing at the pain in her back.

And to think Zane was bitter because his powers hadn't reached the necessary level to be a troubleshooter.

Some people had all the luck.

She'd just regained her balance when he lifted her. Instead of fighting it, she used his energy to steer toward the makeshift altar. For a moment, she wasn't sure she'd be able to harness it, but then she changed course and landed lightly on her feet.

The entity roared and threw another rock. She held up a hand, directing it back at him. Then the barrage started. Ryne took a few hits, but she kept trying to reach the book. Once he had to use his own abilities, the fight would be easier.

When he noticed that his ammunition wasn't slowing her down, he growled and charged. That was his error. He stumbled over his own shoes and fell. While he thrashed around, trying to stand, she made a dash for the tome.

Her fingers closed around the leather-bound volume and she glanced over her shoulder. He'd regained his feet. It was natural to call on fire, but she found her access blocked. She didn't bother puzzling out why. Instead, she melted a patch of ice and ran the water under the teen's feet before freezing it again. As the creature slipped, flailing his arms to maintain balance, she brought up the wind and knocked him to the pavement.

Ryne didn't waste a second. Her heart pounding wildly, she quickly chanted the spell that would take the old text and put it into an alternate dimension. When the grimoire disappeared, she did another sweep and found out his power hadn't decreased. Not one iota. Damn, it hadn't been the book.

This time he tossed her with so much vehemence that she was unable to counter it. Her head missed the grave marker, but her shoulder hit it dead on. The impact knocked the stone askew and deadened her arm. Tears filled her eyes, but she blinked rapidly and took stock of her condition. She didn't think anything was broken, but it hurt like hell. Cradling her injured limb close to her body, she stood as quickly as the pain allowed.

He wasn't interested in her—not right now. The thing searched the area around the flagpole, unaware she'd sent the book to another realm, but it wouldn't take him long to realize

it wasn't there. Before he came after her again, she had to find his outside power source. If she didn't locate it, and neutralize it, she was going to die in this cemetery.

She might have to sacrifice the boy.

It went against everything she believed, but she couldn't let the entity kill her without fighting back. She preferred to end the possession by blocking access to the well, but her other option was to attack. If the boy's body was too damaged, the thing would abandon it, but this was her last resort.

She needed to find that damn pool he was drawing on. The tome had been the only visible thing that could be boosting the creature, so she let her senses scan for an unseen reservoir.

Something tried to make itself felt, but before she pinned it down, a yell echoed through the night. He'd accepted that the book was gone. With a gulp, she turned to deal with his wrath.

She tried to draw on fire again, but it remained obstructed. Delving deeper, she followed her connection to find out why. It only took a second to discover it was her opponent doing it. He was so strong, he was able to throw a dam between her and flame. Her stomach tightened and she had to run her palms over the front of her jeans to get rid of the clamminess. A quick check showed she'd lost water and air, too.

She used earth to upend the being as he raged toward her. He floundered on the ground again, giving her another opportunity to scan for his power source. Nothing. Not a damn thing.

If she were smart, she'd try a tactical retreat. But if she left, or if she failed, the monster would have time to finish the ritual to free himself. Surrounded by humans he could draw on for energy, he'd wreak untold havoc before anyone could stop him.

Wait a second. Maybe that was it.

Ryne grit her teeth as he raised her up. Earth was blocked now, too, so she focused on casting the spell to cushion her landing. The damn buffer didn't help a whole hell of a lot, though, when she slammed into a stone building. The back of her head connected sharply and her vision went white. A whimper escaped as she landed in a heap. Had to get up. Had to.

"Give me the book!"

The entity's demand barely penetrated the buzzing in her ears. She staggered to her feet, blinking to clear her mind. She had to remember something, ASAP.

Souls. That was it.

She should have guessed. Every soul, in body or not, had its own energy. Although she could barely see straight, she reached out and discovered she was right. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of souls were trapped in the cemetery. He'd prevented them from passing to the other side and sucked their power.

Her mind went blank as she tried to recall the proclamation to open a soul gate. Sweat born of pain trickled down her temple. Or maybe it was blood. Her vision swam and she shook her head to clear it. She curled her hands into fists as she watched him close the distance. Think, she exhorted, think!

Then the words came and she whispered them quickly, fiercely. It took a good deal of power to call forth the gate and the cemetery was large, so she'd need more than one. She placed the first on the far side of the graveyard, and though she felt energy drain out of her, she began the chant for a second. "And so it is," she closed with a squeak when he grabbed her.

She shoved at his shoulder with her uninjured arm, but although she was as tall as the teenager, he had the strength of an unworldly being and she took another flight. Frantically, she chanted. This time, she could only manage to throw a weak bulwark around herself. When she hit the wall around the flag-pole stomach first, her defense gave and she felt ribs crack.

Her breath left her. *Oh God, oh God, oh God, it hurts.* She gasped, trying to bring in oxygen. Troubleshooters don't cry, she told herself, blinking hard.

It was tempting to remain where she landed, but Ryne forced the pain aside, tried to anyway, and pushed herself upright. Troubleshooters didn't give up or give in.

None of the spirits had used the gates, she realized when she ran a quick scan. None of them. As long as they remained in the graveyard, she didn't have a chance. And if they didn't leave soon, it would be too late. She'd used most of her personal energy and he'd blocked her access to the elements. Even her thought about forfeiting the boy had become a moot point—she didn't have enough left in her to launch any kind of attack.

She almost sagged with relief when she felt the first soul slip through the portal.

"Give me the book!"

“No.” She didn’t know what it contained, but she’d ensure he never touched it again.

“It matters not,” he said almost conversationally. “I’ve the words memorized. You can do nothing to prevent my freedom.”

She didn’t doubt that, but she didn’t believe him when he said the text didn’t matter; he wanted it too badly. Instead of commenting, she pressed, hoping he’d make another mistake. “If that’s true,” she countered, wishing her voice sounded stronger, “then why haven’t you completed the ritual?”

He moved closer and she fought the urge to back away. Troubleshooters didn’t cower.

“Need a sacrifice. Female sacrifice.” The smile chilled her. “You’re chosen, Gineal.”

Now Ryne knew that the tome held the vilest of rites, the darkest of the dark. The Gineal had tried to secure all texts of this nature, whether written by their people or by others, but there had been so many, some were bound to have escaped the hunt.

His smile gave way to a puzzled expression and he cocked his head much like a dog would when it thought it heard something. She stretched her senses to discover what had his attention.

More souls trickled through the gates. She had to keep him diverted, had to allow time for the spirits to depart. Sweat ran down the column of her spine. She ignored it. Her most solid connection was closed, but she called energy from the universe and mentally pushed him back a step.

It worked. His focus centered on her once more.

She had nothing left inside her and the protection spells were long gone. Her body hit the tree full force. Only sheer determination fueled her now. Somehow her brain had become distanced from the pain and the numbness enabled her to continue to confront the creature. She just had to hang on long enough for the imprisoned souls to clear out.

He tossed her again and again, but she kept getting up. It wouldn’t be much longer. The souls were streaming through the gates now, leaving quickly. Her hair was damp with sweat and the dark tendrils hung in her face, but Ryne couldn’t lift her hand to push them aside. All she wanted was to lay down and sleep.

Soon, she told herself. The spirits needed a few more minutes, then she could rest.

Unfortunately, he figured out what was happening. Although she couldn't see much through her swollen eyes, she heard his roar of outrage, but it was too late for him to stop it.

She was leaning against the side of the stone building when he picked her up again. This time something felt different and her brain sluggishly kicked in to work out what.

He wasn't inside the kid any longer.

Too damn bad she couldn't take advantage of it.

There was still power, a lot of it, but if she were at full strength she could have taken him down. Now, of course, she was virtually helpless. She didn't know what she hit when he threw her this time, maybe another tree; it didn't matter.

Cold ground pressed against her cheek. She tried to focus on that to remain alert, but it didn't help. Ryne panted and thought about opening her eyes. It seemed like too much work. Then she heard chanting and knew she had to make the effort.

The kid lay prone on the asphalt, but she couldn't tell if he was alive. She fought to turn her head far enough to see the entity. He stood at the improvised altar and there was a transparency to him that made her decide he was a wraith.

Her eyes slid shut again. The blades of frozen grass poked at her lips, at her face, but that was the only thing she could feel. The rest of her was numb. She fought the need to drift off; she had to check a few more things.

The trapped spirits had crossed, none remained. Taking a shallow breath, she closed the soul gates. It was a house-keeping detail, but she didn't want to leave any loose ends.

A black void encroached, and she fought against it. She had things she needed to do tonight. There was no one else. Maybe she'd played this hand too close to the vest. Not even the council knew what she'd been working on for the last four years.

Another mistake.

Ryne felt herself vacate her body. It was odd. Though she hadn't been blessed with precognition, she'd always imagined that if she were to die in battle it would be when she faced Anise.

Anise. She couldn't leave yet.

Ryne noticed that she was floating above her procumbent form and fought harder against the pull. Even from her vantage point, she could see the blood, feel the extent of the injuries, but she wasn't ready to die. She slipped farther away from herself.

Not now. Please, not now.

Despite the plea, her view tunneled. Crap.

Ryne was shivering uncontrollably when she regained awareness; the shaking stabbed pain through every cell of her being. Her clothes were damp, probably from her body melting the ice and frost, and the clamminess added to her suffering.

It had felt better while she'd been dead.

No pain. No cold. No need to fight.

The entity continued to chant. He was louder now and more enthusiastic. She took that as a sign he was nearing the end of the ritual. Then he'd offer her as a sacrifice.

Like hell. She was taking him down.

As she lay there, splayed across the grass, it finally penetrated her lethargic mind that he hadn't completely blocked her connection to Earth. There was an opening. It was slight, but enough for small amounts of energy to seep into her. She wouldn't need much to open a tiny soul gate.

A one-phantom soul gate.

She was ridding this plane of his presence. No way would she leave him for another troubleshooter to take out. He was hers. If he hadn't been inside the kid, she'd have sent him through long before things had reached this point. She let the regret drift away. Nothing she could do about that now.

The process was slow, but she didn't try to hurry. Instead, she let the power pool inside her. Somehow, she'd be ready when the time came. She had to be. When she had enough stored, when she heard the creature's rite start to crescendo, she recited the words for the gate. She held them in her mind, but didn't close the spell. Wouldn't until he was right in front of her.

He came for her before she was ready, but the choice wasn't hers. Though he narrowed the space, Ryne held the final phrase. A little nearer, she thought, come on, just a little nearer.

His gait was more glide than walk, but he was incorporeal. He appeared indistinct, blurry, but she wasn't sure if that was him or her eyesight. She didn't bother to blink, just tightened her jaw. The shaking was so violent now that it was more like spasms than shivering, but she couldn't stop. Instead, she shut out the pain and gathered herself. She'd only have one shot.

When he was about twenty feet from her, she finished the proclamation and the gate appeared between them. The entity came to a halt, and though she couldn't see him, she sensed his scorn.

"You are a fool, Gineal."

That was probably true, but she preferred to think of it as determined.

"You believe you're capable of forcing your will upon me?"

Right now, she didn't feel capable of much, but if he were so confident he'd best her, why was he staying back? Why was he bothering to taunt her? She was no match for him even without his extra power source. Or was she?

Carefully she probed, and discovered he wasn't any stronger than her. It took her a few seconds to figure it out. He was performing a ritual involving the darkest of the dark and those forces exacted a price. Part of the cost was a lot of personal energy. He wanted her to fight him on his terms, to use up the rest of her reserve, so that she was no threat.

But she was too injured to get angry over a few insults, and the longer he delayed, the more power she was able to soak up.

Maybe he guessed that. Or maybe he decided her lack of response meant she wasn't a danger. In any case, he moved closer. She couldn't wait any longer.

The incantation was in the ancient language of the Gineal and had never been translated. It didn't need to be. All troubleshooters were fluent in the old tongue. If she could complete the spell, the thing would have his powers caged. Too damn bad she hadn't been able to use this before, but with his strength then, he'd have overcome it easily.

She whispered the words through clenched teeth. Some weren't even a breath of sound, but she didn't need to speak aloud—all that was required was focusing the energy. Her body shook harder as what little power she had began to amass.

The entity realized what she was doing and his howl pierced the ringing in her ears. Ryne didn't stop. Not even when he levitated her again. She'd already died tonight and been gifted with reentry to her body—it didn't matter if she died a second time. Not as long as she did what she'd come back for.

He didn't throw her. She was prepared for that. Instead, when he had her about five feet off the ground, he dropped her.

Numbness disappeared.

Agony ripped through her, turning her world a hazy red and purple. Her eyes rolled back and blackness began to fill the corners of her mind, but she fought it off.

It was the touch of his vile, dark energy that forced her out of the misery. She resumed speaking. He tossed more debris at her, trying to stop her from finishing the proclamation, but she uttered the closing phrase anyway. She ensnared him. His fury raged, but she sensed the panic.

Ryne drew on everything she had remaining inside her and gave him a mental push. Then another.

The attempts to break free failed. His powers were tightly contained within an invisible force field. She shoved until he stood before the soul gate. As she took a minute to collect herself, he struggled harder against her magic.

She gave the final thrust and sent him through the gate.

His shout rang as she shut the portal behind him.

The kid. Had to check on him, see if he was still alive. It would be a hell of an irony to find out that he was dead, that she'd taken this abuse for no reason. She tried to stand, but didn't reach her knees before falling back to the icy ground.

She needed a healer. Desperately.

Ryne sent out the call, but knew it didn't travel far. She was weak, much too weak, to reach anyone who wasn't nearby. Zane.

He probably wasn't here any longer. His responsibilities had ended as soon as he'd briefed her, and as cold as it was, why would he hang around? But she had to try. He was her only shot.

Zane. Need help.

No response, so Ryne focused on holding energy. Though her connection to the elements was restored, her injuries were so severe, she was leaking power like rain through a window screen. All she needed, however, was enough to call someone. Soon.

A transit opened mere yards from her. She didn't feel like moving, but she made herself check who came through. It could be any of her people, including one of the Gineal who had embraced the dark forces. Her eyes were swollen almost shut now, but she peered through the small slit that remained. Zane. Thank God.

He crouched down next to her, checking her out. She felt him push her hair off her face. "You need a healer," he said.

Since that was obvious, she didn't respond. She knew when he sent the request for help, but she spaced out. The next thing she was aware of was the warmth of energy. Three healers surrounded her, their hands suspended just above her body.

There were things that had to be taken care of. Important things. She turned her head, scanning carefully until she saw him. Her voice had deserted her, so she used telepathy.

Zane. The kid. Was possessed. Check him, 'kay?

"I'll take care of it," he assured her.

The healers began a chant, one in the old language, but she didn't listen to the words. She had to remain alert until she knew the situation was in hand. That was part of her job.

It seemed to take forever before he returned. "The boy's alive. He's out cold, but there's no sign of any physical harm."

Good. But the word didn't transmit. She'd weakened too far to even send thoughts. With a small frown, she managed a quiet murmur to let Zane know she'd heard. He knew about the book and would tell the council. They'd check out the dimension where she'd sent it, recover the text and secure it.

Everything she needed to worry about was taken care of.

Ryne closed her eyes, and with a soft exhale, she let go.

2

CHAPTER

She should have bought a longer couch.

Ryne stared at her toes. Thick socks kept her feet warm, but her heels were resting on the arm of the sofa and her head was on the other arm, three pillows propping her up. It would have been smarter to stay in bed where she'd been more comfortable, but she couldn't chance falling asleep.

The couch wasn't the only shortcoming. She grimaced. Aside from the sofa and a coffee table, the only furniture she had here was the huge television. The whole house, with the exception of her bedroom, suffered from the same lack of furniture and style.

With a sigh, she ran her hand along the couch beneath her right thigh. The nubby fabric abraded her skin, but the sensation was comforting, familiar. She stretched out farther, wincing as the movement intensified her aches. After what she'd been through tonight, the residual soreness was a welcome sign.

The healers had done a tremendous job mending everything, and her condition was nothing short of miraculous. By the time she woke tomorrow morning, she'd be at full strength again.

Only she needed to be able to use her powers before then.

The weakness, the lethargy were problems she couldn't afford

right now. She turned her head to see the clock and her fingers flexed against the couch. Four and a half hours, give or take, before equinox. If she couldn't recoup enough energy to perform the rite by then, she'd have to wait for the autumnal equinox and she had a feeling that would be too late.

She wished she could shrug off the sense of dread, but she knew better than to discount her instincts when it came to Anise. After living with the woman for so long, Ryne knew what she was likely to do. It was that familiarity that had earned her the assignment, one she'd been working for six years without success. Her lips turned down. Anise had trained her, and though Ryne had learned a lot since, her quarry had given her the foundation.

Damn, she hated being predictable, but no matter how hard she tried to do the unexpected, Anise always anticipated her. Ryne wanted to blame it on precognition, but her mentor's talent in this area was very limited; it had to be familiarity. Anise had avoided many of the confrontations by clearing out moments before Ryne arrived. When they did meet face to face, it ended in a draw, often with both of them injured and in retreat.

Her instincts also told her that Anise was going to go for broke in an attempt to get rid of her hunter. Soon. Ryne's plan was to push the time frame forward, force her former mentor to act before she was ready. But she had to be able to perform the ritual tonight or she'd be facing Anise without the big gun.

Every year the woman delved deeper into the dark forces, and sooner or later, she'd be able to overpower Ryne. It wasn't that dark was stronger than light, but there were ethics involved with using the light forces. It was a disadvantage, but if she abandoned those tenets, she'd start her own slide into darkness.

From the time she'd been a child, she'd been scared by tales of what happened to Gineal who practiced black magic. Human kids had the boogeyman; her horror had been much worse. Anyone among her people could be a monster. When she'd been much younger, she'd been sure she'd never need concern herself with this. As an adult, she knew better. Temptation. She fought it often.

All troubleshooters did.

Using the dark forces was like taking an opiate, hell, a poison.

It seeped in slowly, so gradually that the user wasn't aware of how deep she was till it was too late.

She wished the line between dark and light was clearer. Instead it was murky, filled with shades of gray. While most Gineal could avoid using shadowy magic, troubleshooters couldn't. They had to walk into no-man's land regularly to defeat the dark.

It was one of the reasons why they were at greater risk at turning to the black arts. Go a little too gray . . . She decided she didn't want to think about this anymore.

Another look at the clock. Ryne reached for the remote resting atop her stomach and clicked on the television, flipping through the stations till she found the one she wanted. She pushed thoughts of Anise out of her head. The only thing she needed to concern herself with right now was regaining enough energy so that she could conduct the rite.

The theme song for the show stopped her worrying. She normally wasn't much for cartoons, but this one was the exception. In the opening credits, an animated red pickup truck screeched around a corner, pulled in front of a convenience store, and the driver jumped out to arrest a would-be robber.

"Man, who are you?" the perp asked, sounding bewildered.

A squad car arrived in time to hear the question and the cops said, in unison, "He's Deke Summers, PI." Then they slapped the cuffs on the man and hauled him away.

The opening was the same, but Ryne stared closely, looking for one small difference. The cartoon Deke removed his sunglasses and looked out of the television. On her big screen, his silver eyes were easy to see and she blew out a long breath. No change.

Tonight's show, where Deke was hired to find a missing cat, wasn't one of her favorites, but she quickly found herself riveted. She studied him intently. If only—

"Oh, for God's sake!"

Ryne jerked. She hadn't heard her sister come in. Damn.

Normally she loved spending time with Maia, but tonight wasn't good. She didn't have the energy to spare for a fight, and from the look on her sister's face, it was unavoidable. If only she'd heard the door open, she could have switched to another station in time to prevent this.

"This is pathetic!" Maia declared, coming deeper into the room. She'd already taken off her jacket and put down her purse. "When I invited you to dinner and a movie, you said you were busy. Watching some damn cartoon is not busy, but I should have guessed."

There was a pause, but Ryne didn't comment. As she watched her sister pace the room, she found herself considering how different they were from each other. They were both dark and about the same height, but that's where the similarities ended.

She'd always wished she looked more like her big sister. It wasn't only that men found Maia more attractive, although that was part of it. For Ryne the big reason was how people reacted to them. The same guys who rushed to help Maia carry a pillow would stand and watch her struggle with a heavy box. She looked capable, her sister appeared delicate.

Maia returned, cutting Ryne's contemplation short, and leaned on the couch so she could glare down at her. "It would be bad enough if you were this obsessed with an actor. At least you'd have a chance with a flesh-and-blood man, but you're infatuated with a *cartoon character!*"

"I'm not infatuated with Deke," Ryne disagreed calmly.

"Deke." Maia rolled her eyes. "Listen to yourself. You even refer to him as if he were a person."

She bit the inside of her lip to keep from saying anything. Maia had revoked her powers and was no longer one of them. The Gineal, particularly the troubleshooters, never shared their business with outsiders. It was simply too dangerous.

Her sister pushed off the couch and resumed pacing. Every now and then she'd glance over and shake her head sadly. Ryne knew the concern was genuine. Even though Maia had forsaken her and their people for some damn human male, Ryne had never questioned her sister's love. It might not be as much as she needed, as much as she wanted, but it was irrefutable.

Ryne looked back at the TV. How come no one else saw it? Maybe humans would miss it, but Maia had been Gineal. Hell, she'd been a troubleshooter. Surely, giving up her powers hadn't made her blind to the truth?

With a screech, Maia swooped down, snatched the remote from Ryne's stomach, and turned off the television. "You're not

obsessed, huh, Ryne? That's why you can't keep your eyes off the screen for five minutes?" She came around the sofa and put the remote on the coffee table before sitting beside it and leaning forward. "Look," she said, "I know you can't chance going to a human psychologist, but maybe a healer can work with you."

"There's nothing to work on," Ryne said. She usually lost her temper by now, but she was too weary to get upset.

"Nothing? Come on! You lied so you could stay home for a TV show and you have every episode on disk. You watch them over and over. That's an obsession, sweetie, and you need help."

Ryne closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and blew it out slowly. She was too damn tired for this. "Maia," she said and looked at her sister, "go home. Please," she added.

The anger drained out of her sister's face. "You didn't stay in to watch television, did you?"

Ryne shook her head slowly.

"You had to work tonight, that's why you were busy."

This time she didn't respond. She hadn't received the assignment yet when her sister had called, but she'd needed to prepare for the ritual. Of course, she couldn't tell either thing to an outsider.

"You were injured, weren't you? That's why you're lying on the couch and not arguing with me. How bad?"

She didn't say anything. It pained her to remain quiet when she saw her sister's distress, but while the Gineal had few rules, the ones they did have were strictly enforced. As a troubleshooter, she'd taken an oath to uphold the laws of her people.

"Okay, you can't talk about it. I know that. How about this?" There was a short pause. "Hi, how are you feeling?"

"Like crap," Ryne said, her lips turning up slightly.

Maia's gaze became more intent, but she said easily, "I'm sorry to hear that. What's wrong?"

While she considered how to answer, Ryne tugged at her sweatpants, trying to get rid of the wad of fabric under her thigh. When it was smoothed out, she said, "I'm sore. Everywhere."

Neither of them spoke. Maia would know Ryne was on thin ice and was unable say more. She sure couldn't explain how she'd been hurt, though her sister appeared even more anxious.

"I wish you could tell me what happened."

Ryne tried to tamp down the resentment, but the words escaped anyway. "Yeah? Well, so do I!" She closed her eyes, fighting to keep the rest of it contained. It wouldn't do any good to bring it up now. When someone revoked her powers, it was forever. There was no going back.

She heard Maia walk away. Damn it, she usually had more restraint than this. Undoubtedly, what she'd said had caused hurt and she regretted that. It didn't matter that her own pain, her own anger, had been festering for years. Her sister was the one who'd suffered. Not only had she ceded her powers, but the man had dumped her a month later. "I'm sorry," she said quietly.

No response.

Ryne opened her eyes and turned her head. The only thing she could see was her sister's rigid back. Hell. She struggled to sit up, blocking a gasp or two as the movement made the aches sharpen. She'd had to crawl from her bed to the couch, dragging the pillows with her, but she'd be damned if she'd embarrass herself like that in front of Maia. Ryne just wasn't sure if she could stand yet. Did she really believe she'd be able to perform a ceremony in a matter of hours when she felt like this?

Taking a deep breath, she fought her way to her feet and took a couple of steps away from the support of the sofa. She didn't stay upright long. Her legs were about as solid as gelatin, and though she did her best to avoid it, she hit the floor. A whimper escaped as agony shot through her body.

She planted both hands firmly behind her, determined not to end up flat on her back. That would be the final humiliation. Nausea welled, her thoughts swam, and red stars spun wildly in the blackness of her vision. Before she fainted, Maia slipped an arm around her. She leaned on her sister and battled the urge to pass out. "Mom and Dad weren't there," she muttered.

"What?"

"I thought I'd see Mom and Dad when I died tonight, but there wasn't anyone waiting for me."

"God, Ryne . . ." the rest of her sister's words faded into unintelligible murmurs as she lost the battle for awareness.

When she came to, she was back on the couch and sweat covered her body. Someone was crying quietly, but she couldn't open her eyes. She'd remembered. At least a little.

“Ryne Althea Frasier, you look at me right now. Do you hear me?” Maia demanded.

She wanted to ignore the voice, but Maia wasn't going to leave her alone. “Yeah,” she said, surprised by how raspy she sounded. A cool cloth dabbed the perspiration from her face and she turned toward it. She wasn't sure how long it took before she was able to pry her eyelids open, but it wasn't enough time for her sister to stop crying. Instead of wiping the tears away, Maia continued to tend her.

It was awhile later, when she was feeling relaxed, that her sister snuck the question in. “Did you really die tonight?”

Tension snaked into her body. “How much did I tell you?”

“You said no one was waiting for you when you died.”

“I said that out loud?”

“It's true then.”

Ryne said nothing. It wasn't a question anyway. She decided the slip, given the circumstances, wasn't bad enough to earn her a dressing down from the council. Maybe she could skip reporting it. She dashed her own hopes. Of all the troubleshooters, she was the one most closely watched. Best she come clean rather than chance them discovering this on their own.

She became aware that her sister was sending her healing energy. Her eyes widened. Humans could do this if they believed, so it wasn't the exchange that surprised her. No, what stunned her was this was the first time Maia had done anything remotely reminiscent of the days before she'd given up her powers.

The energy stopped flowing from her sister's hands an instant before she withdrew. “How are you feeling?”

“Better, thank you,” Ryne said. It had been more than a healing, she realized belatedly. Maia had transferred personal energy as well. Again, a human could do it since this was life force, not magic energy. The Gineal, however, rarely did it either intentionally or unintentionally. “You shouldn't have—”

“Here,” Maia interrupted, picking up the remote. “You can see the end of your show.” When the television came on, Ryne knew her sister didn't want to talk about what she'd done.

Maia moved to sit on the couch at her hip and her attention was glued on the screen. For an instant, Ryne stared at her, then turned to watch the cartoon.

Already, she felt stronger and knew it was the life force

she'd received. It was a renewable resource, just like any other kind of energy, so it wasn't as if her sister had sacrificed years off her existence, but it still touched her. Maybe, just maybe, she would be ready at the time of equinox.

As the show reached its conclusion, Ryne turned her head so she could unobtrusively view both her sister's face and the TV screen. The program always ended on the same image before the closing credits rolled and she wanted to see Maia's response.

Deke strolled from the pet owner's house and there was a close-up of his face for the beat of three, then he slipped his sunglasses on and walked off screen. The theme song played.

Maia didn't react and Ryne knew she hadn't seen it.

How could anyone miss it? It was always there, but it was obvious when they zoomed in on his eyes.

A man's soul was trapped inside Deke the cartoon character.

The Gineal were attuned to the rhythms of Earth in a very visceral way. Ryne knew in every cell of her being how close the planet was to the moment of equinox and she trusted her senses far more than the clock on the wall. Since she couldn't afford any mistakes, she'd spent weeks carefully rehearsing the ritual until she had every word, every action, committed to memory.

Even so, butterflies tap danced in her stomach. Although she'd spent the time since Maia's departure pulling energy and meditating, she wasn't sure she was centered. Her thoughts had been in a whirl. Hell, they still were. It was up to her to rescue Deke. The man was the key to defeating Anise, she was certain of it. Too bad she didn't know how or why. Even if he wasn't, though, she'd go through with the ritual to free him anyway. It was her duty as a troubleshooter.

She leaned a hip on the stool to her left and tried to clear her mind. It was imperative that she focus. If she could settle down, she put the odds on a successful outcome at about fifty-fifty. She'd recovered a great deal, but it was borderline on whether or not she had enough power yet for the rite.

Her workroom filled much of the basement. Most of the space was taken up with rows of bookcases crammed with

texts. Her collection had hundreds of titles and the Gineal library had millions. It was cumbersome to find anything, especially since a lot of the books didn't stick to one subject. While she'd searched for the spell she needed, she'd learned tons of trivia—like some Gineal had believed that Twilight Time didn't necessarily mean Armageddon, that Gineal females could perform a few incantations that their males couldn't and vice versa, and that dormants couldn't come into their powers while under a spell. Nothing that could help with her task or that she could use in her daily life.

She should never have had to wade through all the crap. Years had been wasted! Years while a man was trapped. Over and over she'd suggested creating a database, but the council had ignored her. Ryne was unsure if it was because the idea had been hers or if they simply had an aversion to more technology.

With a shrug, she straightened from the seat and turned to take the tome off the counter behind her. The book was nearly two feet tall and handwritten in a time before printing presses. Ryne found her marker, opened it to the correct page, and slid it into the holder on her work table. Though she had the ritual memorized, she couldn't risk not having the reference at hand.

It was occasions like this when she missed Maia most. Her sister had taught her to spellcast, and had walked her through her first rite. If Maia hadn't revoked her powers, Ryne would have asked for her help. It concerned her how deeply she'd be delving into the gray and she would have liked the support.

Taking another deep breath, she retrieved one of her crystal bowls from the shelf. It was shallow, maybe three inches high, but wide. She placed it on the table next to a short dagger.

The second bowl was smaller and filled with soil. Neither one was designed for this purpose, but she couldn't see buying another set for one night. She placed the vessel beside the first and went to the counter behind her for the ewer of water.

In the first ritual she'd conducted, she'd used this same pitcher. The leaded crystal had been too heavy for her to lift, but Maia had put her hands over hers and helped. Normally, it was parents who introduced their children to magic, but both Mom and Dad had been troubleshooters and too busy to take the time.

After setting the ewer down with the other items, she ran her fingers over the shiny oak expanse. All the furniture was made from natural products. Real wood. Metal nails. Nothing synthetic. Her tools came from the earth as well. Artificial had its place, but it was introduced when she wished to do so.

The counter and the table were both built to make it comfortable for her to stand while she worked, and she had the stool when she wanted to sit. This, too, was wood. It had been Maia who'd explained the importance of surrounding herself with only organic things. Putting both her hands flat on the surface in front of her, she forced herself to take another deep breath. She wasn't sure why she couldn't put thoughts of her sister out of her mind tonight, but she had to. Maia wasn't here and would never take part in this facet of Ryne's life again.

Cold swept over her and she shivered. She should have turned up the heat as soon as she'd entered the basement, but it wasn't worth the effort now. By the time the furnace kicked in, she'd be done. She crossed the floor to one of the cabinets, opened it, and scanned her choices. An off-white, vanilla-scented pillar candle seemed to call to her so she took it and the box of wooden matches to the table and arranged them with the bowls.

Nearly time. She could feel the position of the Earth. Reluctantly, she reached for the hem of her sweatshirt and tugged it over her head. Since she was braless, the chilly air hit her bare breasts and made her nipples go taut. Ryne grimaced, tossed the shirt on a bench, and reached for the drawstring at her waist.

When she had only her socks left to shed, she hesitated, then scowled and tugged those off, too. It was frigid down here. It had been centuries since the Gineal had performed magic while unclothed. She doubted there was a need to strip now either, but she wasn't taking any chances. The instructions for the ceremony said naked, so she'd be naked. Of course, the book also said she should be outdoors, but no way in hell was she prancing around her backyard in the buff. She'd freeze her ass off.

With a deep, calming breath, she released the tension and recited a proclamation to connect to Earth and the universe. She added a request for protection from the dark forces.

When the timing was right, she spoke the words that began the ceremony. The lilt and flow of the ancient language of the Gineal felt natural, as if it were bred into the very fabric of her being from lives without number.

Ryne shook off the stray thought and reached for the ewer. As she chanted, she slowly poured until water reached two-thirds of the way to the top of the bowl. She exchanged the pitcher for the dirt-filled container, intoned the next section, then lowered the second bowl inside the first. Water rose to the rim as it was displaced, but she'd gauged correctly and it didn't overflow.

The candle came next. She settled it in the center of the soil and lit the wick. Deep inside, she felt the kick that came with fire. Her affinity with this element ran deep.

There was nearly an entire page that needed to be recited next, and while she went quickly, she was also careful not to skip or mispronounce anything. Energy surged, not only inside her, but around her, filling the room.

So far everything she'd done had been well within the light, but now she entered murkier territory. She turned the page of the tome and reached for the knife. Its haft held semiprecious stones—sapphire for intuition, citrine to clear the aura, garnet to maintain and adjust the flow of energy, and topaz for success. The blade was etched with symbols that predated what was known to be the first written language of the Gineal.

Ryne raised the dagger, held a clear, perfectly pitched tone, and shallowly slashed her palm. Blood ran and she moved her hand until it dripped on the dirt, in the water, and into the pool of melted wax. It hurt, but she focused only on the ensuing words.

When she plunged the knife into the bowl of soil, energy flared again, spiking far higher than usual. Her hair stood on end, almost as if she were receiving a continual static charge, then it flowed through her, warmed her bare skin. This time when she felt her nipples peak, it was with arousal.

The power rose within her. She was stronger than she'd ever been. The dark forces whispered to her. Enticed her. Promised her if she went deeper she'd be unstoppable. Immortal. Damn near invincible. It could be true.

She felt as if she'd finally been freed of her fetters, finally

had been allowed to feel the full extent of what she could do. Always she'd been held back by the light.

The giddiness was unexpected and she grinned, barely stopping herself from dancing in joy. Her blood flowed like champagne through her veins and she soared with the next part of the chant, expressing her rapture with her voice. The call grew stronger, promised her more if she embraced the dark.

She'd be able to defeat Anise without difficulty.

She stuttered a bit, surprised by how appealing the idea was, and had to restart the sentence. Ryne slipped her sliced hand into the space between the two bowls, then let the rosy water cascade from her fingers over the knife. It was a lie. It had to be. There wasn't freedom in the dark forces. But they felt less restrictive, and far more potent, than the light.

With each part of the rite, the lure became stronger. It was a seduction, not only of her body, but of her senses. Why shouldn't she have full use of her powers?

She reached for it. Stopped herself. But it was close. So damned close. So damned enthralling.

Her voice sounded choked and she knew she walked a fine edge. The physical arousal deepened, had her shifting to find relief. There was none, but that was promised to her as well in an indistinct, almost teasing, manner.

As interested as she was in sexual release, however, it was a lure easy to resist. No, what tempted her was the power hovering just beyond her grasp. Incredible amounts, more than she'd ever wielded, would be hers if only she were brave enough to take it. She wanted to, wanted to keep feeling this high. The dark forces knew this and used the desire against her.

If she surrendered, she'd prove right all those who had doubted her. She wouldn't give them that satisfaction.

But if she had the power, she could show them that she was a force to be reckoned with. Ryne shook her head, denying the suggestion. She'd never turn against her people, even the ones who thought she was well versed in black magic. Her oath bound her to protect them.

Sweat trickled down her temple as she struggled against the pull. Her hands gripped the edge of the table, the pain almost unnoticed as she tried to hold out. She strained to close her mind to everything but the ceremony. No way was she giving in.

Final page. She braced herself. She couldn't relax, not when she fought herself as much as the dark forces. She thought she'd been prepared, but she was wrong. Though she'd heard the call often through the years, it was nothing compared to this.

The Earth reached equinox.

Ryne pushed aside the craving, chanted the final words, and blew out the candle. She felt the power shoot from her as she closed the ritual and only her hold on the table kept her from sagging to the floor. The whispering of the dark forces ceased.

She started to grab for the energy before she realized what she was doing. Was this what an addict went through? This gnawing need to recapture the exhilaration their drug of choice gave them? She wanted to fly again, wanted that sense of nearly limitless power, and to hell with the cost. The urge ebbed.

Her whole body shook. Much of it was residual energy and wouldn't last. Some of it was arousal, some fatigue, and some of it was relief. She wiped sweat off her cheek, and taking a shuddering breath, hoisted herself onto the stool. Ryne hissed as her ass met cold wood and leaped back to her feet.

She didn't waste any time crossing the room and yanking on her clothes. A shiver went through her as the cool fabric touched her body, but there was a comfort in having her sweats on again. She cast a quick glance around the room, but saw no sign the spell had worked. With something as involved as this ritual, though, it sometimes it took a few minutes.

Ryne didn't want to think she'd failed, not when she'd won an incredible victory. She'd done it, she'd resisted the dark forces. As tempting as it was to celebrate, she knew better. Her capitulation had been too close for her peace of mind. Instead, she'd have to be more vigilant in the future so she didn't slide deeper than she'd gone tonight.

After fifteen minutes, goose bumps covered her body and there was no indication of success. Crap. She thought she'd pulled it off. Her hands curled into fists and she realized then that she still bled. With a sigh, she tested how much energy she had left and decided there was enough to heal her palm. She ran a finger over the wound and watched the slash disappear until nothing but a faint, pink line marked the spot.

She was tired, but she was able to move under her own steam, and that put her ahead of where she'd been a few hours

ago. Feeling weary and cold, she went upstairs and changed into a long-sleeve T-shirt and a pair of flannel boxers. She fell into bed, turned out the light, and burrowed deeply under the blankets. Even that didn't ease the chill she felt.

She'd have to wait till the autumnal equinox to try the rite again. If she were alive. In all honesty, she didn't think she could put off another confrontation with Anise, not for six months, and she didn't know if she could win or fight to a draw. Her sigh became a yawn. She'd have to contact Creed and ask him to free Deke if something happened to her before September.

Death. She'd never been afraid of it, but she didn't court it either—not like some enforcers did. Ryne turned on her side and tried to wrap herself more tightly in the covers. Her thoughts lingered on what had happened while she'd been out of her body. Everything she'd read had said family and friends who'd passed on before were there to greet those having a near-death experience. But even in this she'd been utterly alone.

She closed her eyes and pretended it was fatigue, not tears, clouding her vision.

Ryne knew she was dreaming.

It came as a surprise. After the day she'd had, she figured she'd sleep too hard to be aware of any dreams. She was toasty warm, content, and the weight over her waist left her feeling sheltered, protected.

Still more asleep than awake, she raised her hand and touched the arm slung across her middle. There was no question that the hard muscles and sturdy bone structure were masculine. The tactile pleasure drew her, and she trailed her fingers from his wrist to his elbow, then back down again.

She didn't want to wake up, not from this. For the first time in her memory, loneliness wasn't crushing her. With an almost silent hum of delight, she snuggled back against his chest and felt the press of rigid male flesh against her hip.

Another soft purr escaped. This was the kind of morning she wished was a normal part of her life. Waking up with someone who cherished her, feeling a serenity that started deep inside and filled every part of her. His hold tightened.

He made a short snuffling sound.

Did dream men snore? Ryne frowned. She didn't think so. That roused her enough to realize this was more than a charming little fantasy. Despite the wards guarding her home, there was a strange man in bed with her and he was bare-ass naked.

3

CHAPTER

She froze, stifling a gasp before it escaped. Instinct had her immediately scanning. In a nanosecond she knew no one else was in her home and that the guy was human. Ryne probed again more carefully, but got the same results. The tenseness seeped away and she relaxed back against his chest.

It was foolhardy to be so unconcerned. Humans had been responsible for more Gineal deaths through the ages than any other cause. Hell, most of their laws about secrecy were the direct result of some long ago persecution. Yet she didn't feel threatened in any way. Besides, she could handle one man if the need arose. Her powers were back at full strength.

Maybe it was the gentleness of his embrace. Or maybe it was because his warm breath lightly tickled the side of her neck. Whatever the cause, the sense of well-being remained. She wanted to indulge herself in the feeling awhile longer, but her practical side wouldn't leave her alone.

Slowly, not wanting to rouse him, she turned and started to shift away. His hold tightened and she went still. Her twisting had caused the T-shirt to bunch up beneath her breasts and part of his hand rested on her bare stomach. He stroked her lightly

a few times, and though she tried not to react, something inside her went hot at the caress. For a moment, she feared he was awake, then with a deep exhale, his body went slack.

Relief vied with disappointment. She yanked the shirt down, but his calloused fingers stayed under the fabric, heating her skin. In a few minutes, once she was certain he was deeply asleep, she'd attempt to ease free once more.

She tilted her head, trying to see him, but though sunlight seeped through the blinds and brightened the room, her position didn't give her a view of his face. It did, however, allow her to check out his broad shoulders and heavily muscled upper torso. Despite herself, she took a moment to appreciate the sight. When she realized her pulse rate had increased, she began sliding away again.

Even moving carefully, she wasn't any more successful at leaving the bed. Not only did his arm firm its grip around her waist, but he tugged her toward him until she ended up half sprawled over his body. As she tried to figure out how to circumvent this problem, his fingers flexed, drawing her attention to the fact he cupped the cheek of her butt. His hand fisted in the flannel of her boxers, drawing one loose leg up until her entire thigh was exposed. She sucked in a quick breath when he rolled onto his back, bringing her along for the ride.

With a frown, she looked down at her mystery man, but his eyes were closed. Her heart skipped a few beats. He seemed vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place where or when they'd met. She wouldn't have forgotten him, not with the way she reacted to him.

She studied him feature by feature, trying to jog her brain. Long lashes brushed high cheekbones, the softness a stark contrast against the masculine planes of his face. His sable brown hair was cut short on the sides, but was longer on top, falling onto his forehead in a sexy, rakish way. Shaking off her need to push the hair off his face and feel the strands slide between her fingers, she moved on to the straight nose, full lips, and stubborn chin. Okay, he was attractive. At least her body sure as hell thought so.

Without warning, he looked at her. As she met his gray-blue eyes, Ryne felt a jolt ricochet through her. Even with her own

surprise, she saw his shock and momentary confusion, but in a microsecond, his eyes went flat and his expression smoothed out. Never show weakness—she understood that.

His hand tightened on her bottom, minutely adjusting the alignment between them. The new position pressed his erection against her bared flank, and for a fleeting moment, she wished she were as naked as he was.

An arrogant smirk tilted his lips. "Morning, babe."

The attitude irked her and she stiffened, but the thickness of his voice, the heat in his gaze, kept her from elbowing him in the belly and hopping off the bed. She really wasn't normal. Most women, Gineal or human, would have been out the door long before now. Something about him, though, challenged her and she never walked away from a dare. Her inner imp slipped its tether. She propped herself up on his chest to get more comfortable, and with a slow, sultry smile, drawled, "Morning, hotshot."

He lazily ran his free hand up the back of her thigh and under her boxers till his palm rested on her bare bottom. It took all her willpower not to flinch at the intimacy. Okay, there was holding her own and there was idiocy. She reached behind her and grabbed his wrist. "Watch it," she warned.

"A little late to be modest now, isn't it, babe?"

She hated being called babe, but if she got bent out of shape about it, he'd no doubt use it more—a way to needle her without expending much effort. Come to think of it, he might be doing that already since he'd no doubt felt her stiffen the first time he'd said it.

His eyes glinted with amusement, but he drew away without stalling and without groping her. When his hand rested low on her waist, he raised an eyebrow as if to say *now what*.

That left her in a quandary. She wasn't willing to concede, but the options that came to mind would start a game of sexual one-upmanship. That was a direction Ryne didn't want to go. Not when she couldn't trust herself.

Silence fell. She decided to let him break it, but as the quiet lengthened, she upped her estimation of him. Most humans couldn't help but fill any gap in conversation. That sparked her curiosity and she looked beyond the irreverent expression he wore. Ryne picked up the infinite patience deep in his eyes and

grimaced. He'd wait all day if he had to. She kept searching, seeking more information, and identified keen intelligence as well as self-control. It was a formidable combination.

His stare discomfited her. It was veiled, but he was assessing her as closely as she'd studied him. She wondered what weaknesses he'd found and if he'd exploit them. Maybe she *should* be worried about his presence.

But that wasn't what had her edgy. She was a troubleshooter. From childhood, she'd been trained to master her emotions, and yet the best she could do now was mask them, try to appear unaffected.

She barely kept from fidgeting as the stare-down dragged on. Not from impatience, but because maintaining eye contact with him aroused her more than the feel of his hard body beneath her or the press of his erection at her hip. Clearly, she couldn't wait for him to pick up the conversational ball. She needed to end this soon. Somehow.

Running through her choices again, she came up with an alternative she hadn't thought of earlier. The best defense was a good offense, right? "Would you like to explain how you got in my house?" Her voice came out thickly.

Again, uneasiness flickered in his eyes, but it was gone so quickly that she never would have seen it if she hadn't been watching so closely. He raised his eyebrows. "You don't know?"

She shook her head.

"We must have really tied one on last night," he said, and while his voice was neutral, Ryne identified a thread of displeasure. Before she could examine that further, he shifted her until she straddled him. He was perfectly centered and the urge to rock against him was so strong she nearly moaned. She had to get off him before she did something incredibly stupid, but she didn't want to appear to surrender.

"Don't worry," he added, his tone deeper than earlier, "I'll make sure neither one of us forgets this time around." He raised his hips, rubbing against her and she gasped. An even more self-satisfied grin spread across his face at her unthinking response.

"Lord, you're cocky." It wasn't until he laughed that she realized how she'd worded that. Talk about a Freudian slip. "You know what I meant," she said quickly when she saw his mouth

open. She'd bet anything he'd been about to make some smart-ass comment and she wasn't going to let him zing her.

"Nah, confident. When a woman looks like you, a man knows he can rise to the occasion." He thrust up again and she had to swallow another gasp.

She was in trouble here. It didn't matter that he was a stranger. An arrogant stranger, she corrected. It didn't matter that she'd sworn never to get involved with a human. She wanted to take him up on his offer and to hell with the consequences. Not smart. Not smart at all.

As much as she'd love to blame her current state on residual stimulation from last night's spell, she couldn't lie to herself. It was him. In near desperation, she asked, "Do you frequently drink enough to wake up in a stranger's bed with no idea of how you got there?"

A different kind of heat came into his eyes. "Don't be throwing stones, babe. Your memory of last night isn't any better than mine."

"You're wrong. When I went to bed last night, I was alone. I know this unequivocally. And I don't drink or use any other kind of substance to alter my perception of reality."

No Gineal did. It was too dangerous, since control over their powers became sporadic with just a sip of alcohol.

"Right, then why are you laying on top of a naked man? This position is damn intimate for two people who haven't had sex." He squeezed her butt with both hands.

Though she fought it, she felt a blush heat her cheeks. The embarrassment didn't stop her from identifying the opportunity he'd given her. "You have a point," she said stiffly as she climbed off of him. For an instant, his hold tightened, as if he wanted to keep her where she was, then he released her.

Ryne only went to the edge of the bed before she turned to face him and propped herself up on an elbow. "Do you feel hung over?" she asked. It was a way to divert attention away from her actions, but she was interested, too. He didn't act, or smell, like someone who'd been tanked mere hours ago.

"No." He turned on his side, mirroring her. The blankets rode low on his hips and she struggled to keep her attention on his face. "Not only do I not feel hung over, but I rarely drink,

let alone get shit-faced enough to lose time. I can't think of how else I got here without remembering it, though."

Unfortunately, she could come up with several ways and they involved magic. Her wards weren't easy for anyone to circumvent, let alone a human. They'd been created by all nine councilors combining their powers and only the full council acting in concert could enter without her approval. It protected the troubleshooters and gave them sanctuary within their homes. Without this in place, they'd have to sleep with one eye open.

The only person she allowed to enter at will was Maia, and even if she wanted to, her sister couldn't lead anyone else inside without Ryne's permission. She considered the next possibility and decided it was unlikely the council had been involved. She couldn't think of a single reason why the leadership would want to put a human in her house.

Anise? Some other Gineal working with dark energy? Again, the question was why? To prove someone could be sent through her protection? It wasn't logical. If they'd been able to gain entrance, she'd be dead.

"Babe?"

She scowled at him and said, "My name is Ryne. Remember that and use it."

"Ryan? That's a guy's name."

Ryne grit her teeth. She should be used to this by now, but it still grated. "It's Ryne. R-Y-N-E."

"Your parents named you after Ryne Sandberg? He's a man."

It figured he'd be a baseball fan. Ryne might not pay much attention to the National League, but she knew a lot about this one former Cubs player. Voice tight, she said, "It's a family name—for Frasier *women*."

"No need to get defensive." His lips twitched, but before she could take issue with that, he said, "I'm Daniel." He held out a hand for her to shake. "Pleased to meet you."

Her frown deepened and she ignored his outstretched hand. She'd been right, he was a smart ass. With a sigh, she shook off her irritation. "You don't look like a Daniel."

"And you don't look like a Ryne." He pulled his arm back and shrugged one shoulder. "Just call me Deke. Everyone else does."

* * *

"Deke Summers?" She stared at him, half in disbelief, half in hope. "*You're Deke Summers?*"

"Yeah. Why are you looking at me like that?"

Ryne shook her head, but didn't say anything. No wonder she'd thought he seemed familiar. He didn't resemble the cartoon Deke that much, but now that he'd introduced himself, she could see the similarities. Still, it was better to be safe. She closed her eyes and tuned into his auric field trying to verify what he'd said. Sure enough, she picked up the telltale signs of someone who'd been subjugated to a black magic spell. It took more work to identify Anise's energy signature, but then he had been snared in the show for four and a half years.

This explained how he'd gotten through her wards; she'd brought him in. She didn't know why there had been such a long delay before the spell worked, but each incantation was different and she'd never performed a ritual that dark before either.

"Babe?"

Her eyes popped open and she scowled at him again.

The man grinned. "I thought that would get your attention."

"Ryne would have worked just as well."

With a shrug, he sobered. "You wanna tell me how come you said my name the way you did, like you know me, and how do you know my last name? We've never met, I'm sure of that."

He might have said he was sure, but she heard the tendril of doubt in his voice. Before she'd performed the ritual, Ryne had considered how much to tell him about the Gineal, her job as a troubleshooter, and Anise. The council would be angered, but she'd concluded that if she planned to use him in the battle with her former mentor, she would have to tell him a lot. Of course, he already knew a lot. Anise had seen to that.

"No, we haven't met. I said your name like that because I was surprised. I thought the likeness to your TV character would be stronger."

"TV character?" Deke sat up and shifted the pillows behind him to cushion his back against the headboard of her bed.

Ryne moved, too, sitting cross-legged on top of the covers. She paused, trying to figure out what he was asking. For a

moment she was distracted by all that bare skin and hard muscle. No cartoon, no matter how well drawn, could have prepared her for the effect he had on her. She didn't like it. That smug look was back on his face and she glowered. Damn it, he knew what he did to her and was enjoying it.

"Why did Anise bespell you?" she asked, getting down to business.

"Bespell? What the hell are you talking about?"

Okay, so that wasn't a word in the English language. At least not one humans used. He still should have understood her meaning; it was self-explanatory.

"Why did Anise cast the spell to imprison you inside a cartoon character? You must have done something to tip her off that you knew too much and held the key to defeating her." She added the last part to be as clear as possible.

"Lady, you're cracked." His expression changed, but Ryne couldn't name it. "Shit, you abducted me. That's why I'm naked in your house and can't remember how I got here. You slipped me a mickey and had an accomplice or two drag me here."

She didn't know whether to be outraged or amused. "I did not abduct you! I performed the ceremony that freed you."

"Freed me. From a cartoon. Right."

Clearly, he thought she was deranged. If this turn of events weren't so disastrous, she'd be seriously pissed off. "You don't believe me. Fine. Hand me that." She pointed to the remote on the nightstand beside him. Maybe it was a simplistic solution, but seeing was believing. And if this didn't work, she'd think of something else.

For a minute, he stared at her, then he grabbed the control and slid it across the bed to her.

Turning so she was on an angle, she flipped on the TV and hit the buttons to start the disk. It seemed to take forever to get through the obligatory warnings and into the show, but once the opening for *Deke Summers, PI* began, his reaction was immediate. The real Deke went pale, and as the view zoomed in on the character, he cursed, one vehement word.

Ryne gazed at the cartoon. No longer was there a soul visible in the animated figure's eyes. It was the final proof she needed that the ritual had worked.

They watched half of the episode in complete silence. "Turn it off." Although he'd issued an order, his voice had been so rough she couldn't take offense.

"Are you okay?" she asked gently after she'd powered everything down and put the remote aside.

"Sure, who the hell wouldn't be?" His laugh sounded hard, cynical, and not one bit amused. "God." Deke rubbed both hands over his face, and when he lowered his arms, he said, "I remember now. I liked it better when I thought you were nuts."

"I'm sorry."

"Do you have any idea what it was like? To have moments where I knew everything that was going on and yet was forced to do and say whatever the animators and scriptwriters wanted?"

He looked furious, but underneath it was something else—fear. In his position, she'd be frightened too, but she didn't say anything about that. Instead she moved nearer and put her hand over his knee. "I really am sorry. If I could have rescued you sooner, I would have, but it took me a long time to figure out what spell Anise used and even longer to find the one that countered it."

"Who are you? Glinda, the good witch?"

"I am not a witch," she said, trying not to let his tone aggravate her. "I'm Gineal."

She pulled her hand away, but didn't get far. Deke caught her and held on. After giving one halfhearted tug, she let him have his way. So what if the heat of his fingers disturbed her? She'd functioned through greater distractions than this.

"You said Anise imprisoned me." He looked less cavalier at this moment than he had at any other time this morning. "I've never met anyone by that name, and if I don't know her, why the hell would she put a curse on me?"

Ryne opened her mouth to tell him it wasn't a curse, but shut it again without speaking. In this case, the differences between a curse and an incantation that drew on the dark forces were negligible. Besides, it wasn't like he needed to know the fine points of magic. With a sigh, she ran her free hand through her hair, pushing her tresses behind her shoulder.

"She might have used another name. I'll show you what she looks like." Silently, she cast a short spell and an image of her mentor appeared in the room. The figure was life size and three

dimensional, although not quite as solid as a photo. His gaze snapped to hers, but his emotions were masked and he didn't ask how she'd done it. "Does she look familiar to you?"

Deke examined the likeness for a long time, then shook his head. "Nope, I've never met her."

"Are you sure?"

He gave a sharp nod. "Can you people shapeshift or change your appearance in another way?"

"Some can, but it's a rare talent and Anise doesn't have it. She may have altered her hair length or color or even her eye color, but anything else would have required a trip to the plastic surgeon just like it would for a human."

"What about making someone *think* they look different?"

"You mean like fairies and their glamour thing? No, we can't do that." She pursed her lips. At least she didn't think they could. It wasn't a light-force power, but the dark? She hadn't heard of it, but that didn't mean it was nonexistent.

He looked back to the representation she'd created and gave it more study. "Sorry. I'm sure I never met her."

With a wave of her fingers, she dissolved the image. His answer surprised her. As far as her teacher had been concerned, humans were beneath contempt and their males good for nothing but sex. To be honest, she'd expected Deke to have been a bed partner, one who'd discovered something he wasn't meant to know.

Using her powers, she opened the blinds, letting more light into the room. She wanted to see his face clearly. "If you don't recognize her," she said slowly, "then you don't have a clue what you know that makes you dangerous to her, do you?"

His lips tilted. "Ba—I mean, Ryne, I wouldn't believe any of this shit if I didn't remember being trapped inside a damn cartoon. How could I know anything that scared the Wicked Witch enough to put me in hell?"

"Crap," she muttered and pulled free of him. Dropping her head so it rested on both hands, she considered the situation. He was a threat to Anise, he had to be—the woman wouldn't have wasted her time and magic on him otherwise—but this added a layer of complexity that she hadn't expected. She looked up again. "We'll just have to figure out what it is about you that frightens Anise."

"Why bother?" He crossed his arms over his chest. "You got me out and everything's fine now."

"You think she's going to shrug and say, 'Oh, well, Ryne freed him, guess I'll go take a nap'? Uh-uh. She's coming after you with everything she has and you'll either be dead or back in 'toon town. I'm your best hope of staying human and staying alive."

"I can take care of myself."

Ryne tried to suppress her own smirk, really she did. Okay, maybe she didn't put as much effort into it as she could have, but he'd certainly dished out the attitude, let him take some. "Right, because you did such a good job the first time."

The fierce look that came into his eyes was there and gone quickly, but she saw it. Mister Easygoing wasn't quite as laid back as he wanted her to believe. There was more to Deke Summers than what was on the surface and she was reluctantly intrigued.

"I didn't have any warning then," he said. It took her a second to recall what they were discussing. "Now I'm aware of her and I'll be prepared."

"You have no magic, yet you think you're going to hold your own against a woman who was among the most powerful of the Gineal? A woman who's turned to the black arts, and since she no longer has a conscience, follows no one's rules? A woman I haven't been able to defeat in six years using all my abilities? Don't you think that's unrealistic?"

"You don't know wh—"

A loud bang interrupted him and they both jerked in surprise. Ryne was scanning before the sound faded. "It's my sister." She scrambled off the bed. No way did she want Maia to meet Deke. Her sister had called her obsessed last night, she'd really think Ryne had gone off the deep end if she introduced her to Deke Summers. "Stay here. Whatever you do, don't come out."

His demeanor didn't inspire confidence that he'd obey her order, but she couldn't stand around and argue with him. If Maia wasn't already on her way to the bedroom, she would be soon. Ryne had to head her off before she got here. After casting one last glare over her shoulder as a warning for him

to stay put, she closed the door softly behind her and went to intercept.

It was a good thing she'd moved fast. She met her sister halfway across the great room. "Maia, hi!"

"Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get you out of bed. The wind grabbed the door and slammed it."

She withstood her sister's appraisal with outward calm, but Ryne was aware of her sleep-tousled hair, wrinkled pajamas, and the fact that she had a naked man in her bed. Her fingers twisted in the hem of her boxers, but she couldn't stop the nervous motion.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better. Back to normal. Thanks for checking on me." She took Maia's arm and started to turn her toward the entryway, but her sister extricated herself.

Maia headed toward the couch, unzipping her jacket as she walked. Ryne clasped the flannel harder when her sister shrugged her coat off and tossed it and her purse on the sofa. She looked as if she were preparing to visit for a while. How long could she expect her houseguest to stay put? And even if Deke remained in the bedroom, Maia would hear him if he moved around and she'd investigate. When her sister headed back her way, Ryne shifted subtly, putting herself more squarely in front of the hallway.

"I don't know; you look flushed," Maia said after she reached her. "Go to bed. I'll make breakfast and bring it to you. What do you want? A waffle? An omelette?"

Ryne tried to keep from looking as appalled as she felt. If Maia started cooking, she'd be here for hours, and Deke was a big man, he had to be hungry by now. The smell of food would flush him out faster than a pheasant routed by a bird dog. "Thanks, but you don't have to do that. Really. I'm fine."

"I know, but I love you and I almost lost you last night." Maia looked away for a moment. When she raised her gaze again, Ryne got an overly bright smile. "So I'm going to stay here and take care of you and that's all there is to it."

Now what? Her family had never been physically or verbally demonstrative, so Maia's words were staggering. Ryne floundered, trying to think of what to do. After that amazing,

heartfelt statement, Ryne couldn't ask her to leave. The problem was keeping Maia from meeting Deke. Even if her sister didn't think she'd lost her mind, his presence would start an inquisition.

She could lie and claim romantic interest, but she'd never been able to deceive her sister and she'd spouted off too many times about never getting involved with a human. Maia might have revoked her powers, but she had her instincts—she'd know instantly that he wasn't Gineal.

The truth was out of the question. When the council found out she'd conducted such a deep gray ritual without their permission, she'd be censured. There was no doubt about that. If she added passing sensitive information to an outsider, or so much as hinted to Maia that this was troubleshooter business, she'd receive worse than a verbal reprimand.

A gust of wind hit the house, rattling the windows, and she shivered, but it had more to do with facing the council's disapproval than with feeling cold. "Sounds nasty out there," she said when her shudder garnered a questioning glance.

"It is," Maia agreed. "Freezing cold and windy. At least the sun's out. Now what did you want to eat?"

Ryne smiled weakly. Her fingers clenched around the leg of her shorts and she tried to relax. She couldn't think of a way to get rid of her sister without hurting her and she wouldn't do that. "Um, a waffle sounds good. Let me throw on some socks and I'll keep you company in the kitchen."

That would prevent her sister from entering the bedroom and give her an opportunity to persuade Deke to remain quiet. God, she was going to have to do some fast talking there. The man wouldn't understand why she wanted him hidden and she wasn't going to have the time to explain it to him.

"Are you sure you don't want breakfast in bed?" Maia grinned at her. "You know I don't make this offer often."

"I'm sure!" When her sister gave her a puzzled look, Ryne realized she'd said that too fast and too emphatically. "We don't talk enough," she added, hoping to cover up her mistake. "After what happened, well, I want to spend more time with my big sister." She hoped her smile looked innocent.

"Okay, get some socks on and . . ." Maia's voice trailed off.

Ryne saw her sister's gaze lock on something beyond her

shoulder and she closed her eyes briefly, praying it wasn't him. Reluctantly, she turned. Oh, crap.

Deke stood behind her, wearing nothing except one of her bath towels. It left far too much of him exposed, including most of his left thigh, since there wasn't enough terry cloth to cover all that muscle.

"Babe," he said, voice husky, intimate. "What did you do with my clothes?"

4

CHAPTER

She was going to kill him.

Deke grinned. The promise of murder shining from her eyes was even better than he'd hoped for. He enjoyed riling her. Hell, he'd never called anyone *babe* as many times as he'd used it today, but he couldn't help himself, not when she reacted every time.

"Who is this, Ryne? What's going on?" the woman demanded.

Ryne shot him one last glare before her expression smoothed out and she turned to answer the questions. Deke nearly laughed aloud. So she didn't want her sister to know she was pissed at him. That opened all kinds of possibilities. Deciding to see how far he could push her, he closed the distance between them.

"Maia—"

Ryne's voice cut off when he slid his arms around her waist and tugged her against him. She wriggled, and because her ass was pressed against his groin, he felt every shimmy. He wondered what she'd do if she dislodged his towel, but Deke didn't get a chance to find out. When she realized he'd started to get hard, Ryne froze. "My sister's here," she hissed as if that were why she'd tried to free herself.

“Babe,” he said, and he didn’t have to work to sound disappointed, “you haven’t told her about us?”

She was practically vibrating in fury, but she didn’t tell him to fuck off. Definitely wanted to keep her sister in the dark, Deke decided. Leaning down, he pressed a lazy kiss where Ryne’s shoulder and neck met. Her muscles became rigid, but he heard her nearly silent intake of breath. He wasn’t the only one getting hot.

The sister was staring at them and he had no doubt she was sizing up the situation. He did some assessing of his own. First, he’d bet big that Maia was the older of the two, since she looked ready to do battle to protect Ryne.

Second, though there was a strong physical resemblance between them, they were more unlike than alike. Maia’s chin-length hair was lighter, her eyes a milk chocolate brown, and something about her seemed . . . softer, less interesting. The woman he held was more vivid—her shoulder-length hair nearly black, her eyes the color of dark chocolate, and Ryne had an edge—her personality was as intense as her coloring.

Ryne’s hands covered his, but Deke only had a moment to enjoy her touch before her nails dug into his skin. She couldn’t gouge him—not without tipping off her sister—but Ryne was covertly putting all the strength she could into her fingers. Deke bent forward again, only this time he didn’t kiss her shoulder. He nipped her. It was more than a gentle love bite; he was warning her. When she retracted her claws, he knew his message had been received and understood.

Disapproval radiated from Maia, but he met her glare evenly. When she didn’t back down, he cocked an eyebrow. Her scowl deepened before she dismissed him.

“Where did he come from?” Deke’s lips twitched at the distaste in the woman’s voice.

“Los Angeles.” Ryne’s hesitation was almost imperceptible.

“That’s not what I meant. Why is he here? He’s not—” Maia stopped short.

“I know he’s not Gineal.”

Deke saw shock cross Maia’s face, but before he could question it, she took a step forward. “You *told* him? The council is going to be livid when they discover this.”

"I'm aware of that," Ryne said stiffly. Her fingers spasmed around his hand, but she stilled them almost at once.

His interest in the conversation spiked. What was this council and why was Ryne worried about their reaction? He started paying closer attention.

"I don't buy any of this," Maia announced. "He wasn't here last night, and when I left, you were in no shape to go out and find some guy, let alone one from California." She switched her gaze from Ryne back to him. "Who the hell are you anyway?"

"Daniel Summers. You can call me—"

"Dan! You can call him Dan." Ryne's interjection wasn't smooth and it didn't surprise him that her sister looked even more suspicious.

"Where was he last night while I was here?"

He felt Ryne square her shoulders. "He came in on the red-eye. The taxi dropped De—Dan off around seven." She turned her head to look back at him. "Or was it seven-thirty?"

"Closer to seven," he replied.

"Where's your luggage?" Maia demanded, taking a step closer and glowering at him.

"The airline lost it," Ryne answered for him.

"That's convenient."

"Only someone who's never had her bags lost before would say that," Deke said. He may not know what was going on, but until he had a good reason not to, he was backing Ryne.

"How long have you two known each other? How did you meet? Why didn't you tell me about him?" With every sentence Maia closed the distance. "And why are you involved with a human? You've always been adamant that you'd never date one, and yet here the two of you are, fresh out of bed."

Ryne tensed further. "You answered your own question," she said. "I've been so insistent, so vocal for such a long time about not taking a human as a lover that it was too embarrassing to say I'd changed my mind."

She might not be a smooth liar, but she'd just pulled a pretty slick maneuver. Ryne had ignored the things she didn't want to discuss and used Maia's own argument to explain the one she was willing to address.

"How long have you two known each other?" Maia repeated.

She was more tenacious than Deke had given her credit for.

He reassessed her and decided that Ryne's sister might have a core of steel beneath the softness.

"We met when I was in Las Vegas at Halloween." Ryne shrugged, her shoulders sliding against his chest.

"So you thought you'd have a vacation fling?" The skepticism in Maia's voice suggested that this wasn't something she'd expect from Ryne.

"Not exactly."

"Then what, exactly—"

Though she sounded confident, Deke had a sense that Ryne was far from comfortable. Without giving himself time to second-guess his decision, he interrupted. "Ladies, do you mind if we save the twenty questions till after I'm dressed?" He barely paused. "Ryne, help me find my clothes."

That was the opening she needed to extricate them. It wasn't until the bedroom door closed and Ryne sagged against it that he realized how difficult lying had been for her.

"What the hell was going on out there?" he demanded, keeping his voice low.

"It's a long story."

Deke closed the distance between them and crowded her against the wooden panel. "Then you better start talking before your sister comes in here to find out what we're doing."

She attempted to sidle away from him. Deke leaned in, pinning her against the door with his hips. Ryne wiggled, trying to free herself, but again, she went still when she felt his reaction to her movement. Shit, even if she hadn't shifted, he might have started to get hard. Her body felt so fucking good against his and those brown eyes blazing up at him made Deke want to see them glow with a different kind of fire.

He shook off his fog and braced his forearm on the door near her head. "Well?" he prodded. "Why did you call me Dan? And why the hell are you lying to your sister?"

Ryne's scowl deepened. "She doesn't know you were a cartoon. I spent a lot of time watching *Deke Summers, PI* while I was trying to learn how to undo the spell and she's been all over me about being obsessed. If I call you Deke, Maia will really get weird."

Which left the big question unanswered. "Why don't you tell her. She's a witch, too."

Ryne's face flushed. "I am not a witch," she gritted out. When he smirked, sparks lit up her eyes. "If you were smart, you'd stop antagonizing me. You've already been bespelled once, do you want to try for two?"

"Babe," he said, threading his free hand through the hair at the back of her head, "you'd never turn me into a toad or whatever, not after going to so much trouble to free me."

The impotent fury on her face, the low growl that rumbled in her throat, made his smile broaden. He'd hit the bull's-eye.

"Right now, I'm beginning to wonder why I bothered."

"No, you're not. Why did you lie to your sister?"

"Why are you such a pain in the ass?" Ryne shot back.

"Has anyone ever told you you're beautiful when you're mad?"

She shoved his shoulders then, putting a hell of a lot of power behind it, but Ryne didn't have enough strength to move him. He'd always liked pushing people's buttons, finding out how to get under their skin, but he'd never been this bad before. There was something about her and the way she responded, though, that brought out this side of him. "I won't stop asking."

Taking a deep breath, then another, Ryne regained control. "You'd have to understand our culture to truly get it, but the bottom line is that Maia is an outsider and we don't share information with anyone who isn't Gineal."

He wasn't Gineal either, but Deke decided to leave that for later, when they were alone. "How can she not be Gineal if she's related to you? Or is it a talent that only some are born with?"

"It's a long story." Ryne sounded tired, and something else that he couldn't put a name to.

"Tell me anyway."

"We're not going to have time for me to explain it so that it makes sense to you, not before my overprotective sister is knocking on the door to make sure I'm okay." She gave him another shove, then subsided. "Maia was Gineal until she ceded her powers. Now move, hotshot."

Reluctantly, Deke straightened. Although he wanted more answers, that wasn't why he was hesitant to stand back. For one thing, he liked pressing against Ryne, and for another, while she had to know he had a hard-on, feeling it and seeing it

tenting the towel were two different things. Although, he decided as he ran his fingers through her hair, it might be interesting to observe her reaction. Deke stepped away.

Ryne immediately moved out of reach. He found that amusing and her glower intensified when she saw his smirk. It didn't take long, however, for her gaze to dip. She seemed to stare for a long time, but that was likely wishful thinking on his part. Her apparent fascination, though, was causing more blood to flow away from his brain, and when his cock jerked, she gasped. Her flush didn't come from embarrassment; he was experienced enough to read the signs. She wanted him, maybe as much as he wanted her, but they couldn't do this. "Like what you see, babe?" Deke asked, his voice so thick he sounded choked.

Instead of spiking her temper the way he'd intended, she ran her eyes over every inch of his body before she reached his face. "Yeah, I like." Ryne licked her lips and he almost groaned aloud. She sashayed closer, and in a sultry voice, asked, "But you know what?" Her hand caressed his shoulder, his biceps, and came to rest at the crook of his elbow.

"What?" he managed.

"There are plenty of good-looking men out there." The sexy tone vanished and the scowl returned. "Men who are Gineal and who aren't aggravating pains in the ass."

Deke chuckled quietly as she stormed across the room and bent over to dig through a drawer. Even as frustrated as he felt at that moment, he liked that Ryne could hold her own with him. He might have her riled up, but she wasn't going to back down or cede the upper hand. This was going to be fun.

"I never found flannel boxers sexy till now, but babe, the way they pull taut across that gorgeous ass of yours is raising them to a whole new level in my eyes. Of course—"

"If you say you're rising to a new level, too," she scowled at him over her shoulder, "you'll wish you were wearing an athletic cup."

He laughed and watched her eyes go molten. One more good push should do it, Deke decided. He waited until she straightened and started toward him. "You're not going to kneel me. You want me too bad to risk damaging the merchandise."

"You arrogant, insufferable"—Ryne closed the gap until she

was toe-to-toe with him—"conceited jerk. With your attitude, I'm surprised you get any women. You're not irresistible."

Quirking his lips to add fuel to the fire, he drawled, "No? Then why are your nipples hard? It's not cold in here." Deke hesitated, then decided to cross the line. Reaching out, he grazed her breast with his knuckles. That did it.

Ryne dropped what she held and lunged at him. Despite being braced, she hit him hard enough to knock him off balance. He wrapped his arms around her to stay on his feet, but instead of keeping him upright, they both landed on the bed.

He lost his towel as she wildly punched at him. To defend himself from her blows, Deke put up his arms, but Ryne showed fighting skills he wouldn't have guessed she possessed. Before he could figure out what she was up to, she straddled him. Her abrupt motion caused the headboard to slam into the wall, but she didn't stop, not until she'd pinned his wrists beside his head.

"Babe, you should have told me you wanted—" He didn't get a chance to finish. The door flew open with a bang.

"Ryne, are you— Oh."

Given their position, Deke had a fair idea what Maia was thinking. Ryne started to move off of him, but he freed his hands, and taking hold of her hips, kept her in place. "Do you want your sister to see what you do to me?"

"Crap," she muttered, but soft enough that he bet he was the only one who heard it.

"I guess I'll hold breakfast for a while," Maia said wryly. "Think half an hour will be enough?"

Ryne's blush had him struggling to contain his laughter. "Ten or fifteen minutes will be plenty," Deke offered, but he didn't take his eyes off the woman above him. "This is the second time you've interrupted us."

Fury blazed in Ryne's eyes and she shifted, but he didn't let her go. When the door shut quickly, he suspected that the movement had looked sexual. And it was sexual. Whatever her intent had been, the result was that she was rubbing against him and both of them were feeling it. "It'll be good between us," he told her. "Tug your shorts aside and let me show you."

She was tempted. He could see the battle she waged with herself—what her body wanted versus what common sense

said to do. Deke watched her head win out over her desire and released her a split second before Ryne swung off him.

He didn't bother to reach for the towel. Instead, he tucked his hands behind his head and let her look. She stared for a long time before she realized what she was doing. With a curse, Ryne tore her gaze away and bent down to pick up the bundle of clothes she dropped. Her eyes closed and she ran a hand in a clockwise motion over the top of the pile.

"Get dressed." She tossed the garments at him and he caught them before they hit him in the face.

"I'm not wearing girl clothes."

"They're sweats."

"I'm not wearing your stuff." Deke stood, let the clothes fall to the floor, and squared off with her.

The confrontation lasted until Ryne said, "Oh, for God's sake! You're half a foot taller than me and much broader; do you think you could fit into my things? Those," she gestured to the heap at his feet, "are your size. Hold them up if you don't believe me and you'll see."

Giving her one, last hard look, Deke bent down and snagged the sweatshirt and sweatpants. She was telling the truth. While some women liked to wear loose-fitting sweats around the house, these were much too baggy and too long for Ryne. "Okay," he said grudgingly.

It was Ryne's turn to smirk. "Why don't you take a shower, get dressed, and join us for breakfast?"

"I don't need a shower," Deke grumbled.

"Yes, you do. You need to take care of that," she indicated his erection, "so you don't embarrass my sister."

Deke grinned. "Does it turn you on to think of me jerking off because of you?"

Her face went red. "Just shut up," she snarled, and whirling, she stormed out of the room.

Maybe he would hang around, let her think she was protecting him. After all, what did he have to go home to? His apartment would have been rented out long ago, his credit cards inactivated, and his bank accounts frozen. Besides, it was going to be hot between them, and it was only a matter of time before he got his hands on her. Whistling, Deke sauntered toward the master bathroom.

* * *

Ryne wanted to scream and she probably would have if it wouldn't let Deke know how much he got to her. Pausing in the hallway, she drew deep breaths until her need to strangle him receded. The cartoon Deke was an occasional smart ass, but that was television. She'd never dreamed that the real man would be so much worse. Ryne took another deep breath.

She never lost her control. Never. Until she'd woken up in bed with him. In less than an hour, he'd caused her to forget years of training. For God's sake, she'd tackled him! No magic, no cool martial arts moves—she'd run at him. As if that was going to do her any good.

The worst part was that he knew what he did to her—Deke enjoyed winding her up. Hell, he'd been playing her expertly, and even though she knew it, she couldn't stop herself from responding. Ryne leaned against the wall and shoved her hair back with a shaky hand.

Her temper wasn't the only thing he'd aroused, and Deke knew that, too. It left her frustrated. And confused. She'd grown up watching what Anise did to human males and Ryne had vowed not to be like her mentor, not in any way.

When she heard the shower come on, she swallowed a moan. The thought of Deke masturbating did get her hot and Ryne hated that. She could almost see him, his big body slick with water, his hand sliding up and down his shaft while he thought of her.

Her respiration increased again, and she forced herself to slow it down. She had to locate her peaceful center, the place that allowed her the serenity to deal with whatever came her way. But for the first time in her life, she couldn't find it, not with her entire body hot and aching in places she didn't want to feel throb.

With one, last deep breath, Ryne straightened away from the wall. She wasn't anywhere close to ready to face her sister, but she couldn't linger here. All she'd need was Maia turning down the hall to check on her—or worse yet, Deke finishing his shower and discovering that she was still struggling for composure.

The instant Ryne walked into the kitchen, Maia pounced. “What the hell is going on? Maybe now that he’s not around, you’ll give me a straight answer.”

Ryne suspected her smile looked as weak as it felt. As nonchalantly as possible, she headed for the fridge and pulled out the orange juice. “I can’t believe you even need to ask. Did you get a look at him?” She grabbed a tumbler out of the cabinet and set it on the counter. “A woman would have to be three-quarters dead not to react.”

“Sell it to someone else, I know you too well to fall for that. It’s more than you sleeping with him—that’s improbable enough—but you told him you’re Gineal. When it comes to the laws of our people, no one is a bigger stickler than you.”

Pouring her orange juice, Ryne tried to decide the best way to counter Maia’s assertions. Slowly, she raised her eyes from the cup and met her sister’s gaze. She needed her lie to be convincing. “Our relationship—” she stopped short.

“What about it?”

“It’s serious.” Ryne fought to look innocent, and maybe a touch reluctant. “When I’m around Dan, I can’t stay centered. He does something to me, affects me like no one else ever has, and it started the instant we met. I don’t want it, but I can’t seem to resist the pull either.” It was true, more or less, but it mortified her to admit she lost her self-command with him.

“You said—”

“I know what I said, but he’s human and there’s nothing I can do about that.” Ryne closed the OJ and brushed past her sister to put it away. She shut the door harder than she needed to, but damn it, she hated lying to Maia. It was *his* fault. If he’d only stayed put, if he hadn’t come out wearing nothing except a towel, if he hadn’t wrapped his arms around her and kissed the spot where her T-shirt had gaped away from her throat. But the if-onlys didn’t matter. He had done those things and they left her little choice.

“Sorry,” Ryne apologized, her voice quiet. “I, well, it’s embarrassing to have you find out about Dan after the hard time I gave you about your human.”

“There is that,” Maia said as she crossed her arms at her waist. “You were holier than thou.”

Ryne tried another smile. "Yeah, sorry." She knew she should leave it there, but she couldn't stop herself from adding, "But I'd never give up my powers. Not for any reason."

"Don't be so quick on the never."

To keep herself from saying more, Ryne shrugged, picked up her orange juice, and took a sip. Maia seemed to be surviving fine without her magic, but Ryne doubted she'd function even half as well. Her abilities were so much a part of her that a large piece of her soul would die without them.

"Why?"

"Why what?" Ryne put her glass down on the counter and linked her fingers.

"I don't know. Why him? Why now? Just why?"

"What can I say that you haven't heard already?" And damn she wished Maia hadn't come over this morning. Ryne willed Deke to hurry up. Once he was here, the questions wouldn't be as pointed, she was certain of that.

"You're unusually fastidious when it comes to men and sex. I know why you're so reserved"—Maia held up a hand to cut off her protest—"Anise messed up your head when you lived with her and you've never worked through it, but the bottom line is you're much too cautious to pick up some guy in Vegas."

Ryne didn't know what to take issue with first. "Just because I'm not promiscuous doesn't mean my head is screwed up." She fought the need to slash back—Maia's words had cut at her—but she'd already hurt her sister last night and didn't want to do it again. "As for Dan," Ryne said, her voice calmer, "I said I met him in Vegas, I didn't say I slept with him there. This morning is the first he's been in bed with me."

"That I find easier to believe. How much time have you spent with him in the four months since you met?"

Crossing her arms at her waist, Ryne replied, "I've seen him a lot more than you realize." Like once a week, and if she counted watching the DVDs, more than that.

"How many waffles do you want?" Maia asked.

Ryne blinked at the abrupt change in conversation, but before she could comment, she felt *him* behind her. Damn it, she hadn't heard him come in. Reluctantly, she turned. The sweats he wore were a perfect fit. When she'd cast the spell to change

her clothes to his size, she'd had to guess, and it satisfied her that she'd been right.

"Problem solved, babe." And he winked at her.

Her face scalded, but that didn't stop her eyes from dropping to his crotch. His groan was almost inaudible over the sounds of Maia pulling out the waffle iron, but it was enough for Ryne to jerk her gaze back to his face.

"Don't," she warned him quietly.

"Don't what? You're the one who started it." He leaned nearer. "You get me hard again and it'll be up to you to take care of it."

For an instant, she was speechless. The temptation to reach out and stroke him was so strong, she nearly did that. It was the sound of the top of the waffle iron falling against the bottom half that shook her out of her daze.

"What are you two, a pair of rabbits?" Maia glared at her. "If you want waffles, make them yourself. I'm going home."

Ryne opened her mouth to stop her, then shut it again. This was for the best. There was too much she and Deke needed to talk about that couldn't be said in front of her sister.

A few moments later, the front door closed hard enough that she heard it in the kitchen. Ryne scowled at her houseguest.

"We might go at it as often as a pair of rabbits, but don't worry, babe, I won't finish rabbit fast."

Deke chucked her under the chin lightly and sauntered from the room, completely oblivious to how close she was to tossing a tiny burst of fire at him.

5

CHAPTER

Ryne pulled a long-sleeve polo shirt off the rack and held it at arm's length.

"I'm not wearing pink," Deke growled over her shoulder.

"It's salmon."

"It's pink."

With a silent sigh, Ryne put the shirt back. If she'd learned one thing during this trip to the mall, it was that there was no point wasting energy arguing with Deke when that hard note entered his voice. Not about something as trivial as this.

"Any objection to turquoise?" When he didn't say anything, she reached for the hanger.

"I don't need more clothes." As he moved to her side, his hand curled lightly around hers, stopping her from taking the shirt off the rack.

He stood close—too close for her peace of mind—but Ryne refused to show weakness by stepping back. "Yes, you do." She worked hard to stay on topic and sound unaffected. "Three pairs of jeans and a handful of shirts aren't enough to last a week."

Deke moved her hand till it rested on his chest and covered it with his. "I don't have any money," he said quietly. "You've paid for everything and I know you can't afford this."

Ryne stared at him in amazement. What he'd said wasn't some smart-ass comment, but a thoughtful statement of concern about her finances. It was the first time she'd seen this side of him. "Why do you believe that?"

"You always head straight for the clearance area. I don't want you going into debt for me, babe, okay? Clothes wash."

The heat of his body made her palm burn, but she didn't pull away. Instead of correcting his erroneous assumption, Ryne went off on a tangent. "I might not have time to wash clothes if I have to deal with Anise on top of my regular duties."

"I can take care of it."

"Do you know how?"

Edging a half-step nearer, Deke said, "I've been doing my own laundry since I was twelve. I'll handle it."

"Really? You don't strike me as having domestic skills."

He smiled. Not a smirk, but an honest-to-God smile. For a split second, she forgot how to breathe. "I'm thirty-four—" Deke stopped short. "I aged while I was stuck in *DSPI*, right?"

"Yes, you did. Sorry, you won't get those years back."

With a shrug, he restarted, "I'm thirty-four and I've never earned enough money to hire servants. I do laundry, I cook, I dust, I vacuum—everything an adult who's lived on their own has to do. You're the one who's probably helpless around the house." Deke's grin widened. "A little twitch of your nose and the chores are done."

If he'd said that with his smart-ass tone or if he'd given her that smug expression, she would have gotten irate over his remark—especially the nose-twitching part—but he hadn't been jabbing at her, so she answered seriously. "I almost never use my abilities for something like that." Ryne lowered her voice. "The Gineal consider it a waste of magic."

She'd inherited the attitude, she realized, but hadn't really understood the whys behind it. Now, however, she knew. Last night she'd been cut off from the source, left with only her own pool of power. If she'd used it frivolously, say to put on her jacket before she left the house, she would have died—Ryne had no doubts about that. It had taken everything she had to survive long enough to send the wraith through the soul gate.

Deke's thumb brushed across her cheekbone, jerking Ryne's attention back to him. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, sorry, I was thinking about something." Before he could ask any questions, she quickly said, "You're wrong, though. I can afford to outfit you. It's March, which means you need warm clothes, and those are on clearance at this time of year." He looked doubtful. "Have you heard of The Gineal Company?"

Recognition sparked in his eyes. "That's your people?"

She nodded. "We own conglomerates that sell everything from food to electronics to household cleaning products. You name it, we probably own a business that produces that good or service. Officially, I'm an employee of the corporation and I'm well compensated for what I do."

For a moment, he stared at her. "I'm still going to pay you back for everything when I can access my bank accounts."

"Okay."

Deke stepped away then, opening up some distance between them. "Just so you know I'm no freeloader."

"I know," she assured him. He was a pain in the ass, but Ryne had no desire to step on the man's pride. Besides, he'd never be in this situation if it weren't for Anise. "Now how do you feel about turquoise?"

He grunted. She took that as a go-ahead to pull the shirt off the rack and hold it against his chest. It was a good color for him, making his eyes seem more blue than gray, but she didn't mention that. "Do you want to try it on?"

"I don't need to." He gently removed it from her grip. "It's my size, the color isn't horrible—let's buy it and get out of here."

Ryne blew out a long breath. Deke didn't want to try on anything, and damn it, he was right; he didn't need to. He was wearing jeans and a long-sleeve, waffle-knit Henley shirt in red—something they'd picked out at the first store—and both fit him perfectly. No wonder men didn't appreciate the difficulty women had in finding a pair of jeans. He'd simply grabbed his size, changed clothes in the dressing room, and handed the tags to the salesclerk to ring up. His cooperation had gone steadily downhill since then.

"You need more pants, more shirts, another pair of shoes, and a couple of jackets—one for winter and one for spring. The only things we're done shopping for are briefs, tees, and socks."

Deke grumbled. “How many more damn stores are you going to drag me into?”

“As many as it takes.” Ryne went toe-to-toe with him. “I hate shopping almost as much as you do. I’d rather buy stuff online and have it delivered, but you need clothes now, not a week from now. If you’d stop being so difficult, we could finish and get the hell out of here.”

“I have an idea,” Deke said, and from the sweet smile he gave her, Ryne guessed she wasn’t going to like it. “Why don’t I write down my sizes for you, and you pick out the clothes. I’ll wait for you by the televisions.”

“Not a chance, hotshot. If I have to suffer, so do you.” Something went through his eyes and she suspected he was about to head off anyway and make her try to stop him. “You do what I think you’re going to do,” she warned, “and I swear to God, you’ll have more pink clothes than any man who’s ever lived.”

“I won’t wear them.”

“If I return everything else, you won’t have much choice.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.” Ryne glared up at him.

He measured her, and she knew when he decided she meant every word she’d said. “You’re a hard ass,” Deke complained.

“If I wasn’t, you’d walk all over me.”

“Probably,” he admitted easily. “The blue is fine. Why don’t we pick a few more of the same shirt and call it good?”

There was a wide selection of colors available, even some stripes, and Ryne was tempted to go with his suggestion. “If we do that,” she said, “most of your wardrobe will be the same.”

“So what?”

Ryne shrugged. If he didn’t care, why should she? And the polos had been marked down low enough that they were practically a steal. With a common goal—getting out of the mall ASAP—things went much faster. They picked out a few more jeans, a belt, shoes, a denim jacket, and a warm winter coat for the thirty-degree weather—also a hell of a deal since it was so late in the season. He nixed the knit hat in favor of a baseball cap with *Minnesota Wild* emblazoned on it, and they were ready to go.

Or so she thought.

Deke was dragging his heels so she stopped and asked, "Did we forget something?"

"Babe—Ryne," he immediately corrected, "I hate to ask, but . . ." His voice trailed off as he hesitated.

She knew he wasn't feigning his discomfort. Ryne had seen how embarrassed he'd been when she'd whipped out her credit card to pay for his clothes, yet he'd gone up to the register with her each time anyway. Maybe it was a small thing, something most people wouldn't even notice, but it told her a lot about what kind of man Deke was and she liked his determination to do what he thought was right even if he was mortified.

"What?" she prompted softly when he didn't say anything.

Deke grimaced. "Would you mind if I got a watch? Nothing fancy," he added quickly.

"It's not a problem," she told him. But it was. Not because of the price of a watch. Hell, with what she was paid to be a troubleshooter, she could buy him the most expensive Rolex available without flinching. No, the problem was the way he'd asked, as if he didn't want to be an imposition.

Anise had imprisoned him inside a cartoon character for four and a half years—that was an unforgivable imposition on his life—and he was worried about the cost of a wristwatch.

And when she saw the piece of crap he picked out, Ryne nearly smacked him. Damn it, she didn't want to like him, but Deke wasn't giving her much choice about that. "I'm not wasting money on that thing. Here," she grabbed a watch that was about triple the cost, but still cheap enough that she didn't think he'd argue with her too much. "This one's better."

"It's too expensive."

"No, it's not."

"This one's fine." Deke held up the one he'd chosen.

"If you think I'm going to be seen in public with some guy wearing a watch with a plastic strap, you better think again. I have my standards." Ryne caught the glance he gave the watch she held, and it was obvious he preferred her choice. "The brown strap will go better with the clothes we bought," she suggested.

"Yeah, like I'm some kind of fashion geek."

"You're going to pay me back anyway," Ryne said, trying another tack, "so why not get the nicer watch?"

He hesitated for a moment. “Are you sure?” Deke lowered his voice. “You’ve put a hell of a total on your credit card already today.”

Instead of answering him, Ryne flagged down the sales associate and had her ring up the one with the leather band. “He’ll wear it,” she said, handing the watch to Deke, “but you can put the box in a bag for us.”

The teenager did that as Ryne signed the receipt. When she finished, she glanced up and noticed the girl gawking at Deke. Her smart-ass companion appeared completely oblivious as he set the watch to the correct time and fastened it around his wrist. Probably used to his effect on females.

When she finally recaptured the teenager’s attention and finished the transaction, Ryne handed the small bag to Deke, who stowed it inside one of the larger packages.

“We need a pack mule to make it to your Explorer with all these damn bags,” he grouched as they walked through the mall.

“I thought that was your job.”

His laugh surprised Ryne. “So that’s the real secret behind why women drag men shopping, huh?”

Deke’s grin was infectious and Ryne returned his smile before she was aware of what she was doing. Damn, she did like him—when he wasn’t infuriating her. “Since everything we bought is yours, why shouldn’t you carry most of the bags?”

“Point taken, babe.”

Ryne frowned, but otherwise ignored the *babe* thing. He wasn’t going to stop using it as long as she continued to react, so she needed to learn to tune it out. Either that or she might have to pound her name into his thick head.

As they stepped out of the mall, the icy wind slashed at him, tearing at his unzipped jacket. Deke shivered. How did people live here? It was March, for God’s sake.

When he saw Ryne looking at him, he tried to act as if the cold didn’t bother him. There was no way he’d admit that he was glad she’d forced him to shop for warm clothes. Deke grimaced. Shit, he owed her. Not just money, but his gratitude as well.

She claimed that any Gineal would do the same, but he doubted it. He might have met her mere hours ago, but he

already knew Ryne Frasier didn't do anything halfway and that included taking care of him. Despite his pushing her, aggravating her, teasing her, and generally driving her insane, she hadn't repaid him in kind. Her generosity made Deke feel guilty about how much he'd poked at her.

As much as he might hate it, he needed her charity. Reclaiming his life wouldn't be quick or easy, and until he managed to get the red tape unraveled, he had nothing. No money, no home, no car. Deke tried to imagine the conversation if he contacted one of his buddies for help. The first question would be *Where the hell have you been for the last four and a half years?* No one would buy the truth and any lies he told would have to be damn good to fool a bunch of cops, ex-cops, and private investigators.

The wind whipped up again, and he shrugged deeper into the jacket. It was a damn long walk to where they'd parked. When they'd arrived, the mall had been jammed and they were about as far out as they could get and still be in the lot, but it was after five now and most people had cleared out.

He owed her for more than material things. Her promise to help him had gone a long way toward keeping him calm. Once he'd recalled being imprisoned in the cartoon, Deke felt more afraid than he'd been since he was a kid. He'd done his best to conceal the gut-deep fear, but he didn't know how much she'd discerned anyway. Maybe he'd decided to trust Ryne, but she was still a stranger and he wouldn't allow her to see his vulnerability, not if he could prevent it.

It had been a relief when her sister had shown up. Deke had taken the time alone to overcome his anxiety. The curse was no big deal, right? He was out now and she was going to make sure he didn't go back. After being a cop and a PI for so many years, he was used to finding himself in strange situations and used to thinking on his feet. This wasn't that much different. Not really. He just had to take it one step at a time.

Ryne dug in the tiny purse she carried slung across her body and pulled out her keys. Deke hid a smile. The woman could do magic, but she still used keys entry to unlock her SUV doors.

She opened the rear hatch and he tossed the bags inside. Ryne, however, wasn't satisfied with that and she started rear-

ranging things. Deke bit back a groan. Who cared if stuff tipped over or moved around?

As she was fussing, the hair on his nape prickled. Careful to keep his movements casual, he glanced over, then did a double take. *Something* was lumbering toward them. It moved silently despite having about the same amount of grace as Frankenstein's monster, and as it neared, Deke decided it bore a resemblance to Jabba the Hutt—at least as far as facial features went.

"What the hell is that?" he asked.

Ryne's head jerked up. "Crap!"

That was the last word he understood. She started muttering in some indecipherable language as she stuffed her keys in the front pocket of her jeans. The monster came closer and Deke moved, putting himself in front of Ryne.

She grabbed his arm, tugged, and when he looked over, she gestured for him to get out of the way. He shook his head. Jabba was least seven feet tall and muscular. What was she going to do? Wave her magic wand at him?

There was a pause in her cadence, then Ryne began murmuring again, faster yet.

The creature's attention was locked on them. The way it moved, how it behaved, and the urgency in Ryne's voice confirmed what he knew—the bastard's attack was imminent.

He moved to meet it.

It reached out and lifted him from the ground as if he were a child. Deke tried to break the hold, but Jabba's arms were like tree trunks and his blows had no affect.

Then, as easily as Deke would toss a football, the monster threw him. He flew through the air and slammed into something headfirst.

Deke slowly regained awareness. He tried to figure how much time had passed while he'd been out cold, but couldn't guess. With a groan, he struggled to open his eyes, but his head hurt too damn much. Easier to stay where he was for a while. But as he was drifting, he heard Ryne shout. He had to check on her, had to make sure she was okay. The world spun violently before righting itself and he blinked hard to stop seeing double.

She held a long-bladed dagger, wielding it through a series

of spins and kicks that made him dizzy. Deke closed his eyes again to beat back the surge of nausea.

She knew martial arts.

Not the pretty stuff, but the down-and-dirty deadly kind that got a person banned from tournaments.

That should have relieved him, but she was facing something that wasn't human. He had to help her.

Deke didn't make it to his feet.

Sweat covered his body, his vision blurred, and he almost puked on himself. Great. Ryne was battling a monster and he, the ex-cop, was leaning against a Hummer, trying not to do the Technicolor yawn. Some protector he was.

He inched himself up the side of the SUV. It was slow progress, but he'd made it about halfway to his feet when Ryne let loose with a rope of fire.

Holy shit!

Deke wound up sitting on the asphalt once more. She'd engulfed the monster in a fireball so intense, it melted the snow piled up between the rows in the parking lot.

Jabba was unfazed. It kept coming for her, and as it walked, it pulled back its hand, as if pitching something.

As far as Deke could tell, the bastard wasn't holding a damn thing, but Ryne leaped. And remained airborne.

Hell, no one could jump that high or stay up that long—she had to be levitating. When she landed gently back on her feet, he was sure he was right.

Quickly, she moved in, raking her dagger across the bastard's chest. The knife made a scraping sound, but it caused no damage. When it dawned on Deke that he was sitting there, watching the show, he made another attempt to stand.

The monster raised its arm and swatted at Ryne. She ducked, and the first swipe missed, but the second one caught her and she went down. "Ryne!"

Had to help. Deke fought his way to his hands and knees, but she was up before he managed to clear his vision. He struggled to get to his feet, nearly heaved, and his palms hit the parking lot as he fell again.

Damn it to hell, he hated being helpless. And he definitely hated that a woman half a foot shorter than he had to defend his sorry ass.

Grabbing hold of the Hummer's side mirror, Deke used it to pull himself upright. His legs were wobbly, but he hung on tighter. Ryne's roar made him jerk and he nearly lost his grip. He looked over his shoulder. She was delivering a thigh kick to the monster and wasn't hurt.

He turned, keeping one hand on the mirror. As he leaned against the side of the SUV, working up the energy to move, Ryne went at the creature again. This time the blade found its mark. She turned her head to avoid taking a spurt of yellowish liquid in the face, but what spewed from the monster's neck hit her on the side of her head and ran onto her clothes.

Sweat dripped into his eyes from the exertion of standing and by the time he wiped it away, Ryne had taken the thing to the ground. She pulled the blade free, chanted just loud enough for her voice to reach him, and the creature disappeared.

Magic. He'd seen Ryne do small things that were easy for him to dismiss, but hurling fire and making a monster vanish weren't insignificant. How did he wrap his mind around this?

His stomach rolled alarmingly and he swallowed hard. Now that Ryne was safe, Deke allowed himself to slide down the side of the vehicle until he was sitting again. He'd think about magic later. Right now, his chief question was did he have a severe concussion or was it worse? And he wondered how much money he'd owe her after a trip to the hospital.

"Hey, hotshot," Ryne said softly. "How're you doing?"

Deke didn't bother to open his eyes. "My head is fucked up. I'm seeing double or blurred mostly, and the nausea is bad."

"That's not a surprise. You made a hell of a splat when you hit the side of the Hummer. Do you hurt anywhere else?"

"Does numbness count?"

Ryne moved her hand through his hair until she found a spot that made him grunt. Deke tried to reach for her arm to tug her away, but it was too much effort and he surrendered. She didn't do anything except lightly touch him, but as her palm rested against his scalp, it grew hot, and a funny thing happened—the pain started to lessen.

"What are you doing?"

"Just relax."

Since he didn't have the energy to argue with her, Deke was willing to oblige. As he continued to improve, he became

aware of how close Ryne was to him. He heard the gentle sound of her respiration. And he smelled something that almost made him gag. What the hell was that odor?

He hadn't realized he said that aloud until Ryne replied, "It's the crogaid's blood. I've got a lot on me. Now hush up, would you? I'm not a healer and I need to concentrate."

Deke had questions—lots of them—but he stayed quiet and let Ryne continue. By the time she removed her hand, he felt better than he had in years. Not only were his head, eyes, and stomach completely normal, but old aches that he'd earned during his time on the LAPD were gone as well.

"We better leave before someone wonders why we're sitting here," Deke suggested reluctantly. Maybe he felt 100 percent, but he wasn't ready to move yet.

"Before I fought the creature, I put a spell around the area to keep humans away. Nobody's coming until I lift it."

"That's what you were chanting?"

Ryne moved from her knees into a crouch. "Spells." She paused, shrugged, then explained, "The first spell was to protect myself, second was to protect you, and the third was to put a barrier around here."

"I came second?" he teased.

She scowled. "When you board an airplane, the flight attendants tell you to put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others. You know why? Because if you're out cold, you can't help the guy beside you anyway. It's the same theory at work. We're trained to protect ourselves first and then take care of others. A dead troubleshooter is no good to anyone. I'm sorry, though, that I wasn't able to finish your incantation before you went sailing." Ryne stood and held out a hand to him.

Deke wanted to touch her, so he took her up on the offer. When he was on his feet, he dusted the sand off his ass and looked around. That's when he saw the damage to the Hummer. There was a dent in one of the door panels where his head must have connected and a broken side-view mirror. "Shit."

"Fixable." She closed her eyes, was silent for a moment, then flicked her fingers toward the SUV. As he watched, the ding popped out and the metal smoothed itself back into its normal shape. Next, the side mirror mounted itself into position. "The owners will never know. Come on, let's get out of

here so I can lift the barrier. The mall closes soon and people will need to get to their cars.”

She shivered, and for the first time, he realized she was only wearing her sweatshirt and jeans. “You should have told me you were cold.” Deke shrugged out of his jacket and started to put it around her shoulders, but Ryne backed away.

“The crogaid blood will permeate the fabric and it doesn’t wash out,” she explained.

“Why don’t you do some more chanting and clean up? Or is that considered wasting magic, too?”

Ryne looked thoughtful. “It’s unnecessary and I used a lot of energy already. I probably shouldn’t.”

“Because the threat might not be over?” He should have thought of that himself. It was a classic tactic—send in a diversion, then launch the real assault when the opponent was confident he was through with the fighting.

“Odds are there won’t be another attack, but better safe than sorry.” The wind gusted and Ryne shivered again.

“Come on, let’s get you out of the cold.” Taking her arm, he escorted her to the Explorer. “Where is your jacket anyway?”

“I can’t fight bundled up so I transported it inside my car along with my purse.”

“SUV,” he corrected.

“Whatever.”

He thought he detected laughter in her voice and he shot a glance her way. Yeah, she was definitely amused. “There’s a difference between a car and a SUV.”

Without commenting, Ryne dug the keys from her pocket and pressed the button to unlock the vehicle. He opened the driver’s door for her, but she didn’t get in until he was settled on the passenger side.

Deke studied her in the fading light. The bastard’s blood was only on her front side so her upholstery was safe enough, but she looked pensive. “You’re okay?” he asked. Ryne hadn’t acted as if anything hurt, but he’d seen her take at least one hit.

“I’m fine. I only had some minor bruising and I healed that before I reached you.”

“Good.” Deke was glad she was unharmed, but damn he was worthless. When had he become some fucking damsel in distress? Ryne had fought Jabba on her own and she’d defeated it

while he was trying not to puke. Okay, so she could do magic, big deal. He was a man and men protected women. It was embarrassing enough to have her buy clothes for him like he was some kind of gigolo, but the scene in the parking lot left him totally humiliated.

She rotated her hand in a counterclockwise motion, and Deke felt something. He'd bet she'd lifted the spell to keep people out of the area. Interesting that he could sense that. He put aside his thoughts, though, when she reached for the ignition. "That monster was after you."

Ryne's fingers were around the key, but she didn't start the Explorer. "No, it wasn't. You're the one it wanted to kill."

"Bullshit. If it wanted me dead, I'd be dead."

Turning to meet his gaze, she said, "You believe because it threw you instead of ripping out your heart, that you weren't its intended victim. You're wrong. Crogaids are lower dimensional beings with more brawn than brain power. When you confronted it, that probably left it confused."

Deke shook his head. "There's no reason in hell for one of those things to target me."

"Crogaids are easily manipulated and that one had Anise's energy sig all over it. She knows you're free and sent it to kill you."

6

CHAPTER

It was past twilight and edging into night when Ryne turned the Explorer onto her street. Instead of going straight home after leaving the mall, she'd driven to Target, forced some cash on Deke—too much according to him—and sent him into the store to get a razor, soap, and whatever other supplies a guy needed. She was certain he'd be completely safe and she couldn't go with him, not the way she looked.

He'd been gone a long time. Long enough that Ryne thought she might have to waste energy to clean herself up and go find him. It would have been magic she couldn't have afforded to use.

Deke had been badly hurt. If she'd followed procedure, Ryne would have called in a healer. She hadn't. Instead she'd poured healing energy into him and drained her own magic. It had been a stupid move, she knew that, but she hadn't been thinking of anything except taking care of him.

When he'd returned to the car, he'd not only had a bag full of stuff, he'd brought food from the snack bar. They'd sat in the darkening parking lot having dinner while customers came and went around them. That had been idiotic, too, since her hair was matted with crogaid blood and all they would have needed was someone a little too curious to send security over.

Ryne made the turn into her driveway and her headlights caught a figure sitting on the bench on her front porch. It took a few seconds for her brain to process the image. "Oh, crap."

"Who is that?" Deke asked, straightening in his seat.

She pressed the garage door opener and kept her eyes facing forward. "Gineal councilman."

"So?" Ignoring the question, she pulled inside, turned off the engine, and pressed the button to close the door. He caught her as she rounded the hood of the SUV. "Ryne?"

"I might be in trouble."

"Might be?"

"The spell I used to free you? It's one I needed council permission to use and I didn't bother to check with them."

It was obvious he had questions—knowing him, a million of them—but she didn't have time to answer them. She hurried to the front door. Ryne paused with her hand on the knob, took a deep breath, and then opened it. "Ceannard Taber, you are welcome in my home."

Taber didn't hesitate once she gave him permission to enter and she closed the door behind him. When Ryne turned, she saw Deke standing in the great room, hands at his sides and body tensed. Covertly, she scowled at him, then immediately smoothed out her face when Taber looked over at her.

"Please, have a seat," Ryne invited.

He ignored her. Instead, Taber addressed Deke. "I need to speak with Ryne privately. If you'd be kind enough to withdraw?"

"No."

Ryne rushed from the foyer to Deke's side. "He's a member of the Gineal council," she warned under her breath.

"I don't care if he's the fucking king of England; I'm not leaving you to face him alone."

His stubborn expression told her that she'd be looking at a hell of an argument to get rid of him. If they were alone, she'd wade right in, but Ryne was aware of Taber's interested gaze. Troubleshooters were supposed to remain in control, and when she and Deke had one of their discussions, she didn't stay cool and serene. Showing a weakness like that in front of a councilor was a good way to get assigned to Outer Mongolia.

"Excuse us one minute," she told Taber, and grabbing Deke

by the forearm, Ryne tugged. She didn't let go until she had him on the other side of the room. "I report to the council, that makes Taber one of my bosses and I'm in enough trouble. Don't dig the hole I'm in any deeper."

Deke leaned closer. "If you think I'm leaving, you better think again. Gineal can turn, you told me that. Maybe after what happened today you don't believe it, but I can protect you."

Ryne was momentarily speechless. He wanted to *protect* her? His conviction that he could defend her was delusional, but it was also . . . sweet. "I'm not in any danger, I promise." Deke didn't look convinced, so she continued, "You can—"

"That's enough discussion." The councilman's unexpected interjection made her freeze. "Both of you, over here."

She looked at Taber and he gestured for them to rejoin him. Ryne took Deke's hand and pulled, afraid that he'd resist just to be argumentative, but he moved with her readily.

The ceannard stared at them for a long moment, but Deke didn't flinch under the perusal. Finally, Taber nodded, and his thick fingers worked at the buttons of his coat. Ryne apologized—she should have invited him to remove the garment and taken it from him—but Taber waved aside her lapse in manners. Once he had it off, he sent both it and his driving cap to rest over the bannister near her foyer.

"In light of the other things you forgot to do, *laoch solas*," the councilor said, "this is a small matter."

Ryne swallowed hard. While other Gineal regularly called troubleshooters by their title, councilors reserved the use of *laoch solas* for formal occasions—like when an enforcer had transgressed far enough to earn worse than a slap on the wrist.

Taber looked around, shook his head, and with a wave of his hand, produced a wooden, straight-back chair. Slowly, he sat. "This man is the reason you used the spell last night."

"Yes, ceannard."

"He may stay." Some of the tenseness left her at the pronouncement. If he hadn't given his permission, she didn't know how she would have gotten Deke to leave. While the Gineal had no hard and fast rule about using magic to override another's free will, it was something they tried to avoid.

Taber remained silent as he considered her, and Ryne used the time to study him also, hoping to gauge how severe her

punishment would be. As always, the ceannard's expression revealed nothing. He looked older, she noticed, and after some quick math, she guessed he must be in his late eighties now. For the first time in her memory, however, he looked every minute of his age. His hair was almost pure white, his wrinkles deeper, particularly those on his forehead, and though he carried little extra weight, Taber's jowls seemed to hang, giving him a droopy-dog appearance.

Ryne didn't want him to be old. Of the nine councilors, he was the most benevolent toward her. He'd also been Maia's mentor, and on the few occasions she'd been allowed to see her sister, he'd been nothing except kind.

But it was more than that. Maybe most important were the lessons Taber had given her. She'd been too young at the time for formal troubleshooter training, but he'd taught her things about her powers that helped while she'd lived with Anise, things that she felt certain had kept her from succumbing to the dark forces at a young age.

"The council," Taber said at last, "has granted me the authority to speak for the body as a whole."

Wanting to appear as respectful as possible, Ryne released Deke and linked her fingers in front of her. If they'd sent Taber, it meant the council was prepared to be lenient—provided she had a strong enough reason for her actions—and she didn't want to take a chance on messing that up by seeming impertinent. No doubt Deke and the aura of challenge surrounding him would cause enough problems for her.

"Give me a report on the spell and the events leading up to your use of it." And with that, Taber sat back and waited.

Ryne took a second to center herself, then launched into her explanation. Giving oral reports to the council was a routine part of her job, and because she'd expected to have to justify her use of the incantation, she had her arguments prepared.

Taber didn't interrupt, but when she concluded, his first question hit right to the weak spot of her case. "When did you find the spell and make the decision to use it?"

"Recently," Ryne said, although she knew that wouldn't work.

"Define *recently*."

"Two weeks ago."

The councilor nodded, and while his expression never

changed, she was aware that he hadn't liked her answer. Worse than his displeasure, though, was the disappointment. Maybe he hadn't been her mentor, but in some ways, she thought of him that way. It hurt Ryne to realize she'd let him down.

"A monitor discerned the use of very gray magic and reported it to the council," he said as if he were the one giving the report. "We assigned a tracker to locate the source. You can imagine the reaction when he reported your name to us."

Ryne quirked her lips. Oh, yeah, she could definitely imagine it. Most of the council was certain she'd either turned already or was on the verge of doing so at any moment.

"The only reason we didn't have you immediately brought before us to explain yourself is that you made no effort to hide your transgression. After much discussion, it was decided that I would find out the whys of it." Taber looked down at his gnarled hands and the silence was deafening. When he met her eyes again, she knew he'd reached a decision. "Anise grows more dangerous every passing day; she must be stopped. You're our best hope and you say that this man is the key. What can he do to aid you?"

Ryne shifted slightly. "I'm not certain. All I know is that Anise went to a lot of effort and used a great deal of magic to take him out of the picture. He must be a threat to her. We'll work on discovering why."

"She did go to considerable lengths." Taber paused, clearly considering what he'd been told. "Very well," he said slowly, "I'll grant you until the full moon to resolve this situation with the provision that you're careful to restrict how much information you share with him about the Gineal."

"But that only gives us two weeks, ceannard."

"That's all the time you have. The incantation grants him temporary freedom. Anise's spell returns him to his cartoon at the full moon."

Deke expected to find the door at the bottom of the basement stairs locked, but the knob turned easily beneath his hand. He opened it slowly, not wanting to alert Ryne if he could help it. He might as well have saved himself the effort. She was so involved in whatever the hell she was reading that he could

have come in leading a marching band and she wouldn't have noticed.

Standing quietly in the doorway, he watched her for a while. She even read with intensity. Scowling, she pushed forward one of the books she had open on the table, and with a wave of a hand, made a second disappear.

"You find anything yet?" Deke asked.

Ryne's head jerked up. "No, not a damn thing. I've read the references Taber gave me, followed what I found there to a new list of books, but everything supports what he said about my incantation only freeing you till the full moon."

He pushed himself away from the jamb and ambled toward her. "Maybe he only mentioned the ones that corroborate his statement."

Deke leaned his hips against the edge of the table next to her, and Ryne stiffened before trying to unobtrusively put a few more inches between them. "I don't bite, babe. Unless that turns you on."

She rolled her eyes, but otherwise ignored his teasing. "A ceannard wouldn't lie." Before he could protest, she added, "But I did some checking on my own anyway. The book you're almost sitting on? That's where I found the spell. I reread it and there's nothing in there about a time limit. When I skimmed through it, though, I found references to additional texts."

Ryne's elbow connected solidly with his thigh and Deke shifted. She pulled another book over to her. "Most of them had nothing about the incantation, but this one did."

Deke stared down at the spot she was pointing to, but he didn't recognize the language. "What's it say?"

"Basically it's warning the sorcerer to be cautious, that there are hidden pitfalls. Not too helpful, but I found more books named in here and several of them refer to my spell."

The grimness in her voice had his gut twisting. "Let me guess—they mention it's temporary."

"Yeah." Ryne leaned back in her chair and sighed loudly. "Two of them anyway. The other one is vague enough to be useless. I've exhausted everything I found independently of Taber and they agree—the full moon is the deadline."

Nausea swamped him and dread welled. He couldn't go

back to that fucking cartoon. *Shut it down, man, shut it down.* “Great,” Deke said when he had command. “I guess I better enjoy myself before I end up back in hell. Wanna go to bed?”

“Don’t be an ass,” she reprimanded mildly. “There’s always a way to reverse someone else’s proclamation; I just need to find out how to undo this one, that’s all.”

Deke squashed the surge of hope that arose. “You reversed it and it didn’t work. Not for good.”

Ryne finally looked at him. “You’ve known of our existence for less than twenty-four hours, yet you’re an expert on the Gineal and magic? Trust me, the spell can be undone forever.”

“You wouldn’t jerk me around, would you?” But even as Deke asked, he knew the answer. Ryne was an in-your-face person. No matter how much he aggravated her, she wouldn’t lie about this.

“I stopped looking when I found the equinox incantation that I used. I’ll resume my search until I locate the right one.”

“Ba—um, Ryne, you said it took years to find *this* spell. I don’t have that long.”

“I know, but we were lucky—the equinox fell on a new moon.”

Funny, Deke didn’t feel lucky, but he supposed he was—in a way. He was out of the cartoon for now and Ryne was on his side. Everything about her showed her tenaciousness, and while that was part of what made her so easy to tease, it was also something he respected. She’d work her ass off for him.

He reached over and took her hand. “What can I do to help?”

She smiled and Deke stopped breathing for an instant. Damn, she was beautiful—even with her hair matted into clumps thanks to the yellowish crogaïd blood—and he bet if he told her that, she wouldn’t believe him. “What?”

“I said,” Ryne enunciated carefully, “that the most important thing you can do is figure out why Anise is after you. The information would help me a lot.”

“I’ve been thinking about that.” Deke looked around for a place to sit, but the bench was too far away from Ryne and it didn’t look comfortable. “Are you done here? Why don’t we go upstairs and talk. I’ll tell you my theory and you tell me more about Anise and casting spells, okay?”

Ryne seemed reluctant.

"It's late," he coaxed, "and you've been poring over these books for hours."

She had been. As soon as the old man had left, Ryne had headed straight for the basement. He'd let her go, taking the opportunity to check out her house without her watching his every move. She had a top-of-the-line computer in her dining room on a desk that she'd probably assembled herself, and her chair looked like something she'd found at a thrift store for five bucks.

The two spare bedrooms were mostly empty. One had some exercise equipment, the other had an unlocked filing cabinet. He'd felt vaguely guilty, but that hadn't stopped Deke from checking out her financial paperwork.

Ryne was very well paid—his eyes had about bugged out when he'd seen how much she earned as a troubleshooter—and she wasn't a big spender. That television in her great room, however, hadn't been cheap. Her enormous flat screen was a man's dream and perfect for football, but he'd bet she rarely took the time to watch anything. The vaulted ceilings and the sheer size of the space made her couch appear even shorter than it was, and the coffee table had seemed more like an after-thought than a choice.

Her bedroom was the only place that wasn't painted the basic white color the builder had probably slapped on the walls. That room was Ryne—the woman she kept hidden from the rest of the world—the woman he wanted to get to know.

The wall behind the bed was a deep purple and the rest of the room was some shade of orange. Bold colors, but there was something about how they were put together that was soothing. From the wood of the furniture to the comforter on her king-size bed, everything inside was rich, lush, sensual, and warm. Ryne's prickly exterior—that was protection.

"It wasn't a tough question, babe," he said as the silence lengthened.

"I wish you'd stop calling me that."

"I know." Gently, Deke tugged her hand, encouraging her to stand. "But I can't help myself."

"Why? Because it annoys me and it's easier than remembering a woman's name?"

He led her to the stairs. "You might not believe this, but I

rarely call anyone babe. It fits you, that's all. Besides, you look sexy as hell when you're irritated."

"Yeah, right. Hang on," she said as he reached for the light switch. With a wave of her free hand, Ryne made the books disappear off the table. Deke had to glance away to hide his amusement. His little witch was obsessive. It would be a great way to yank her chain except for one thing—he shared her quirk.

"Why did you bother with the books," he asked as they started up the stairs, "when you won't 'waste' magic to clean yourself up?"

"Those texts aren't mine, they belong to the Gineal people. Since I was done with them, it was my responsibility to return them to the repository so someone else could use them if they needed to."

That was an interesting library system, but he didn't say a word. Things she took for granted were foreign to him. Deke knew himself well enough to understand that part of why he teased her was because he didn't want to be the only one off-balance. He felt like he'd fallen down a rabbit hole and found himself in Wonderland or maybe an alternate universe.

"Do you want coffee or something?" Ryne asked when they reached the great room.

"Nope." Deke steered her toward the sofa. "Just answers." She sat as far away from him as she could get. "I guess you don't trust yourself if you get too close, huh? Don't worry, babe, I can handle it if you get hot for me." He leered at her, making sure to exaggerate it.

"Is sex the only thing you think about?"

"With you? Yeah, it's on my mind a lot."

Ryne stared at him for a moment, eyes narrowed, then said, "You claimed you had an idea about why Anise is after you."

"Not quite." Deke ignored her exasperated sigh. "Before we get to that, explain a few things to me. What was that whole 'didn't release the spell' thing that the old man talked about?"

She shrugged, then studied him, and Deke knew she was weighing if she should say anything, and if so, how much. Taber hadn't bothered to speak in that other language when he'd warned Ryne that Deke was an outsider and to be careful about how much information she doled out. That had pissed

him off. She'd been prepared to tell him a lot, she'd said as much, but the councilman had taken care of that.

"Usually when we spellcast, we close the incantation and let go of the energy." Ryne began to push a hand through her hair, grimaced, and lowered it. "When Taber said Anise didn't release the spell, he meant she kept a line of energy between her and it. Not you," she added. "The spell she put on you."

Deke didn't get it, not entirely, but he couldn't even think of how to ask for clarification. "Huh?"

Ryne smiled. "Sorry. It's hard to explain a lot of this. It would be as if you were dropped in a remote civilization, someplace where they'd never seen a car, and you tried to describe how to operate one without any kind of visual prop. I've been Gineal my entire life—I can't remember a time I wasn't using magic—how do I explain something that's so ingrained in me?"

"Carefully and thoroughly," he suggested. But he understood what she was saying. Ryne didn't realize what she needed to fill him in on because so much of it was second nature to her. Her example made sense. How would he tell someone who'd never seen a car before how to start one if he couldn't show them? He'd done it a million times and there were steps he'd forget to mention because they were instinctual at this point.

"Spells are based on directing energy." Ryne smiled and Deke figured his incomprehension must be written on his face. She leaned forward, and using the heel of her hand, slid the remote across the coffee table. "That's using physical energy to move a physical object, get it?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, it's kind of like that with magic, too." She gestured with two fingers and the remote sailed back toward them. "That was using mental energy to physically move an object."

"Telekinesis."

Ryne nodded. "Very simple stuff. Watch the remote." She turned it into an unlit candle. "I closed the spell, but didn't release it. Now I'm going to illuminate the cord connecting me to what I just did. Do you see it?"

"Got it." There was a glowing line almost as thin as a strand of spider web going from the candle to Ryne. Deke thought he

could see pulses of light starting on her end and traveling down the strand to the other end. “What’s that flow?”

“My energy. I’m releasing it now.” The link disappeared. “That’s what Anise did. And unlike my demonstration, the spell she used to imprison you was complicated, something that probably most Gineal aren’t strong enough to invoke.”

Deke mulled over what Ryne had told and shown him. “That’s how she knew I was free so quickly, isn’t it?”

“Yes. She felt the cord being severed. The thing you need to understand,” Ryne said and leaned toward him, “is that it requires a lot of power to hold a spell, and the more complex the incantation, the more strength it takes. In the last four years, I’ve fought Anise to a draw about half a dozen times, which means our magic was about equal.”

It took a second for the implications to sink in. “Shit, you mean that you *were* equals when she was diverting some of her power to hold the spell, but now that her connection’s gone and she has that magic back, she’s more powerful than you. You’re saying she’ll win the next time you fight.”

“Probably.”

Something in the way Ryne said that alerted Deke. “She’ll kill you, that’s what a win means, doesn’t it?”

“We’re not playing baseball,” Ryne snapped. “She’s completely corrupted from using dark magic, so yeah, she’ll kill me if she can.”

Deke studied her. He’d watched her fight—more or less, since his vision hadn’t been perfect—and had known she was tough, but this piece of information readjusted his perception.

When he’d first come out of the police academy, he’d been assigned to the Newton Division, one of the most dangerous areas of Los Angeles. It wasn’t easy being a cop in that place, and there’d always been risk, but that was his job. Ryne would tell him the same thing—facing Anise was her job.

“Troubleshooters are the Gineal police.”

Her lips quirked. “Kind of.”

“What if you win, do you kill her?”

Ryne shook her head. “When I come out on top, I bind the person’s powers and send them to face the council. And before you ask, they generally strip the transgressor of their magic.”

“Which ends the threat?”

"It does because the dark forces can only work through someone with ability. Maybe the person is a dormant who doesn't realize they possess magic, but it's never someone powerless."

"How—" he started to ask, but Ryne interrupted him.

"I'm not up for more questions tonight, and I'm sure Taber would say I've already told you too much. Let's get to your end of things—why do you think Anise wants you out of the way?"

Deke considered pressing her, but Ryne did look tired, and if she was worried about how much she'd shared, she'd be more reticent than if he caught her at another time. He decided to drop this line of questioning for now. "Would you answer one more thing?" Before she could say no, he asked, "How did I end up naked in bed with you? You weren't doing magic while you were sleeping. Right?"

She grinned, and even though he knew it was because she found his question funny, he smiled, too. Ryne was too serious most of the time, and he liked seeing her like this.

"No, we don't do magic in our sleep. Some spells take awhile to work. Usually, it's no more than a few minutes and I have no idea why it took hours for you to show up. As for ending up in bed with me, well, the spell was written to call the enslaved person to the spellcaster."

"And the naked part?" he asked because he was certain it would make her a bit uncomfortable.

"Maybe because everything cartoon was left behind and that included your character's clothes. Or maybe Anise bespelled you while you were naked." She shrugged one shoulder.

"I sleep naked," Deke told her.

"So I figured out from the pajama discussion we had at the mall." She sounded beleaguered. "Now can we talk about Anise?"

Deke hid a smile. He hadn't told her that to needle her. It made sense that he'd been yanked out of his life while he'd been asleep, vulnerable. Making her uncomfortable—and getting her to think about him naked—was pure bonus.

"Okay," he said, trying to sound serious, "here's what I'm thinking. I've never met Anise, but I am a private investigator. What if I inadvertently saw or heard something while I was

working on one of my cases? Maybe I have pictures or video of something she didn't want anyone to know about."

"It's possible," Ryne said.

Her lack of enthusiasm was obvious. "It gives us a place to start."

She nodded. "True, and maybe it'll help us figure out what's going on. What assignments were you working on?"

He opened his mouth, and then shut it again when it dawned on him that he couldn't remember any of them.

It scared him to discover a blank spot in his memory and Deke closed his eyes, trying to pin down something, anything. Normally, he had a good half dozen cases going at one time, and he'd probably need to check things he'd worked on for maybe six months before he'd been sent into the cartoon world—after all, there was no reason why Anise had to cast the spell immediately. That gave him more possibilities.

But he still couldn't think of anything he'd worked on.

"Deke?"

He shook his head. Calm down, he told himself, there was no reason to panic. Just because his memory was nearly photographic didn't mean this lapse was anything to worry about.

Something tickled the back of his mind and he opened himself to it, let it flow in.

"My last case," Deke said, opening his eyes, "was looking for a cat. Not just any cat," he added quickly. He didn't want Ryne thinking he was a second-rate detective. "This was some rare breed worth like a gazillion dollars and there was a ransom note, too. It turned out that it was a rival on the cat show circuit that had taken the . . ." Deke let his voice trail off. Ryne was shaking her head, her expression sad, and he felt fear rise up again. "What?" he demanded.

She rested a hand on his knee and that's when he knew it was bad. "That was last night's episode of *DSPI*."

7

CHAPTER

The phone jolted Ryne awake. She groaned softly and started to roll toward the receiver, but she ran into warm skin and a whole lot of hard muscle. Deke.

“’lo.”

“Give that to me,” she demanded softly and tried to reach over his back to take the phone from him. He maneuvered out of her range and she muttered a curse.

“Why do you want to talk to her? It’s 3 A.M.”

“Oh, for God’s sake!” Ryne climbed halfway over him to get her hand on the receiver. “Hello?”

She’d known it was a call-out. Bracing a hand on his shoulder to stay balanced, she listened to the council aide, and opened herself to receive information. Deke picked that moment to run his hand up the back of her thigh. She shivered as the caress traveled through every cell in her body.

“What?” Ryne asked when she realized the woman was talking to her. “No, can you send it again?” She reached back and put her hand over his, stopping Deke before he reached an even more sensitive area. This time when the woman ended the transmittal, Ryne said, “Yeah, I have it.”

The phone went dead, and slowly, she leaned farther over to

drop it back in the cradle. Deke's fingers teased her inner thigh and she sucked in a sharp breath. Part of her didn't want to move. Her brain, though, overruled her body.

Hastily scooting over to her side, Ryne scrambled out of bed and went in search of clothes. Damn Deke. The aide would gossip about a male answering her phone in the middle of the night and word would spread in certain quarters. At least it hadn't been a high-level assignment—those were given by a ceannard—and if it were critical enough, the entire council would participate. That would have been too mortifying for words.

Ryne glared at Deke. This was his fault. Why was he picking up her phone in the middle of the night? Hell, that wasn't the main question. "What are you doing in bed with me anyway?" she demanded.

"I'm six-four and your couch is almost a foot shorter than that. The only other choice was the floor." She was amusing him, Ryne could hear it in his voice, and that irritated her.

He climbed out of bed and she ignored the stab of disappointment. She was *glad* he was wearing shorts—really—but the fact that she had to tell herself that brought her back to her senses. Okay, so this wasn't the most dangerous assignment she'd ever had; that didn't mean she could take it lightly. Overconfident troubleshooters tended to die young.

The reminder had her trading the tight jeans she'd chosen for a looser fitting pair. Rule number one: never assume.

Deke ambled in her direction, and from the look on his face, she knew he was planning to wind her up. Before he could reach her, she popped into the bathroom. He was bad for her. And damn it, he still had her tingling from trailing his hand up her inner thigh.

Ryne left the lights off and worked on centering herself as she dressed. If she was wrong and the situation was dangerous, she had to be ready both mentally and physically. She couldn't afford to be thinking of him. Not while she was working. She was fully clad long before she'd found the peace she needed.

Deke was waiting for her when she exited, and that easily, her serenity poofed out of existence.

"Where are you going?"

"Out." She tried to evade him, but he caught her arm.

"You get a phone call in the middle of the night and you're just going to take off?"

"That's my job." She tugged free and headed for the front hall to retrieve her ankle boots from the closet.

"I'm going with you." He trailed behind her.

Ryne stopped and turned to glare. "I work alone."

"I'm going with you," Deke repeated.

His stubbornness aggravated the hell out of her. "I have protection around the house. Stay inside and you're safe."

"I can take care of myself. I'm ex-LAPD."

She opened her mouth, shut it, and resumed course for the closet. Her first inclination was to mention they couldn't be sure he was a former cop. After their conversation last night and the questions he'd asked her, it had become clear that he didn't know which memories were his and which belonged to the cartoon Deke. But she couldn't say that. Deke had been shaken by the realization and she had no desire to use it against him.

Her second thought was to remind him how well he'd done against the crogaid, but his male ego would probably insist he prove himself capable and that could only lead to trouble.

"You can't fight against magic," Ryne told him, hoping this reason would discourage him without putting his back up. "And if I have to protect you, my attention will be splintered."

"I'm going to follow you if you leave without me," he threatened.

It was Ryne's turn to smirk. Even if she were traveling by conventional means, he didn't have a car. With a transit, well, no human could cross one of those. She didn't say anything, though, until after she pulled on her boots and tugged her jean jacket off the hanger. "Let me know how that works for you."

"You'll have to hurt me to keep me here and you won't do that," he said. "Harm none, that's the rule."

"That's a Wiccan law, not Gineal." But that was a bluff. Her entire job revolved around protecting humans.

"You didn't save me from the cartoon world to hurt me. I'll take my chances." His smart-ass expression returned. "Of course, if you want to tie me to the bed and use your hands and mouth to torture me, I won't object, babe."

Ryne took a step toward him, ready to rip into him, when

she caught herself. She was agitated and had to fight for command. How could he do this to her so easily? She knew better. Closing her eyes, she struggled to find calmness again. The only thing more dangerous than a cocky troubleshooter was a distracted one.

“What are you doing?” he asked. His mouth was next to her ear and the warmth of his breath tickled her. “Imagining what you’re going to do to my body once you have me tied up?”

She glared at him. “Will you be quiet? I need to be centered in case I have to fight. Don’t rile me right now.”

Deke sobered immediately. “How risky is this?”

“Low level, I think, but I won’t know till I’m able to assess the situation firsthand.”

“This centering yourself thing isn’t some story to get me to shut up, is it?”

Ryne pushed both hands through her hair and huffed out an impatient breath. “No. Every time I get a call-out, there’s the potential for danger.”

“Like a cop.”

With a shrug, Ryne donned her jacket. She wasn’t going to discuss this with him any longer. The man would ask questions until dawn if she let him and she didn’t have time for that. Closing her eyes again, she sought her place of inner calm. It took longer to find than she liked.

When she finally had it, Ryne began the spell to open the transit. Before she completed it, she warned him, “You’re staying here, remember that.”

“Sure, babe.” Deke held up her car keys and smirked.

He thought he had her—his smug expression said it all—but he was in for a surprise. Ryne walked away from the front door, and saw Deke relax slightly. That was when she finished the incantation and brought the glimmering gate into being.

“See you later, hotshot,” Ryne said with a wave. The sound of her name echoing as the transit closed made her smile.

The first thing she saw when she reached her destination was a boulder lit up with an illumination spell. Its glow was faint and she didn’t move, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the low light. A quick mental sweep located Zane a moment before he stepped away from the tree trunk he leaned against. She huddled in her jacket and watched him cut a path through

ankle-deep snow. As she grew more accustomed to the dimness, Ryne noticed the area was lightly wooded and far off the beaten path—not a surprise given the assignment.

“Why are you in such a good mood?” Zane asked as he noticed her smile, then he shook his head. “Never mind. I don’t know why they sent you. It’s only Benny; I could have handled it.”

Ryne barely kept from rolling her eyes. What was it about testosterone? “I know you could,” she agreed to appease another male ego. “And I figured it was him. He’s the only trolld I know who visits regularly, though God knows why.”

Some of Zane’s aggravation vanished. “I think Benny likes you, Ryne. He only appears in your territory.”

She snorted. “Yeah, right. Trolds like gold and gems, but not much else. I’m not sure they even like other trolds.”

“They reproduce somehow.” Zane smiled and Ryne almost sighed. Damn, the man was gorgeous, but while she appreciated his looks, it was a distant admiration, like going to the movies and watching Johnny Depp or Joaquin Phoenix. Not like when she looked at— She cut that thought off before she could finish it.

“Anything out of the ordinary about Benny’s visit?” Ryne took a closer scan of her surroundings.

“No, so far it’s business as usual.” Zane went quiet, but there was a tension to it that pulled her gaze back to his. Only when she was looking at him, did he gruffly say, “I’m sorry about the other night. I’m the one who tracked the gray spell to you.”

It made sense that he’d been the one assigned by the council. Once the monitor had pinpointed the questionable magic to her territory and the council learned how strong the user was, they would have assigned the best tracker in the vicinity—Zane. “You don’t need to apologize. It’s your job.” Ryne shrugged and slipped her hands in her jacket pockets. “Just like if you ever turned, it would most likely fall to me to hunt you. We do what we have to in order to protect our people and others.”

Zane nodded. “That doesn’t make it easier.”

“I know.” The council always assigned the enforcer closest to the one corrupted and it was tough going after a friend. “So are you going to hang around while I talk to Benny or take off?”

"I'll hang." The memory of the last time they'd worked together and how badly she'd been hurt shimmered between them. "Let me know when you leave so I don't sit out here all night."

"Will do." Ryne started toward Benny, then stopped. "Zane? Thanks. I know it's late and cold as hell out here."

"No problem," he said, and with a nod, she headed off.

Tromping the distance to the trolld wasn't easy. Not only was the snow up to her knees in places, there were fallen tree limbs and scrub to contend with. At least she didn't have to bother concealing her presence; Benny had known she'd arrived the minute she'd set foot in the area.

She paused when she spotted him. The trolld sat at the edge of a small clearing atop the trunk of a fallen tree. One hand held part of a branch and the other a knife that he ran along the length of the stick. He appeared aged with his long white beard, but Ryne had no real idea how old he was. With his black clothes and jaunty red cap, he stood out in the snow-covered forest, but she'd never seen him dressed any other way.

Benny didn't look up from his whittling, but he was aware of her, she was certain of it. Ryne moved again, clambering over another downed tree to reach him.

"You're early this year," she greeted him when she stopped halfway across the open space. "Normally, you wait for warmer weather to make your first appearance, Benny."

He put aside his wood and knife. "Not named Benny. You know this, little warrior."

The trolld always referred to her as *little warrior* and she'd never been sure if he was deriding her or if it was simply a title. His accent was thick—Scandinavian she knew, although Ryne hadn't been able to pinpoint which country—and between that and his cadence, she couldn't accurately read the nuances of his speech. "I do know that, but you've never told me your real name and I have to call you something, don't I?"

With a grunt, he reached for his knife, closed the blade, and slipped it into the pouch of his leather apron. "Not using bad magic here. Don't know why Gineal always send you."

"We don't only challenge those who embrace the dark forces. The Gineal consider it our duty to protect humans, and your people have a bad habit of abducting them."

"Not I, little warrior, never I."

Ryne shrugged. Maybe it was true, maybe it wasn't—it didn't matter. Her job was to encourage him to return to his home. "So why the early visit?"

"Wanted to speak with you."

Now that was a first, but Ryne didn't let her amazement show. "You just said the council had no need to send me, yet you wanted to talk to me? You contradict yourself."

He looked at her for a long moment before shaking his head. "Not contradictory. Am not playing with bad magic, so no need to send you, but I know you come anyway. Logical."

Now that he'd explained his reasoning, it made a certain sense. "What did you want to tell me?"

"Impatient," Benny scolded before he patted the spot beside him. "Come. Sit and we talk."

She eyed him dubiously. Sure, he'd never been violent in the past, but Ryne knew better than to trust a trolld. While they could be benign, even benevolent at times, they had the potential to be dangerous. If she were sitting next to him and he attacked, she'd have almost no time to react.

"So suspicious," he chided. "Binding pledge of no harm reassure you?"

At Ryne's nod, he gave his oath. She paid attention, but there were no verbal games or any other indication he'd played her false. This time when he gestured toward the place beside him, she accepted.

The trolld didn't say anything. Instead, he picked up the stick he'd been whittling and ran his thumb down the exposed wood. Ryne bit back her sigh. She'd learned—not easily—that sometimes she had to wait until the other person was ready to speak. She curled her toes inside her boots and pulled her jacket more closely around her. It was wickedly cold, but Benny seemed impervious to the temperature and uninterested in her discomfort.

"Despite connection to earth, Gineal more like humans than the trolld," he commented as she shivered.

Ryne immediately took exception to that. "We're not like humans, we honor the earth."

Benny chuckled softly. "Mean only that you are not *of* the earth." He put his hand over his heart. "Feel earth mother here; we are part of her. For Gineal, more here." He touched his head.

True. Trollds lived underground, taking shelter within the earth itself, while the Gineal lived among humans. She supposed the argument could be made that his people had closer ties.

“Earth mother weep.”

For a moment, she stared at him blankly, then she remembered the time he’d reprimanded her over environmental issues. “Hey, I give to Greenpeace,” Ryne told him. Benny appeared confused. “That means I support the groups working to protect our planet. I don’t have time to chain myself to trees.”

“Not what I speak of, little warrior.” He shook his head sadly, as if she were a slow student and he despaired of her ever grasping the lessons he was trying to teach. “Gineal connected to the earth, but not feel her, not like trolld. Hold this.” He passed her the stick. “Feel you the pain?”

“What? Why are we wasting time on this?”

“Making a point. Feel the pain?”

She huffed out an impatient breath, but the trolld appeared adamant. Going along had to be faster than arguing, and taking a deep breath, Ryne opened herself to the piece of wood she held. She felt nothing and shook her head.

“Torn from tree when high winds blow. Pain of tree fills branch. Gineal do not know this. Trolld do.”

Ryne was uncertain what this conversation had to do with anything. “If the branch feels pain, why were you cutting it?”

Benny shook his head again. “Branch is dead. It feels nothing. Pain belongs to tree.”

“Why are we talking about trees and branches?”

He didn’t answer her, and as the silence lengthened, Ryne couldn’t help but fidget. She’d been out here longer than she’d expected, and because she wasn’t moving, she was freezing her ass off. “Come on, Benny. It’s late, it’s cold, and I want to go home. Get to the point, okay?”

“Told you about tree for a reason, little warrior,” he said and she heard disappointment in his voice. “Demonstrating how closely connected trolld are to earth mother.”

“I understand.” But Ryne knew he didn’t believe her.

“Earth mother weeping because much bad magic being used. She feels it here.” Benny touched his hand over his heart again. “Causes pain to trolld. Must end.”

Ryne’s attention sharpened. “Who’s using the dark forces?”

“Know not the answer to that question. Know that they harm the earth mother. Know that she weeps.”

Oh, crap, they were back to this again. She wasn't able to rein in her frustration as she asked, “How can I help the earth mother if you don't have any details?”

“Did not say that.”

Ten minutes later, Ryne was ready to scream. Benny would say something vague, but seeming to provide information; she'd try to pin him down and get specifics, only to have him become even more ambiguous. “This is ridiculous!” she interrupted as he was off on another rambling tangent. “If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to keep me here.”

Realization dawned. Deke. She couldn't trust him to stay inside her house where he'd be protected. Ryne leapt her feet. “You son of a bitch. I hope Anise paid you richly for this because I won't forget your actions and I get even.”

She ignored the trolld's denials; she'd seen the flash of fear sweep across his face before he'd been able to hide it.

Zane, Benny's appearance was a setup. Can you make sure he leaves? I have to rescue someone else.

As soon as Ryne received Zane's assurance, she opened the transit. She had to be in time to save Deke.

8

CHAPTER

Deke cursed as he watched the glowing gate shut behind Ryne. What the hell was that thing?

He'd known she'd try to leave without him and he thought he'd circumvented that by confiscating the keys to her Explorer while she'd been in the bathroom. Most people didn't know where their spares were and he didn't think Ryne would be any different. He'd never considered she'd leave via magic.

The howling wind broke him from his paralysis and Deke went to check out the area where she'd disappeared. There was nothing there to tell him where she'd gone. So much for hopping into her SUV and catching up with her.

Not that he'd be much help anyway, as much as it pained him to admit it, she was right about that. She hadn't called him a liability or a danger, but that's what he was. It chafed. He'd been raised to protect, and with his training and experience, Deke had always been confident he'd be successful. Until meeting Ryne.

She inhabited a world he didn't understand. Before they'd been confronted by one in the parking lot, he hadn't known that there were such things as croguids. According to Ryne, the creature didn't possess magic. It hadn't mattered—he'd still been tossed like a football.

Another gust of wind hit the house, and standing this close to the large windows, Deke felt the cold. The shorts had been enough while he'd been under the covers with Ryne, but he needed something more substantial now. Since he wasn't going to get any sleep till she returned anyway, he decided to get dressed.

The jeans he picked up off the bedroom floor were stiff and the sweatshirt had that new-clothes smell that he hated, but he did feel warmer. He dug through the pile of shopping bags until he found some thick socks.

To give himself something to do, Deke decided to hang up his clothes. There was plenty of room in her walk-in closet and enough empty hangers to accommodate his meager wardrobe. Meager. He scowled. The amount of clothes might be small and almost everything might have been on sale, but he owed her a lot of money. It didn't matter that she could afford it; he'd never freeloaded in his life and he sure as hell wasn't going to start now, not with Ryne. Deke Summers paid his way.

He checked out the drawer situation. She had those only partially filled, too. Deke started to combine her things when an idea struck him. With a grin, he put his briefs next to her panties, then did the same with their socks.

Ryne would lose her mind.

God, he loved it when she got riled up. Not only did she look sexy as hell with flames shooting from her eyes, but she lost some of her formidable self-command when she was steaming mad. There was nothing he liked better than seeing the heat, even if it was fury.

Next, he put his personal articles in the bathroom, mingling his things with hers. Except for one item. He tucked the box of condoms in the nightstand next to the bed. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but as explosive as things were between them, Deke didn't want to be caught unprepared.

He picked up his watch. Ten minutes had passed. With a sigh, he strapped it on and headed for the main room. He dropped onto the couch, reached for the remote, and flipped through the channels, but not even ESPN had anything worth watching at this time of the night. Deke stabbed the power button and leaned back, propping his feet up on the coffee table.

God was a cosmic practical joker. Look at his life. He'd

been minding his own business, and one day he was plopped into—how had Ryne put it?—’toon town.

But it didn’t stop there.

After more than four years, he’d been freed by the sexiest little fireball he’d ever met, and instead of impressing her, he’d gotten an ass whooping from a lower dimensional being. His entire world was in flux. Everything he thought he knew about himself was in question. Had he been a PI? Did he live in L.A.? Shit, he didn’t even know if his name really was Deke.

Every single fact he remembered about himself and his life was something Ryne told him was part of the TV show.

It added to his embarrassment that she’d known how scared he’d been by that turn of events. What if he didn’t exist at all? What if he truly was a cartoon and his memories of being human were false? If he couldn’t trust his own mind, what could he trust? The fear started rising again and he fought it down. Ryne had insisted he was a real person. He had to believe that and not allow himself to think beyond being permanently restored to his life. Once that was accomplished, then he could worry about his memory, about where he’d live, about unfreezing his finances, and a million other details that would rear up. If he didn’t stay human, it was all moot anyway.

Instead of sitting here worrying and freaking himself out, he needed to do something. Deke might not know what was real, but he had access to a computer and he could investigate.

Getting to his feet, he headed for the dining room. Her chair groaned when he swiveled. He’d have to oil that for her, Deke thought as he pulled up a search engine and typed in his name. Hundreds of thousands of hits popped up and a cursory glance showed most related to the cartoon. With a curse, he tried to narrow the results.

He was still attempting to get below the hundred thousand mark when he thought he heard someone calling him. Deke lifted his head and looked around, but Ryne wasn’t there. He could have sworn that was her voice. With a shrug, he returned to the computer and decided to try his real name.

“Deke.” The voice sounded muffled, as if it were coming from outside the house.

“Ryne? That you, babe?”

No answer. Deke felt the hair stand on the back of his neck.

What if she were in trouble? Or hurt, unable to get inside? He pushed back from the desk and went looking for his shoes. Maybe he'd gotten his ass kicked once already, but he'd get it kicked again if that's what it took to defend her.

His heart was thundering so loudly that he almost missed hearing his name and the plea for help that followed it. He turned off the lights and let his eyes adjust to the dark.

Moving stealthily, Deke slipped into the kitchen and took one of her knives. He wished like hell he had his Glock, but he didn't bother looking through her house for a pistol. Ryne wouldn't own one, he knew it as sure as he knew how to anger her.

"Help! Deke!"

His hand tightened around the knife handle, but he took a deep breath and fought off the adrenaline surge. No way in hell was he letting Ryne down by carelessly rushing outside.

Front door or back? Deke decided to use the back. Slowly, carefully, he turned the deadbolt and eased the door open. He crept into the yard, barely registering the cold air. As he paused to get his bearings, he noticed a stillness to the night that seemed unnatural. More reason to find her ASAP.

"Deke." Ryne's voice came from behind him and he whirled. It wasn't her.

The thing was close to his own height and build and it looked humanoid—except for the long tail. Deke absorbed that in the millisecond he had before it attacked.

The son of a bitch was fast. He raised his forearm just in time to block the strike. Deke brought the knife up, but his opponent delivered a blow that sent it flying.

He ducked to avoid a second strike and came up swinging. All Deke got was air. He kept moving, spinning to deliver a kick to the back of his opponent's thigh. It was a solid hit, but it didn't seem to have any effect.

They circled each other, looking for an opening. Deke kept his eyes on the other's shoulders and legs, watching for an indication that it was going to strike.

But it was the tail that lashed out. It connected with his stomach and the air whooshed from his lungs from the force. How the hell did he anticipate something like that? Even as he worked to suck in oxygen, Deke didn't stop moving.

He thought about taunting the creature—maybe if it made a mistake, his odds would be better—but he didn't know what he was facing. With his luck, enraging this thing would turn it into the Incredible Hulk. Better to keep his mouth shut.

Deke danced out of the way of another blow. The glancing hit hurt, but he pushed the pain aside.

His enemy kicked and he brought up his knee to block it. With both hands, he grabbed the creature's ankle and yanked. It went to the ground, but didn't stay down long enough for Deke to take him out. Shit.

A fist connected with his temple before he could stop it. Deke shook his head, trying to clear his vision, but he wasn't quick enough. The second punch made his knees sag.

He firmed his legs. Deke was damned if he was going to get beat by something with a tail.

So far, he'd been primarily on the defensive. Now he went on offense, lashing out with a series of kicks and punches. Half of them actually hit flesh. The bastard staggered, and while his head was lowered, Deke laced his fingers together and brought down both fists to the back of its neck.

With his adversary down on one knee, he let loose with a roundhouse kick that caught it in the ribs. The grunt brought satisfaction, but it was only momentary.

That damn tail curled around his ankle and jerked Deke to the grass. He rolled and the thing's foot missed his head by a fraction of an inch. While it was open, Deke kicked upward with both legs, catching it in the balls.

That gave him enough time to get to his feet. He drove the heel of his hand into his opponent's throat and smacked it in the right temple with his elbow. The second elbow strike missed.

The thing attacked with a vengeance then, not allowing him an opportunity to get in a hit. He took the next blow on his chin and the force of it spun him around before Deke landed on his knees. His head was swimming and his back was toward his enemy, but he sensed something. He dropped to the ground, avoiding the strike. Deke pushed himself back to his knees.

But before he could get to his feet, the tail wrapped around his neck and began to squeeze. He brought his hand up, putting it between his throat and the tail, and tried to pull it loose.

He couldn't.

Deke wasn't going to die, not tonight. Not when Ryne would find his body. The tail tightened further.

Something caught his eye. The knife. He reached out, but his fingertips only brushed the blade. Shit. Straining forward, he tried again. So close. So damn close. He only needed another inch. Just another fucking inch.

He was running out of air, running out of time. With all his strength, Deke pulled and stretched as far forward as possible. His vision started to go dark as his hand curled around the handle. It was instinct that helped him swing around and slash the blade across the tail.

It screamed, the sound nothing a human could produce, and withdrew its injured appendage. Deke sucked in air, staggering to his feet.

His vision cleared enough for him to see the creature baring blackened fangs. Shit, he was in big trouble.

It leaped at him.

“Deke?” Ryne called the instant she stepped through the transit. Nothing, not a sound. She scanned. The idiot was outside. A split second later, she picked up the energy of an amadan and started running for the back door.

Even though she knew it would blind Deke, she flipped on the floodlights as she yanked open the door. She caught the amadan midpounce, its fangs extended. Crap!

Ryne drew energy, but before she could fire, it was on Deke and she couldn't risk it. She jumped to the yard and raced toward the fight, her heart in her throat. He couldn't die, he couldn't. She ran harder.

It was over before she got there.

But it wasn't Deke who lay lifeless on the ground. She looked at him in surprise before she dropped her gaze to the amadan. It wasn't dead yet, but it would be in seconds. It took her another moment to identify the handle from one of her kitchen knives buried the being's right abdominal quadrant—the place where its heart was located.

If Deke had struck it anywhere else, the amadan would have had enough time to kill him. He was so lucky. Ryne started shaking. “You could have died!”

He straightened and turned. Deke's pupils were dilated, his eyes so intense she nearly gasped. In less than a heartbeat, the emotion shifted, changing from ferocity to fierce passion.

Deke reached for her, pulling her against his body. "I know." His mouth covered hers and Ryne buried both hands in his hair, keeping him close as he kissed her. She opened for him, tasted his blood and there was something so elemental about that, so primal that desire exploded inside her.

Ryne ran her hands down his back, grasped his hips, and drew herself closer against his lower body. His big arms wrapped around her, one hand on her butt, the other on the back of her neck, holding her still as his tongue explored her mouth.

She barely noticed when he pushed her jacket off, too lost in the taste of him, the feel of his hard body against hers. But when he drew her sweatshirt up and the icy wind bit into her skin, Ryne pulled away.

They couldn't do this. Not with adrenaline surging through their bodies and blurring their thoughts. He was panting, too, though, and it satisfied something inside of her that he was every bit as affected as she was.

Her pleasure, though, didn't last long. He was a human. Memories about Anise's parade of men and the things the power difference had allowed her to do to them flashed through Ryne's head. She wanted to drive the images away, but knew she'd never get rid of them no matter how much she wished for it.

Bending down, she retrieved her jacket and put it back on. "It's about fifteen degrees out here, hotshot. Go inside while I take care of the amadan."

"No."

Ryne rolled her eyes. "Stubborn."

"Just like you. Now do what you need to do so we can both get out of the cold."

Deciding it wasn't worth the fight, Ryne began the spell to transform the being's body into energy and return it to the universe. She began shivering as she spoke the words and his arms came around her from behind, startling her so badly that she nearly lost her train of thought. She wanted to tell him to stop it, but she was warmer with him at her back, so Ryne settled for standing straight and not snuggling into him the way she wanted.

A soft glow began to encompass the amadan's body, and as the spell progressed, it grew brighter. Finally, Ryne closed the incantation and when the light disappeared, the body was gone. So was her knife and any evidence that the creature had ever been in her backyard. "Done. Let's get inside."

Deke stepped away and gestured for her to precede him. Again, she opted not to argue and crossed the ground to her house. Only when they were inside and she had the floodlights off and the door locked did she take a deep breath. He was safe now. Ryne turned on the kitchen lights and sucked in a sharp breath. "How badly are you hurt?" she demanded.

"I'm fine."

"Bullshit. I can see the bruising at your neck. How bad are you hurt?"

"I'll live."

She bit back a snarl. "Not if you keep pissing me off, you won't." He grinned. Not the smart-ass smile that aggravated her so much, but his real one, and Ryne felt her anger lessen. With her head clearer, she noticed the color of his skin. "You went outside without a jacket or gloves."

"Yeah, so what? You went outside in a jean jacket and without any gloves. I think that makes us about even."

Taking his hand, she tugged him into the great room. His fingers were like ice. "Your comeback would be a lot more effective if your teeth weren't chattering so hard. Sit." She pointed to the couch.

When he did, she settled in front of him on the coffee table and rested her hand on his chest. He was nowhere near as badly hurt as he'd been after the crogaid attack, and Ryne breathed a sigh of relief. It only required a small amount of healing energy to take care of his exposure to the cold. When the most dangerous problem was solved, she worked on the damage the amadan had caused.

"I hope you have enough magic left to warm yourself, too," Deke said when she opened her eyes. "I can feel how icy your fingers are through my sweatshirt."

Ryne sighed, but he was right. She'd been outside a lot longer than she'd planned to be. Folding her hands in her lap, she closed her eyes and quickly warmed herself as well. "There."

He didn't believe her. Deke ran his fingers over the tip of her nose and Ryne jerked away. "Watch it," she warned him.

"Too intimate?" he mocked and she grit her teeth.

That damn smirk was back and she knew Deke was thinking about their kiss, how she'd opened her mouth under his and let him take it as deep as he'd wanted. The memory sent tingles through her, but she fought them off. "Want to explain to me what the hell you were doing outside when I told you to stay in the house?"

He immediately sobered. "I thought you needed help."

"What?"

"I heard, 'Deke, help,' and it sounded like you."

Ryne leaned forward and rested her hand on his knee. "You couldn't know this, but amadans are expert mimics. The question is when did it hear my voice?"

"And how did it know my name?"

She realized she was stroking inside of his knee and jerked her hand back. And immediately regretted it. Why hadn't she removed it casually? Now he had that smug expression back in place and Ryne wanted to groan. "Anise, of course," she answered quickly, hoping to get his mind off her actions.

For a moment, she thought he was going to press her; instead he went along. "Are you making an assumption here or do you have a reason for thinking it's her?"

"Crap." Ryne dropped her head into her hands. She was an idiot, so damn caught up in Deke that she'd never thought to scan the amadan's body for an energy signature before transforming it. "I'm assuming," she admitted. And she shouldn't be. The first thing she should have done was discover who was behind the attack. That was basic, something a troubleshooter learned at the very beginning of his training and repeated over and over.

"It's okay, babe." He rubbed her nape lightly. "I doubt there's anyone else with magical ability who wants me out of the way, so it's probably a safe assumption."

With a sigh, Ryne sat up. "Maybe, but I know better. I can't make careless errors like this."

"It's done; all you can do is learn from it."

He reached for her hands, but Ryne shifted so he couldn't

touch her. Deke was bad for her. He made her forget the reasons she couldn't give in to the heat between them. "It's a reminder, not a lesson—one I shouldn't have needed."

"Give yourself a break. Everyone makes mistakes; why do you think you get to be perfect?" Deke leaned forward, getting in her face, and Ryne had to fight not to shift away.

"Because I have to be. This isn't like I forgot to pick up the dry cleaning. My error could be important. What if it wasn't Anise and there's a threat that we don't know about? What if she's working with another who's embraced the dark forces and they tag-team us? Did that occur to you?"

Deke shook his head. "You think I don't understand? I was a cop for five years, most of that time in an area we called the Shootin' Newton because of how explosive it was." He put his hands on either side of her hips. "I lost count of how many times I was in a situation where a mistake could mean someone died. You know what? Sometimes you can't help it, you screw up. Maybe you get lucky that day and no one gets hurt because of it. Maybe you're not so lucky. But you file it away and you don't make the same mistake again."

His gray-blue eyes were intense. This was the man behind the irreverent exterior, the side of himself he kept mostly hidden. Ryne didn't know if this memory was any more real than his memory about his cat case, but she didn't point that out. "How bad did you mess up?" she asked instead.

"I got my partner shot." One side of Deke's mouth quirked, but it wasn't in amusement. "I don't know which of us lady luck was smiling on, but it was only a graze."

"Did he share your view of it being a learning experience?"

"Noguchi was a veteran and he didn't pass up the chance to impart a little of his wisdom." Deke smiled faintly. "As the EMTs were patching him up, he said, 'Kid, you ever fuck up like this again and I'm going to kick your ass.'"

Ryne considered what Deke had told her. His job was something like hers, the stakes about as high. Sure, he used a gun instead of magic, but the point was the same. "I get it," she said reluctantly.

"Good." Deke sat back and Ryne breathed a sigh of relief. He'd been too close for comfort. "Now you want to fill me in on what the hell happened tonight?"

“Technically it’s morning.”

He reached for her, took hold of her, and tugged her forward until she was nearly on top of him. “Ryne,” he warned.

Need to know, Taber had said, and a lot of what had happened didn’t fall into that category. But. But it was his ass on the line, too, and Deke deserved to know how serious the threat against him was. Without giving herself time to dwell on how furious the council would be, Ryne told him, “The call-out was a setup.”

His fingers tightened. “You mean there was nothing to deal with when you arrived wherever the hell you went?”

“No, there was something there. His part of the plot was to get me away from the house so that you were vulnerable. When he kept blathering on about dead branches and tree pain without ever reaching a point, I finally figured out that he wasn’t trying to give me critical information about the users of dark magic.”

“And that’s when you twitched your nose and came home.”

Ryne growled low in her throat before she realized he was baiting her again. “When are you going to stop doing this?”

“After we’ve spent about a month in bed together, burning off the sexual desire.” Deke grinned. “Maybe.”

She pulled away from his hold and gave him her most forbidding scowl. “Did you want to talk about what happened while I was gone or would you rather provoke me?”

“It’s not an either-or situation. I can do both.”

The laugh escaped before she could prevent it. He was absolutely incorrigible and damned if that didn’t make him even harder to resist. Ryne sobered. Why couldn’t he have been Gineal? There would still be pitfalls because of how powerful she was, but the playing field would be much more level—then she might risk giving into the fire between them.

With a sigh, she put the thought out of her head. She had to deal with reality. “So,” Ryne said, getting back on topic, “when I realized he was trying to stall me, I hurried home and arrived in time to see you kill the amadan.”

“Amadan. Is that another lower dimensional being?”

“No, they live here with us. There aren’t many of them and they prefer to remain unnoticed. Over the ages, humans have seen a few, though, and labeled them as demons.”

"If they're not demons, what are they?"

Ryne shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe if I did some research, I could find out, but I never considered it a priority. All that mattered to me was that they rarely ventured into places where they'd run into humans and that they're powerless."

Powerless. Amadans could be nasty, but they didn't have the talent for magic. None. Just like the crogaid.

"Babe, why that look on your face?"

"Anise," she said slowly, thinking as she spoke, "sent two creatures after you, and neither one of them can do magic. There are things out there that could kill a human by lifting a hand. *Anise* could kill you by lifting a hand, so why the hell is she sending in the B-Team?"

9

CHAPTER

Something smelled good, and Ryne's stomach growled. She shifted in her seat and tried to refocus her attention on the book open before her, but the only thing she could think about was whatever was cooking. With a sigh, she stood and stretched her stiff muscles. Her worktable was cluttered with texts she didn't need any longer and she started returning them to shelves.

She could have worked upstairs—that's what she'd always done in the past when she'd had a project that required a lot of research—but Deke was up there. After that kiss, she needed some distance between them to get her equilibrium back.

Ryne put the last book in place and tried to dredge up some interest in resuming her studies. Time was short—she couldn't waste it—but she was tired.

Despite going back to bed somewhere after five, she hadn't gotten much rest. It wasn't adrenaline, the problem was Deke. That damn kiss kept replaying in her mind, building the arousal that she'd been fighting since meeting him. Then there was his warm body beside her in those cold predawn hours, the time where she always felt most alone.

"Babe, dinner's ready," Deke called down the stairs.

"Be right there."

Ryne put down the book she held and took a few deep breaths. She'd been doing that a lot since she met the man, and she guessed she'd be doing it more before this situation was wrapped up. It hadn't even been forty-eight hours yet. Shaking her head, she went upstairs. Less than two days. It seemed much longer than that, and in some ways, Ryne felt as if she'd known him forever.

She forgot about how fast things were going when she reached the main level and took a deep breath. Her stomach rumbled again and she headed for the kitchen. "It smells good," Ryne said. "What did you make?"

"Chicken fajitas." Deke retrieved a foil-wrapped package from the oven, pulled it open, and put tortillas on the plates he had next to the stove. "It's my surefire, never-fail meal."

"Your company dish. How many women have you dazzled with it so far?"

"There's only one I'm trying to impress." Deke winked.

"Nice dodge." Ryne shook her head, but she smiled anyway. "So are you going to feed me or are we just going to stand here?"

"Don't worry. I'll take care of you in every way." Before she could comment, he lifted the cover off the pan and said, "Hang onto the plates while I fill the tortillas."

When he finished, Ryne led the way to her great room. It was embarrassing, but her coffee table was the only place to sit and have dinner. She seriously had to shop for furniture. Carefully positioning the plates, she lowered herself to the floor and scooted close to the table.

"I should have put the sour cream and the shredded cheese in bowls," he commented as he set down the containers. "It must be poor etiquette to serve food in the package it came in."

"From our elegant seating to our fine presentation, it's only the best at Chez Frasier," she joked and picked up her fork.

She lost her smile in a hurry, though, when Deke sat beside her. The coffee table was so narrow, her thigh was pressed firmly into his and she swallowed hard. Crap. How could he get her tingly merely by sitting there?

To give herself something to do, Ryne cut into her fajita and

took a bite. Her eyes slid half-closed as her taste buds found nirvana.

“Well?” he prompted.

“You’re not just another pretty face, you can cook, too.”

Deke grinned and Ryne wanted to kick herself. The words had come out before she’d had the chance to censor herself. She’d given him a perfect opening, but instead of taking it, he said, “Thanks. I told you this recipe can’t miss.”

“Do you cook other things?”

He shrugged. “Enough to get by. You?”

“The same.”

They ate in silence for a while. “Did you find anything in your books?” he asked.

“Not yet, but I discovered a lead I need to follow.” She could hear the underlying concern in his voice, and she turned to reassure him. “Don’t worry, okay? I won’t let you down.”

“I know you’ll give it everything you have, but two weeks isn’t much time.” Deke stabbed the tines of his fork through a piece of chicken. “I don’t want to go back to the damn cartoon.” Although he continued to keep his voice carefully neutral, she picked up the edge of desperation.

Ryne was quiet for a moment. “I won’t lie to you, time is short, but I promise, I won’t give up until your humanness is restored permanently. And if something happens to me, I’ll arrange it so Creed takes over. One way or another, you’re not going to spend the rest of your life animated and on Friday nights at eight.”

“You mean if Anise kills you.”

She met his gaze squarely. “Yeah.”

Deke hesitated, then demanded, “Who the hell is Creed?”

“Creed Blackwood is the biggest badass troubleshooter the Gineal have. He won’t fail even if I do.”

“That wasn’t what I wanted to know. Who is he to you?”

“We’re just good friends,” Ryne said with a smirk.

The noise that escaped him sounded suspiciously like a growl, but his face was blank when she looked at him. Ryne was paying him back for the times he’d baited her, but she didn’t understand why he cared. Maybe he simply didn’t want any competition while he tried to get in her pants.

Without a word, he maneuvered himself out from beneath the coffee table and picked up his plate. "Are you going for seconds?" she asked.

"Yeah, did you want more?" She handed him her dish and his grin returned. "I wish you were this eager when it came to other things." She received another wink before he sauntered away with that relaxed stride he had. He wasn't gone long.

Deke waited until she'd sprinkled cheddar cheese over the top and added a dollop of sour cream to her fajita before he said, "Tell me about Anise."

Ryne froze, then forced herself to relax. "You saw that image I conjured and I've told you about her."

"Not enough. What's her full name? From what I saw, I think she's about average height—five foot five? Blond hair. I have no clue what her eye color is and can't guess at her age."

She finished chewing, swallowed, and said, "Her name is Anise MacAlister. I think you're right on the height because she came up to here on me." Ryne put her hand to her forehead. "Her eyes are a muddy shade of hazel and her age . . ." She pursed her lips. "Forty-four, I think. Around there anyway."

"Where's she from? Who are her friends? Are there people likely to help her? What's her routine?"

Ryne pushed her plate away. Talking about Anise made her lose her appetite. "She was born in the Chicago area and did her apprenticeship with a troubleshooter who worked in France. When she finished training, she was assigned this territory, the one I have now. Her powers are strong, but not much different from any other enforcer, although she does have extremely limited precognitive abilities. She gets flashes of events," she explained without him having to ask, "but not the whole picture, and she doesn't know if what she's seeing has a five percent chance of happening or a ninety-five percent chance."

"Could she be after me because of something she saw instead of something I did?" Deke asked.

"Maybe, but she knew how unpredictable her visions were and never put much credence in them. As for friends, I don't know who they are or if she even has any left. Gineal distance themselves from one who turns." Ryne grimaced. "Or even one suspected of turning to the dark forces."

Deke was actually quiet for a few moments, but she didn't

think he was done with the questions yet. “So she knows this area and likely has human friends here.”

“Yes and no. Yes, she knows the area, but if she has help, I would refer to them as temporary allies rather than friends. Anise is too far gone to fool anyone for long. Even the most unobservant human would pick up that she’s dangerous and keep their distance. However, that doesn’t mean she hasn’t made deals with other beings that operate on the dark side.”

“Like the crogaid and the amadan?”

Sliding out from her position at the coffee table, Ryne got to her feet and made a couple of circuits of the room before she realized Deke was watching her pace.

“The crogaid was probably duped rather than aligned with her.” Ryne settled on the couch and fought to appear calm. “But yeah, odds are the amadan was working for or with her. The trolld that kept me occupied so that you were unprotected was likely bribed to complete his part—wealth means a lot to them—and no doubt, there’ll be more dark beings coming at us.”

Deke finished his fajitas, used his napkin, and joined her on the sofa. “Why didn’t someone pick up on the signs she was going to the dark side and stop her before she escalated?”

“No one knew.”

“Oh, come on,” he scoffed. “She must have done something. Maybe as a kid she started fires or tortured animals. There’s always some indication that a person’s bad.”

Ryne shook her head. “Maybe with humans, but any Gineal can turn. Any single one of us.” She wanted to pace so badly. “Some, like the troubleshooters, have worse odds than others.”

“Why? Because you’re the strongest?”

“That’s part of it. It seems the more power we have, the more we want.”

“What’s the other part?”

“The biggest reason is the use of gray magic. Enforcers fight Gineal and beings from the dark end of the spectrum. Our job requires continual use of shadowy magic and the darker we go, the easier it is to slide farther.”

So easy. Ryne closed her eyes as the echo of what she’d felt the night she’d freed Deke rippled through her. It still enticed her, called to her. That limitless power, that—

"If someone could detect you using the spell to free me," Deke said, breaking the thrall she was falling under, "why didn't anyone notice Anise using black magic?"

"We can conceal our incantations." Ryne had to clear her throat. "Most of us do it automatically no matter what type of spell we're casting. She hid her actions, but I didn't."

"Because you had nothing to hide," Deke said, and Ryne didn't bother to correct him. He looked thoughtful for a moment. "I find it hard to believe that there aren't any warning signs. She had to do something that would have tipped others off."

It was his patronizing, I-know-better-than-you-do tone that pissed Ryne off. "No one suspected," she bit out.

"Bullshit. Maybe no one wanted to know, but you can bet she did something that should have set off warning bells. The people closest to her were probably covering for her."

The scorn in Deke's voice sent her temper into the red zone. "I was the one closest to her and I didn't know! I lived with Anise for seven years—seven—and I had no clue for most of that time, so don't you dare sound so damn judgmental."

Ryne surged to her feet, and this time, she didn't care what he assumed from her pacing the room. There were Gineal who felt the same way, that she should have known Anise had turned. They'd taken that as a sign that Ryne was every bit as guilty of using dark magic as Anise. It was why such a close eye was kept on her and she hated the unfairness of it.

The council had been the ones who'd sent her to apprentice with Anise. It hadn't been her choice. She'd suffered and she'd survived despite them.

Deke's arms closed around her from behind. Ryne struggled to get free, but he tightened his hold. "I'm sorry, babe," he said quietly next to her ear. "I'm sorry."

She sagged against him, some of the fight going out of her. "I never covered up for her."

"Of course you didn't. You're too straightforward for that. If you'd known, you would have done something." Deke turned her to face him, keeping her close against his body. She looked up, saw his contriteness, and the rest of the tension left her.

"Maybe I should have figured it out," she admitted, "but I'd

been sheltered my entire life and I was incredibly naïve at twelve.”

“Whoa, wait a second. You went to live with her when you were twelve? What happened to your parents?”

There wasn’t any accusation in his voice, only curiosity, but Ryne stiffened anyway. “Nothing happened to them. Children whose powers test strong enough are sent to apprentice with a troubleshooter when they turn twelve. My sister had left to live with Taber and both my parents had done that, too.”

“And your mom and dad let you go?”

Ryne tried to yank away, but he held fast and she subsided. “It’s always been done that way,” she told him. And it was doubtful her parents had missed her anyway. Between their duties as troubleshooters and the way they were lost in love with each other, Ryne had usually felt like an intrusion.

“Okay,” he said easily. “You said you lived with her for seven years and that you’ve been hunting her for six, so that makes you what? Twenty-five?”

“Twenty-seven. It was two years after I left that someone discovered Anise was using black magic.” He shifted and it was then that Ryne realized that her arms were around Deke’s waist. She didn’t remember doing that, but she didn’t pull away.

“If she’d hidden her use of that stuff, how did anyone find out she was dirty?”

“Do you always ask so many questions?” It never ended with him. As soon as she answered one, he had ten others.

“Look at my career choice. What do cops and PIs do?” At her groan, he laughed. “Seriously, how do you ever know anyone has gone over to the dark side?”

Ryne shook her head at the way he’d phrased that. “They quit concealing their use of black magic. I know, I know, you’re going to ask why stop if it’s working. Arrogance, I think. The dark forces make you feel invincible, and after a while, the person must start to believe they really are unbeatable.”

“The way you said that, it makes me think you’ve had a few brushes with the dark side yourself.”

Her lips quirked at the corners before she could prevent it. “There isn’t a troubleshooter alive who doesn’t have some familiarity with the dark. We’ve always walked into dangerous

territory; it's part of the job description." Deke's hand rubbed her back, but the motion was soothing, not sexual, and Ryne let herself sink into it. "Returning to Anise. The one thing you need to understand is that she's not necessarily rational. The dark forces warp a person over time; they lose their personality and become an instrument."

"That sounds melodramatic."

"I know, but the real Anise, the Gineal woman who fought the dark forces, died a long time ago. What's left is a shell."

Ryne did break his hold then and put distance between them. That was her consolation—that she wasn't hunting the person who'd baked brownies for her or helped her with her homework. Ryne wasn't lying to herself—in hindsight, she was certain Anise had turned before she went to live with her, but her mentor hadn't been too far gone. Not in the beginning.

The change in her had happened so gradually that Ryne hadn't noticed it. Even the way Anise had used men hadn't necessarily meant anything. Before she could dwell on that, Ryne turned to Deke. "How did you do today? Find out anything about your cases that will help us figure out why Anise wants you dead?"

He stared at her hard before going along with her subject change. "No—my memory is full of holes." This time Ryne was the one who closed the distance. He looked tormented, and before she could think better of it, she put her arms around him. "Of the cases I remember, I don't know which ones are real. What if everything I recall is fiction?"

"You're not going to start that 'What if I really am only a cartoon?' crap again, are you?"

Deke laughed. "Nope. I found proof that I existed as a human. I know," he said quickly, "you told me the spell you used wouldn't have worked if I wasn't, but I needed to verify it for myself."

"I understand that." In his place, she'd have to prove it to herself as well. "What did you find?"

"A picture from my days as a cop. I'm in the background doing traffic control at a gang shooting. It was my rookie year. I remembered as soon as I saw the photo."

"Good." She tried to turn out of his arms, but again, he held on.

“I recalled something else. I have a buddy who’s employed at the same detective agency as me. He’d know which cases I was working on or at least be able to get into the company records to find out. His number is unlisted, but I should be able to turn something up with a few more hours of Internet time.”

Ryne’s heart sank. Deke sounded excited about contacting his friend and she was going to have to pop his bubble. “You can’t risk calling him.” She brought her hand up and gently rested two fingers over his lips to keep him from interrupting her. “If Anise discovers you’ve asked him for help, she’d probably decide to kill your buddy, too. I can’t protect both of you, and the L.A. troubleshooter is constantly on call-outs.”

Deke’s tongue teased the spot below the pads of her fingers. Heat shot through her before she managed to yank her hand away. “Stop that!”

“You liked it.”

She had, but that was beside the point. Not with a human. It was too dangerous—for both of them.

Deke snagged a bottle of water from the fridge, but instead of heading straight back to the computer, he paused in the kitchen doorway to watch Ryne. She’d staked out the center of the couch and surrounded herself with at least a dozen open books. Her hair was a mess from dragging her hands through it—the dining room was open to the great room and he’d watched her do it—but that just-got-out-of-bed look was sexy as hell. Shit, *Ryne* was sexy as hell. Simply looking at her made his body hum.

As if sensing his stare, she lifted her head and their eyes met. There were a number of things he could do to lessen the intensity between them, but he didn’t use any of them. Deke wanted Ryne to feel the desire without channeling it into anger. Not immediately.

He didn’t move until she tore her gaze away. “Instead of water, I should have grabbed something with caffeine to keep me alert. I didn’t get much sleep last night.” He transferred a few of her references to the coffee table, making room to sit beside her. Ryne didn’t look up, but the rigidity of her muscles told

him she heard every word. One last poke. "Babe, you gotta stop crawling all over me when we go to bed."

"I did not crawl all over you!"

Deke grinned. She was too easy to wind up. "Sure you did. You were sprawled half on top of me when I woke up this morning, and since I stayed on my side, you were the one who moved."

"You must have pulled me over there."

"If it makes you feel better to believe that, you go right ahead. We both know the truth, though."

"Don't you have something more important to do?"

He put his hand on her knee and squeezed. "You're always my number-one priority. In and out of bed."

"Oh, for God's sake, go away and let me work." Ryne shifted, moving until his hand came off her knee and she was twisted away from him. Her shirt rode up.

"I'm disappointed." She looked confused. "You're wearing the red panties." He traced the exposed waistband with his index finger. "I asked you to wear the black thong for me. I've been fantasizing about it for hours."

He was almost to her navel before she slapped his hand away. "What kind of pervert goes through a woman's lingerie drawer?"

"It's our drawer. Can I help it if that tiny thong was right on top when I went to get a pair of briefs?"

"It was underneath my other panties because I never wear that damn thing. You had to dig to the bottom to find it."

Deke fought back the smile. He'd learned more about Ryne by checking out her personal items. She favored high-cut panties in jewel tones, nothing too sexy except for the thong, and nothing with a pattern on it. She didn't own a single matching bra. Those were flesh-colored and plain. The lingerie fit her personality—straightforward, no frills, no nonsense.

"Can I talk you into wearing the thong for me? Your ass is gorgeous."

She rolled her eyes. "Knock it off, hotshot. We've both got too much work to do for you to play games."

"Who's playing?"

Ryne shifted again so she could sit back. "Why do you always have to push?"

He moved, too, until he was shoulder to shoulder with her. “My dad used to ask me that question frequently and I’ll tell you the same thing I told him—I don’t know.”

“So it’s not only me you provoke.”

“No, not only you.” Deke turned his head to see her better. “I’ve known how to push people’s buttons since I was a kid.”

She was quiet for a moment, then she said, “That must have made you a lousy cop.”

Deke laughed softly. “You’re wrong, it made me a great cop. I push your buttons to get you mad, but that’s not the only emotion I can elicit. If I wanted, I could make you feel sorry for me, maybe even enough to get a pity fuck.” He watched fireworks go off in her eyes and kept talking before she could rip him to shreds. “With the criminal element, I’d play them whichever way worked. You’d be amazed how many crimes got solved because I got a guy bragging about what he’d been involved in.”

“Believe me, there is no way I’d have sex with you even if you laid the biggest sob story in the world on me.”

With a smirk, Deke asked, “Are you challenging me?”

“You know,” Ryne said conversationally, “it isn’t a surprise that Anise turned you into a cartoon. The amazing thing is that no one else murdered you before she had the chance to put the spell on you. Has anyone told you how aggravating you are?”

“A few times,” he admitted. Deke uncapped his water and took a swallow before changing the subject. “While I was working on the computer, hitting dead end after dead end, I had an idea.”

“Uh-oh.”

Deke put the bottle down on the coffee table and ignored the comment. “Instead of doing this the hard way, why don’t you cast some spell to take us back in time and prevent Anise from cursing me to begin with?”

“Why on earth do you think I can do that?”

“Witches on TV time travel.”

With a groan, she dropped her head to the back of the couch and closed her eyes. “That’s entertainment, not real life. Can you imagine what a mess things would be if such a spell existed? All Anise would need to do is go back and kill you as an infant or kill your mother when she was a child and there’d be no you.”

That was a sobering thought and it underlined how much he didn't know about her or the Gineal. Since he didn't want to think about that, he studied her instead. Ryne was beautiful, but Deke doubted she knew how beautiful. She was intense—beyond intense—and it had probably scared off more than a few guys. Men who preferred someone softer, easier—like her sister—but he'd take Ryne's edginess any day.

She had the slightest indentation in her chin and he leaned over her to trace it with his thumb. Her eyes opened, but she didn't pull away and she didn't tell him to stop. He brushed his lips over hers, testing the waters, but Ryne remained relaxed. Deke went back for a second, longer kiss.

This time, he didn't try to take it further no matter how much he wanted to, and when he felt his control slip, he eased away. "I want you, Ryne, and what I'm feeling goes both ways. Don't try to deny it, I know better."

Sparks ignited in her eyes, and for a moment, he thought she'd argue with him anyway. Deke was almost looking forward to proving how two-way things were between them, but she took a couple of deep breaths and banked her temper.

"Can we focus on the situation and leave sex out of it?"

"That would be the smart thing to do," he agreed, but Deke didn't think either one of them would be able to turn off the attraction. Instead of telling her that, though, he asked, "How are you doing on tracking down the spell to free me forever?"

She grimaced and he sat back. "That good, huh?"

"I'll get you out no matter what it takes, I promise you."

"I know you'll do your best." She would, but it might not be enough. If he went back to the cartoon, he could spend more years imprisoned while she searched for the correct spell. Deke grit his teeth. He wasn't going back. "Why is it so damn hard?"

"Because most of the books are handwritten and none of them have an index. Do you know how many times I asked the council or the librarians to database everything? Everyone ignores me." She sat up, reached for his water, took a sip, and returned it to the table. "I'm as frustrated as you are, believe me."

He wondered if she realized how intimate it was to share the bottle, but decided not to ask. "You can use the books anywhere, right?"

"Yeah, why?" she asked, her voice filled with suspicion.

“Because I want to go to L.A. and I’m pretty sure you’re going to insist on coming with me.”

“What?” she growled and the fireworks she’d controlled a few minutes ago were exploding in her eyes now. “Damn it, we talked about this last night! Any friend or acquaintance you contact is at risk from Anise.” Deke tried to interrupt, but Ryne kept going. “Are you willing to bet the lives of others that I’m wrong about her? Because I’m sure as hell not.”

“I don’t want to talk to anyone I know,” he snapped, his own temper igniting. “I need my case notes and those are sealed in a plastic bag, hidden underneath the floorboards in my apartment.”

“Someone else is probably living there now.”

He almost told her no shit, but amusement overcame his anger and he swallowed the words. She was such a law-abiding citizen. “Babe, haven’t you ever heard of breaking and entering?”

10

CHAPTER

Ryne hated airports and she hated flying. Both plane and terminal were inevitably too full of people, and crowds wore on her, put her on edge. Walking through LAX would be hard enough if she were alone, but she had Deke at her side. He was in the open, unprotected, and since he had no idea what form a threat could take, she needed to remain particularly alert.

If there had been any way she could have used magic to bring his notes to them, she would have done it in a heartbeat, but Anise's spell wouldn't allow that. She'd cut his ties to all his possessions, and without an energy signature to home in on, Ryne couldn't locate anything to call forward.

Two men came to an abrupt halt in front of them and Deke swerved right to avoid them. Since she'd gone left, he was farther away from her than she liked and Ryne hurried to close the distance between them.

"You need to relax, babe," Deke told her. "I can take care of myself."

"Against a human threat," she countered. His jaw went hard and Ryne sighed. She didn't want to antagonize him, but he had to remember that he couldn't fight magic.

The logistics involved in this trip had been a nightmare. Normally when she traveled, she remained on call. She was reachable by cell phone, and with the transit, Ryne wouldn't be any slower arriving on scene than if she'd been home. This trip to California, however, fell under business and Deke couldn't be left alone while she answered a call-out. The council had enlisted a Canadian enforcer to cover her territory for her.

Last-minute plane tickets had also been a pain in the ass. Deke, ever cognizant of how much money she was spending on him, wanted to take the cheapest itinerary, a ten-hour odyssey encompassing much of the United States. Ryne preferred to spend more and fly nonstop. She'd won by bringing in the time factor, but he'd insisted on flying coach.

Coach! The sardine section and they hadn't even been able to sit together. Ryne had been stuck in a middle seat three rows behind him. Then there'd been the fake ID she'd had to conjure for Deke so he could make it through security, hotel reservations, rental car, packing. Ryne sighed again. Yeah, she hated to fly.

Of course, there was a line a mile long to pick up their car and she muttered a curse. "Relax," Deke said, "we'll be out of here in no time."

Two hours later, Ryne was hanging onto her sanity with both hands. "How can a city this size not have any freaking rental cars available?"

"The next return is ours; be patient."

"I've been patient. We have a reservation, damn it."

His lips twitched, but Deke was smart enough not to laugh. Ryne took a deep breath, tried to find her peaceful center, but they were surrounded by other people—tourists who also had an advanced booking—and their anger, impatience, and frustration buffeted her. She gave up and settled for not screaming when another elite club member showed up and was given their car despite the fact that he hadn't made any prior arrangements.

Deke grabbed her hand. "Harm none, babe."

"I was only going to put a slow leak in a few tires." But she subsided. "If you weren't human, we could have used the transit and avoided this crap."

"Sorry."

"No, I'm sorry." Ryne slumped back against the wall. "I don't do well in crowds. They give me a throbbing headache and that leaves me crabby. I can handle it for short periods, but it's been seven hours since we arrived at the airport in Minneapolis. I'll do better once we get out of here and I can lay down for a while."

"Why don't you zap the pain away like you did when I was hurt in the parking lot?"

"There's no point in doing that now, not with a psychic headache." Ryne read the blank look on his face and brought a hand up to rub her forehead. "I'm picking up other people's emotional energy and their auric vibrations. For me, it's like I'm listening to thousands of radios that are turned on, but not tuned in. I could do a healing on myself, but as long as I'm surrounded by a crowd, it would just come right back again."

It was more complicated than that, and healing from this type of pain wouldn't be fast, but there was no point in telling him that—too much information and Deke had to be on overload as it was—but damn she wanted a dark room and a flat surface.

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer. For a moment, she stiffened, then she leaned into his side. And a funny thing happened—the shield around her strengthened enough to actually keep the roiling emotions of others at bay. Ryne settled against him and let the peace fill her. A half an hour later, when they finally had the keys to their rental, she was calm enough to thank the harried clerk.

Her head still ached, though, and as they stepped outside, she immediately donned her sunglasses to block the glare. Deke put the carry-on and her laptop in the trunk and Ryne handed him the car keys. "Here. This is your town, you drive."

"Where's the hotel?" he asked after they were buckled in.

"That's not our first stop. Before we go anywhere or do anything else, I have to pay a courtesy call on the troubleshooter operating in L.A." Ryne managed to hide the grimace. "Protocol."

She gave Deke the address and sat back to let him negotiate the traffic. "Tell me about this troubleshooter," he said as soon as they cleared the worst congestion around LAX.

"His name is Sinclair Rexley Duncan. He's my age and

should fit right in with the L.A. crowd because he's drop-dead gorgeous." A muscle started to tic in Deke's cheek and her lips turned up at the corners. She decided to see if *she* could push some buttons. "When we were teenagers, the girls called him Sexy Rexy," she teased and almost laughed at his expression. "Yeah, I know, that was pretty lame, but we're talking thirteen, fourteen here."

Deke grunted and switched lanes.

Her good humor didn't last long. After a moment's consideration, Ryne decided she'd better prepare him for one aspect of the meeting. "He's going to invite us to stay with him while we're in town—that's part of the troubleshooters' code—but we're turning him down, got it?"

"Yeah, I got it."

Ryne breathed a silent sigh of relief. As much as Deke wanted to conserve money, she was afraid he'd argue with her about accepting free lodging.

When they entered an upscale residential area, her stomach began to twist. Even if she was upset, she refused to let it show—no way was she giving Sin that kind of satisfaction. She wished, though, that she was facing him at full strength and not with her head pounding.

They pulled in front of his house before she was ready, but Ryne only hesitated long enough for Deke to catch up with her before going to the entry and ringing the bell.

It didn't take long before the door opened. Sin was as handsome as ever with his dark hair, broad shoulders, and Caribbean-blue eyes. Unfortunately, his attitude was the same too. "Frasier," he greeted her coolly.

"Duncan."

"The council warned me you were headed this way." Sin looked at Deke. "This must be the human they mentioned."

"His name," Ryne said firmly, "is Deke Summers."

Sin shrugged and stepped outside, closing the door to his house behind him. It was an insult, a huge one, but she'd expected it. "How long do you plan to be in my city?"

"No more than a couple of days."

"Good. Do you require any assistance?"

That question was also part of the custom for enforcers

when another needed to work on his or her turf. "I don't think so, but if things change, I'll let you know. Thank you for the inquiry," she tacked on politely. It almost hurt to say that.

"Aren't you going to invite us in?" Deke asked, challenge in his voice. Ryne gave him a hard jab in the ribs with her elbow. "What? This isn't a front steps type of conversation."

The moment of silence felt like an eternity, then Sin said, "We could go around to the patio."

Ryne felt that knot in her stomach pull taut. The implication was clear—she would not be invited into his home. Deke picked up on the snub, too. "What's your problem, man?"

"Deke," she warned softly.

"No—"

She cut him off quickly. "Excuse us for one minute." She pushed Deke over to the car. "Will you shut up? You're making this situation even more awkward than it is already."

"I'm supposed to let that asshole show you disrespect? Or is he being a bastard because I'm human?"

"It has nothing to do with you."

Deke nodded. "That's what I figured. What the hell is his problem anyway?"

"Sin is one of the Gineal who believes that I've been using the dark forces for years."

"Then he's not just an asshole, he's a stupid asshole. Let's get out of here." Deke started to round the hood of the car, but Ryne grabbed his arm. He looked at her incredulously. "You can't want to stay and take more of his attitude."

"Not particularly, but like I told you, this visit is part of the protocol. Now let's go back over there and be civil until we can wrap this thing up and leave."

He stared at her in disbelief for a moment, then said, "The faster the better."

Ryne reached for his arm again before Deke could walk away. "I'm stopping you," she explained at his questioning look, "because I wanted to say thank you. Your support of me—" she swallowed hard. "It means a lot, okay?"

Deke's face softened. "You're welcome."

She wanted to say more, but she couldn't. If Sin hadn't been standing nearby, arms folded across his chest as he waited for

them, she might have done it. But they did have an audience and he wasn't her friend, so Ryne settled for a smile before heading back over to the front door.

"Anything I should be watching out for?" Sin asked when they reached him. He acted as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred and Ryne was happy to go along with that.

"Anise has already sent a crogaid and an amadan after Deke and she's involved one of the troid," she reported. "If she knows we're here, you can expect more along those lines."

Sin nodded, uncrossed his arms, and told her, "We've been heavy on dark beings in Southern California for the past few years, and if she enlists their aid, you'll be facing a lot worse than you've seen so far."

"I knew she'd escalate the threat." Although it galled her to ask him any questions, Ryne couldn't let the opportunity pass by. Both of Sin's parents were troubleshooters as hers had been and maybe he'd learned something that she hadn't. "Do you know any reason why Anise would use creatures that don't possess magic rather than sending those that do or going after Deke herself?"

Leaning against the front of his house, Sin gave the question some consideration. "She might be trying to avoid a confrontation with you, but you've probably thought of that."

"Yeah, I did, but that doesn't explain the B-Team." Deke bristled beside her and Ryne reached over and took his hand.

"Perhaps she didn't want to pay the price that a magical being would demand," Sin suggested. "Few work cheaply and none for free. Other than that, I can't think of any particular reason to avoid using powers against a human."

"Maybe no one wanted to waste their magic on a mere mortal," Deke said sarcastically.

Ryne shook her head. "You're a danger to her—we've already established that—and Anise was a troubleshooter. We're trained from day one to answer any threat with the power necessary to end it. She's not hedging her bets to conserve magic."

"Ryne's right about that. If Anise isn't coming at you full throttle, there's a good reason for it."

She had to bite back her own sarcastic comment. Sin hadn't called her by her first name since the truth about Anise had

come out six years ago. That was newsworthy enough, but to have him agree with her? Ryne figured she better circle this day on the calendar because it was unlikely to happen again.

"If you think of something later," she said keeping her voice polite, "will you let me know?"

"Sure," Sin agreed. There was a long hesitation, but she knew they weren't finished yet. "Do you and your companion have a need to stay here while you're in my territory?"

Despite her admonition to Deke, for a split second Ryne was tempted to say yes because the stilted formality made it so obvious that the other troubleshooter didn't want her around and because he'd be forced to allow her inside his home. Common sense prevailed, though, and she answered every bit as formally. "No, but we thank you for your offer of hospitality."

"If you need help, call me," Sin said.

"Thanks. We have to get going."

They made nice for a minute or two more, then she and Deke escaped. As soon as they were out of view, Ryne slumped back in the passenger seat and closed her eyes. Her head hurt worse now than it had earlier.

"I can't believe you used to date that ass," Deke growled.

Slowly, Ryne turned and looked at him. Yep, he was serious. "I never dated Sin."

He snorted. "Sin. That's a damn pretentious nickname."

"Sinclair Rexley offers limited options."

That earned her a grunt rather than a snort. "I can't believe you're defending that bastard after he dumped you."

"We never dated." Ryne bit out each word.

"Don't play word games. You don't want to call it dating, fine, but the two of you were involved."

"Not romantically—there was never anything like that between us—but I used to believe that Sin was my best friend, the one I could go to with anything and he'd always be there." She turned her head forward again and stared blindly out the front window. "I found out different when I needed him most. I wish he had been nothing more than some guy I'd been dating because then it wouldn't have hurt half as much as it did when he turned his back on me."

Deke came out of the hotel bathroom and found Ryne lying on her side in bed, her back to him. She'd pulled the drapes to darken the room, but that likely had to do with her headache. What worried him was how abnormally quiet—almost docile—she'd been since they'd left that asshole's house. She hadn't even reacted when Deke told the desk clerk they wanted a room with one king-size bed. That's when he'd really become concerned.

He never should have let his jealousy get the upper hand, but he'd sensed undercurrents between her and that son of a bitch. With a woman as incredible as Ryne, it had never occurred to Deke that the relationship had been platonic, so he'd blundered ahead and ended up making her sad.

Stepping out of his tennis shoes, he crawled in beside her. Moving carefully, he spooned his body against hers and wrapped his arm around her waist. "You okay, babe?"

"Yeah. The headache's easing. Give me a few more minutes and we can go."

That didn't reassure him a whole lot. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"You know that he was never a true friend if he could abandon you when you needed him." She stiffened, but that was the only response he received and Deke let the silence stand for a while. He ran his hand up and down her arm until Ryne reached for him and laced their fingers. He tried another tack to get some information. "If the situation had been reversed, would you have stood by him?"

"Yeah."

Deke frowned at the lack of fire in her voice. Ryne should be snapping at him, not sounding passive. If he couldn't get her angry enough to spill some info, he'd have to push other buttons.

He wanted her to tell him what had happened. Not because he was curious. Hell, even if she didn't say one more word, he could fill in the blanks. Ryne was someone who never did anything halfway—that included befriending others—and it would never dawn on her that her kind of loyalty was rare. Then the shit had hit the fan, she'd turned to her friends, and they hadn't been there for her. It made sense now why she didn't want to let anyone else close.

But she needed to vent about this and Deke would give odds that she'd never talked about it to anyone, not even her sister. Ryne was the kind of person who preferred to lick her wounds in private.

"How long did you know him?" Deke asked. The question was general enough that it shouldn't be sensitive.

"Since we were in diapers. Our parents were friends."

"You were stuck with each other then."

Ryne's hold on him tightened, then she relaxed again. "I wouldn't put it that way."

"How would you put it? Your folks visited with each other and the two of you had no one else to play with. Doesn't sound like the makings of a solid relationship."

"It wasn't like that," she told him. "We shared secrets, built forts, created codes. Even when our parents weren't socializing, we hung out together. We were inseparable when other kids were screaming about boy or girl germs."

Since Ryne couldn't see him, Deke didn't attempt to hide his smile. He'd expected to have to work harder than this. "We didn't scream," he said. "We wrote *dis* on one hand and that took care of the girl germs."

"What did *dis* mean?"

"Disinfectant, babe. Kills germs on contact," Deke said.

He couldn't hear Ryne laugh, but he felt her shoulders shaking. It didn't last long enough. "That's worse than lame."

"I'd be insulted if I'd been the one to come up with it."

"Who was the genius?"

"I have no clue." But she was at ease now and that's what he wanted. Instead of jumping in with another question, Deke let her enjoy it—and he took time to savor the feel of her ass nestled against his groin.

After a few minutes he said, "So the truth about Anise came out and your so-called friends scattered."

There was a long pause, but he waited as patiently as he could. Ryne wasn't used to talking about personal stuff and he'd give her time to decide if she was going to say anything before he nudged her more firmly.

"I knew I'd lose most, but I didn't expect Sin to be one of them," she said about the time he'd wondered if he was going to have to prod her. "How'd you know that was when it happened?"

“It’s not hard to figure out. People are real good at assigning guilt by association, and since you were her apprentice . . .”

“Yeah.”

“Did anyone stand with you?”

Ryne was silent long enough that Deke thought he was going to have to try again, but at last she spoke. “Maia, of course, but she’d already ceded her powers by then and her defense didn’t hold much weight.”

“And she’s family. Anyone else?”

“The council gave me a vote of confidence and there was Creed. That was a surprise because I hardly knew him then.”

Deke almost growled, but he was glad there’d been someone in Ryne’s corner. She was tense again, and he leaned forward, resting his chin on her shoulder. “You were a better friend than any of those cowards deserved.”

He wanted to say more, but he wasn’t sure what. As crazy as Ryne could make him, Deke far preferred her telling him what to do than lying quietly. She shifted and he swallowed a groan. Here he was trying to be nice and she had to torture him. “Do that again.”

“Stop thinking about sex so much.”

There was more life in her voice and that heartened him. Nothing to chase away the blues like being royally pissed off, and when it came to angering Ryne, he was the best—he’d bet the bank on it. “It’s tough to think about anything else when you keep wiggling that gorgeous ass of yours.”

Ryne went rigid. “What the hell are you talking about?”

There was a definite growl in her voice. One more good push should do the trick. “I’ve known you what? Four days? And in that time, whenever I’ve had your body against mine, you wiggle.”

She jerked loose and went up on her knees. “You’re the one who keeps wrapping himself around me.”

Deke sat up. “And you’re the one who crawls on top of me when we’re in bed.” He smirked because he knew how much she hated that. “Let’s face it, you’re a prick tease.”

She dove at him, catching him off guard. Instead of using her fists, Ryne was trying to wrestle him into submission. “I am not a prick tease,” she snarled when she straddled him and pinned his wrists beside his head.

“Look at our position.”

The dawning horror on her face said it all. With a scowl, she scrambled to her feet and wordlessly escaped into the bathroom. The door closed sharply behind her.

Deke tucked his hands behind his head and grinned. His fireball was back, and damn, he was glad to see her.

11

CHAPTER

As they walked through the neighborhood where Deke used to live, Ryne kept her attention focused outward, scanning for any threat. It was chilly enough in Los Angeles for a light jacket, but the sun was shining and the day was pleasant. She'd rather be in the car because that made an attack more difficult, but he'd muttered something about wanting a closer look and parked. She hadn't argued after she'd seen his grim expression.

Their hands brushed from time to time, and earlier Deke had tried to hold on to her, but Ryne had pulled free. He probably believed that she was still mad about the prick tease remark, but that wasn't it. If she needed to react, every second counted.

After her temper had cooled, she'd figured out why he'd said it—Deke had wanted her mad enough to stop thinking about the past. It was a tactic she might have employed had the situation been reversed. Anything sappy or emotional made her uncomfortable and maybe he felt the same way. Hell, he was male, odds were good that her mood had made him uneasy, so he'd gotten the info he'd wanted, then torqued her off enough to burn the mopiness out of her. Ryne grimaced slightly, embarrassed that he'd seen her wallowing like that.

She made another thorough study of the area. Everywhere she looked there were expensive imports—Lexus, BMW, Mercedes, Range Rover—she didn't see one domestic or affordable vehicle. It wasn't merely the cars; signs of affluence were rife. The high-end boutiques alone told the story.

"You used to live here, huh? The pay for private detectives must be better than I thought."

"It's not."

His sharp tone surprised her, then she figured it out. "Skyrocketing property values changed the makeup of the area?"

Deke didn't respond, he just kept walking. Damn, the man could be a pain in the ass. She picked up her pace to stay even with him, but they didn't go too much farther before he stopped and slid his arm around her shoulders.

"That was my apartment building." Deke pointed briefly to a white, three-story structure across the street. "The security was minimal when I lived there and it would have been easy enough to circumvent. It'll be a lot tougher now."

Ryne didn't know how he'd determined that so she decided to take his word for it. But had the area really changed? Her next question was guaranteed to upset him, but it had to be asked. "Are you certain this is where you lived?"

"Yes," he snapped and took off, leaving her where she stood.

She knew why he was angry—he was scared that this was another memory from the cartoon Deke rather than his real life. Shaking her head, she chased after him. "Don't walk off like that again, hotshot. I'm—" she stopped abruptly before she said *protecting you*. That would only piss him off. "I'm shorter than you are," Ryne substituted quickly.

The skeptical glance Deke gave her told her it was a fairly weak explanation, but he didn't call her on it. "There's a security guard in the lobby," he pointed out as they walked past the front of the building.

"What about side entrances?" Ryne asked. "Residents tend to be careless about making sure they latch behind them."

Deke gave her that infernal smirk. "The alternate entrances are what I planned to check out next."

Ryne scowled. Okay, he'd already thought of that; she was only trying to help. She took a deep breath and attempted to put herself in his place. He'd come back to his home and noth-

ing was the same. Intellectually, Deke had to have accepted that his possessions were long gone, but seeing the changes must have hit him emotionally. He was homeless, had no access to his bank accounts, and owned nothing more than what she'd bought him.

Yeah, he was entitled to be shaken.

They turned the corner. The first door was an emergency exit and had no outside handle. "This was a great place to live," Deke said quietly. "It's a few miles from the beach and I had friendly neighbors. We used to have parties that involved the entire building. I wonder where everyone went?"

Ryne did take his hand then, wanting to offer him the same kind of comfort he'd given her earlier. "After we get this thing with Anise resolved, I'll help you look for your friends."

Deke shook his head. "It's not worth it. The only thing we had in common was where we lived. With that gone . . ." He shrugged.

The side of the structure was much longer than the front. There was a second emergency exit, but it was identical to the first. They kept walking. "You don't think there's anyone left from when you were here?" she asked as they neared the back.

"I doubt it. Not unless someone won the lottery or found themselves a much better job than what they had then."

The rear had a small parking lot with expensive vehicles scattered throughout and four green Dumpsters along the apartment building's wall. She took a careful look around. It was a good place for someone to set an ambush. Unlikely? Maybe. But as the line went, they paid her to be paranoid.

Ryne was occupied studying the area and didn't see the small stone on the asphalt in front of her. Her foot sent it sailing under the first Dumpster, disturbing a rat. The rodent scurried out, looking for a new place to hide. It froze her. Her heart thundered and her pulse zoomed. The urge to incinerate it had her raising her hand, but she couldn't waste magic like this or risk being caught shooting fire for no good reason. She struggled to breathe, then the rat ran the opposite direction from where she stood. Only then did she shakily exhale.

"Are you okay?" Deke asked, looking at her with concern.

She was saved from having to admit to her phobia when the door ahead of them opened. The sound jerked her to her

senses. Ryne tugged her hand free from Deke's and drew on the element of fire, ready to shoot it in an instant if the situation warranted.

It didn't.

The Hispanic man was startled by them and dropped the garbage bags he was holding. He looked to be around sixty and had on the type of uniform someone who was part of building maintenance would wear.

"Jay, is that you?" Deke asked. He closed the distance fast, not waiting for an answer.

Ryne had to rush after him—again. Damn it, he'd promised her not to contact anyone he knew and what did he do the first time he spotted someone familiar? Deke called his name and headed straight over to him.

"Deke Summers," the older man said with a faint accent. "You disappeared. They said you were dead."

"Not yet." Deke offered his hand and the two of them shook.

"You often spoke of living on a tropical island. Perhaps with the money you were paid for the cartoon show, that's where you were."

With a noncommittal grunt, Deke changed the subject. "Things have sure changed around here."

"They have, though not for the better." Jay turned to her and said, "You must be Deke's friend."

Deke performed introductions, but it was a hurried thing, his interest clearly elsewhere. "When did the turnover happen?"

"It wasn't long after you vanished that the owners decided to renovate the units and raise the rent."

"And no one could afford to live here anymore."

"Not at the new rate." The older man stooped to pick up what he'd dropped and Deke bent to help him. Each of them tossed a bag in the trash bin. "The new residents aren't like the good, hardworking people that were here when you were. Few now take care of anything. Soon, though, it will not be my worry."

"The owners didn't fire you, did they?" Deke asked.

Jay shook his head. "No, in five months, I retire." A smile spread across the man's face.

Ryne didn't interrupt as Deke asked question after question about people she didn't know. She paid more attention when he

inquired after who lived in his old apartment, but the men quickly moved on to other topics.

The late afternoon sun dipped lower in the sky and she buttoned her jacket against the cool breeze. It took awhile before Deke got around to asking what happened to his things, but Jay didn't know the answer. Finally, the conversation drew to a close and they shook hands again before the older man went back inside the building.

"Come on, babe," Deke said and took her elbow.

She was quiet as they crossed the parking lot, but when they turned back onto the sidewalk, she said, "For a while, I thought you were going to ask Jay to help us get inside your old unit."

"That's what I was planning, but how could I? If we got caught and anyone figured out he'd been involved, he'd lose his job at the very least. Five months till retirement." Deke shook his head. "I couldn't put him in that position."

"It might have been for nothing anyway. He said the apartment units were renovated and your notes might not even be there anymore."

"I know."

Ryne remained quiet although she wanted to ask him what he was thinking. He'd told her that he understood how dangerous it was if he talked to his old friends. The Gineal didn't have the resources or enough troubleshooters to protect a large number of humans at one time. She'd told Deke that as well.

They reached the car and he opened the passenger door for her. He rounded the hood, and once he was seated, Ryne got in herself. "No more contact with people you know," she warned him.

They pulled out into traffic. "I already promised I wouldn't. Running into Jay was a fluke."

He sounded angry, but Ryne figured that was because he didn't like being reminded that simply talking to them could put targets on his friends' backs. She changed the subject. "What's our next step on the notes?"

Instead of answering, Deke asked, "You hungry?"

Ryne blinked at the non sequitur. She glanced down at the dashboard clock, but it wasn't even six yet. Of course, with the time difference, it was past dinnertime at home and she was ready to eat. "Yeah. Do you know any good restaurants?"

"I used to. Let's see how many are still around."

They hit pay dirt on their fourth attempt. It was deep dusk by then and Ryne was edgy. It wasn't that the night made attack more likely, but it was easier to conceal it until it was too late. She kept her senses extended, scanning the area until she and Deke were sitting side by side in a booth.

"Sorry about the prices. If you want," he said, "we can go somewhere else."

Opening her menu, Ryne took a look for herself and discovered why he sounded uncomfortable. "Don't worry about it. This is business travel." She grinned. "Everything gets expensed to the Gineal Company."

"I pay my own way."

"I don't understand why you're so stubborn about this. The trip isn't coming out of my pocket. If I wanted to, I could turn in everything I've spent on you and get it reimbursed." The hard set to his jaw told her she was wasting her breath. "Fine. We'll add it to your tab."

She flipped open the menu again, but Deke took it from her. "I don't want you to think I'm unappreciative of what you've done—I am—but it's important to me not to take handouts."

One look at his face was all it took to decide how serious Deke was about this. There had to be a story there, but before she could ask, the waitress came over and introduced herself. By the time she left, the opportunity was lost.

Ryne reached for a menu and scanned the choices—mostly surf and turf with a few pasta and vegetarian dishes thrown in. It didn't take long to decide what they wanted, and once they'd given their orders and relinquished the menus, she returned to the question she'd asked earlier. "What's the plan on your notes? Mission scrubbed?"

"You don't have to sound so hopeful," he complained.

"Sorry, but I wasn't crazy about this idea from the start."

Deke reached for his water and drank before he said, "Yeah, I know." He turned toward her, smiled, and voice low, said, "I was thinking, though."

"Uh-oh."

He ignored that. "Why don't you zap the notes into my hands? Easy."

She shook her head. "If I could make them appear just like

that, I never would have flown to L.A. There's nothing I like about this trip, especially the fact that you're in danger here."

"On TV—"

"Do I have to tell you again that Hollywood doesn't have some inside track on how Gineal magic works? I can't call forth anything of yours no matter how much I'd like to."

Their dinner arrived, delaying the conversation. When they were alone again, Deke asked, "You can zip books in and out of your library, so why the hell can't you get my notes?"

Ryne swallowed before she spoke. "Mainly because of the spell that Anise used to make you a cartoon. There's a phrase in there about disassociating you from all worldly ties—that includes everything you own. If I can't use your energy signature to home in on them, I can't transport them to us."

Deke salted his french fries and said, "Why didn't you tell me this when I first brought up the idea?"

Stiffening with indignation, Ryne whispered heatedly, "Not once while we discussed this did you mention using my powers to get your notes, so I thought you knew I couldn't."

"You've pointed out more than once how ignorant I am of your people. Why would you think I knew?"

She opened her mouth, couldn't come up with anything to say, and took a bite of her filet instead. He was right—she should have realized he was clueless. Not only was he human, but he would have had to read the spell to know what it entailed. "Sorry. You're right. My only excuse is that I've pored over that incantation for years and know it backward and forward."

They ate in silence for a while. "Explain this energy thing to me. Why would I have ties to the notes?"

Basic. Something any Gineal child knew by the time she was old enough to start school. Ryne didn't tell him that, though. Instead she explained how people put their personal energy into things they handled often. Deke, of course, had a million and one questions and that took them through dinner.

"We still haven't addressed the issue of the notes," Ryne pointed out as she dug her spoon into her sherbet.

"What's there to discuss?" He reached over to help himself to a bite and Ryne slapped his hand away.

"You've got your own dessert."

"It's delicious, too. Here, try." Deke fed her a spoonful of *crème brûlée*. Her eyes closed and she hummed softly. "Good?"

"Oh, yeah. It's better than sex."

"You can only say that because I haven't made you come yet."

"That's arrogant."

He shook his head. "Nope, it's confidence that the heat we share isn't going to fizzle when I'm deep inside you." Deke leaned closer and ran his index finger over her lower lip. "Babe, it's going to be so fucking good with us—just thinking about it gets me hard."

As she stared into his eyes, Ryne found it easy to imagine the weight of his body over hers, the way his hands would feel touching her intimately, and she shifted. The awareness arced between them. Then someone laughed loudly, reminding her they were in a restaurant, and she pulled away, tamping down the desire.

"Eat your sherbet," he told her when he'd reined in his desire. "It's melting."

Ryne eyed his dessert enviously, but didn't ask for a second taste. She'd gotten herself in enough trouble with the first. "Don't think I haven't noticed how you've diverted me each time I ask about your plans for those notes."

"I should have guessed you'd catch on."

"Well?"

He grimaced. "I honestly don't know what I'm going to do. I want to put my hands on them—I'm sure they hold the key to why Anise cursed me—but it's risky."

With security tighter, it had to be. "Why don't you introduce yourself to the people who live there and explain that it used to be your apartment and that you left something."

"Right. 'Hi, you don't know me, but I used to live here. Is it okay if I rip up your floorboards looking for something that might or might not still be there?' They'd call the cops."

"Or rip up the floor themselves thinking that you left a valuable item." Ryne tipped her bowl to scoop up the last of her sherbet. "But you're slick enough to talk your way inside and convince them to loan you a crowbar."

"Maybe," Deke said with a shrug. "Except I don't want to chance it and get arrested. I bent the rules some when I was a

PI, but I was an honest cop. I don't want anyone I used to work with to answer the call, see me, and think I wasn't."

Ryne nodded. She could understand that, but she had an unanswered question. "Why did you quit the force?"

Deke looked down for a moment, and she suspected he was considering how much to say. "I got sick of the bullshit." His voice was quiet. Tired. "I spent most of my five-year career in a high-crime area, and I expected to have people swear and spit at me there. I didn't expect it when I was transferred to one of the more affluent divisions."

"Dunks?"

"No. Routine traffic stops were opportunities to tell me I was a brutal racist. You know why? Because I was wearing the uniform. Yeah, there were and still are bad cops on the LAPD, but most of us weren't beating the shit out of people. Most of us were doing our jobs because we wanted to protect citizens, to make things better so that kids could go outside and play without worrying about a drive-by shooting. And some asshole in a Beemer whose most meaningful contribution to society was writing a check to a charity for the tax deduction was accusing me of horrible things."

Ryne reached out and stroked his thigh. She wanted to soothe him, comfort him, and she didn't dwell on the whys.

"It happened too often." He shrugged. "Finally, I thought fuck it, I don't have to do this. I had a buddy who'd left the force and gone to work for a big-name detective agency. He was always trying to recruit me, so I called him up and less than a month later, I had a new job."

"One that probably paid more and had better hours."

The corners of his lips tipped up. "Definitely better pay. It was still iffy on the hours."

"I'm sorry you had to listen to the abuse."

"All things considered, that was better than 'toon town." She began another apology, but he cut her off. "Do you realize where your hand is?"

Ryne froze, glanced down, and saw what her fingers were brushing. "Crap," she muttered, and jerked her arm back.

Instead of teasing her, he said, "I have a spoonful of crème brûlée left, it's yours if you do that little hum again."

"Stroking you wasn't enough?" Ryne knew better than to say that, but something about him tempted her to play his game.

"Only the very generous would call that a stroke."

She opened her mouth, but before Ryne could get a word out, Deke fed her the last bite of his dessert. This time she expressed her pleasure with a sigh.

As they left the restaurant, she said, "I enjoyed dinner. Thanks for bringing me here."

"I enjoyed it, too. Right up until you paid for it."

Ryne was trying to decide how to respond when the air in front of them shimmered. Even as she pushed Deke against the wall and put herself in front of him, she was reinforcing her protection spell. He tried to get out from behind her and Ryne brought her elbow back hard into his stomach. She'd barely started an incantation to protect Deke when Anise materialized.

"*Co-aigneach*, you disappoint me," the woman said.

Ryne didn't stop, not until she closed the spell and had cast the barrier to keep humans away. It was only then that she realized it wasn't Anise but a perfect image of her. She looked around, trying to discover if her mentor was projecting from nearby. Ryne sensed nothing.

"I'm not like you," she disagreed.

"Deny it all you wish, but we are kindred. Twenty years ago, I was the same as you are today. I know the power calls to you, *mo cridhe*, whispers through your blood like a siren's song. I shaped you, molded you. No one knows you as I do, and you know me every bit as well."

Ryne nodded. It was why she'd been assigned to hunt the older woman and it was why they'd fought to so many draws. The student and the teacher, each had learned from the other until their set of skills was nearly identical.

"I'm the only one who's ever loved you."

"That's not true," Ryne said calmly.

"But it is. Your parents had no time or interest in you. Your own sister has forsaken you. Who do you have? That human cowering behind you?"

Deke growled and Ryne brought her elbow back again to keep him in line. All she needed was him falling for this.

“I’m heartbroken that you think I’m so unlovable.”

“Sarcasm,” her mentor said, making a tsking sound, “and when I came to offer you a gift.” The Anise image snapped her fingers and a lifeless body appeared at her feet.

It was Deke’s friend, Jay.

12

CHAPTER

Deke tried to get around Ryne to check on the old man, but she hit him hard enough with her elbow to drive the air from his lungs. It brought him back to his senses. Even if minutes could make the difference between life and death, he couldn't do anything until the woman who wanted him dead was taken care of.

"Why are you so frightened?" Ryne asked.

"You don't scare me, *mo cridhe*." The woman shook her head as she laughed, tossing her blond hair behind her shoulders.

"Perhaps not, but the human does. Don't bother to deny it. If he didn't, you'd be here in the flesh instead of projecting an image of yourself from a distance and you wouldn't have sent in powerless creatures to do your dirty work."

Projecting? Deke studied Anise more closely, but she looked as solid as Ryne did.

"You assume much," the woman said with a smile that made Deke's skin crawl. "That's to my benefit."

Ryne *was* assuming. Maybe she had the whole thing wrong. If that were true, they were wasting their time, doing things that brought them no closer to resolving his situation. The time they had was short, he should— Deke felt his anxiety lessen

suddenly and realized it had come from outside himself. Damn it, had Anise caused him to doubt Ryne?

“Don’t try to manipulate his mind and emotions again,” Ryne said with a growl. “It won’t work.”

“No, but you’ll have to use magic to keep that protection in place and it leaves you at a disadvantage.” The woman held out her arms. “But perhaps I won’t need to kill you. You’ve felt the power of the dark forces more strongly than ever before and you’re tempted. It’s merely a matter of time until you join me.”

He felt Ryne stiffen. “I’d rather die than turn.”

“Such bravado, but we both know how close you were mere days ago. Think of what we could do as a team, *mo cridhe*.”

“Stop calling me that.” Ryne’s voice sounded placid, but something told him that she wasn’t calm.

The other woman laughed and Deke figured Ryne hadn’t fooled her either. “I wish I could stay and talk with you longer, but I have plans. I’ve missed you, *mo cridhe*.” That last was tacked on deliberately to irk Ryne, he knew it, but before she could say anything, Anise disappeared.

Deke immediately moved to check on Jay, but Ryne brought her elbow back yet again. “Just because she’s not visible, doesn’t mean the threat is over,” she warned.

“I have to get help for Jay,” he insisted.

“He’s beyond help, but you’re not. Stay still.”

“What the hell do you mean he’s beyond help? He might be alive but badly hurt, you don’t know.”

“The life force is no longer in his body, I can sense it from here.”

“That’s pretty damn iffy,” Deke growled.

Ryne stepped aside. “Go ahead, verify it for yourself. Anise is far enough away that I can’t pick her up and it should be safe.”

He didn’t wait for a second invitation. Kneeling in front of Jay, he tried to find a pulse, but as Ryne had said, there wasn’t one. The old man was dead. Deke wanted to swear, but didn’t have the heart for it.

It was his fault. All his. Ryne had told him that anyone he contacted from his old life would be in danger from Anise. He should have listened.

Five months till retirement. Shit.

Facts about Jay flew through Deke’s head. His wife’s name

was Inez. They'd had six children and he'd been proud of them, elated that they'd gone to college. Grandchildren. How many times had Deke seen pictures of the grandkids? Jay had been proud of them, too, eager to show the latest snapshots to anyone who'd look.

"Deke," Ryne said, resting her hand on his shoulder. "We have to get out of here."

"We have to call the police. Give me your cell phone."

"No."

Deke got to his feet and went toe-to-toe with her. "Give me the fucking phone." He tried to use the tone of his voice and his size to intimidate her, but of course, he didn't faze Ryne in the slightest.

She lifted her chin to glare into his eyes. "You're not thinking clearly. We can't afford to get involved with the police. For one thing, too many of them are going to know you. How many questions do you want to field about where you've been for the past four years? How much scrutiny do you think you can afford? I conjured your ID from a credit card. One run through a computer and they'll discover it's false."

He scowled. "We can't leave him here."

"They'll think you did it. Or me. They'll watch us, maybe bring us in for questioning. We'd have to lie and our stories would have to match closely enough to be convincing. We don't have time for this."

"Jay deserves better than to be left on the sidewalk like a pile of trash."

"Jay deserves to have his killer apprehended, to have her dealt with so that she can't murder anyone else." Ryne reached out, took hold of his shoulders. "The police can't handle Anise. I can. Don't tie my hands and make things even more difficult than they are already."

Ryne was making sense, and damn it, he didn't want her to. The cops would look at the two of them thoroughly if they reported the body and his connection to Jay would bring them more focus. His time on the force, his disappearance, his fake ID would guarantee he'd bear the brunt of the investigation. What was he going to tell the detectives? That a blond-haired witch had made the body materialize in front of them? They'd have him in the psych ward ASAP.

“People are going to know we were here, that we found him, and they’ll tell the police that,” Deke said.

“No they won’t. I’ve got the barrier up to keep humans away and I added spell that blurs this area. No one has seen us with the body. I’ll obscure our car, too. We’ll drive away calmly and when we’re far enough away, I’ll undo my magic. This is a busy area, someone else will find Jay quickly and he’ll be taken care of. He won’t be on the sidewalk long.”

Reluctantly, Deke nodded.

“Good.” Ryne flicked her fingers. “Come on.”

As he walked with her, he asked, “What did you do?”

“I erased any indication of our presence from the body and the area surrounding it. We can’t afford for anything to point to our presence here tonight.” They reached the car. “Are you okay to drive?” she asked.

“Yeah. This isn’t my first corpse.” But it was the first time he’d been responsible for someone’s death. He unlocked the car doors, but instead of helping Ryne in, Deke said, “Maybe no one will see us out here, but the detectives will discover we were at the restaurant and that we left close to the time the body was found.”

Ryne was shaking her head before he finished speaking. “I’ve already thought of that. I used cash instead of my credit card to pay for dinner, and I know a spell that will make everyone who saw us here forget it. We’re covered.”

Deke nodded and opened the passenger door. She didn’t get in, though, till he was behind the wheel. Damn it, he hated that she did that. And he hated feeling useless.

Shit, he hated *being* useless.

Pulling out of the parking lot, he headed back toward their hotel. He had to accept it, Ryne was protecting him. Like tonight. He’d stood behind her as if he were a child while she’d shielded him. Deke knew he’d had no other option, that if he tried to involve himself, he could have put her at greater risk than what she already faced. It didn’t make it any easier.

No wonder Ryne didn’t want to have anything to do with humans. With her job, caring about one was a liability, leverage for a corrupted Gineal to use against her.

“Stop brooding,” she said. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“It was. You warned me.”

"Anise killed him, you didn't."

"She wouldn't have known who he was if I hadn't talked to him." Deke pulled to a stop at a red light and turned to her. "Anise has to be monitoring us."

"Yeah, I know."

She didn't sound surprised and that irritated Deke. Why the hell hadn't she told him? "Which one of us is she watching?"

"Probably both of us. You're a threat to her for some reason we need to figure out and I'm her hunter. The only place I know she can't pick us up is inside my house."

The light changed and he accelerated through the intersection before he asked, "What does *mo cridhe* mean? She called you that a lot in Gineal."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Ryne smile. "We don't call it Gineal. It's referred to Cànán or more frequently as the old language. *Mo cridhe*, though, is bastardized Gaelic. We borrowed pretty heavily from the Scots."

Deke almost went off on a tangent. The names he'd heard so far—Frasier, Duncan, MacAlister—were Scottish. How close were the Gineal's ties to that people? But then he realized Ryne hadn't answered his question. "What does *mo cridhe* mean," he asked a second time.

She wasn't smiling when she said, "It means *my heart*."

"Why did she call you that? Were you close?"

There was a pause and Deke felt her lift her spells. He shook his head. She hadn't moved a muscle, but he was certain of exactly what she'd done. It didn't make sense.

"For a time," Ryne answered, then explained. "Apprentice troubleshooters are referred to as the *cridhe*—the heart—of the Gineal. Don't ask me why; I don't know. My guess is that it has something to do with our society only remaining strong as long as those who turn to the dark forces are kept in check. There are stories in our history of horrendous persecutions by humans. A lot of our people were killed, more ceded their powers thinking to protect themselves." She shook her head. "God only knows how many dormants are running around because of this." Before Deke could ask another question, Ryne straightened in her seat. "A couple found Jay. I told you it wouldn't be long."

"Great. Now two people who were out for a nice dinner will be traumatized by finding a body. I should have called it in."

Ryne stared at him for a long moment—he sensed her eyes on him—before she said, “I appreciate how you feel, but you can’t protect everyone from everything. There are times you have to make choices. It’s not easy to live with some of them, but you, me—we can only do so much. You know this.”

Yeah, he did, but he’d never liked it. “You’re one to talk. You’re as bad as I am—maybe worse.”

She didn’t comment on that. “We’re not going to Jay’s funeral and we’re not paying a visit to his family, got it?”

“I got it,” Deke growled. Ryne hadn’t needed to tell him that. He knew better now. Anise was watching; he wouldn’t give her anymore innocents to use against them.

Deke took the turn into the hotel’s drive and pulled into the valet parking area. Ryne had insisted on paying for the service while they were here, and as much as he hated racking up more debt, it made sense now that the wicked witch had made an appearance. He had the suspicion that a busy entryway full of humans wouldn’t be any deterrent, but he had to trust Ryne.

The valet opened the passenger door and waited while she reached in to get her purse. As Deke rounded the hood, he realized the boy was staring at her ass and it pissed him off. “She’s mine,” he warned softly as he held out the keys.

With an audible gulp, the kid said, “Yes, sir.”

Ryne remained quiet until they were on the elevator. “You didn’t have to scare him, you know. That valet couldn’t have been more than twenty.”

“Babe,” he said, putting his arm around her waist and tugging her against his side. “If you’d seen the way he was leering, you would have put the fear of God into him yourself.”

She looked skeptical and he didn’t blame her, but what could he say? The last thing Deke wanted to admit was that he felt possessive of her. It would make Ryne edgy, especially coming on the heels of this morning’s jealousy. Shit, it made *him* nervous. It had to be some weird psychological thing. Didn’t hostages develop an attachment to their emancipators? That had to be it.

Since he didn’t want to think about it, let alone discuss it, Deke changed the subject as they left the elevator. “How’d you know Anise wasn’t really there anyway? She looked solid.”

They reached their room, but Deke waited for Ryne's nod before sliding the card in the slot and unlocking the door. Everything was secured behind them before she said, "Her image didn't have an aura. Every living creature emits one, but while Anise is strong enough to make the likeness look real, even she can't project her auric field that far out." She shrugged out of her jacket and draped it over the back of a chair. "What I want to know is why Anise didn't show up in person and attempt to blast you to pieces."

"Maybe I'm not the danger to her you think I am." Deke took off his own jacket and hung it in the closet. "Or maybe," he said as he closed the door, "she didn't want to tangle with you."

"Trust me, Anise is wasting a lot of time and energy on you. She wouldn't bother if she didn't feel she had to. You're a threat," Ryne said, "a big one. Now we need to know why."

Ryne put down the book she was reading and stretched. There were so many things she needed to do and she didn't know how she was going to manage to do them in the time she had. The number-one priority was to protect Deke, but it wasn't as clear what item had second place.

She looked over at him. He was sitting on the bed watching a basketball game with the sound muted so he wouldn't disturb her as she combed through the books, but his consideration wasn't helping. There were too many texts to go through and too little time to do it in. Deke had volunteered to help, but not one of the tomes was written in English and it was up to her.

Finding the spell to undo Anise's magic wasn't going to be easy. Damn it, there wasn't enough time until the full moon. That left a pair of options—either she got lucky or she delegated.

Since it had taken Ryne years to find the first spell she'd used to free Deke, she guessed she couldn't count on luck to turn up the one that would do it permanently.

Delegation. She hated owing anyone, and Creed, the only Gineal she felt comfortable asking for help, was on the other side of the world, hip-deep in some big problem. Or so the council had told her when she suggested he cover her territory.

"Is your headache coming back?" Deke asked.

Only then did Ryne realize she was rubbing her forehead. "No, I'm just tired."

"Yeah, it's after eleven back home and we started out damn early today. Come to bed. The Lakers are kicking ass and I don't need to watch the last five minutes."

The idea of curling up beside him was tempting. She was exhausted, but Ryne shook her head. "Maybe in a while."

She looked at the stack of books on the table. There was no way she could do this alone and Deke didn't deserve to go back to *DSPI* because she had too much pride.

Ryne stood and he immediately looked over. She pointed to the bathroom and he nodded before going back to the game.

Closing the door behind her, she cast a quick spell to block any noise from escaping. She'd hear anything in the outer room, but odds were good it was an unnecessary precaution. The first thing she'd done after they'd checked in was surround the room with a protective spell. It wouldn't prevent Anise from entering, but her mentor had shown an aversion to confronting Deke head-on and it *would* keep out any member of the B-Team.

After taking a deep breath, she made the mental call. A transit appeared almost immediately and Fia McNair stepped through. Ryne relaxed. They weren't friends, but Fia was the one librarian who didn't look at her with a sour expression when she was forced to deal with her. More important than that, however, she was a damn good researcher.

"You requested assistance, laoch solas?"

"Yes," Ryne said and the word was harder to get out than she'd expected. "I have a research project that I'd like you to undertake for me."

"And when do you need me to start?"

"ASAP. I need the information before the full moon."

Fia shook her head. "I'm sorry, but that's not possible unless we're talking about a very simple search and I doubt that's the case. For a complex and lengthy project, the earliest date I—or any of the librarians—can start is May 10."

Crap. She almost never asked for help, and the one time she needed it, they wanted to put her at the back of the queue. "That's unacceptable. I need full resources on this now."

"I'm sorry," Fia repeated with more sternness than someone with her youth should be able to manage. "We can't do that unless the council gives you priority over our other tasks."

"This is important."

"You troubleshooters are all the same," Fia said, and she sounded exasperated. "Every one of you feels that your assignment is more important than anybody else's, but that's rarely the case. Unless the council concurs that your project is vital, you'll be treated the same as every other Gineal."

Ryne sighed. Another person with an attitude about troubleshooters. "Fine. Let's talk to the council."

Maybe it was petty, but Ryne took pleasure in the trepidation that crossed the younger woman's face before she could conceal it. The council dealt with the head librarian and the others wouldn't have much contact with them. An enforcer, however, was in constant communication with their leadership. Ryne might not be certain the ceannards would back her, but she wasn't worried about talking to them. She put out another call.

Taber's image appeared in the mirror. Ryne explained the situation, giving both sides, before turning to Fia and asking if she wanted to add anything. The librarian didn't.

He disappeared and Ryne figured he was consulting with Fia's boss and maybe more of the council. Bureaucracy sucked.

It seemed to take an age before the hotel mirror shimmered again and the entire council made an appearance. Taber, however, was the one who spoke for them. "Dìonachd," he said, using Fia's official title, "you are to make any request from this laoch solas your top priority. Everything else on your list can wait or will be reassigned to others. Are the instructions clear?"

"Yes, ceannard."

Ryne released the breath she'd been holding. She hadn't been sure they'd agree with her even though Taber had mentioned they were concerned about Anise.

With the situation resolved, the council wished them good night, and she and Fia bowed slightly to show deference. The ceannards winked out one by one and the mirror returned to normal.

"What did you need me to research for you, laoch solas?"

Great. Now Fia was miffed that she'd been overruled. "I'm sorry I had to bring the council into this, but it really is very important. The fate of a human lies in your hands."

Her words had the desired effect. Most Gineal were unused to the war against the dark forces. They were support— healers, librarians, monitors, trackers—but everyone believed that protecting humans was important to the survival of their own people. Whether it was true or only what they were taught, Ryne didn't know, but she did understand that those who weren't enforcers wanted to feel part of it. She'd given that to the younger woman, and hopefully, that meant Fia would work harder to find the spell for Deke.

"What do you need me to do?" Fia asked.

Ryne gave an overview of what she was looking for and why before adding, "This man holds the key to defeating a Gineal who's turned. If you can find the spell to free him, you'll not only be helping a human, you'll be helping me to end the threat this woman holds to our people."

Fia nodded. "Where have you already searched? What kind of information did you find? Do you have any leads on where you planned to check next?"

There was one simple method to answer those questions—they both knew it—and it was the most thorough way to do it, but Ryne didn't want to. It meant opening herself up to another Gineal. It meant risking the other woman discovering how close she'd come to turning—if Fia knew how and where to look. It meant taking the chance that she might accidentally transmit more than she intended and Ryne never wanted anyone to learn of some of the things she'd done while she'd lived with Anise.

And she had no other choice. If she didn't, the librarian could waste time retracing steps Ryne had already taken, hitting dead-ends that Ryne had already found. She had to do it for Deke. Had to do it because he despised being a 'toon.

Reluctantly, she closed the small distance between them and bent forward slightly so that the shorter Fia could comfortably put her hands on Ryne's head. Then, with a deep breath, she opened herself—partially. Maybe that would be enough.

It wasn't.

"You're closed, laoch solas," Fia complained.

"Sorry." And Ryne stopped trying to do it halfway.

It took only minutes, and since the other woman didn't scream in horror or look at her oddly when Ryne stepped back, she assumed her secrets had remained undiscovered. "I have some books I was going through on the table in the other room. I'll send them to you."

"Thank you," Fia said. "You're a thorough researcher and I appreciate you passing along what you've found."

The formality made Ryne nervous. Had Fia read something after all? She didn't ask. "Can you send me brief updates so I know how you're doing?"

"Of cour—"

There was a light tap on the door. "Babe, are you okay?"

"Fine," she called, then realized she needed to undo the spell so he could hear her. "Fine, I'll be out in a minute."

"I'll be in touch," Fia promised in a whisper as she created the transit.

"Thanks."

When she was gone, Ryne opened the door and found Deke leaning there, waiting. "You were in there a hell of a long time. The game's over and *SportsCenter* is on."

"Sorry." She tried to ease past him, but he wrapped an arm around her waist, stopping her.

"I don't need apologies. You weren't feeling well earlier today and I was worried about you."

Ryne could see his concern plainly and she wasn't used to being around anyone who cared. Sure, there'd been Maia, but her sister had left home when Ryne had been seven. God knew her parents had been too busy, and while Anise had been a surrogate mother, she'd had her own agenda—then and now.

"I asked someone to take over the search for the spell. I can't look for it and handle the other things I need to do," she admitted regretfully. "I was filling her in."

"In the bathroom?"

She nodded.

"Damn it, Ryne, you scared me half to death. Why couldn't you have done this in the room?"

Part of it was that she didn't know which librarian would be on call and one of the more senior members would be disapproving of a human's presence. But that wasn't the biggest

reason. "Because," Ryne said quietly, "I didn't want you to know I can't do it all."

He tugged her closer. "I know you're not Wonder Woman."

"I thought I could manage it." Her arms went around him. "But that was when we were inside my house where we were safe and I'd simply need to answer an occasional call-out. Now, though, I'd only have time to look for the spell at odd moments or for a little while at night. It's too important for that."

"You won't get an argument from me, but can we trust this person? What if she turned?"

"It's unlikely. She's a librarian."

"And librarians are too weak to turn?" Deke looked confused.

"Not weak, although they're certainly not among the strongest Gineal. Their powers are . . . weird."

"How are they—"

Ryne put two fingers over Deke's lips, quieting him. "How did I know you were going ask a question?" She grinned, then added, "I'm not sure how to explain their differences since I don't understand them myself. I can feel it, that's all."

His tongue came out, teasing her fingers and Ryne shuddered. When she saw the spark in his gray-blue eyes, she lowered her hand. Great, now he knew what he did to her, but she didn't move away from him even though she should.

"Okay," Deke said, "her powers are different and that makes her less likely to become evil. Got it."

That wasn't exactly what she'd said, but as Ryne started to clarify, the index finger on his free hand traced a path from her collarbone, up her throat to her chin. She let her voice trail off. Deke pressed lightly, tipping her face to his and his lips brushed against hers—once, twice, a third time.

She tightened her hold on him, leaned into his chest, but before she gave into the desire, Ryne remembered Anise. *We are kindred*. She wasn't like her mentor, she wouldn't be.

Ryne broke away, moved as far away from Deke as she could get, and gazed sightlessly out the window. It was too tempting to go to bed with him and that was dangerous. Ryne knew how easy it was to control humans, to subjugate them. How simple would it be to become like her teacher if she had sex with Deke?

I shaped you, molded you.

Anise had and in ways Ryne hadn't realized until much later. There were still times she was surprised by how deep her mentor's influence ran.

Co-aigneach.

She was terrified it was too late, that she was headed down the same path. Ryne couldn't be like Anise. She couldn't!

Deke's arms went around her from behind. "It's okay, babe," he murmured against her ear. "You're nothing like Anise and you never will be."

Ryne went rigid. Either Deke had made a lucky guess about what was bothering her or he'd just read her mind.

13

CHAPTER

Ryne watched the city of Los Angeles go past her car window as Deke maneuvered them through traffic. This morning, while she'd been in the shower, he'd plugged in her laptop, gone online, and discovered that there was a unit for rent in his old building. By the time she'd emerged, he'd made an appointment for them to take a look at it.

From the start, she'd been uncertain whether breaking and entering was the right answer, but now that they were on their way to case the place, her stomach had knotted up.

They'd pass inspection, Ryne was sure of that. Since there was no way in hell she'd get Deke to shop again, she'd transformed their casual things into designer clothes—understated, elegant, and incredibly expensive. They'd rented a second car for the day, a Mercedes sedan that quietly spoke of money. If anyone realized it wasn't theirs, they would simply say they were planning to relocate to L.A. and had flown in to find somewhere to live. Easy. Or so Deke had claimed.

Despite her lack of excitement, she'd agreed to go along with this scheme to get his notes. They had to know why Anise was fixated on a single human. The more Ryne thought about it, the more certain she became that she was missing something

important. She knew her mentor the way nobody else did and projecting her image was not an Anise-type move.

They pulled to a stop at a light, and he reached over and rested his hand on her knee. "Don't worry, we're simply looking at an apartment. No reason to be nervous."

Because she was wearing a skirt, the only thing she had between her skin and his calloused palm was a pair of nylons. Her legs might as well be bare. "I'm fine," Ryne said.

Deke didn't look convinced. Instead of calling her on it, though, he stroked the inside of her knee. If he was trying to remind her of the heat between them, he succeeded. Ryne felt the caress in every cell of her body.

Though they'd both been trying to ignore the attraction between them for the past couple of days, she was finding it harder to resist now—maybe because he'd stopped being a constant pain in the ass and had become a partner.

Or maybe it was harder because she liked him. She liked the way he cared about others, how he tried to protect her even though he was the one who needed defending. And she particularly liked the way he'd reached for her in bed last night—not for sex, but to offer comfort. Ryne had been busy worrying about Anise, about finding the spell, about a million other things, and she hadn't expected to get much sleep, but Deke had wrapped his arms around her and somehow her troubles had seemed to lessen.

That was scarier than thinking he might have read her mind. Almost.

The light went green and he took his hand off her leg, returning it to the steering wheel. When she realized she was staring at his fingers, imagining them touching her in places far more intimate than her knee, Ryne shifted to look out her window again. She couldn't trust herself with him. Not after—

"You know, babe, I like you in that suit. You look so but-toned up and professional—navy skirt, red power blazer, your hair pulled back. The only thing you need is a pair of glasses. I could be your male secretary." He grinned, but kept his eyes on the road. "You could coerce me to have sex with you in order to keep my job. And I could push that skirt up, bend you over a desk, and take you from behind. Damn, that would be hot."

“Be quiet.” Her body was warm from his words, even while her blood was running cold at the word *coerce*.

“Don’t tell me the idea turns you off. I saw the way your legs widened.” She snapped her knees together and caught Deke’s grin. “You keep fighting yourself. It’s going to make it that much sweeter when I’m finally inside you.”

Ryne wanted to tell him emphatically that there was no way in hell anything was going to happen between them, but she wasn’t a good enough liar to pull it off. Despite her best efforts to remain strong, she might lose the battle. God help her if that happened. What was she thinking? God help *him*.

“Stop pushing me, okay? You don’t understand how dangerous I am,” Ryne warned him.

“What? You think you’re going to hurt me?” Deke shook his head. “Maybe I’m only human, but I’m tough enough to handle you in bed, tiger.” He lowered his sunglasses and winked at her before pushing them up and looking back at the traffic.

“I’m serious.”

“I can see that. How about this? I’ll tie you to the bed. It would mean I’d have to give up my fantasy about having your hands all over me, but if it’ll make you feel better, I can get into bondage.” He turned into the parking lot of the apartment and pulled the car into a spot. “What do you say?”

“Quit being an ass.” Deke didn’t understand, he couldn’t unless she told him everything, and there were some secrets Ryne planned to take to her grave. She pushed open her door, but before she could get out, he was there to help.

Even though she didn’t want to touch him—not right now—she let Deke assist her. Ryne had no choice when someone could be watching them either on camera or through one of the windows. She tucked her left hand in the crook of his elbow and allowed him to escort her to the front of the building.

When they stepped into the lobby, the guard at the desk came to attention. “I’m Duncan Frasier Sinclair and this is my wife, Kitty,” Deke boomed in a Texas accent. “We have an appointment with Mr. Forsythe.”

Ryne nearly burst out laughing, but turned it into a discreet cough in the nick of time. Duncan Frasier Sinclair? Kitty? Wife? He hadn’t warned her about the wife part. With her fingers

tucked against Deke, Ryne doubted anyone had noticed she wasn't wearing a ring yet, and she conjured an impressive, though not overly ostentatious one.

The guard offered them a seat while he contacted the building manager for their appointment, and when they were out of earshot, Ryne murmured, "Kitty?"

She got a quick smirk. "It sounded preppier than Tiger."

"You try my patience."

"There are other parts of you I'd like to try, too."

Ryne rolled her eyes and gave up. This was who Deke Summers was—she might as well get used to it.

He leaned forward to kiss her and Ryne stepped back. "Uh-uh-uh," she warned. "Preppies don't approve of PDA." She knew from the confused look on his face that he was thinking PDA as in Palm Pilot. "Public displays of affection," she explained.

From the spark that came into Deke's eyes, Ryne was certain he had something irritating to say. Luckily, however, a man approached them and introduced himself as Mr. Forsythe. She didn't miss the way he measured them, judging their clothes, shoes, and the size of the diamond on her finger. The fact that it was pink upped its value. The manager's smile became warmer.

"Mr. Sinclair—"

"Please," Deke interrupted with that thick drawl, "call me Sin. Everyone else does."

Ryne almost choked.

"Sin," Forsythe said uneasily. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Mrs., um, Sin."

"And please," Ryne said, extending her hand, "call me Kitty." She was tempted to try to sound Texan herself, but wasn't confident enough in her skill to risk it.

"Is the guard on duty twenty-four hours?" Deke asked. "I travel a lot on business and I want to be certain Kitty will be safe when I'm not here to protect her."

"We have state-of-the-art security," Forsythe said. "If you'll come this way?"

Ryne hooked her arm through Deke's again, and when he looked at her, she fluttered her eyelashes. "My hero," she mouthed.

Deke winked and nudged her to follow the manager.

“One guard,” Forsythe said when they reached him, “is on duty in the lobby during business hours. In the evening, we have two.” He gestured behind the desk. “Behind that door, we have more guards monitoring the building at all times. I assure you, Mrs.—I mean, Kitty, will be quite safe.”

“Hmm. What about the parking lot? It’s at the back of the building and the doors we saw appear to be emergency exits only. I don’t want my wife walking alone from her car to the lobby. Not at night.”

“Perfectly understandable,” Forsythe soothed. “Many of the women feel that way. All Kitty need do is call the desk on her cell phone and a guard will be happy to walk with her.”

The manager went into his spiel about the lobby decor, the imported marble, the stained-glass windows, and other selling points. Deke kept asking questions. Where had the marble come from? Was the stained glass antique? How often were the floral arrangements replaced? And on and on he went. Ryne knew why he was doing it, but in her opinion he’d gone overboard. If the manager hadn’t judged their net worth by what they wore, she might have had more sympathy for the poor soul. He was an older man, clearly very reserved and no doubt used to a different type of client than Deke was portraying.

They finally made it to the elevators. Deke started in with more queries. Some were about security in the elevators and in the stairways, but most of it was about the building itself or the amenities. He asked about maintenance, and though Deke didn’t give anything away with his voice or demeanor, Ryne knew he was saddened by the thought of Jay. She slid her hand down his arm and linked her fingers with his. He squeezed her briefly, then continued with his endless questions.

By the time they reached the available apartment, Forsythe’s jovial expression seemed forced. He unlocked the unit, but before he could open the door, Deke was off about security again.

The older man must think they were complete paranoids—or at least that Deke was. Did anyone else see attack at every turn? The questions weren’t subtle, but Deke had asked a million others about every aspect of the place so she didn’t think he’d raised suspicion. Once he finally finished his current inquisition, Forsythe opened the door and gestured for them to enter.

"Oh, my," Ryne said, pausing in the foyer, "this is beautiful." The manager beamed at her.

Ryne smiled in return, and freeing herself from Deke, she went deeper into the empty unit. Tipping her head back, she made a slow circle, taking in the lofted ceilings and the crown molding. "I never expected anything this majestic in Los Angeles."

"Only the third-floor residences have the high ceilings," Forsythe said.

"Are these real hardwood floors?"

"Of course," the man puffed up with a bit of indignation.

"No insult intended," Ryne apologized. "It's merely that one rarely sees wood floors of such high quality any longer."

"They're original to the building," Forsythe said with pride. "Refinished, of course."

"Of course."

Deke took over again, asking about the height of the ceilings, the method used to refinish the floors, the name of the paint color on the walls. Ryne tuned him out and made a leisurely circuit of the room. If she lived here, it would have broken her heart to leave. The only thing that would have made it more perfect was a view of the ocean, but they were too far inland for that. She ran her fingers over the cool marble of the fireplace, examined the wood of the built-in bookcases, and impatiently waited for Deke to finish so she could see more.

"Oops, looks like my Kitty-cat is ready to move on. I'll have to save my other questions for later."

Ryne grit her teeth and nodded when Forsythe asked if she'd like to see the kitchen. She was an indifferent cook at best, but even she was impressed. It was large, with granite countertops, a center island, and a six-burner stove.

"Plenty of cabinets; are they birch?" Deke asked and then he was off and running again.

It had to be the longest apartment tour in the history of the world, but Ryne was almost disappointed when they finished. Every room in the unit had been gorgeous, and she could see herself living here—not that she was thinking of moving. Her job was in the Midwest and this part of L.A. was too crowded for her to reside in anyway. Still, it was nice to dream sometimes.

After they bid farewell to Mr. Forsythe in the lobby, Deke escorted her to the Mercedes and opened her door. Ryne wanted to sink into her seat—she done the tour in heels and her feet hurt from standing for such a long time—but she waited until he was in and safe. “So Duncan Frasier ‘call me Sin’ Sinclair”—Ryne kicked off her shoes as he pulled out of the parking lot—“did you find out what you needed to know?”

“Yeah, that place is a fucking fortress. I spotted all kinds of shit that Forsythe didn’t bother to mention.”

“Sounds like it’ll be impossible to get inside.”

“Difficult, babe, but not impossible,” Deke disagreed. “Here’s how I’m going to do it.”

They were still arguing as they ate Chinese food from take-out boxes in their room. “It’s too dangerous,” Ryne insisted for what had to be the millionth time. She’d returned their clothes to their original state and was happy to be back in jeans and out of the skirt.

“It’s not that bad, and with you wiggling your nose, the chances of getting caught are even lower.”

“Your *Bewitched* references are getting old. Find something new, or better yet, give it a rest.” Ryne chased a water chestnut with her chopsticks.

“Everyone’s a critic.”

She settled for a piece of bok choy and popped it in her mouth. Once she swallowed, she reminded him, “You can’t be sure your notes are still there, you told me that yourself.”

“I’m aware of that, but you heard Forsythe, they refinished the original floors.”

“In that unit. That doesn’t mean they did the same in yours, and even if they did, those floorboards you raised and lowered are probably nailed down tight. At the very least, the shellac or whatever they use to seal the wood must have those boards glued in position.”

Deke gave her that too-charming smile he sometimes used and Ryne braced herself. “That’s where your no—your magic comes in. You can lift those boards easily, right?”

Ryne sighed. “I can, but why don’t we try hacking into your detective agency’s computer again?”

He shook his head. "The official version and my personal notes aren't identical. There were things I couldn't turn in that I would have kept in my own set."

"We'd be taking a stupid chance." It was idiotic, but she wasn't arguing as strenuously as she could, nor was she telling him no way in hell were they doing this. Part of it was Deke. He was a take-charge kind of guy, but he'd been forced to stand back and let her lead. It had to be eating at him to have her fight what he probably thought were his battles. Breaking in, though, was an area she knew nothing about so it put him in charge—more or less—and had to make him feel as if he were contributing.

The other part was more self-serving. Ryne needed to know how she could use Deke to fight Anise.

"The risk is low." Deke reached over with his chopsticks and deftly stole her water chestnut.

"Hey! You have your own food."

"You'd begrudge me a taste of yours when I haven't been able to eat in over four years?"

Ryne scowled at him. "That's pure manipulation." But even though she knew he was playing her, she quit protesting. He hadn't been able to enjoy much while he'd been trapped.

"Here." Deke tipped his box toward her. "Try my Szechwan chicken. *I'm* willing to share."

"Jerk," she muttered and he grinned. Ryne shook her head. "If you're done yanking my chain, would you care to explain how you want me to use my magic in our little caper?"

"Caper, I like that. Makes me think of those old Pink Panther movies."

He was in a lighthearted mood, the happiest she'd seen Deke since he'd discovered his freedom was temporary. It had to be because there was finally something he could do to help his own cause. It was foolish, she knew that, but Ryne didn't want to deflate him. Looked like she was going to try her hand at second-story work. "What's your plan and what do you want me to do?"

Deke gazed at her for a long moment, realized she'd agreed to go through with it, and a satisfied expression crossed his face. "Getting inside the building is going to be the toughest. An alarm will sound if any of the emergency exits are opened

and the lobby is guarded. I thought about a diversionary tactic, but there are too many uniforms in there. I'm also betting that the guards do regular patrols around the perimeter as a precaution."

"So it is impossible."

Shaking his head, Deke took another bite of chicken before he said, "I was thinking—why couldn't you transport me inside?"

"Humans can't cross the transit."

"I know, you told me that before; that wasn't what I was thinking. You can zip books and things from one place to the other easily enough. Why not do the same to me?"

"I can't put you inside."

"Why not?"

Ryne put aside her carton before she said, "Because I don't have the gift of remote sight and I haven't seen the place in person. Not only is there the layout of the unit to consider, there's furniture as well. What if I send you into a space where there's a couch? I could probably deposit you safely in the exterior hallway where I know it's clear."

Deke put down his own container. "That means we'll have to deal with the security cameras."

"I know, but if you mark the location of them for me, I can take them out of commission."

He nodded, reached over to grab a piece of hotel stationery, and began to sketch. "You'll have to be careful how you do it," Deke said as he drew. "If a whole area goes dark, those guards are going to check it out. This outfit they're with is top notch and they don't hire anyone who doesn't meet their qualifications even if the company only needs a warm body for a boring and routine job assignment."

"The guy who greeted us didn't look too tough."

With a smirk, Deke said, "He's a scrub. The real threat was in the comm room behind the front desk." He paused and became more serious. "You can't make us invisible, can you?"

"I can, but it would drain a lot of power from me and it'll take hours for my strength to return."

"You'd be helpless?"

"Not completely, but if Anise or one of her minions attacked, I wouldn't last very long."

Since he was focused on drawing, Ryne gathered up the remains of their lunch and straightened the table. "Are you done with the Szechwan?" He grunted and she took that as a yes. She knelt in front of the minifridge, shoved the stuff the hotel was hawking out of the way, and added their leftovers.

When she was finished, Ryne wandered back over to the table and watched Deke. He was a better-than-average artist and he'd put quite a bit of detail into the drawing. With the sleeves of his shirt pushed halfway up, she had a great view of his muscular forearms. There were a few visible veins and she nearly reached out to trace them down to his hand.

He had sexy hands. His fingers were long, hinting at the artistic nature she was only now seeing, and Deke had a gentle touch.

"Here," he said startling her. "This is the floor plan."

Ryne leaned over, resting her palms on the table, and stared at the drawing. "Your apartment was on the floor we visited today?"

"Yeah." Deke got to his feet and moved to her other side. "I lived in the one on the corner farthest from the elevator."

"And with a camera right in front of the door."

"The arrangement of the cameras encompasses the entrances of every unit." Deke pointed to a symbol in his drawing. "I marked their positions like this." He leaned forward and their shoulders brushed. Ryne didn't move away. "These are their sight lines." He sketched cones radiating outward. "I'm going to need three or four minutes to work the locks, probably longer because it's been awhile since I've done it."

Ryne nodded and didn't mention that she could pop them in a microsecond. Since she was getting them in the building and using magic to lift the floorboards, this would be his biggest contribution to the foray.

And she couldn't believe she was worried about treading on a man's ego. While she'd never deliberately run around showing up anyone, Ryne hadn't concealed her strengths from those who knew she was Gineal either—yet she was now. She shouldn't let worry about hurting him stand in the way of what was most expedient, but as she opened her mouth to volunteer to take care of the locks, Deke glanced at her and smiled. It

was a we're-in-this-together look, and instead of laying it on the line, she smiled back and let it go.

Flipping the paper over, he began to sketch the layout of the apartment as it had been when he'd lived there. This one was quicker since he could only draw the walls and windows.

"I'd like to break in while the residents are away and not while they're sleeping, but if we go too early, there'll be traffic. People coming back from dinner or a show. People going out for a late bite. We're safer in the dead of night."

"I can encase the bedroom in a barrier to block sound and to prevent the couple from exiting. Where did you stash the notes?"

"This is the spot right here." Deke drew a rectangle near the outside wall. "I stuck them far back and I'm hoping that prevented them from being found even if the contractors raised those loose boards."

This whole mission was based on hope and not much else. Ryne sighed and stared at the plan. The spot he'd marked wasn't too far from the master bedroom wall. It was definitely a good thing she could do magic.

She didn't realize Deke had shifted behind her until she straightened and bumped into him. He wasn't pinning her, but he was so close, she could feel the heat of his body seep into hers.

"Turn around, Ryne," he said softly.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw the fire in his eyes and shook her head. Facing him was too dangerous.

"No, it's not," he disagreed and she stiffened, but before she could do more than wonder if he was reading her mind again, Deke continued, "We won't go any farther than you want."

That was the problem. Something about him undermined her common sense and she wanted more than what was wise.

Deke moved until he was directly in back of her. Before Ryne could stop herself, she leaned into him. His hands took her hips, adjusting her position until she fit against him perfectly.

"It's easier for you when I'm behind you, isn't it?"

Instead of answering, she tipped her head forward, baring her nape. He pressed his lips there, strung a line of kisses around her neck until he reached her pulse point. The nip was quick, but it left her gasping. "Again."

He did and licked the sting away. "Turn around, Ryne."

And she did. She knew better, but she didn't care. Deke's hands stayed on her hips, holding her a hair's breadth away. It was tantalizing—and one of the most frustrating things she'd experienced. Ryne broke free and pressed herself against him. His arms went around her, and now he held her close.

"Kiss me, babe," he murmured, his mouth nearly brushing hers. "Show me what you like."

Ryne started slow with little lingering kisses at the corners of his mouth before she met him squarely. Deke responded, but he didn't take the lead. She deepened the kiss, pulling his head to hers. And still he let her set the pace.

It was maddening, aggravating—and it made the fire burn hotter. The idea that she was the one doing the seducing aroused her. Ryne growled and tugged his shirt free of his pants so she could run her hands over his warm skin, feel the taut muscles beneath her palms.

Deke's control slipped, but he reined himself back in. Ryne didn't want him tamed, she wanted him as wild as she felt right then. She writhed against him, stroked him with her body.

The days she'd held herself tightly in check seemed like a foolish waste of time. Ryne muttered a complaint as he broke the kiss, but when his shirt was off and she had all that bare skin exposed to her eyes, to her hands and mouth, she smiled.

She pressed a kiss at the base of his throat, traced his collarbone with her tongue and tasted the slight saltiness of his skin. Ryne moved lower, bit at his pec and slipped her fingers under the waistband of his jeans.

The world spun, and when it righted itself, she was on the bed, Deke at her side. He kissed her, and this time, he was the one in command. With one hand, he fumbled with the buttons to her shirt, but she pushed him aside and undid them herself. They worked together to open the front clasp of her bra.

He stared, a finger lightly tracing her areola. Ryne arched, wanting him to use his mouth, but while he put his leg over hers, he didn't take the hint and do what she needed most. Frustrated, she pushed him onto his back and straddled him. He tried to move, but she leaned forward, pinning his wrists to the bed and forcing him to bend to her will. If he wasn't going to do things right, she would.

Mo cridhe, you learned well.

Ryne went ice cold. “No!” *Get out of my head.* And she increased the energy to her mind shield, blocking Anise.

Shakily, Ryne pulled her shirt closed and slipped off to the side. She had learned well. She’d treated Deke almost exactly the way her mentor had behaved with her human males.

Co-aigneach. Maybe she and Anise really were two of a kind.

14

CHAPTER

They had every light in their hotel room ablaze, but it did nothing to relieve her unease. Low risk or not, she couldn't quite believe that breaking the law was smart. She kept quiet, though, and at Deke's nod, Ryne looked down at the sketch she held and focused on the camera positions. This was one of those times where remote sight would really come in handy, but instead, she had to rely on his drawing of the apartment building's hallway.

When she felt confident that she had her energy directed toward each of the four cameras, Ryne began to chant. Because she was modifying a spell in a way she hadn't tried before, she went slower than usual. Fooling electronic equipment was difficult anyway and it was important she get this right. Her goal was to hold the current view of the hall in lieu of a live shot. Of course, if someone was walking through right now, that would shoot her plan to hell—if it worked at all.

Ryne reached the end and closed the incantation. She drew in a deep breath and slowly released it, clearing her body of residual energy. It was crucial she be centered before she attempted to transport Deke. If she messed up the camera spell, he'd find himself rounded up by security, but if she made a

mistake on this second proclamation, she could injure or even kill him.

“Are we set on the cameras?” he asked.

“I think so, but I won’t know for sure until we’re there.”

“I’ll take my chances. Send me over.”

Ryne didn’t want to. She wanted to keep Deke here, to tell him to forget the whole scheme, but she’d already committed to this, and unlikely as it was, if there was a chance something in his notes could help defeat Anise, she needed that information. “I’ll be right behind you—don’t start without me, okay?”

“Sure, babe,” he agreed with a smirk.

His cavalier attitude made her scowl. Until she arrived, he was going to be on his own. If Anise or one of her minions was waiting, Deke could die before she got there—the protection spell she had around him wouldn’t last long—but she’d explained the potential problems earlier and he’d been serious enough then. She had to trust that he got it.

“Are you ready?” Ryne asked.

“Almost.” He closed the distance between them and leaned down to kiss her. It was short, sweet, but Deke eased away so slowly, his lips clung to hers.

She knew what he was doing. It wasn’t merely reassurance for what they were about to do, he was also telling her that although she’d pulled away from him this afternoon, everything was all right. He was wrong.

“Okay, now you can send me,” he told her.

Softly, Ryne began the incantation. Normally, she sent items to and fro without saying or even thinking a word—everything worked by focusing the energy—but Deke was human and this was meant for inanimate objects. She wasn’t taking any chances.

It was a brief spell. Reluctantly, she closed it and he was gone. Ryne didn’t bother with a cleansing breath this time; she immediately began the proclamation to open the transit. The instant she completed it, she crossed. Her eyes scanned the hall until she spotted Deke crouched in front of the far door, studying the lock. She allowed herself a deep breath. He was okay.

When she reached him, he handed her a penlight and pointed toward the dead bolt. The hallway had light, but it must not be enough for him. With a shrug, she turned it on and

aimed it while he pulled out his tools. Deke hadn't wanted her to accompany him earlier in the evening when they'd bought them, but since she had the money, he couldn't go without her.

They'd entered a neighborhood so bad that Ryne had been happy she could throw fire. The negative energy—and the dark-force creatures that were attracted to it—made her more uneasy than the humans, although they couldn't be discounted. Nothing had happened while they'd been there, but she'd been glad to get out of the area.

Deke inserted the tension wrench into the lock. He'd walked her through the tools and their purpose, and if they had time to kill at some point, she'd ask him to show her how to pick a lock. Just for fun. When he had that tool the way he wanted it, he slid in the lifter pick.

Ryne leaned over his shoulder, trying to see what he was doing. When he turned his head to frown at her, she realized she was breathing down his neck and backed up a pace. The adrenaline pumping through her system made the minutes he spent on the lock seem like forever. Nervously, she looked around, half expecting to see guards rounding the corner, but the hall remained empty.

More minutes passed. Ryne wanted to use her magic to get them inside, but she fought the desire. It was only after he believed his role was a vital part in this mission that Deke had been his usual, pain-in-the-ass self. He needed to feel necessary and she'd curb her impatience to give that to him.

There was a soft click and he grinned at her.

He stood, slipped the tools back into their case, then eased the door open. The apartment was dark. Ryne grabbed his arm to keep him in place. "Spell," she mouthed, indicating she wanted to corral the residents before they entered.

When Deke nodded, Ryne silently repeated the containment proclamation and one that would block sound from the bedrooms. As soon as she finished, she released him. Turning on a second penlight, he led the way inside the unit, closing the door behind them. Part of her relaxed—they should be safe from arrest now.

Even with the mini flashlights, though, it took a minute for her eyes to adjust to the much lower level of illumination. As soon as they did, she looked around. The place was loaded

with furniture and knickknacks—one false move and they'd make enough noise to rouse the dead.

Ryne followed Deke on his zigzag path to the back of the room. He stopped short and pointed. An oversized chair that looked like it weighed half a ton sat atop the spot he indicated and under that was an area rug that covered a hell of a lot of the floor. It wasn't a huge problem, but it would slow them.

Deke was wrestling with the chair before she could volunteer to move it with magic and Ryne swallowed her offer. This was one more thing he could contribute to their mission, and with the protection she had up around the bedrooms, they weren't going to be caught. She winced as he lost his grip and the leg thudded against the floor. Probably they wouldn't be caught—as long as he didn't wake up the downstairs neighbors.

When he had the chair shifted to an open space, Deke rolled up the rug and started pressing around, testing how secure the floorboards were. Nothing moved.

"This is it," he said and drew a rectangle with his finger.

She nodded and tried to lift it with her magic. The boards were down tight. Ryne increased the strength, and with a squealing groan, the section rose.

Deke knelt beside the space and put his hand in the opening. He went down lower, reached farther inside, and she knew he hadn't found anything. When he laid on his belly to reach farther yet, Ryne was tempted to tell him to give it up. She didn't. If he needed to grope around for an hour to prove to himself that his notes were gone, she'd give it to him.

"Yes!" Deke said and Ryne jerked her eyes off his ass.

Moving into a sitting position, he shone the penlight on the sealed plastic bag he held. "Looks like everything's here," he told her. "No damage either."

"Good. Now can we leave?"

He smirked at her. "You'll never make a good thief. You're much too uptight."

"And honest," Ryne added.

"That, too," he said, getting to his feet. "Close up the floor, then we'll put everything where it belongs and go back to the hotel."

Ryne gestured with two fingers, returning the floorboards to

their original position, and installing them as tightly as they'd been when they'd arrived. Her relief was short lived. While he was unrolling the rug, she felt something enter the room. She strengthened the protection spells around both of them and turned. Crap.

The temperature dropped fast, becoming almost arctic. Ryne didn't react, simply continued to watch him approach.

"What are you looking at?" Deke asked.

"Just stay still," Ryne ordered. When the ghost stopped in front of her, she said to him, "You know you're dead, right?"

"I know."

He was probably used to scaring people with his gruesome appearance. Half his head was blown off—maybe he'd even done it himself. From the angle, it could have been self-inflicted.

"You're supposed to go to the light." In her peripheral vision, she saw Deke shift and silently willed him to stay back.

"This is my building; you're trespassing," the apparition said, menace in his voice.

Ryne guessed he was lying. If there'd been a ghost here when she and Deke had toured the other apartment, she would have felt it, but the place had been clean. "You weren't here this afternoon."

"Babe, what's going—"

Before Deke could say another word, the ghost flung his arm out, throwing energy. The fussy things covering the fireplace mantel crashed to the floor, shattering on impact.

"Is that supposed to scare me?" Ryne snapped her fingers and the shards of glass reassembled themselves into the figurines they'd originally been. "You're supposed to go to the light," she repeated. "Or are you too cowardly to see what's there?"

He sent knickknacks flying at her and Deke, but Ryne threw a hard wall and they crashed into it, falling harmlessly to the floor. She put those back together, too.

"You're not much of a ghost. I've dealt with spirits a lot more frightening than you."

That deflated him. "If you were normal, you'd be scared. It ain't my fault you're not."

Anise hadn't sent him, that was obvious. She would have

found one that was far more powerful, something that would be a match for— Ryne stopped short. Had her mentor had anything to do with the wraith she'd faced at equinox? The timing was pretty coincidental if she hadn't. The ghost shifted and she put the idea aside. Right now, she had to do some spirit counseling.

Deke moved again and Ryne put her body squarely in front of his. She didn't need him trying to help her and aggravating the situation. "You followed us out of that bad neighborhood this afternoon and trailed us here," she said.

"I told you, I live here."

"That's bullshit, we both know it. Why'd you decide to come with us?" Ryne had a pretty good idea, but he needed to realize it. "That area was your home."

"Long time ago. Back before those other things moved in. I don't like them." He folded his arms over his chest. "I ain't going back there either."

"I didn't say you had to, did I? Why did you follow us?"

He stayed stubbornly silent, but Ryne stared at him, not looking away from his one remaining eye. The ghost fidgeted, growing uncomfortable under her steady perusal. "He shines," the ghost said pointing to Deke. "You kinda do, too—not like him though."

Her heart stuttered in her chest. How much had her dance with the dark side tainted her aura? It worried her. What if she were turning, sliding into darkness without realizing it? She pushed the fear aside. This was something else she'd have to consider later. "And you've been surrounded by the dark spirits and those humans who are dark for a long time."

"Too long."

Ryne felt more energy fill the room, but this was glowing, beautiful. "You have friends here to help you cross over. They'll go with you through the light."

"I ain't going."

"Why not? It's what you're supposed to do."

"I like it better here."

Deke grew restive again and she made a sharp gesture behind her back, warning him not to move. An infuriated poltergeist wasn't fun to deal with. "If that were true, you wouldn't have been attracted to his light. You want to go, but you're

afraid." He didn't respond and Ryne decided to be blunt. "You're worried because you committed suicide, aren't you?"

He said nothing.

"It's time to stop running," she told him.

For a long moment, the ghost was silent. "Does he think I should cross over? He's the one who shines bright."

Ryne battled the fear back again. As much as she wanted to take care of this, she knew the words had to come from Deke. She turned to look at him. "Tell our ghost he should go to the light, okay?"

Deke must have cued in on where her eyes were directed, because he managed to look directly at the apparition. "Go to the light," he said with a hint of shy medium in his voice.

"Will you help me?" the ghost asked, addressing Deke.

"He'll encourage you," Ryne answered, since Deke hadn't heard the question, "but it's not our place to help you cross. You sense them around you, don't you? That's their job."

They stared at each other for a long time, then about the time Ryne thought she was going to have to tell him again that it was time to leave, she saw the light envelop him. In an instant, the ghost was gone and so were those who'd come to assist him.

"Okay," Ryne said as she turned, "he left." She popped the chair back into position. "And we're ready to get out of here." "You can explain that ghost deal back in our room."

She nodded, but Ryne didn't want to talk about it. She was Gineal; her aura should be brighter than any human's—unless she was turning. Had the dark forces left her after she'd rescued Deke or had they remained, unnoticed by her? Later, she reminded herself. They had to get out of here now.

Carefully, she did the spell to transport Deke, then quickly removed the magic from the cameras and from around the bedrooms. It took only a moment before she crossed the transit.

Ryne walked into hell.

When Deke arrived in the room, the first thing he saw was an intruder. He didn't think robbery was the motive, not when the freak was stroking a pair of Ryne's panties. At least the bastard wasn't masturbating with them, but it pissed Deke off. If anyone

was going to play with her lingerie, it was going to be him—preferably while she was wearing it.

He put his notes silently on the bed and demanded, “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

The guy dropped the panties and turned. Only then did Deke realize it wasn’t human. In the blink of an eye, he assessed the creature. It was so pasty, he wondered if it was an albino. The only color came from its jet-black pupils and the clothes it wore. It had four arms. The lower set, positioned about eighteen inches below its shoulders, looked like the legs of an eagle complete with four claws. This couldn’t be good.

Deke immediately braced himself for an attack and he wasn’t wrong. The thing lunged across the distance separating them and he barely had time to bring his arm up to block the blow.

His question about how far the secondary arms could extend was answered when it slashed out with one of them. Deke jerked back, but he wasn’t fast enough. A set of talons raked his forearm and he hissed as pain seared through him.

He pushed it out of his mind, and spinning, delivered a high round kick to its chest. That drove the freak back a step.

The albino attacked with a flurry of blows and Deke was unable to block most of them. He retreated, trying to evade the claws. It followed him and Deke ended up leaning backward over the table, the thing grinning and drooling above him. Reaching behind him, Deke searched for a weapon. He needed something—fast.

His fingers closed around a chopstick as the talons of the creature’s right arm headed for his heart. With full force, he drove the wooden implement into the bastard’s chest. The thing roared, the sound a combination of growl and screech. Purple blood spurted, falling on Deke, the table, and the hotel’s carpet, but the strike was enough to drive the thing back a few steps and Deke scrambled out of range.

It recovered fast and leaped at him again, driving him into the wall hard enough to force the air from his lungs. Those talons shot out and he spun to avoid them. The tips grazed his chest, ripping his shirt and slicing into skin.

This time, instead of backing away, Deke launched his own assault. He reached for the painting hanging on the wall, jerked it loose, and brought it down on the creature’s head.

That seemed to royally piss off the albino, but Deke didn't wait to see what it would do next. He scooped up a shard of glass and slashed down with it. The blood that streamed from his gash made it difficult to hang on to the slippery weapon, but he needed to render at least one of the claws useless. More purple blood flew as he found his target.

Deke barely managed to avoid the left talon. He was back by the table again. Damn, he needed more space to maneuver, but hotel rooms only seemed to come in one size. He tried to use the glass again, but it slipped out of his hand.

There was one more chopstick on the table. He grabbed it, tried to drive it home, but the albino anticipated the action. It seemed to grow in size, surrounding him, overwhelming him.

It knocked Deke to the floor and held him down. He tried to free his hand. If he didn't block the strike, the bastard was going to rip out his heart. Deke couldn't break loose.

The good talon drove for his chest. He grit his teeth and fought harder, certain that any moment would be his last.

But the death blow didn't land.

The albino flew off him and Deke leapt to his feet. Although his head swam, he ignored the sensation. He had to be prepared for another attack.

As Deke's vision cleared, he saw the cavalry had arrived. Ryne let loose with an intense blast of fire and she kept the heat on, not stopping even when the thing screamed in agony. It charged at her, but as Deke moved to help, she brought in more fire, surrounding the freak with a ring of flame.

Ryne tightened it and he smelled the acrid odor of burning flesh. It screamed and thundered, and as the circle grew smaller still, the albino sounded as if it were pleading.

The fire intensified, burning so brightly that Deke had to look away. All sounds stopped except for the whisper of her flame.

When the room returned to its original level of illumination, Deke looked back. Ryne had charred the freak. "Holy shit, babe, remind me never to piss you off."

He didn't hear her answer. His lightheadedness surged back, and this time, he couldn't shake it off. Deke sat down hard on the floor. It had to be blood loss, but he couldn't open his eyes far enough to assess the gash.

Then she was there. Sweet, sexy, dangerous Ryne. Her hand covered the heart of his wound and Deke felt the energy flowing into him. He forced his eyes open and actually saw the tissue mending on either side of her hand. And as his arm closed, he felt his dizziness and his weakness subside.

“What are you doing aside from closing that?” he asked quietly.

“I’m speeding up your body’s healing processes and it’s producing blood to replace what you lost.”

“Pretty impressive.”

Ryne snorted. “Hardly. I’m not a healer. If you think this is good, you should see one of them work.”

She lifted her hand and the gash was nothing more than an angry pink line. Before he could comment, Ryne carefully lifted his shirt and he raised his arms to help her get it off. “These aren’t bad,” she said, lightly tracing a finger over the first talon wound on his chest. “You were lucky.”

“I know.” Deke scowled as she closed scratch after scratch. He’d been useless, and if Ryne hadn’t shown up when she had, he’d be dead. It ate at him. He’d never been helpless before in his life. “What was that albino thing anyway?”

“We call them baine and they have more than enough magic to get around the protection I had on the hotel room.” Ryne closed the last wound and sat back on her heels. “How do you feel now?”

“Fine. Why didn’t it use any of its powers against me when it attacked?” Again, he felt how drastic the differences were between his world and Ryne’s. It soured Deke’s mood further.

“What do you mean he didn’t use magic? Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Unless you call those talons magical, everything it did was physical.”

Ryne looked perplexed and it assuaged his ego some to know that he wasn’t the only one confused. Before he could ask why she was puzzled, though, someone knocked on their door.

They looked at each other and froze.

The knock came again, louder. “Security.”

“Oh, crap,” Ryne muttered. She chanted quickly, and Deke found himself cleaned up, the congealed blood gone from his body, and dressed in fresh clothes. “Someone probably heard

the fight in here and called it in. Go stall him while I clean the room.”

Deke nodded and got to his feet. “Coming,” he called. When he got to the door, he looked out the peephole and saw two men in navy blazers with walkie-talkies hooked onto their belts. “Do you have some identification?”

“Sir, open the door.”

He glanced over. Ryne was working fast. The remains of the baine were gone, but the room was still a shambles. “Hey, buddy, I don’t know you from Adam. This could be some ploy for you and your friend to get in and rob me. I want to see some proof you are who you say. That shouldn’t be a problem if you’re legit.”

They each held up a card that said they were hotel security. “Are you satisfied now?”

Deke checked on Ryne again and she held up one finger. Shit, he didn’t know how much longer he could stall them. “Why are you knocking at this time of night?”

“Sir, if you don’t open this door, we’ll have to bring in the police.”

“Okay,” Ryne said, and Deke saw she had the room perfect and the television on, sound muted. He opened the door and stepped aside to let the two security guys in.

“Ma’am are you all right?” the one who’d done the talking asked her.

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be?” Ryne came over to them and leaned into his side. Deke’s arm went over her shoulders, the motion almost a reflex.

“We had reports of a fight in here.”

Ryne shrugged. “The reports are wrong. We’ve just been sitting, watching a movie.”

“Do you mind if we look around?” the other guy said.

“Go ahead,” Deke said, hoping Ryne had fixed everything that had broken. If these two found pieces of glass or other signs of a fight, he had the feeling they’d be dealing with the LAPD.

The security team checked the garbage cans, the bathroom, the drawers, but came up empty. He squeezed Ryne’s shoulders. She’d done a lot of work in a short amount of time. She smiled up at him and winked. He grinned because usually he

was the one giving her that signal. Maybe he was rubbing off on her.

At last, the duo conceded defeat and apologized for the visit. "I don't know what everyone heard," one of them said.

"Maybe it was the TV," Ryne suggested. "We are watching an action movie and there were fight scenes in it."

A couple of minutes later, Deke closed the door behind them and locked it. "All I have to say, babe, is it's a damn good thing you didn't really need help from hotel security. They took their own sweet time checking out what must have sounded like a murder to the people in the adjacent rooms."

"They probably aren't paid enough to deal with an attack in progress." Ryne walked over to the television and turned it off. "How are you feeling?" she asked. "Any residual pain?"

"Nah, I'm just hungry and thirsty."

"That's probably from the blood loss and regeneration. How do you feel about cold Chinese food?"

"Bring it on."

She went to the refrigerator, dug out the leftovers, and brought them to the table. "They've got pop in the fridge. Did you want a can?"

"No. There's no way in hell I'm spending over twenty times the amount they paid for it."

Ryne laughed at him, but Deke didn't mind. "How about you?" he asked as he unwrapped a fork. This time he wasn't using chopsticks. "How are you holding up, especially with all the magic you had to use tonight?"

"I'm fine," she told him.

He couldn't quiz her further, not immediately, because she disappeared into the bathroom. When she returned with two glasses of water, Deke asked, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Positive." She put the glasses down and sat across from him at the table. "The amount of magic I use depends a lot on what I'm doing with it."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm a troubleshooter. That denotes a certain level of power, of course, but it also indicates a particular skill set." She must have read the confusion he felt because she explained, "Like when I mended you. That cost me more magic than it would a healer because that's not what my innate talent is. On the other

hand, shooting fire is natural for me, but a healer wouldn't be able to hold it for half as long as I did and probably would be drained afterward."

Deke nodded. "So the stuff you did tonight was mostly what comes easily to you?"

"A lot of it." Ryne unwrapped a second fork and dug into her box of chow mein.

He thought about asking more about the baine, but decided it didn't matter right now. Instead, he considered Ryne as he ate. Even though it was close to 3 A.M., she didn't appear tired. He wasn't either. Adrenaline had stormed through him while he'd been fighting, and he had enough experience that it didn't leave him sleepy afterward. Looked like she had his same level of immunity to the hormone surge.

Deke knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to take Ryne to bed and make love to her until neither one of them could keep their eyes open any longer. And he couldn't.

The last time he'd held her, he'd promised her she could set the pace. Instead, Deke had lost control, had put her on her back, and covered the lower half of her body with his. That had been enough to freak her out. She'd almost immediately flipped him off of her, then pinned him to the bed. Only then had the terror come into her eyes.

Maia had said that Ryne was screwed up when it came to men—he'd stood outside the kitchen that first morning and listened to them talk. Ryne had only been twelve when she'd gone to live with Anise and she'd told him disdainfully about the human males that had come and gone while she'd been there.

Sure, Ryne had powers, but young kids could be easy for an adult to scare. Or her perverted mentor could have had a hand in it as well. Deke forced his grip to relax before he snapped the fork. If that bitch had been part of it, he was going to kill her. He didn't care that he was human—no one hurt Ryne without paying a price. Especially that way.

Maybe he was slow, but Deke had finally figured it out. Ryne was as tough as they came. There was only one possible reason that she'd react so violently, then look so panic-stricken about him putting his body over hers. It made sense now.

Some son of a bitch had molested her.

15

CHAPTER

Ryne hid a yawn behind her hand as she waited for the desk clerk to check them out. Damn, she was tired, but she hadn't been able to sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the baine's claws mere inches from Deke's chest. He'd nearly died and that shook her up more than she'd expected.

There'd been other thoughts racing through her mind as well. She'd jump from his close call to the security of their room to her concern that she'd already delved too deeply into gray magic. And Ryne had struggled against the desire to curl into his side and hold on tightly to Deke while she shared her fears with him.

Stupid. She knew that, but it didn't make the need any less. Ryne was so tired of dealing with everything alone, so tired of *being* alone. She didn't need anyone else to take care of her problems—she handled her own—but she did want someone to listen to her. To hug her. Was that too much to ask?

He leaned his back against the desk beside her, both elbows resting on the high counter as he studied the lobby area, and Ryne drank him in. Deke's face was impassive, not a hint of the smirk he usually displayed, and he hadn't tried to touch her last night. With adrenaline flowing through both of them, she'd

expected some kisses hot enough to burn brain cells. Hot enough to make her forget the reasons why she shouldn't want him to touch her. But they'd gone to bed and he'd stayed on his side.

Deke had even slept.

"Ma'am?"

"Sorry," Ryne apologized and took the pen to sign the receipt. She'd been a million miles away and that was another mistake. Anise would have no compunction about attacking in a hotel lobby—the deaths of bystanders would be nothing except collateral damage to her.

Ryne put her credit card and her copy of the bill in her purse and said to Deke, "Let's get out of here."

When they were in the car, Ryne leaned back and tried to rub the gritty feeling from her eyes. It didn't help, but maybe she could catch a nap on the plane. It should be safe enough to sleep there if she were able to block out the other passengers. Timing the opening of a transit to end up onboard an aircraft rocketing at five hundred miles an hour was only something the very desperate would attempt. Anise wasn't there. Yet.

"Do you mind if we make a couple of stops on our way to the airport?" Deke asked quietly.

She nearly asked if he was joking, but Ryne could see from his face that he wasn't. Her first thought was to remind him of how little time they had before his freedom ended and that they couldn't afford to waste it, but it was a specious argument. They'd just be waiting for their flight anyway.

Her second reason against it, that they were vulnerable, ran into the same problem—they were in as much danger at the airport as anywhere else. "No, that's fine," she finally conceded. "As long as we don't miss the flight."

"We won't."

"And as long as you're not planning to see people you know. Remember what Anise is capable of."

His jaw hardened. "I'm not putting anyone else in the line of fire, trust me."

They drove in silence. She didn't know what was bugging Deke and she was too tired to try and figure it out. Instead, Ryne mulled over what she had to do when they got home. First, she decided, was to contact Fia. She needed an update.

Second, was to start examining Deke's notes. They'd both need to go through them because she knew Anise and he didn't. She could spot something that meant nothing to him. He flipped on the turn signal and she put aside her thoughts.

It shocked the hell out of her when they pulled into the parking lot of a florist. Deke didn't say one word as they entered the store, didn't so much as grimace, but Ryne could feel his impatience. He didn't want her dogging his heels, and when she pulled out her credit card to pay for the thirteen coral roses and a bottle of water, she swore he wanted to growl.

"Hang on to these, babe." He handed the bouquet to her as they reached the car.

When he had the engine started, Ryne said dryly, "I guess that means the roses aren't for me."

Deke grinned. It was reluctant, but it was real. "Sorry. When I get you flowers, they won't be something this traditional. You're not a pale rose type of woman."

"What kind of flower would you pick?"

"For you, I'd choose something bright and exotic. And I'd damn well pay for them myself," he added with a scowl.

Ryne swallowed the sigh. He had far too much pride, but she had to respect him for his desire to pay his way. Too many people would have felt they were entitled after Anise had imprisoned them, considered it reparation or something, but not Deke. The only thing he wanted was to be free permanently.

He grew more tense as he drove, and Ryne reached out and rested a hand on his thigh before she could think better of it. Deke shot her a questioning glance, but instead of speaking, she squeezed his leg. She didn't want to consider what this need to comfort him meant. It would be one more thing to keep her awake at night and she had plenty of others already.

The dark forces had whispered to her again as she'd fought the baine. With her emotions running high, the enticement had been almost more than she could resist.

That was the key phrase—*with her emotions running high*.

Now she knew why she'd had emotional control drilled into her head: a troubleshooter was more vulnerable to turning without it. But when she'd seen that damn thing on top of Deke, ready to rip out his heart, she'd lost her self-command. She'd used a lot more force to pull the baine off than she'd

needed. That wasn't the worst of it, though. Ryne could have killed it much more humanely than she had; she'd deliberately made it suffer—she'd tortured it—before ending it.

That was something Anise would have done.

Co-aigneach. That kept coming back to haunt her. Could she trust herself any longer?

Deke—a human—shone brighter than her according to the ghost. That had to mean her aura was dimmed by dark magic. She couldn't allow herself to turn. Ryne refused. She'd let herself die in battle before she'd give in to the dark.

But what if it was too late?

Deke made a right-hand turn and she realized they were in a cemetery. Somehow that seemed oddly appropriate. He drove slowly on the curved road and pulled to stop.

"I don't suppose you'd stay in the car?"

Ryne shook her head. "Until this is over, I go where you go. No exceptions."

"That's what I figured."

He was around the front of the car in time to take the flowers from her and help her out. Instead of walking with her as he usually did, though, Deke went ahead, leaving her to follow. Ryne hurried after him.

She slowed her pace when he came to a stop in front of one of the grave markers. It was large, the kind of headstone used for a double plot, and in the center stood an empty vase. He unwrapped the flowers and stuck them in it, then emptied the bottle of water inside.

Deke fiddled with the roses, arranging them, which shocked her given his personality. He plucked a single stem from the batch and laid it on one side of the headstone. Only then did he stand and move back far enough for Ryne to see the names on the marker. It had to belong to his parents.

Ryne blinked hard a couple of times to clear the moisture. The damn man got to her on so many different levels, she was reeling, but this touched her more deeply than was comfortable.

He'd laid the flower down on the side that had his mother's name—Helen—engraved on it. Deke had told her he was thirty-four. Ryne did some math and figured out he'd been twelve when he'd lost her. That comment he'd made in the mall made sense now, the one about doing his own laundry from the

time he was a kid. She looked at the other side of the grave marker. His father's name was Daniel, too. That explained why Deke wasn't called Dan—it might get too confusing. Then she noted the date carved in the stone—his dad had died when Deke had been twenty-six.

He knew about alone. She'd bet on it.

Crouching down, he pulled some weeds that had sprung up next to the headstone. Despite his four and a half years away, the site was clean and in good condition. Someone had obviously taken care of it and she hoped that made him feel better, but she doubted that it did.

When he had the area tidied, he took the refuse to a nearby trash receptacle, then returned to stand in front of the graves. Ryne stayed back, giving him as much privacy as she could—Deke was such a guy that her presence was probably embarrassing. She wanted to go to him, though, to offer what comfort she could, and as the minutes ticked by, the urge became too strong to resist. She walked up beside him and took his hand. Because she knew he wouldn't want her looking at him while he was this vulnerable, Ryne stared straight ahead at the headstone.

After a couple of minutes, Deke's hand gripped hers more tightly and she risked asking, "Your mom liked coral roses?"

"Yeah." His voice was thick and he cleared it before adding, "My dad brought them home for her every month, but when she was sick, he brought one home each day."

"That's sweet."

"He loved her more than anything in the world and he was lost for a long time after she died. I think the only thing that kept him sane was his job. He worked a lot of overtime to pay the medical bills—he hated being in debt—but it also kept him from dwelling on the pain."

Ryne twined their fingers and leaned into his side. Maybe this was where Deke's need to pay her back had originated. "What happened to your mother?"

"Ovarian cancer." He stayed silent for a minute and Ryne didn't press. "She would have liked you. My mom was a fighter, too; in a different way than you, but every bit as stubborn."

Deke became quiet again and she stood with him. This section of the cemetery was empty. She looked around. Many of

the other graves had flowers on them, so people visited, but not at midafternoon on a weekday.

"My dad would have liked you, too. You don't put up with my shit—he'd appreciate that. Of course, I can still push your buttons." He sounded amused as he said that last part.

She looked at him, and sure enough, he was smiling. "Yeah, well, you're pushing them less and less. You notice I don't even wince anymore when you call me babe."

"I noticed. That's why I'm not using it as often."

Ryne frowned at him. "Not as much fun for you."

"Exactly." He sobered and went silent again.

"What did he do?" she asked, curious about his family.

"My dad was a cop, too." Deke paused and his hand briefly firmed around hers once more before he added, "He was so damn proud I joined the force. I— It didn't take me long to figure out it wasn't for me. All the crap. Fuck, Ryne, I thought I was going to lose my mind, but I couldn't quit."

"It sounds to me like your dad not only would have understood, but that he would have wanted you to be happy."

"He would have, but—" Deke stopped short.

"But you loved him enough that you didn't want to disappoint him, so you hung in there and hid how you really felt."

"Yeah. I lasted another year after he died. You know why I finally did leave—I told you already."

"I remember. What happened to him?" she asked softly.

"Killed in the line of duty." Another long silence. "There was a toddler held hostage by her uncle. My dad went out saving her life—he would have liked that."

Ryne understood the tone of Deke's voice—a combination of frustration and pride. She'd lost both her parents in the line of duty, too. Not that she'd ever had the type of relationship with either one of them that he'd had with his mom and dad, but it had still torn her up in many different ways.

"Sounds like both your parents were heroes," she said quietly. "Not an easy thing to live up to."

Deke studied her, and though it made Ryne uncomfortable, she didn't try to hide anything from him—she couldn't after the way he'd opened himself to her. "I'm guessing you had some big shoes to fill yourself. Want to tell me about it?"

She didn't, not really, but she would. "My parents were both

troubleshooters. Since they were married, they shared a territory and almost always worked together. I never saw them in battle, but the accounts said they were incredibly powerful.” Ryne knew she sounded matter-of-fact, but she couldn’t help it. “They were assigned to hunt someone who’d turned when the original enforcer who had the job was murdered by that man. Less than six months later, he’d killed them, too.”

“Hell, babe, I’m sorry.” Deke pulled her into his arms and rested his cheek against her head. “How old were you?”

“Fourteen.” She could remember getting the news as if it were yesterday—the bewilderment, the denial, the regrets, the loss. Ryne had insisted on seeing her mom and dad despite the council’s warning that they hadn’t died peacefully. It had been impossible for her to believe they were gone, though, and she needed proof. Anise had been the one to sway the ceannards and it had been her mentor who’d accompanied her to see the bodies. And it had been her mentor who’d helped her through the trauma, the nightmares, and the grief.

“Did anyone get this guy?” Deke asked, voice low.

Ryne laughed without amusement. “Yeah, Anise tricked and killed him. Sometimes I wonder if this was what broke her. She would have had to go very dark to defeat this man. What if I’m hunting someone who turned only because she tapped in to black magic so she could capture the person who killed my parents?”

“That isn’t what you told me. You said Anise had turned before you were sent to her.”

He was trying to make her feel better. “I could be wrong. I’m guessing based on some of the things she did.” Ryne wrapped her arms around his waist and held on tightly. “The truth is that usually there’s no way to pinpoint the moment someone embraces the dark forces. Occasionally, someone will make the deliberate decision to turn, but that’s rare. Most of the time, it’s a gradual slide and it can be so slow that even the person herself may not be aware, not at first.” She met his gaze. “I’ve gone pretty deep myself and I hear the dark forces calling me often. I’m scared,” she admitted with reluctance.

“You’re not turning.”

“You can’t know that.”

Deke tightened his grip on her. “Bullshit. I know you. You’re

so damn honorable you can't even lie easily. I've questioned ten-year-olds who do a better job at it than you do." He smiled. "Trust me, you're still okay."

He pressed a kiss to her forehead, then pulled her snugly against his body and gently rocked her.

Somewhere between the smile and kiss, the bottom had dropped out of Ryne's world. Intellectually, she knew it hadn't been that sudden, that if she looked backward, she would spot a million little instances that had led to this moment. It didn't matter, though; the realization had felt that abrupt. Her heart continued to pound wildly, her palms were damp, and she was more afraid of this than she was of the dark forces.

Damn it, she'd really done it this time.

She'd fallen in love with Deke Summers.

Deke glanced over to check on Ryne. Her head was back against the seat and she had her eyes tightly shut to block the early morning sun. They'd made it to the airport in plenty of time for their flight, but the damn airline had canceled it and they'd ended up on the red-eye. She was paying the price for the delay and he thought this headache was much worse than the one she'd had when they'd landed in L.A.

She'd wanted to drive, but he'd taken the keys away from her at the park-and-ride. Ryne was in no condition to be behind the wheel, and since she hadn't put up much of an argument, Deke figured she knew it.

Her paleness concerned him, as did the fact that if they were attacked, it was up to him to protect both of them. Ryne had said she could fight, but he disagreed. She wouldn't even see a threat coming until it was too late. It scared him to know how helpless he was against these creatures that kept showing up. How could he defend her when he couldn't even defend himself?

Some idiot cut him off and Deke braked hard. Ryne whimpered and he reached out to rub her leg. "Sorry. Hang in there; we're almost home."

Ryne made a noise to let him know she heard him, but it wasn't an actual word. With a frown, he returned his hand to the wheel. She'd talked about healers and Deke wondered how he could get in touch with one.

He was still mulling that over when they reached their exit. Ten more minutes and he'd have her safe. He took the turns carefully, not wanting to jostle her again, but Deke had to disturb her when he neared her place. "There's a car in your driveway."

She managed to open her eyelids far enough to peer out. "Maia," she said, and the ID of the vehicle relaxed him.

Deke opened the garage door and pulled in. When the ignition was off and the door down, he went around to get her. "I'll help you into the house."

Ryne leaned heavily into his side, trusting him to steer her along. When they reached the great room, he had enough space to carry her, so Deke swung her into his arms and headed for the bedroom.

Maia was in Ryne's spot. "Come on, big sister," he ordered, "out of bed." As soon as she vacated the space, he lowered Ryne.

"Jeans off," Ryne said, slurring her words.

"You got it." He reached for the button at her waist, and as he worked it loose, he said to Maia, "Get her shoes."

"What's wrong with my sister?" Maia demanded, as she slipped Ryne's sneakers off.

"Headache from being in a crowd for too long." He turned back to Ryne. "Lift your hips for me." It took her a moment to respond, and when she did, he peeled her jeans down and off. "I'm going to remove your bra, too, okay?"

Ryne caught his hand. "Not with Maia here."

Deke pointed to the door. "Out so I can make Ryne comfortable." Big sister looked stunned, but she obeyed. "Okay, she's gone. Can you sit up for me if I help you?"

She nodded, then groaned, and he figured the movement had hurt. He slid a hand behind her back and used the other to support her head as he raised her. Deke kept one arm around her as he tugged her shirt off, but he needed both hands to unhook her bra. When he had her free, he lowered her slowly to the bed. He knew it wasn't right while she was out of commission, but he took a moment to ogle her anyway. Ryne had nothing on except a pair of panties, and Deke had a good look at her body. Shit, she was absolutely gorgeous—full breasts, a narrow waist, flat stomach, and those legs of hers went on forever. Damn, he wanted them wrapped around him.

Reluctantly, he got to his feet and dug out one of those long-sleeve T-shirts she liked to sleep in. "I need to lift you one more time, okay?"

"No."

"When you feel better, do you want to wake up and discover you're naked from the waist up?"

"Just sleep," Ryne insisted.

He figured she'd have his ass for this later, but he tossed the T-shirt on top of a dresser and gently tugged the blankets over her, tucking them beneath her chin.

"Call if you need me, okay?"

Another murmur that he took as agreement. He leaned forward and brushed his lips over her forehead. For a moment, Deke stood watching her, unwilling to leave her alone, but he had to get the bags from the Explorer and probably he'd need to head Maia off at the pass so she didn't irritate Ryne by hovering. He paused in the hallway, but finally settled for leaving the bedroom door ajar so he'd hear her if she needed him. Taking a deep breath, he went out to face the music.

"Where the hell have the two of you been?" Maia demanded harshly the instant she spotted him. She'd been sleeping in her clothes and they were wrinkled. That told Deke how much she cared about her sister and it tempered his response.

"Shh. Keep your voice down. Ryne's real sensitive to noise right now."

"You believe you're some kind of expert on my sister?" she asked incredulously, but the volume was much lower.

"No, but I know as well as you do how hard these headaches hit her."

That sobered her. "No, actually I don't. I've never seen Ryne like this. Where were you?"

"L.A."

"You flew," she said, realization dawning. "Ryne never flies." She hesitated. "She shouldn't be this heavily affected, however, not even if she spent a week in the middle of New York City. A slight headache, yes, but this—no. If she can't hold her mind shield firmly enough to block out most of the static, something is seriously wrong."

Deke felt his heart skip a beat and his sense of urgency grew. "Do you know how to call a healer?"

“Yes, I do. Can I call a healer? No. Only a Gineal can do that—it’s a telepathic request, an ability I lost. You could heal her, though, if you wanted.”

“I’m human,” Deke scoffed.

“So? Humans have always had the ability, but not the belief. It takes both.”

“You can’t heal her?”

“Yes, I can,” Maia admitted, “but I’d rather you did it.”

“Why?”

The corners of her lips tipped up. “You don’t need to sound suspicious. My reasons aren’t nefarious.” She shrugged. “I’d rather not play with the energy, that’s all.”

Deke knew there was more going on here than he understood, but he wasn’t sure he cared. Not right now. Ryne was who was important. “How do I do it?”

“Ask the universe to direct healing energy into your body and send it through your hands. You put your palms to the places on her that seem right—probably somewhere on her head—then be mentally quiet and act as the conduit.”

Deke eyed her skeptically. Sure Ryne had done something with energy when she’d healed him, but it had to be more complicated than that. “What a bunch of bullshit.”

Maia glared at him. “Why don’t you try it first before writing it off?”

“Point taken,” he said, and without another word, Deke turned to head back to the bedroom.

“Dan,” Maia called stopping him. “When she’s over the headache, she needs to find out why she can’t hold the shield. That’s serious for any Gineal, but critical for a troubleshooter.”

Deke nodded and left the room. Ryne hadn’t moved since the last time he’d seen her and he carefully sat down beside her, his hip against hers. Enough light seeped around the blinds to let him see the lines of pain on her face and he lightly brushed his fingers over her brow, wanting to soothe her.

“Here goes nothing,” he whispered and followed directions. Deke thought he felt something, but instead of examining it, he tried to decide where to place his hands. Closing his eyes, he put the center of his palms over her temples.

He wasn’t able to keep his mind blank, and instead, he concentrated on the image of Ryne back at full strength. Deke

pictured her squaring off with him and giving him as good as she'd gotten. That was one of the things he liked best about her—Ryne's strength allowed him to be himself.

His palms seemed to be searing hot, but he didn't remove them from her head. He worked on building the heat, directing it into her. Healing energy was green, Deke decided, and he imagined the color filling her body, especially her head.

Before he was ready, his palms cooled. He tried to hold on to the power, to keep sending it to Ryne, but it was gone. Forced to concede defeat, Deke opened his eyes—and saw she was watching him. He pulled his arms back and whispered, "Sorry, I didn't want to disturb you."

"When did you learn to heal?" Ryne asked, voice normal.

"You mean that really did something?" Deke looked down at his hands in disbelief.

"Yeah, hotshot, it did." She smiled up at him. "Thanks."

Bemused, he shook his head. "Don't thank me. You've done more for me than I've done for you."

Ryne sat up, grabbing the blanket the instant before he saw the good stuff. "You undressed me."

"I did, and I tried to put a shirt on you, but you refused."

"I'll take it now," she said.

Deke was a little surprised by how calm she was, but he wasn't going to question it. He got off the bed, retrieved the tee he'd tossed aside, and handed it to her.

"Turn your back."

"I've seen you before."

"And maybe you'll see me again, but not right now. Turn your back."

He opened his mouth, realized he didn't know what the hell he wanted to say, and shut it again. Deke faced away from her and wondered if she had any idea that he could see everything in the mirror. If he were any kind of gentleman, he wouldn't watch, but he wasn't that well mannered. Ryne had damn fine breasts, and he didn't think he'd ever tire of the sight. Unfortunately, it didn't take her long to pull the shirt on.

As she lifted her head, their eyes met. Ryne groaned when she realized he'd seen it all and he grinned. "Sorry, but you are sexy."

She got out of bed and walked around to face him. Slingsing

her arms around his neck, she said, “You’re just saying that because you want to get laid.”

“Nope, I’m saying it because it’s true. If it helps me get laid, that’s a secondary benefit.”

When Ryne laughed, Deke relaxed and put his hands at her waist. He wasn’t sure how she’d respond to this kind of teasing, but she’d started it, so he’d taken the chance. Pulling her closer, he went serious. “How’s your head feeling?”

“About ninety percent of normal.” Ryne looked away for a moment. “Please tell me I was hallucinating Maia’s presence.”

“Sorry. She’s worried about you not being able to hold the mind shield. She said you shouldn’t be this affected by crowds.”

“Crap. And yeah, she’s right, I’m having trouble blocking things, but that’s between us—my sister doesn’t need to know she’s right.” He nodded and Ryne continued, “I suppose now that you’ve made me feel better, I’m going to have to deal with her.”

“Better than me having to deal with her.”

“Jerk,” she complained, but ruined it by smiling at him. “Let me get some pants on and then I’ll go get rid of her.”

Ryne turned out of his hold and Deke let her go, but he didn’t think Maia was going to be as easy to send packing as she hoped. She didn’t waste any time pulling on a pair of leggings and headed toward the door. “Why don’t you shave while I’m encouraging her to go home?” she suggested.

“You don’t like the stubble?” Deke stroked a hand over his chin. “I thought it made me look kind of hot.”

“Hmm,” she hummed, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. “But it might be rough against my skin if we kiss.”

Deke chuckled as she disappeared. That was a nice piece of manipulation she’d tried there, but she wasn’t as practiced as he was. He thought about keeping the whiskers to see if he could rile her up, but decided to shave anyway. There were other ways to make her temper flare without this and he didn’t want to do anything to put her off his kisses.

When he reemerged from the bathroom, his good mood disintegrated. Ryne’s voice was raised and that wasn’t a promising sign. “You’re saying I can’t go out of town without getting your okay first?”

“It’s common courtesy to let me know when you’re leaving!”

Maia wasn't any softer. "But some guy says, 'Let's fly to L.A.,' and you hop on the plane without bothering to pick up the phone."

Shit, the last thing he wanted was to cause friction between the sisters. He went toward the great room, but he wouldn't intercede unless things got out of hand. Playing mediator in a domestic usually ended up with both parties furious at the guy in the middle.

"I didn't think of it, okay? Sorry. Next time I'll call." Ryne sounded aggravated, not conciliatory.

"You didn't think of it?" Maia's tone made Deke wince. The condescension he heard was guaranteed to ignite Ryne's temper. "How self-involved and selfish are you? Maybe I'm not a troubleshooter any longer, but I know the game and I know Anise wants to kill you. You're supposed to be smart; didn't it dawn on you that a sudden disappearance would concern me? Not to mention the fact that you have some strange man in your house. He could be a serial killer for all I know."

"Oh, please! Maybe you're not a good judge of character, but I've never screwed up like you have."

"Just because things are still going well between you and that guy doesn't mean you're in for smooth sailing and it doesn't mean he won't leave you."

"His name is Dan and he isn't like Justin."

"Leave Justin out of this."

"No, that's what this is about. After you gave up your powers, he left you and married someone else. Because you picked some loser, you're sure I did, too, but even if you're right, even if De—Dan walks away, at least I won't be powerless because I'll never be foolish enough to sacrifice the core of myself for anyone."

"You don't know what you're talking about." Maia's voice was shaking and Deke moved. As much as he wanted to stay out of this and let them work it out themselves, the argument was clearly headed south.

"Don't I? *Everyone* knows you gave up your powers for some human male. I've had to defend you time and again even though I agreed with them—it was a stupid thing to do."

"Ryne," Deke warned, "don't say anything else."

She ignored him. "You think I'm selfish? When you ceded

your powers, you didn't think about the Gineal, the oath you took when you became a troubleshooter, and you sure as hell didn't think about me. I needed you and you turned your back on me. Do you know how alone that left me? Do you even care?"

"Of course, I care about you. Damn it, you're the only family I have left. I love you."

"Not enough!"

Ryne wasn't crying, but Deke thought she wanted to. He wrapped his arms around her waist from behind, cuddling her close. "Hush, babe," he murmured quietly next to her ear. "You've said plenty."

"No! I've kept quiet about this for years, let it fester inside me. Why shouldn't I tell her how I feel? Why shouldn't she know what her desertion did to me?"

"I didn't desert you," Maia argued. "I did what was best."

"For who? For the Gineal? For me? For you? I don't see one person that this was good for."

"It was the best for everyone, especially you."

"Liar!"

Deke tightened his hold, trying to calm her.

"I'm not lying! Damn it, Ryne, if I hadn't had that one moment of clarity, *you* would have been the one assigned to hunt me and it would have destroyed you. Don't you get it? I didn't cede my powers for a human, I ceded them because I had no other choice." Maia's voice was a lot quieter when she admitted, "I'd turned to the dark forces."

16

CHAPTER

Deke leaned his shoulder against the kitchen doorway and watched Ryne. She sat on the couch in her great room studying his notes with something more than her usual intensity. The closest phrase he could come up with to describe her was frantically absorbed. He'd teased her earlier about there not being a quiz, but she'd only looked at him for a moment and gone back to reading.

It was probably a way to avoid thinking about the bombshell her sister had dropped. Deke knew how shocked Ryne had been. He'd felt it as he'd held her, and Maia, damn her, hadn't hung around long enough for Ryne to recover. She had to have a million questions, but no one to ask.

This frenzy, though, had gone on long enough. He'd given her a few hours to work it out of her system, now it was time to force the issue. Pushing away from the doorjamb, he closed the distance between them and settled beside her.

Ryne barely glanced from his notebook.

For a moment, he stared down at his handwriting. Deke had read everything on the plane ride home, but most of it had been unfamiliar. Fear surged back then and he forced it aside.

"Babe—"

"I'm not ready to eat dinner yet," she interrupted without looking up. "Go ahead without me."

Deke reached over and took the notes away from her.

"Hey! I was reading that."

"I don't know how many times you've gone through it already, but you must have it nearly memorized. You're done."

She made a grab for it, but he easily moved it out of Ryne's reach. "If you have any hope of remaining human—"

"Don't use that as an excuse. We both know you're reading this thing over and over to avoid thinking about your sister. I let you have some time, but now we're addressing it."

Ryne glowered at him. "You've decided and that's it? I don't think so, hotshot."

"Why are you afraid to talk about Maia?"

"I'm not afraid," she insisted and made another lunge for the notebook.

"You can't lie worth a damn," he said and she subsided. Deke waited for her to start talking, but it didn't happen. He decided to ease into the difficult part. "Why don't you explain the dark forces to me. I thought I got it—black magic equals evil—but Maia doesn't seem like Anise."

Shifting to see him better, Ryne said warily, "It's not like you use one dark spell and lose your soul, not unless you deliberately give yourself over. I've always thought of it like a drug addiction. It starts out small, just a spell now and then that shouldn't be used, but before long, there's temptation to tap into it more often, to feel the sense of power." She paused. "And like a drug addict, when they're not using or in need of their next high, they're normal. With the ability to conceal our use of magic no matter how dark, it can take a long time to ID someone who's turned."

"No one knew about Maia?"

She shrugged. "I didn't guess and I saw her frequently. And if you're thinking giving up her powers should have been a tip-off, you'd be wrong. That's the last thing someone in the grip of the dark forces should do. Yeah, there was a lot of buzz throughout our society when she ceded them because it just isn't done, but everyone thought it was because of that human." Ryne grimaced. "Or almost everyone. I think the council suspected the truth and maybe a few others. It explains why they

watch me so carefully—the two people I was closest to used black magic.”

That confirmed something Deke had suspected, but he went off on a different line. “What would you have done if you had realized Maia was using magic she shouldn’t?”

Ryne dragged a hand through the top of her hair, then dropped her head to the back of the sofa. “I don’t know. How could I report my sister?” She stared up at the ceiling. “But talking to her wouldn’t have done any good. Maybe she would have promised not to use black magic again, but her word wouldn’t be any better than an addict who promised to stop using.”

“Maybe she did you a favor by hiding this from you.”

Without lifting her head, she turned to look at him. “I didn’t expect her to tell me and I’m not mad at myself for not guessing. I was never certain about Anise, not once in the seven years I lived in her home, and it’s a sure bet that she was a lot further gone than Maia ever was.”

“What is bothering you then?” Something was, Deke didn’t doubt that for a minute.

“Maybe we should go eat. I’d hate to see dinner ruined.”

“It’ll keep. What’s bothering you, Ryne?”

Silently, she returned her stare to the ceiling, but Deke didn’t press her. This was an emotional issue and she might not even know herself what was eating at her. He’d wait, give her time to think things through, then he’d push her if he needed to. The furnace kicked in, adding a gentle hum to the room, before Ryne spoke.

“You’re an only child, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

She nodded. “You might not get it then.”

“Try me.” More silence and Deke bided his time.

“My mom and dad might have been great troubleshooters, but they weren’t very good at being parents. Maybe it’s because they loved each other to the exclusion of everything else, even their own children. Half the time I felt invisible around them and the other half I felt like an intruder. But I had Maia. She’s the one who taught me to tie my shoes and tell time, who read stories to me and kissed me good night. My sister was also the one who taught me to spellcast and helped me conduct my first rite—things my parents should have done.”

Ryne stopped. He wasn't sure what to say into the void, and instead, Deke reached out and covered her fist with his hand. Maybe he didn't have words, but he could offer support. Slowly, she unclenched her hand and he threaded his fingers through hers.

"I worshipped Maia. As soon as I was old enough to walk, I trailed after her. When I got a little older, I tried to be exactly like her. I wanted my hair cut like hers and would only wear clothes if they were similar to what my sister wore." Ryne shook her head. "There are still times I wish I was more like her. She's always had her pick of men, both Gineal and human, but me . . ." She let her voice trail off and shrugged.

"You, babe, are gorgeous."

"Not like Maia. Men walk around me to get to my sister."

"That's only because of your intensity. It scares off the lesser males since they're afraid they won't measure up." Deke grinned. "Luckily for you, I find your determination a turn-on."

Ryne laughed and he couldn't have felt more satisfied if he'd climbed Mount Everest. "You're arrogant," she accused, but her tone of voice made it a comment rather than an insult. "The *lesser males*?"

"You caught that, huh?" Deke moved until they were sitting thigh to thigh. "We both know you wouldn't be interested in someone who wasn't as strong-willed as you are; he'd bore the shit out of you in about an hour. But enough diversion and back to our topic of the day: Maia. You worshipped her," he prompted.

She sighed loudly. "I—" Ryne stopped short and turned her hand so they were palm to palm. "I more than worshipped her. I measured myself against her in every respect."

Deke squeezed her hand. "And now you've discovered your hero is only human after all. Um, you know what I mean."

"No, you don't get it." Ryne tried to pull free, but he held on and she gave up.

"Explain it to me then."

A mulish look settled on her face. He didn't ask again, simply waited. Ryne needed to talk whether she realized it or not, and if he had to push a few buttons to make her explode, he'd do it. Deke didn't think it would come to that, but they sat there

for a long time. Long enough that he figured the enchiladas he'd made were probably stone cold.

"Maia's stronger than me," Ryne said at last, her voice so low he barely heard her even as closely as they were sitting. "I've always compared myself to her because of it. What scares me is if she can turn, what hope do I have?"

"She's not stronger than you," Deke disagreed.

That sparked some irritation. "You hardly know my sister."

"It doesn't matter. In my job, I have to be good at sizing people up in an instant. If I were in a tight situation and I needed one of you as a teammate, I'd choose you, magic or no magic. You're stubborn as hell," he grinned, "tenacious, persistent, determined, and a bunch of other adjectives. Maia isn't as tough; I picked that up immediately."

"You're wrong," Ryne insisted, sounding insulted. "Maia's handled all kinds of things—"

"I'm not saying she doesn't have strength—she does—I'm saying that you've got more. And you've got something else, some intangible that defies definition. It didn't surprise me to hear her admit she'd used the dark forces; it would shock the hell out of me if I ever heard that from you."

She looked stricken. Face white, Ryne said, "You don't know how close I've come. More than once the only thing that stopped me was thinking of Maia and how disappointed she'd be if I failed. Now what do I do when the dark forces call to me?"

"You'll find another reason to hold out. Yes," Deke insisted when she shook her head. "You might think it was your sister who stopped you, but it was you. You're the one who doesn't want to turn. Stop selling yourself short."

"But Maia—"

"And stop comparing yourself to your sister. She's not stronger than you. Maybe it seemed that way when you were both kids because she was older and ahead of you, but you didn't only catch up to her, you surpassed her." Ryne appeared doubtful. "How much older than you is she?"

"Five years."

"I rest my case. There's no way a five-year-old can compare herself to a ten-year-old and not come up short, but you're adults now and that doesn't hold true any longer."

This time Ryne looked thoughtful and that was good enough

for Deke. “Was Maia right? Would the council really have sent you after her?”

“Yes.”

Ryne leaned into his side slightly and Deke released her hand to put his arm around her shoulders. “She’s your family.”

“That only matters if it’s parent-child or husband and wife, otherwise the person closest to the one who turned gets the assignment.” Ryne sounded resigned.

“Would it have destroyed you to hunt her?”

“Probably. A battle—hurting her, maybe having to kill her to keep her from killing me. Yeah, it would have devastated me.”

“Your sister wouldn’t go peacefully? Not even for you?”

Ryne shook her head. “If she was far enough gone, she wouldn’t be the Maia you’ve met. Do you think Anise was always this way?”

Her fingers twisted in her lap and Deke reached over with his free hand and covered them. That action told him there was more she had to say. “What?”

She met his gaze squarely and he saw the ghosts in her eyes. “I pulled my punches. I probably could have taken my mentor the first few times we met, but I didn’t want to hurt her.” Ryne’s eyes widened and she grimaced. “I’ve never admitted that to anyone else.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” Deke promised and he leaned forward to seal his word with a kiss.

Ryne had no reason to believe in anyone after the way she’d been treated, but she trusted him. The knowledge humbled him and made his chest feel heavy. He was reluctant to break the connection, but Deke wanted to see her face. Slowly, he eased back, and as their eyes met, his heart began to beat faster.

“Anise nearly killed me before I accepted that the woman I cared for was dead. I hated some of the things she did when I lived with her and I hated what she’d become, but I loved her.”

Deke didn’t want to think about Ryne being hurt, not when it made his stomach knot up, but he understood her better now. She might have magic, but her world was ugly and those she should have been able to trust to make it bearable had betrayed her.

“At least your sister gave up her powers,” he said. “You

called them the core of who you are and it couldn't have been easy for Maia to do that. She must love you a lot."

And thank God for that, he thought. Ryne needed someone who cared that deeply for her. She was too alone.

Realization dawned on her face. "Yeah, I guess. No one's ceded their powers in at least the last hundred years."

There were questions he had about that, but right now, she was more important, and if he went off on that tangent, she wouldn't believe it. Ryne Frasier was even more remarkable than he'd thought, but he knew she thought of herself as ordinary.

Carefully, not wanting to spook her, Deke raised his hand until his fingers touched her jaw and turned her face to his. He paused, giving her a chance to tell him no, but she leaned toward him instead. Her tongue touched her lips, moistening them, and he shuddered as he fought off the urge to devour her. Deke wanted her more now than he had when he'd awakened that first morning and found her on top of his naked body, but he kept his kiss gentle. She'd been victimized by some asshole; he had to remember that and treat her with kid gloves.

With one arm around her shoulders and his hand at her face, he worried she might feel constrained and eased away until the only part of them that still touched were their lips. Ryne's arms went around his neck, holding him to her as if she were afraid he'd stop kissing her. That reassured him—and made him feel that warm sensation in his chest, the one he usually got on the rare occasions when she laughed.

Ryne deepened the kiss, demanding he open his mouth for her. She didn't have to ask twice. Deke loved her taste, the way her breasts felt pressed against his chest. Some of his control slipped, but Ryne fit him the way no other woman ever had.

Deke wanted more, but he let her set the pace. He wouldn't screw up again, not after her reaction last time. That fear—

She gave him a gentle shove and he wound up on his back again with Ryne on top. She was straddling him and undulating, but she didn't stop kissing him. His cock was hard, and damn it, he wanted inside her.

Breaking the kiss, he held on to her hips to keep her from making him insane. He needed a minute to regroup, but that wasn't what he said when she gazed down at him. Instead,

Deke went with humor. “Damn, babe, you love to be on top. I didn’t realize you had a kink about being dominant.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Ryne appeared horrified, but before he could form an apology, she was on her feet and on her way out of the room. When he heard the bedroom door shut, he dropped back onto the couch and put an arm over his eyes. Fuck, he’d really blown it this time.

A couple of hours later, Ryne sat on the sofa, rereading his notes. She knew she was lucky Deke hadn’t said anything about her being a prick tease. Once again, she’d left him hanging, but in her defense, she hadn’t meant for things to go so far. He made her forget herself. She didn’t want to dominate him, and yet that’s what she’d done. For God’s sake, she’d pushed him on his back and climbed on top of him. The scary thing was that she hadn’t realized she’d done it.

“No,” he said absently from his seat on the floor, “the scary thing is how few of these cases I remember.”

Ryne’s eyes almost bugged out of her head. There was no denying it any longer. “How long have you been able to read minds?”

“What?” Deke finally put aside the papers he held and looked over at her. “I can’t read minds.”

Oh, yes, you can.

“Shit, I heard that, but your mouth didn’t move.” He looked half freaked out. So was she. “First, I do some weird healing thing, now this. Next thing you know, I’ll be shooting fire like you do.”

“Relax,” Ryne told him, although she felt far from easy herself. “You’re human. The odds of you developing an ability like that are next to nil.”

“I would have said that about fixing your headache.”

“That’s no big deal,” she waved it aside. “Humans can do healing work, but you train yourselves out of it when you’re children. Most humans, however, can’t read thoughts.”

And it was more evidence that her mind shield wasn’t in place. Thank God she was inside her house, surrounded by the protection the council had put in place. The Gineal were natural telepaths and they learned young not only to protect their

thoughts, but to block out most of the human noise they picked up. They could deliberately choose to project, and often did, but that wasn't as intimate as reading minds. Or as terrifying.

"I'm not doing it deliberately."

He could be replying to her comment, but Ryne had a bad feeling Deke had tapped into her head again. "I know you're not."

That was part of what frightened her. Could she be unconsciously sending thoughts to him? "We need to try an experiment," she said.

"I'm game. What do you want me to do?"

"Tell me if you hear anything." Ryne took a deep breath and tried to come up with something unrelated to their current conversation. *To be or not to be, that is the question.*

"Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune—"

"You know Shakespeare?"

Deke smiled faintly. "I'm a college graduate, babe, but I was introduced to him early. My mom was an English teacher and *Hamlet* was the perfect play for a bloodthirsty ten-year-old boy."

Ryne was intrigued, but knew his exposure to the classics wasn't the critical factor here. "When you picked up my thought, how did it come across to you?"

He appeared confused for a moment. "I heard the words as if you were speaking them. Is that what you're asking?"

"Yeah, that's what I wanted to know." Damn, she had to be projecting. "Let's try something else." This time, instead of focusing on one idea, Ryne kept her thoughts the chaotic mess that she usually picked up from most humans. "Well?"

Getting to his feet, Deke sat beside her. "I'm looking forward to the opening day of baseball, too. No, I didn't spot any orange juice in the refrigerator. Me, I'm more of a traditionalist when it comes to toothpaste—I'll stick with mint. Yeah, some color in here would be nice, but I think you want something calmer than bright pink. How'm I doing so far?"

"You're batting a thousand," she told him with a frown. He shouldn't have grabbed any of those thoughts. Not only had she worked at not sending anything, she'd deliberately kept her mind whirling. It would have been difficult for her to follow a

human through the jumps she'd made, but apparently it had been effortless for Deke. Now the question was whether or not it went both ways. "Your turn to send me a thought."

What she received was visual. She saw her naked body, sensed him poised above her. Deke's hand cupped her breast, but instead of feeling it from her perspective, she got it from his—the way her nipple pressed into his palm, the way she tasted as he went down on her, how she squeezed him as he drove into her.

Ryne struggled to surface from his fantasy. It aroused her, made her want to squirm, and it didn't only affect her body—it was mentally arousing to see herself, feel herself, from his viewpoint. Was that how it was for a man when he had sex?

"Ryne?"

She pushed the question aside, afraid Deke would read her mind, although since he'd projected the scenarios, she shouldn't be embarrassed about responding to them. "What?"

"Did you get that?"

"Yeah." She cleared her throat. "You should have warned me it was going to be X-rated."

Deke shook his head. "I was trying to send you a line from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. What were you hearing?"

Her face heated. "Obviously not that."

"How can we get to the bottom of this if you don't tell me?"

Damn it, he was right. "It wasn't what I heard as much as what I saw and felt."

"And?"

Ryne stared down at her hands and reluctantly filled him in, trying to be as clinical as possible. It didn't matter. She was both mortified and aroused at the same time. He didn't say anything when she finished, so she added almost defensively, "It was clearly from a male perspective. I could see myself, but not you—I mean him."

"It was me," Deke admitted. "I wasn't sending that, but it was—I don't know—a background thought or whatever you want to call it. I didn't think you'd get it."

"Crap," she muttered. "I probably picked it up because you were more interested in that than a line from a movie." He stared at her without saying a word. "Okay, I know. That was a big duh. You're a guy."

"I do think about having sex with you a lot, but you don't have to worry. I won't force myself on you no matter how far we go. When you say no, that's it."

She tried to figure out what he meant by that statement. Sure, the words were self-explanatory, but Ryne didn't understand why he'd said them. No good answer came to her. "I know," she said. "If I didn't trust that, you wouldn't be sleeping beside me every night, but why are you telling me this now?"

Deke took her hand between both of his. "I guessed what happened to you, and though I pushed you hard with the sexual teasing early on, I want you to believe that I won't hurt you."

That didn't make anything clearer to her. "You've really lost me. What do you mean what happened to me?"

"You don't have to pretend, I know you were raped."

Ryne gaped at him. Her brain stuttered through several possible responses before she said, "Huh?"

"Whatever happened, it wasn't your fault."

He was being earnest and sweet, but Deke was so far off the mark, it would have been funny if he weren't treating her with such care and gentleness. "I wasn't raped."

"Even if penetration didn't occur, that doesn't mean you weren't molested. Coming close has the same effect."

"Deke, trust me. I wasn't raped, molested, or even groped and I'm not sure why you think I was."

Now he looked confused, too. "Because every time I have you underneath me, you flip me on my back. You don't like my weight pinning you and that time in the hotel, when I had you half undressed, you looked absolutely panic-stricken. You scrambled off the bed and locked yourself in the bathroom."

It made sense now that he explained his reasons for thinking it—she had done those things—but he'd taken two plus two and come up with five. Part of her was tempted to let him go on thinking what he did, but she couldn't do it.

"You're sweet. You're beyond sweet," she told him. "But you're wrong. The reason I put you on your back at the hotel and climbed on top of you was because you were moving too damn slow, not because I was scared to be beneath your body. The fear part came from something else completely." He was watching her, skeptical, but willing to be convinced. She was going to have to tell him more. "Taking the dominant position,

pinning you to the bed, that's something Anise did with her human lovers. I was terrified that I was emulating her."

"And that's why you ran out of here earlier tonight when I joked about you wanting to be on top," Deke said slowly.

"Yeah." She expected some smart-ass remark now that he knew she wasn't fragile, but that wasn't what Ryne got.

"I'm glad, babe," he said thickly. His arm went around her and tucked her closer against his side. "I'm glad no one hurt you like that."

Deke had been worried about her and he had it so wrong—she wasn't the one who'd been forced into anything. The thought made her uncomfortable. His protection, his consideration of her were undeserved and she shifted, putting space between them.

Isn't that adorable, mo cridhe? He's concerned about your well-being, but he doesn't know what you've done to human males in the past, does he?

17

CHAPTER

FIRST QUARTER MOON

Ryne struggled to keep her eyes open as she worked on her computer. She'd barely slept in two days—not since the night she'd gone to bed and Anise had invaded her thoughts.

She clicked the print icon and started the next file. Deke had relegated her to printing out the information on the disks he'd had with his notebook and Ryne figured that was about all she was good for right now anyway.

It had been bad enough that her mentor had gotten past her home's protection and Ryne's faltering mind shield to taunt her while she was awake, but it was worse when she was asleep. Anise knew her well, knew the perfect torment, and she'd used it mercilessly. When Ryne was unconscious, her teacher could make her relive events she wanted to forget had ever happened. It left her afraid to sleep.

That was stupid—she was weaker without rest, more prone to errors, and it left her reaction times slower than usual. If she had to fight, she'd be at a distinct disadvantage, one that would only worsen the longer she stayed awake.

Wheeling her computer chair back from the desk, Ryne looked into the great room and checked on him. Deke had the coffee table covered with the pages she'd printed earlier. She

watched him run a blue highlighter over something and glance up to meet her gaze. He smiled and winked, but she read his concern.

Ryne waited until he returned to his papers before scooting back to the computer. He'd start quizzing her soon, she knew it, and she had no idea what to tell him. The truth would only start him asking questions that she didn't want to answer. She looked at the screen, but the words blurred and she had to blink several times to see clearly.

Fatigue was definitely taking a toll.

She wondered if he was finding anything. His notes were an overview, Deke said, and the details were on the disks. Ryne forced her eyes open and hit print again. Damn, she had to stay awake, she had to focus.

Her thoughts wandered easily, her head throbbed, and her eyes felt as big as tennis balls. Gritty tennis balls. It was just a matter of time now till she fell asleep whether she liked it or not, and Anise would be waiting.

A shiver went through her and Ryne forced herself to think about something else. Deke. He was scared, too, though he hadn't admitted that. He'd told her that he didn't remember most of what he'd read in his notes, that the cases that were clearest to him were from episodes of *Deke Summers, PI*.

Ryne's eyes shut again and this time she wasn't able to fight it. She wouldn't sleep. All she needed was a minute to rest and she'd be fine. Just a minute . . . or two.

A beeping noise made her frown, but she didn't move.

"Okay, babe, that's it." Deke's arms went around her, lifted her. "You're going to bed."

"No!" Ryne struggled, but she was too exhausted to get much power behind her movements. He simply tightened his grip and kept walking, not stopping until he put her on the mattress.

Heaven. This was heaven. She wanted to curl up and sleep so badly, but she couldn't. She couldn't.

Ryne tried to sit, but Deke gently encouraged her to lie back down. She should try again, but she couldn't muster the energy. His hands went to her waist, undid the button and zipper, and he tugged her jeans off.

He was the one who sat her up, but he had nefarious motives.

Deke removed her shirt, and before she could form a protest, her bra was gone, too. "Stop."

"Don't worry, I'm not into necrophilia and you're too exhausted to do more than lie there like a corpse. You're safe from my evil intentions tonight. Raise your arms." Ryne was puzzled, but she obeyed. He tugged one of her long-sleeve T-shirts over her head.

Finally, she managed to open her eyes and found herself nose-to-nose with Deke. She gripped his arm tightly. "I can't fall asleep. Don't let me sleep."

Ignoring her, he lifted her far enough to pull back the blankets and tucked her underneath. Ryne sighed in pleasure, then forced her eyelids up again. "Please, don't let me sleep," she pleaded with him.

"I don't know why you're scared, but I'll be right here with you." She stared as he stripped to his shorts and crawled in beside her. "See?" Deke settled an arm's length away, just out of her reach. "Sleep, Ryne, I'll keep you safe."

He couldn't. No one could, but she was too tired to fight him. She'd lie here until he fell asleep, then she'd get out of bed. It was late, he had to be tired, too. Just a few minutes. Just a few . . .

"You've been avoiding me," Anise accused with a smile. Ryne shuddered and knew she had to wake up. She had to wake up now.

"You don't like our trips down memory lane? That's unfortunate because I'm enjoying them immensely." Her mentor flicked a hand and the dark void that surrounded them changed, became Anise's bedroom from ten years ago, and Ryne saw herself sitting against the wall in her usual spot. Despite herself, she looked over at the bed. Two men were under the other woman's control—both of them in their twenties, devastatingly handsome, and exceptionally well endowed.

"Look at yourself, mo cridhe."

Ryne shook her head, but Anise put a hand against her cheek and turned her that direction anyway. "See how aroused you are? It's in your eyes, in the flush of your skin, in the minute rocking motion you're making with your hips. You want to slide your hand between your legs so badly, but you always waited

until you were back in your room to pleasure yourself. Such a waste."

Wake up, she told herself, but Ryne couldn't do it. She couldn't overcome the hold the other woman had on her mind.

"You're too exhausted," Anise said, picking up on Ryne's attempt to free herself. "Tonight you're mine."

"What's the point?" she asked, trying to hide her anxiety. Anise might guess how deeply this affected her, but Ryne had to be careful not to do or think anything that verified it. "There's no need to remind me of the past. I know what happened."

Anise shook her head. "You've forgotten how much you liked it. How much you craved the power. This was the evening of your sixteenth birthday; do you remember that night, Ryne?"

A hard shudder went through her, and damn it, she was unable to conceal it. Anise laughed at her weakness and Ryne struggled to put a mask in place. This was worse than two nights ago, the first time her mentor had invaded her dreams. Then she'd been more rested, better able to exert some influence to avert the worst of it. Tonight, she was trapped.

Helplessly, she observed her sixteen-year-old self staring at the action on the bed. She'd been twelve the first time Anise had forced her to watch her have sex and it had continued until she'd left at nineteen. At least there was distance between what the teenager was feeling and experiencing and what she felt now, but Ryne didn't need to be in that body to remember how excited she'd become playing voyeur. It shamed her.

"Force is inaccurate," the Anise at her side said and Ryne had confirmation that the woman was able to read her surface thoughts. "Did I ever drag you into the room and chain you there?"

"Semantics," Ryne managed to say. She had to keep her thoughts calm.

"Truth," her mentor countered. "Don't lie to yourself. I never used physical or magical power to compel you."

Ryne didn't argue, but she knew it hadn't been her idea to play spectator to Anise and her men, not when modesty and privacy were watchwords in her family. Her memory, though, wasn't clear on how, exactly, this had started.

"Look how your nipples protrude." Anise pointed to the

teenager on the floor. "Look at how fast your breathing is. Did you ever come simply watching me?"

The soft lamplight didn't hide the girl's excitement, not when she wore nothing more than a thin sleepshirt and a pair of panties. Ryne had always thought Anise had been preoccupied with her men, but obviously she'd been aware of her student's state.

Almost involuntarily, Ryne's gaze returned to the bed. That version of Anise had one man in her mouth while she rode the other. A ménage was actually fairly tame. She'd seen her mentor with three, four, even more men than this, but then Anise had always seemed to embrace excess.

The woman came, then the men were allowed to have their orgasms and Ryne wanted to leave so badly, she nearly shook. Deke. If only she could reach out and touch him, she might be able to fight this, but she couldn't seem to move. Ryne redoubled her efforts to appear unaffected. She had to hide what this was doing to her—had to or there'd be worse to come. Unobtrusively, she took a deep breath.

"This is my favorite part and it used to be yours, too, mo cridhe, even if you feigned reluctance."

"That's not true," Ryne denied.

"Isn't it? Well, perhaps I'm wrong." Anise laughed. "Maybe your favorite part was when you finally came."

The woman on the bed separated herself from the human men and signaled for the teenager to come forward. The girl shook her head, but Anise gestured again more emphatically. Ryne watched her younger self slowly crawl the distance to the bed. She wanted to tell the girl not to do it, to fight harder, but it was pointless—they hadn't traveled back in time, they were merely revisiting a memory. What had occurred was over, done, and unalterable.

Ryne hid a grimace as Anise picked up a crop. This moment was etched in her mind—the first time her mentor had allowed her this close to the bed. As she'd knelt at the foot, she'd felt the breeze as the whip had slashed over her head and she'd been able to experience the power the other woman had felt up close. Involuntarily, Ryne's hand curled as if she were the one holding the grip.

As she watched, Anise ordered the men onto their hands and

knees and they eagerly complied. Her mentor had already broken these two, trained them to appreciate the pain.

Humans were weak. If they weren't, the Gineal wouldn't need to protect them. It was stupid, they'd hunted and massacred her people by the hundreds—the thousands—and here they were, defending their enemy against their own foolishness. Their own helplessness. They deserved to be dominated and more.

Shaking her head, Ryne denied it. That was what Anise had told her, what she'd half believed herself when she'd been a teenager, but it didn't reflect what she thought now. It didn't.

The younger Anise nodded to her apprentice and whispered one word, "Watch." The girl she'd been enthusiastically did just that as Anise brought the crop down hard on the bare ass of the first man. She left a bright pink welt, but didn't break the skin. He groaned, and from her vantage point, Ryne saw his penis jerk as blood began to fill it.

The second stroke was louder and her contempt grew at his obvious enjoyment. These men had voluntarily given up their free will for nothing more than a little sexual gratification. Anise wasn't using magic to hold them any longer—the doglike devotion was theirs. Her mentor brought the whip down harder and harder, and with each strike, the throbbing between Ryne's legs grew stronger. She heard Anise moan with arousal and a second later, the teenager gasped with her own pleasure.

Thin lines of blood ran on the first man's ass, but he was so sexually excited, his penis was dripping. Anise used her hand to slap at it before she moved on to the second man so eagerly waiting for his turn with the crop.

As the girl watched the older woman work the men, Anise murmured, "Look at your face, watch your pleasure in the control I had over those pathetic men. You wanted to be the one wielding the crop; you yearned for it."

She looked, she had no choice, and Ryne felt shame and revulsion overwhelm her. The girl was aroused, her expression mirroring her mentor's almost exactly as she raptly observed the scene. The harder Anise whipped the man, the more feverish the teenager's eyes became—but then so did Anise's. The student and the teacher. More alike than unlike.

"Have you whipped your human yet, mo cridhe? Has he grown to like it as much as you do?"

Ryne shook her head, denying the idea, but Anise continued, "When he didn't move fast enough for your liking, you didn't hesitate to dominate him—I saw you do it. If you haven't disciplined him yet, you will soon. I have no doubt of this."

It sent a chill through her. This was why she couldn't have sex with a human—Ryne couldn't trust herself. The thrill she'd felt at watching Anise use the crop on the men hadn't sexually aroused her. In fact, the action itself had always left her body cold. The power, though, was a different story—this was what had made her body hum, her panties wet. Her younger self had always been reluctant to be that close to the action, but once the whipping actually began, she'd loved it. The sound of the leather snapping against skin had given her sense of strength, a feeling of invincibility.

But Ryne understood something the teenager didn't—she'd been on the verge of turning each time she'd allowed herself to sink into the excitement. And now, with this flashback, she could see how close darkness was to the girl. The more pleasure she found in Anise's control of these two men, the more dangerous the situation became.

"I was too young and stupid to know it then, but I figured out what this was about, Anise. You were corrupting me, trying to turn me to the dark forces. It didn't work."

The woman smiled again. "The seed was merely planted; it needed time to grow. I've felt you reach for the power you crave and soon it will be time to harvest the field. You and I are the two most powerful troubleshooters living. Think what we could do as a team."

"That's not true," Ryne argued. "The rovers are the most powerful, they always have been."

"How little you know even now. They're the most powerful who were of age when a position opened. Since you turned nineteen, there haven't been any available." Anise shrugged and flicked her hand, ending the visit to Ryne's sweet-sixteen celebration. As uneasy as the void made her, it was preferable to her past. "The council may not offer it to you anyway—they fear how strong you are. That's why they watch you so closely; they know if you turn there is no one who can defeat you."

Ryne shook her head.

"I speak the truth. With the two of us teamed together, we

could do whatever we pleased. We could be worshipped as gods."

"Never. I won't turn. I won't turn."

"I won't turn!"

"Okay, babe, but could you sleep? It's the middle of the night."

Co-aigneach, Anise said, reaching her even though she was awake. *I left you another present.* And then her mentor's whispered enticements joined those of the dark forces until the murmurs in her head sounded like a cacophony. Panic bubbled up and they became louder, more insistent. What was happening to her? Why was she losing her mind shield?

Deke's arm went around her as he tucked her body against his and the call went silent. She stiffened and tried to pull away, but he held her firmly, and the quiet was such a relief that she surrendered, leaning into him. How could she let him touch her, though, when she was tainted? Anise was right—she'd planted a seed, and somewhere deep inside Ryne, it waited to bloom.

The thought of whipping Deke as she'd watched Anise whip those other men made her shudder, her stomach knot. She didn't want to hurt him—the very idea left her sickened—but how easy would it be for her to inadvertently slide into that behavior? It had been her first experience with sex and Anise had trained Ryne almost as well as she'd trained those men.

She'd have to remain watchful, Ryne decided and let her eyes drift shut. For now, though, it was finally peaceful inside her head and she should catch some sleep while she could. She wasn't going to turn no matter what she had to do to prevent it.

Ryne was almost asleep when Anise's parting shot registered. The last time she'd left a present, Deke's friend, Jay had been—

In a flash, she was scanning. "Damn!"

Jumping out of bed, Ryne raced for the front door, Deke on her heels. She used magic to undo the locks, then yanked it open the instant she reached it. Her gaze dropped.

There, lying in a heap on her welcome mat, was Fia.

18

CHAPTER

Deke cursed, but she ignored it as she chanted a spell to move the young librarian into her house where she'd be safe from further attack. Ryne didn't want to cause more injury and she had to be careful how she transferred the girl.

"Is she dead?" he asked.

Ryne set Fia down gently. "Not yet."

Immediately, she put a call out for healers—more than one—and blocked Deke when he tried to shut the door. Multiple transits opened on her front porch and four women and a man appeared. Ryne gave them permission to enter and closed the door behind them. They hurried to the injured girl, surrounded Fia, and scanned her to learn the extent of her injuries.

With the woman being tended, Ryne took her first deep breath. The dark forces were there in her head, bubbling away, and she visualized herself giving them the finger. Not that it registered with an inanimate power, but it made her feel better.

The healers began chanting, combining their energies until an incredibly intense green light entered Fia's body. From the urgency in their voices, the quickness of their intonations, Ryne knew the girl was hurt as badly as she feared. All she could do now was hope that they could save her.

She ran a hand through her hair, pushing it out of her eyes, and tried to think through the incessant noise of the dark forces. Then Deke reached out, took her hand, and blessed serenity returned. Ryne didn't know why he had this ability to help her, but she was relieved he did. "Babe," he said, voice low, "why don't you go put some pants on?"

"Too much to do," she said and called for Taber. This was serious enough to involve the council.

Deke released her as the doorbell rang and she almost grabbed for him as the endless enticement resumed. Ryne did her best to push it from her mind and went to let the councilor in her home.

"What happened, *laoch solas*?" Taber asked when he saw the healers huddled around the girl.

"Anise. She must have discovered Fia was researching for me."

Taber nodded. "I'm requesting the presence of the council and the head of the library."

Ryne hid her grimace. "Yes, *ceannard*."

Someone touched her shoulder from behind, but because there was an instant of peace, she knew it was Deke. "Here," he said, handing her a pair of jeans. "Put them on before I have to throttle that bastard for ogling you."

Shocked, Ryne glanced over and caught the male healer staring at her legs. She scowled at him and pointed to Fia—that's where his attention should be centered—then she stepped into her jeans. Deke, too, had gotten dressed, but Ryne didn't have a chance to comment because there was a knock at her door.

Reluctantly, she allowed the remaining eight councilors and the chief librarian to enter. The chaos in her head was echoed in her great room as five healers chanted and nine councilors and a librarian were shooting questions at her. None of them paused long enough for her to respond and she gave up trying to form answers. Rubbing her forehead with her left hand, she reached for Deke with her right. Ryne wanted some quiet.

That finally made Deke's presence register and the room went silent except for the voices of the healers. "The human must leave," the council leader ordered.

"No," Ryne said, doing her best to sound civil and not desperate. "This involves him as much as anyone else." She needed his touch to keep her sanity.

Taber interceded on her behalf and the discussion that followed was between the ceannards. Deke squeezed her hand and Ryne looked at him. "Hang in there," he said and she smiled. He might not know exactly what was going on, but he was supporting her anyway.

"Very well," the council leader said pointedly and Ryne dragged her gaze away from Deke, "the human may stay."

"His name is Daniel Summers," Ryne said. "Deke this is Nessia, the head of the Gineal council." The way the councilwoman's lips thinned told Ryne clearer than words that her ploy of passing off her correction as an introduction had failed.

"Laoch solas, remember your place."

"Yes, ceannard," she said and bowed her head.

The silence lasted for a moment before Nessia waved her hand and brought the massive council table into Ryne's great room. Nessia took her place in the center and waited for the others to be seated before she said, "Give us a report of the night's events."

With her head pounding, Ryne found it difficult to explain what had happened, especially in a way that would conceal what she didn't want the council to discover. She decided to start with what they already knew. "Fia was doing research for me, this you're aware of." The councilors nodded. "I have no idea how far along she was, though, since I hadn't received an update as yet, but perhaps Dìonachd Galen can provide information."

She looked to the head librarian, who stood off to the far side of the table. Galen was bearlike in size, but while he looked fierce and dangerous—more like a troubleshooter, Ryne thought—he was soft-spoken and had a genuine fondness toward the tomes for which he was responsible.

"Do you know? Had Fia discovered anything of importance?" the council leader asked.

The chanting of the healers ceased and Ryne's heart leapt into her throat. The young woman couldn't be dead. Please, she beseeched as she turned to look. It was Nessia who asked for a summary of Fia's condition.

“She’s stabilized enough to be taken to the healing temple,” the oldest of the women said.

“She’ll pull through?” Ryne hung on to Deke more tightly.

“It’s too soon to tell, *laoch solas*, but her chances are better in the temple than here.”

There was a moment of silence after the healers transported the young librarian and Ryne struggled with guilt. She hadn’t asked anything of Fia that was out of the ordinary; the only difference this time was that Anise was part of the equation. “I should have done the research on my own,” she said softly.

“What happened to the *dìonachd* isn’t your fault,” Nessia said kindly, and that surprised Ryne. In the past, the council leader hadn’t seemed to be one of her fans, but as she looked at the woman, there was compassion in her eyes. “She was doing her job as you were doing yours. The question is what happened to the enforcers who are supposed to protect the librarians.”

“I’ll check,” Galen said, and sent out the question telepathically. When he opened his eyes again, he appeared grim. “Two of them are dead and a third nearly so.”

That led to another flurry of activity that didn’t involve her. Ryne didn’t ask who the dead were—she didn’t want to know. Guarding the library and the *dìonachd* was a task usually given to the youngest troubleshooters. She’d spent the first two years of her career in that position until she’d been awarded her own territory. Anise’s former territory.

“This looks like a war room,” Deke muttered near her ear.

“Right now, it is.”

The councilors called in more experienced enforcers to protect the library and doubled the number that usually stood guard. There was a brief, spirited debate that ended with a vote to add more security to the healing temple as well. Troubleshooters across North America were shuffled to fill in gaps left by the new assignments and the Canadian woman who’d stood in for her while she was in L.A. was told to cover Ryne’s area again. She immediately protested, even though she knew it wasn’t in her best interest to argue with the council.

“Relax, *laoch solas*,” Nessia reassured her again, “this is temporary. We want you to focus solely on one task.”

“Capturing Anise.”

"Yes. We haven't seen a dark one this powerful since—" She stopped abruptly.

"Since the one that killed my parents," Ryne finished for her. Deke released her hand and put an arm around her shoulders instead. Before she could think better of it, she wrapped both her arms around his waist, then barely kept herself from grimacing. All the councilors, with the possible exception of Taber, looked displeased. She knew why. Humans were for fun, not for serious relationships; those were between Gineal. Her embracing Deke in front of them announced this wasn't just a lark.

She cleared her throat, but didn't release him. To hell with the council. She loved this man. If they didn't like it, let them find another troubleshooter to fight Anise. Ryne moved her gaze from ceannard to ceannard, daring any of them to comment, but no one said a word.

"Dìonachd Galen." Nessia broke the silence. "You were about to tell us of young Fia's progress."

"I am unfamiliar with specifics, but she reported that she was following a promising trail and expected to have answers in a day or perhaps two. When I return to the library, I'll check her log and pass the information along." He gave the council a shallow bow.

"Who do you have to take over her task?"

"I'll do it myself, council leader," Galen said.

Nessia inclined her head and her attention returned to Ryne. "Laoch solas, I want to hear what happened tonight. You are not to leave out any details, is that understood?"

Ryne nodded, but she wasn't happy. The ceannard had gutted her plan to omit a few facts. Now, with the woman's command, she had to tell everything or she'd be a liar. Since an enforcer was only as good as her word, she had no choice.

"Anise has found a way to bypass the protection around my home. Not physically," she quickly added over the gasps of some of the council, "but mentally. She's invaded my mind and my dreams." Deke's hold on her tightened, but luckily he didn't say anything or demand to know why she hadn't told him about it. "I woke up tonight with her mention of a gift ringing in my head. The last time she'd said that was in Los

Angeles when she killed a human. I did a quick scan and felt an injured Gineal. When I opened the door, I found Fia.”

“She should not be able to violate your home,” Nessia said.

“I know.”

“What of your mind shield? Isn’t that preventing her from harassing you?” Taber asked.

Ryne bit her lip, then reluctantly confessed, “It’s been faltering for days now. If it keeps failing at the rate it’s been going, I expect to lose it entirely before much longer.”

Silence.

Then, sounding odd, Taber asked, “Who’ve you had contact with in the last week?”

“Well, Deke, of course, and Maia—”

“He means Gineal,” Nessia interrupted.

“Fia, Ceannard Taber, Zane Conners, and Sin Duncan.”

Ryne tried to think of any others she’d spent time with recently, but drew a blank. “I can’t come up with anyone else.”

“Any dormants?”

Ryne shrugged. “There was this kid the night of the equinox, but I don’t know if you could call it contact. He was possessed by a wraith, then unconscious.”

“No one else?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

The councilors exchanged looks, but their expressions were . . . strange. “What’s going on?” Ryne asked.

“There’s a possibility,” Taber said, “that Anise is gaining access to your mind by going through another dimension. It’s a weakness in the protective barrier that we’ve known of, but didn’t consider a real threat since it would take an incredible amount of power to use it. This likely means she’s grown far stronger than she was the last time you battled her.”

Ryne nodded, but she had a sense the council was keeping something from her. She wasn’t sure how to press them about it, though, not when her suspicion was nothing more than gut instinct. “Can you block her?” she asked instead. That was the most important thing.

The ceannards looked at each other again, then Nessia said, “We’ll have your home completely protected as soon as we can.”

She relaxed into Deke's side. Everything would be easier if she didn't have Anise tormenting her while she slept. The last thing she wanted to do was relive her behavior while she'd lived with her mentor—especially since she was in love with a human.

Something was going on with Ryne and it was making Deke uneasy. Over the past two days, she'd touched him. A lot. He didn't mind that, but it was as if she were battling something inside herself, and only when she lost, did she reach for him with an emotion close to desperation in her eyes. He'd asked her several times what was going on, but she'd stonewalled him.

For the first time since Deke had met her, Ryne seemed vulnerable. Really vulnerable. He didn't like seeing her this way and his attempts to tease her out of her mood had failed completely.

Deke looked down at the piles of paper surrounding him. There were stacks on the coffee table, on the floor, and he'd moved the stuff he'd finished reading into the kitchen to keep it out of his way. He had a hell of a lot to get through and not much time to do it in. A glance out the window told him how close they were getting to the full moon.

Six days—give or take a few hours. Shit.

Although he kept reading, his thoughts weren't on the case he was going through. Ryne Frasier. He'd only known her a little over a week, and already he couldn't imagine a day without her. She was fun to provoke—most of the time—and got him hotter than any other woman he'd ever met. Deke just wished he had something to offer. When it came to protecting herself, she was every bit as capable as he was, maybe more so since she had magic. He didn't have any problem with a woman being equal or even more competent than he was. What he was having difficulty with was being worthless. He was contributing nothing and he owed Ryne more than he could ever repay.

It wasn't only money, it was— Deke stopped short, reread the paragraph he'd breezed through. Maybe. Maybe. He needed Ryne to look at this and tell him if he were seeing more here than there was.

Pushing to his feet, Deke went down to talk to her. He stopped at the foot of the stairs and watched. She should have heard him since he hadn't tried to sneak up on her, but Ryne seemed a million miles away. In her hand was a gold disk attached to a thick chain. Curious about what she was so intent on, Deke went over to her. The disk was etched with symbols he'd never seen before and held four stones in different colors—orange, blue, green, and a clear one that he thought might be a diamond.

"What is that?" he asked.

Ryne finally looked at him, her eyes haunted. Before he could question himself, Deke urged her off the stool and into his arms. She resisted for an instant, then sagged against his chest. Damn, she was scaring him.

"What is that necklace?" he repeated.

"This," Ryne said in a near-monotone, "is my apprentice medallion. I gave it to Anise when I was sent to her home, and when I completed my training, she returned it to me."

"You don't wear it."

"It's saved for official or formal occasions."

She seemed willing to talk about the necklace and he decided to use it as an entry to what was bothering her. "What are those symbols on it?" Deke asked, moving her back far enough to look into her eyes.

With a shrug, Ryne said, "Fire, earth, wind, and water." She pointed to each, then indicated the one in the center. "That represents me. I don't know what the others mean," she said, as she put her arms around his neck, "but they've appeared on every troubleshooter's medallion as far back as our history goes."

Deke's curiosity was captured—he wanted to know more about the Gineal—but he didn't pursue it. Ryne was who was important. "Why are you sitting down here, staring at it, babe?"

He locked his arms when she made a move to get away from him. "Leave it alone."

"No. I've let you evade the issue for long enough. I'm worried about you," Deke added quietly.

"I'm worried about myself."

Keeping one arm around her waist, he lifted a hand and carefully pushed her dark hair off her face. For a moment, she hid nothing from him and he saw fear. From Ryne. It stunned

him, then she blinked and her facade was back in place. "What's got you scared?" Her mulish expression returned and he sighed. "How can I help if I don't know what's bothering you?"

"You can't fix it for me," Ryne said, with a touch of fire in her voice. "Let me handle it."

"If our roles were reversed, would you let me get away without telling you what the problem was?"

"That's different."

"Why? Because I'm a mere human and you're one of the almighty Gineal troubleshooters? That doesn't make you better or more capable than me."

The little bit of fight she'd shown drained out of her at his words and Deke regretted saying anything. He pressed a kiss on her forehead—an apology for hurting her—then he simply held her and waited.

"An apprentice," Ryne said quietly after a long pause, "gives his medallion to his mentor on the day he arrives to be taught. It's a symbolic gesture denoting fealty to his teacher, loyalty, respect." She shrugged. "For seven years, a troubleshooter is trained, then after he passes his final test, his mentor returns the medallion to him. That, too, is symbolic, a sign that he's taught his student everything that he knows."

Deke wasn't sure what that had to do with anything, but instead of quizzing her, he thought about it. Ryne had said that Anise had turned before she'd been assigned to her. She'd also said that she'd never been sure while she'd lived with her that Anise had embraced black magic. That had to be significant, though he wasn't sure how it fit together. He kept thinking.

Fealty. Ryne was fiercely loyal anyway. Handing Anise her medallion would have been the same to her as making a promise. And she'd been twelve. A child. A lonely child from what she'd told him. Her sister had left home five years earlier to begin her own training and Ryne would have been alone with parents who didn't pay much attention to her. If Anise had spent time with her and filled the void in her life, Ryne would have leaned toward her like a seedling to the sun.

Then the other part of what Ryne said sank in—a symbol that the teacher had passed along everything she knew.

Pieces started to fall into place for him. "Anise didn't only

teach you what you needed to know to do your job, she introduced you to the dark forces, too, didn't she?"

"Yes, although I didn't realize it until later."

"She was trying to turn you."

Ryne shook her head. "Not then, I don't think. I was too young, not experienced enough. She nudged me, but never gave me the final push. What she did was taint me, though, let me have a taste of the power, enough to whet my appetite for more."

"And make it more difficult for you to resist the pull."

"Yes."

"You haven't turned yet and you won't." If Deke was sure of anything, he was sure of that.

"You can't know that! Hell, *I* don't know it."

"You're strong," he insisted.

"But I might not be strong enough." She tried to yank free, but he hung on to her. "Damn it, hotshot, it's so easy for you to sit there and say it's going to be okay, but you don't know what it's like to have them enticing you twenty-four hours a day. The only time I have any peace is . . ."

"Is when?"

She hesitated, then said, "When we're in physical contact."

"I like that." It meant he did offer her something and that he wasn't completely useless. "But what the hell are you doing down here when I'm upstairs?"

"I wanted to find out how Anise might be circumventing my home's protection."

"Didn't the council fix that?"

"Not yet."

"They better hurry." Deke didn't like the idea of Ryne suffering. "Do you know why the shield you have around your mind is failing?" She dropped her gaze and he tilted her chin up with a finger. "Ryne?" he prompted.

"No," she admitted quietly. "I don't know why I'm losing it, but I'm almost certain that the council does."

Deke considered their reaction and decided Ryne was right. "And they're not talking," he said grimly, stroking a hand up and down her spine. Another reason to dislike her damn council.

They were lucky to have a troubleshooter like Ryne. Someone who not only was honest and honorable, but who also

brought her extraordinary skills to the job. She was incredible and— He pulled his thoughts up short. “Can I ask you something?”

“Can I stop you?” she shot back and Deke grinned because even though the response was predictable, the tartness was Ryne.

“Anise had to know you’d be given the job of bringing her in. Why did she train you so well? Was she counting on you turning before she was found out? If she knew you, she had to realize how stubborn you are and that she couldn’t depend on you becoming evil no matter how well she’d primed you.”

Ryne blew out a long breath. “She didn’t have much choice. Trainees are tested at regular intervals and expected to be at a certain level each time. If I’d failed one of the exams, both of us would have faced scrutiny.”

“And she couldn’t afford that.”

“No. So did you come down here for a reason or did you just want to quiz me?” Ryne asked, changing the subject.

“Maybe I missed you, did you consider that?” She rolled her eyes and Deke grinned. Damn, he liked her. “Actually, I found something strange in my notes and I wanted your opinion.”

“Okay.” She stepped back and put her medallion down on her worktable, but Deke kept contact with her. “How much do you remember now?” she asked as they headed upstairs hand in hand.

“Very little,” he admitted. “I don’t understand why the memories of my life are jumbled up with TV or why the show seems clearer to me.”

“Maybe because the episodes are more recent? Or what about reruns? Real events aren’t repeated over and over.”

Deke shrugged. The whys didn’t matter and he could deal with a few gaps in his memory if it meant he was free of the cartoon.

“What did you want me to look at?” she asked when they were seated on the couch.

Since her thigh was pressed firmly against his, Deke chanced releasing her hand. “Okay?” he asked and waited for her nod before he reached for the sheet of paper he’d been reading. “This is from an insurance fraud case I was working about two months before I was imprisoned. The paragraph I’m

particularly interested in is the second from the bottom, but you should read the whole day's log to get a feel for what was going on."

Deke watched her as she read, following her progress down the page. He knew when she reached the paragraph he meant because she stiffened. "Crap," she muttered.

"It's something then?"

"Shh. I need to read this again."

He subsided. It had been a perfect Southern California day and he'd been tailing a guy suspected of faking the extent of his injuries from an automobile accident. Deke had been leaning against his car, waiting, when a flash of lightning had come. At first, he'd thought it was going to rain, but the sky had been blue and the sun shining. Back then, he'd shrugged it off as some weird atmospheric anomaly. Now he wondered.

"Well?" he prompted when she looked up. "Was that Anise?"

"You don't remember any other details?"

Deke shook his head. "No, do you need more?"

"To figure out what spell she tried to use on you, yes. But there's enough here for me to know one thing—imprisoning you in the cartoon was her second choice." Ryne tapped the page with her finger. "First, she tried to kill you."

19

CHAPTER

Ryne snuggled under the blankets and listened to the sound of the shower running. Deke hadn't wanted to leave her, not even for ten minutes, but she'd finally convinced him that she could handle the noise in her head for a little while.

Her mind shield was gone now and she was completely open. It terrified her. Not only did she no longer have even a small amount of protection from Anise, but any Gineal in physical proximity to her could read her thoughts. She hated that idea.

"Mo cridhe, my feelings are hurt. Do you really wish to deny me access to your thoughts?"

"Like you're sensitive enough for that to wound you," Ryne shot back.

"The council won't be able to close my path."

"We'll see." Ryne refused to argue and she wouldn't demonstrate any fear. None, no matter what Anise did to torture her this time—but she hoped Deke hurried up. Her mentor smiled and Ryne worked harder to keep her mind blank.

"Let's return to your sixteenth birthday. Do you remember the gift I left for you in your bedroom?"

Ryne nearly cringed and she realized her teacher picked up

on her aversion when she laughed. Anise pulled at her mind, and though Ryne fought her, she wound up in her long-ago bedroom. She didn't have to look to know there was a naked male in her bed. Her birthday and Anise had put a college-age man under a control spell for her. Wasn't that sweet? At least there was no way the other woman could know what happened.

"Oh, but you're wrong. I watched."

Her face heated, but before Anise could taunt her with that, the door opened and her teenage self entered. It was a bad situation, she'd been highly aroused from watching her mentor whip the two men and she had power buzzing through her body.

Anise had known her, damn it, known the kind of boy-man she'd found appealing as a girl, and that's exactly the type she'd chosen for Ryne. The teenager stopped short, stared at the human on her bed, and after only a slight hesitation, she crossed the floor. With her whole heart, Ryne wished she'd turned around and walked out, but at that age she'd been too impressionable—too messed up when it came to right and wrong. The grown woman struggled to show no reaction as the girl reached out to touch the kid's semierect shaft. She lost her nerve, though, and yanked her hand back a mere hair's breadth from her goal.

"Look how wet you are," Anise murmured. *"Those panties are sodden."*

Ryne wanted to bring her elbow back and smash her mentor, but she wasn't physically present. Instead she silently cursed Anise and damned the stupidity of a sixteen-year-old girl.

The teenager settled for touching his chest, letting her fingers explore the muscles. Ryne closed her eyes, attempting to shut out one of her most shameful memories, but Anise didn't allow that. She was forced to watch as the girl climbed on the bed, and showing how pathetically desperate she'd been for affection back then, she kissed the kid. Anise had given her a sex slave and she wanted to make out with him, but since the boy had been bespelled to obey Ryne's every desire, he obliged her.

If she could make it to the bathroom and touch Deke, she'd be safe, she wouldn't have to see this. She had to reach him. Ryne battled against the hold Anise had on her mind.

"You're going nowhere. If the kissing bores you—and it does

continue for quite some time—we can fast forward to some more interesting parts. How does that sound, mo cridhe?”

“As if I have a choice.”

“You might be slow at times, but you do learn.” Anise sounded amused. *“While I would like you to watch yourself rub your bare breasts against his chest, why don’t we go to where things become more entertaining.”*

In the blink of an eye, they jumped ahead and Ryne watched her teenage self straddle the kid’s leg. She had her sleepshirt off now and wore nothing except her panties. It wasn’t that big a deal, she told herself. Teenage girls all across America did this and more with their boyfriends every day. Besides, it wasn’t like *she* had subjugated this man to her will. It was her mentor’s doing.

“But you took advantage of the opportunity, didn’t you?” Anise pointed out.

Ryne barely kept herself from cringing at the truth of it. Thanks to her nearly four years of voyeurism, she’d known a lot about sex, but that wasn’t something she was proud of. The girl put that knowledge to use, riding his leg until they both came.

The shame and remorse lifted for an instant and Ryne realized something then, something her mentor was gambling that she wouldn’t figure out. She hadn’t hurt this kid. Instead of getting him up on his hands and knees to whip his ass as her mentor had with her men, Ryne had kissed him. Instead of slapping his penis, she’d rubbed her thigh against it. She hadn’t hurt him.

Even as a teenager she’d been stronger than Anise had given her credit for. With the coaching she’d received, Ryne could have easily tried to dominate the boy, especially while he was held in thrall. And she could have easily sunk into the dark forces before she became an adult, but she hadn’t.

She hadn’t.

“It ended quickly after this,” Ryne said as the girl sat half naked on the bed and looked down at the pool on the college boy’s belly. *“Despite everything you did to corrupt me, I always stopped before I crossed that final line. You lost, I’m too strong. I held out against you as a kid and I’ve only become*

more powerful since then. Your days as a threat are numbered." Anise tried to interrupt her, but Ryne kept right on going. "*You always knew it, but now I see it, too. I'm stronger than you are. Your plan backfired.*"

And Ryne wrenched her mind free of Anise's control.

She sat up in bed and used both hands to push her hair back. She was shaking.

Maybe she'd talked big to taunt her mentor, but Ryne knew defeating the woman wasn't going to be easy. Yes, she was mentally stronger, but Anise had black magic and a long time to hone her use of it.

But Ryne had underestimated her own strength and abilities. Deke had said something about how unfair it had been for her to measure herself against her sister when she'd been so much younger. The same held true for Anise. For years, Ryne had considered herself to be less powerful, but she'd been looking at the picture as a teenager and thinking of Anise as her mentor. She wasn't a kid any longer, though, and she wasn't weak. Although she'd said it before, now she believed it at her core.

She wasn't destined to follow in Anise's footsteps.

The girl she'd been might not have been able to withstand the encouragement to use humans, but she was an adult now. She hadn't played those games since the day she'd left her teacher's home and there was no reason to believe she'd suddenly become some monster with Deke.

Ryne gasped as something dawned on her, something she couldn't have known as a girl. When she'd become aroused watching her mentor dominate those men, her facial expressions, her bursts of pleasure had echoed Anise's by a matter of seconds and the other woman knew a way around Ryne's mental protection. Had she projected her own arousal to Ryne?

The repulsion she'd felt as she'd watched the crop used had always been as strong as the excitement. What if the first emotion was hers and the other belonged to Anise?

She had to take a deep breath to calm herself. If this were true, she wouldn't have to worry about her behavior in bed with Deke. Ryne wanted to make love with him. She wanted to touch him, to kiss him, to know what he felt like deep inside her.

The water stopped. Why not? Oh, she'd give herself some

more time to think it through and test her reactions—she couldn't risk hurting him—but odds were things would be normal between them.

Lying back, she closed her eyes and imagined walking into the bathroom, taking the towel from Deke, and drying that incredible body of his. Yeah. And this time when she reacted, Ryne pushed aside the fear and acknowledged that being aroused by the human she loved was natural, not a signal that she was in danger of turning.

For years, she'd been trying to prove to the Gineal people that she hadn't embraced the dark forces. It had led her to take foolish risks, had her fighting long after another troubleshooter would have withdrawn. But Ryne finally understood. There was only one person who had to believe in her. Herself.

Ryne swallowed a sigh and tried to feign interest in the case she was reading. She was lousy at seduction. It was late evening and she still hadn't made her move—not before dinner, not after dinner, and she continued to sit here, trying to figure out what the hell to do.

It shouldn't be difficult; a few teasing touches and some coy glances, a suggestive smile or remark. Easy. Except that kind of roundabout maneuver was alien to her—she was a charge-straight-to-the-destination kind of person.

She eyed his thigh where it pressed against hers. All she needed to do was reach out and run her fingers lightly up the inseam of his jeans—Deke would get it—but she couldn't do it. Ryne wasn't a toucher, no one in her family had been, and the idea of caressing him made her feel self-conscious. Maybe if it were spontaneous and not premeditated . . .

Crap. Everything she came up with felt so freaking contrived. How did women do this? She'd learned a lot about sex far too early, but there hadn't been any coaxing involved. Anise had simply put the men under her control until she'd broken them and done what she'd wanted. That wasn't an option for Ryne.

She'd even tried the food-as-seduction routine and cooked chicken Parmesan for dinner—her no-fail meal—thinking that if fajitas worked for Deke, this would work for her. Only she

hadn't been sure what to do while they were eating. Flirt with him? God, she never flirted and wouldn't know where to start.

For most of the day, she'd been thinking about making love with him, and her body was so ready, it was all she could do not to squirm to relieve some of the arousal. She had to figure out some way to let him know she was willing.

"Babe?" Ryne jerked. "Why so tense?"

It wasn't as if she could deny anything was wrong, not after her reaction, but she didn't know what to tell him.

"Are you hearing the dark forces even though we're touching?" Deke asked. "Do you need me to do more, like hold your hand or something?"

He'd given her a convenient excuse, but Ryne didn't take it. She wasn't going to lie to him, but the truth was embarrassing. "No, I'm fine." She cleared her throat to get rid of the hoarseness. "The voices are quiet."

Deke stared at her for a moment longer, then returned to his stack of papers. Damn it, she was such an idiot. She'd faced down creatures dangerous enough to send others running in horror, yet she couldn't reach out and touch the man she loved. This was pathetic. She should just do it. Really. What was the worst that could happen? Aside from looking as stupid as she felt. Was he going to tell her no? Ryne doubted it. Deke had made it pretty clear he wanted her.

Slowly, she started to move her hand toward his leg, but he looked up and she hurriedly put it back in her lap.

"Okay, now I know something's up. What's going on?"

The hell with it. "I'm trying to seduce you, damn it, but this indirect stuff isn't easy for me."

He stared at her blankly, as if she'd spoken to him in a language he didn't understand. Ryne could almost see him repeating her words, trying to comprehend them. When he grinned, she realized he'd gotten it.

"You're making it harder than it is," Deke said, still smiling. "If you're not comfortable with games, you don't have to play them. All you have to do is tell me you want me."

Could it really be that simple?

Deke leaned closer, his lips nearly touching hers. "Say it."

She hesitated, then jumped in with both feet. "I want you, Deke."

The minute space between them disappeared and his mouth covered hers. Despite the fact that he knew she was eager for him, he kept the kiss soft—persuading her, asking her, teasing her. Ryne liked that and something inside her relaxed.

Resting her hands on his shoulders, she let her fingers explore the hard muscles there. His tongue traced the seam of her lips and Ryne opened for him, let him taste her.

Deke didn't rush. He kissed her and kissed her as if that were the only thing they were going to do. Even his hands didn't stray; instead, he cupped her face between his palms. Occasionally, his fingers would tighten against her scalp, but even that was slow and gentle.

"You've got such a sexy mouth," he told her between kisses. "Your lips are full, just begging to be kissed, but you usually have this determined expression going on. Makes me wonder what it would take to divert you."

"You're doing pretty good right now."

He grinned and eased back. "You mean your goal isn't to have your wicked way with me?"

Before she could tense up at his words, Deke nipped her earlobe and trailed his mouth down her jaw. "Your chin is sexy, too," he told her and lightly bit her there.

"My chin?"

"Oh, yeah, Ryne. You have this indentation." He traced his thumb down the line in question. "It's so shallow, it's barely noticeable, but damn, it makes me want to do this." He gave her another nip.

She smiled. Leave it to Deke to be attracted to something strange like her chin, but Ryne enjoyed his unpredictability.

"It's your eyes, though, that really get me hot for you." He stopped and let her thoughts clear before he continued. "I can see your intelligence, your intensity, your fire, and that's the sexiest thing of all."

He kissed her again, and when he pulled away, he asked, "What do you like about me?"

"Everything." She tried to draw him back for more.

"That's too easy. Give me some details."

Ryne sighed. "Your eyes." She hurried and kept talking before he told her that was too easy as well. "They were one of the first things I noticed about you the morning you woke up in

my bed. You were trying to be this easygoing smart ass, but your eyes gave away your patience and your own intensity.”

“Most people don’t see that.”

She shrugged. “I’m not most people.”

“I know that. Anything else you like about me?”

From his teasing expression, Ryne knew he was done being even semiserious and she went along with him. “Your arms.” She pushed up the left sleeve of his turquoise polo shirt and traced a finger over one of the veins. “I like how muscular they are, the thickness of your wrists, the strength of your fingers, your calloused palms, but I love how gentle you are when you touch me.” She grinned at him. “And I love your smirk.”

“No, you don’t. It infuriates you.”

“Sometimes,” she admitted, “but I like it anyway.” And she did because it was part of who Deke was. Ryne leaned forward and brushed her mouth over his. “Do I have to keep complimenting you or have I boosted your ego enough to get a little action?”

He laughed. “Ryne, babe, you’ve seen me hard. You know it’s not little.” She rolled her eyes, but he ignored that. “You okay with moving this into the bedroom?”

“More than okay,” she assured him. He took her hand and helped her to her feet.

That was another thing she liked about him—he could be exasperating one minute and sweet the next. She’d already told him she wanted to have sex with him, but Deke wasn’t going to take it for granted and he wasn’t going to rush her. He was amazing.

Deke gave her more slow and easy kisses as they stood beside the bed. The only difference between here and the couch was this time his hands were on her hips, holding tightly against his body. Ryne felt how hard he was and part of her appreciated that he’d reined himself in for her. The other part of her wanted to tackle him to the bed and start pulling off his clothes.

“Move faster,” she told him, scared by the side of her that wanted to wrest control.

“There’s no hurry,” he told her, and in the warm glow of the lamps, she could clearly see the infinite patience in his eyes.

Ryne growled, hooked her foot behind his leg, and pushed

him onto the bed. She'd straddled him before she realized what she'd done. Quickly, she moved to his side and said, "I'm sorry."

"Why? Do you have any idea how hot it is to have a woman take charge?" He gave her his killer grin.

She shook her head. "Don't let me. If I roll on top of you, put me back beneath you and if I do anything that seems too controlling, say something immediately. I need you to promise me this, okay?"

Slowly, his smile disappeared and he sat up, reaching out to take one of the hands she was twisting in her lap. "What's this about? Come on," Deke added when she shrugged.

"Anise." She was hoping she wouldn't have to say more, but Ryne could see that he had questions. She dropped her gaze to their hands, unable to look him in the eye while she confessed part of her most shameful secret. "She made me watch her with her men and she was always the one in charge. I can't be like her, but you weren't moving fast enough for me, so I took over. That's something she'd do." Or at least it was what Anise would do if the human male weren't already bespelled.

With two fingers, he tipped her chin up until she had no choice but to meet his eyes. "You're not like her." She started to speak, but he cut her off. "No, I'm not going to argue about it. I'll do what you want because you'll worry if I don't, but I'll only do it this one time, understand?"

Ryne nodded. She'd take what she could get and deal with the future when it arose.

"You need to make me a promise, too. If I do something you don't like or that makes you uneasy, you have to tell me, okay?"

"I will," she said solemnly.

Deke's lips curved and he reached for the hem of his polo shirt. "The things a guy has to do for his woman."

He pulled the shirt over his head, missing her shocked expression. *His woman?* Did he really think of her like that? Ryne hoped he did. She considered Deke to be hers, so it seemed fair it go both ways.

"Do you still want me to move faster?"

Reluctantly, Ryne pulled her gaze from his chest. "Yeah, I do. I've been fantasizing about you and me for days. I don't know how much longer I can wait."

The most intense look she'd ever seen from him crossed Deke's face. "Damn, Ryne, it's a good thing I've been jerking off in the shower every morning, otherwise I'd last about thirty seconds after hearing you say that."

Going up on her knees, she reached for her shirt and peeled it off. "You've been masturbating because of me?"

"Hell, yes. It's not easy sleeping beside you and not touching."

She unhooked her bra and let it fall to the floor next to her shirt. "You can touch now," she reminded him, arching slightly to offer Deke her breasts.

"Hold that thought." He got off the bed, unbuttoned his jeans, then carefully lowered the zipper. Deke wasted no time shedding his pants and socks. "Sorry," he said as he returned to her. "I felt constricted."

"I can see that." Ryne reached out to stroke his erection through his briefs. She came to a damp patch and circled her thumb around his crown.

With a groan, he caught her hand. "Keep this up and I might be back at the thirty-second mark."

"Do you need me to catch up?" She undid her own jeans and shimmied out of them. "Better?"

"For someone who said she's straightforward, you sure know how to tease a man."

"How much more teasing do I need to do before you touch me?" She licked the thumb that had been caressing him, got it nice and wet, and ran it over a nipple. That was all it took. He had her on her back so fast, Ryne was nearly dizzy, but Deke slowed down again, kissing her lazily while his hand stroked her hip.

Ryne fought herself. She wanted to make him hurry up, and if that meant taking charge . . . She wouldn't. She wouldn't.

To distract herself, she concentrated on Deke's calloused fingers, on the way his chest hair abraded her breasts, making her nipples even stiffer, and she gave herself up to his kisses. His leg insinuated itself between hers, moving up until his thigh rested against her mound. She undulated, then stopped.

"No." Deke lifted his head. "If it feels good, Ryne, keep riding my leg."

She blinked, clearing her thoughts enough to say, "You're not calling me babe."

"You accused me once of using that because I couldn't remember your name. I want you to know that I'm aware of exactly who I'm making love with."

Reaching up, she ran her index finger over the corner of his lips. If she weren't already in love with him, what he just said would have pushed her over the edge. "Deke Summers, you are one special guy."

"Yeah, well, keep that in mind when I come about three seconds after I'm inside you." His grin was crooked, self-deprecating.

"That doesn't matter if I come two seconds after you're inside me." Ryne almost laughed as she watched dawning realization, then determination enter his eyes. Her man had a purpose now—make sure she reached orgasm faster than he did.

He brushed his knuckles under her nipples, touching her so lightly she gasped and arched, begging for firmer contact. She didn't get it. Instead, he trailed his fingers down her torso, circled her navel, and headed lower. Deke's hands curled around the waistband of her panties. "Lift," he ordered thickly, and Ryne did, letting him strip the last piece of clothing from her.

Deke stared. For an instant, she felt embarrassed, then he raised his gaze and let her see his eyes. "Beautiful," he told her, and that easily, she knew how much he appreciated her body. The self-consciousness vanished. This was the man she loved; she wanted him to find pleasure in her.

Ryne tightened her hands into fists, trying to stop herself from pushing down his briefs. She needed him to be as naked as she was, to be able to see all of him again.

Without her saying a word, Deke did it for her and it was her turn to stare. She felt his own question and she raised her eyes to his. "Beautiful," she echoed and licked her lips.

He lowered her mouth to hers, the kiss part reverence, part restrained hunger. Deke didn't spend a lot of time at her mouth. He bit at the pulse point in her neck, licked away the sting, then moved down to her breasts. There was a slight rasp from his stubble and the subtle abrasion had her moaning.

Using his lips, teeth, and tongue, he teased her breasts until Ryne writhed beneath him. His mouth followed the path his fingers had taken earlier. He lingered at her belly button, his tongue tracing the edge before delving inside.

Deke didn't stop there. "Let me see how ready you are." He moved between her legs, his broad shoulders opening her. His fingers parted her folds farther and he kissed her there. With a gasp, she arched asking for more. "Oh, yeah, Ryne."

The man was a master. Almost before the idea of what she wanted could register, he was doing it for her. Although he didn't say a word, she knew he liked it when she was vocal, and instead of repressing her noises, Ryne let him hear exactly how much she loved what he was doing to her.

Damn, she wanted to go down on him and give him the same kind of pleasure she was receiving.

Next time. I'm too close now.

Since he hadn't stopped using his tongue, Ryne knew he hadn't said that aloud and she knew she hadn't said what he was responding to out loud either. Before she could do more than register that, an orgasm crashed down on her and she didn't care about anything else. Arching her hips, she held Deke in place with her hands and came hard.

He was still between her legs, kissing and tonguing her lightly when she regained awareness of her surroundings. "You okay?" Deke asked quietly.

"Yeah." Ryne cleared her throat. "Damn, you're good."

She got a grin, then he refocused his attention on her sex. This time, she propped herself up on her elbows to watch him. There was something incredibly erotic about the fact that Deke obviously enjoyed what he was doing, and that aroused her almost as much as his mouth did. Ryne was writhing again, on the brink when he pulled off her.

The moan of disappointment slipped out.

"This time," Deke said, leaning over her, "we're coming together."

Ryne liked that idea and reached for his shoulders to pull him down to her, but all she got was air. She couldn't figure out why he was sitting on the edge of the bed and not covering her with his body. "Wha—"

"Need a condom."

Hurry, she thought.

"I'm trying."

She'd hardly had a chance to touch him, but she'd save that for next time, too. Right now, she wanted him to finish *this*

time and— He turned toward her and Ryne opened her arms and legs, welcoming him.

Deke kissed her and she could taste herself. As hot as she was, that was a turn-on, as well. *Hurry.*

His head nudged her entrance and she moaned against his lips because it felt so damn good. Ryne tried to encourage him to move faster, but he held her hips, setting his own pace.

Glaciers receded quicker.

He broke the kiss and laughed, but the smile didn't last long. Deke drew in a sharp breath as he sank deeper inside her. He felt good, so damn good. She tried to tell him that, but her words sounded unintelligible. Ryne gave up and moaned.

When he completely filled her, they both froze. *So good, Deke.*

Yeah.

His first thrust was tentative, a test. Ryne met him and his second was stronger. It didn't take them long to match rhythms and that made it even better.

Hurry, he encouraged her.

Ryne tried. She could feel how close he was, though, and knew she wasn't going to make it.

He pulled back far enough to slip a hand between their bodies and teased the place where her pleasure was centered. Deke knew exactly how to touch her by now and her breath hitched in her chest. *Yeah, babe—Ryne, come. Come.*

His excitement fed hers, drove her wild. With a keening moan, she found her pleasure, and only a split second later, she felt Deke coming with her. If anything, this orgasm was more intense than the first he'd given her and she rode the wave, eyes locked on his until he sank down on top of her.

It was a while later that she felt something tease at her brain. Ryne pushed it away and stroked Deke's shoulders. He continued to lay on top of her, unmoving except for his respiration and that made her smile. She liked that she could do this to him.

You would.

The mind-reading thing continued to bother her, but she was feeling too good, too lazy, right now to get worked up by it. *And you didn't enjoy what you were doing to me? It's not different,* she added as she easily picked up his argument.

Then it registered. That thing that was prodding at her brain. Slowly, Ryne opened her eyes. It wasn't possible—she would have sensed it when they'd met. It simply wasn't possible.

But it was.

“Oh, my God. You're not human!”

20

CHAPTER

Deke pushed himself up on his forearms and stared down at Ryne. For a minute, the only thing he could think was how beautiful she was, although she appeared agitated and confused, but then her words sank in. “I’d like to toss out some comment about my sexual prowess, but you’re making me uneasy. What the hell do you mean I’m not human?”

She shoved at his shoulders. “Let me up.”

“No. You can’t drop a bombshell like that and walk away.”

“I need to think and I do that better on my feet.” Ryne gave him another push.

He wasn’t ready to move—he was still trying to recover from the best sex of his life—but Deke shifted off her. Ryne immediately stood and started to pace, oblivious to her nakedness. Perplexed by both her words and her behavior, he watched her move and tried to make sense of things.

He found himself distracted. Her nipples were hard. Damn, despite her announcement, he wanted to stop her and take her in his mouth again. Deke liked Ryne’s easy grace and he could have gazed at her for hours, but instead he headed to the bathroom and took care of the condom.

After he cleaned up, Deke returned to the bedroom. Ryne

didn't seem ready to settle in one place yet and he propped some pillows up against the middle of the headboard to make himself comfortable while he waited. Leaning back, he laced his fingers behind his head and ogled her.

"You know," he said conversationally, despite how bemused he felt, "usually women like to enjoy the afterglow and they want a little cuddling and stroking. This is the first time I've driven anyone to pace."

"If you wanted usual, you should have gone to bed with someone else." She looked at him, but she seemed a million miles away. "Now, be quiet; I'm trying to think."

He shut his mouth and went back to observing her. It took awhile before Ryne surfaced enough to realize she had his undivided attention. She stopped and said, "You're staring."

"Hey, I'm a guy and I have a gorgeous naked woman strutting around in front of me. Do you think I'm not going to look?"

With a small smile, she climbed onto the foot of the bed and crawled up to kneel at his hip.

Deke unfolded his arms and took her hand. "Are you ready to talk to me now?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

She played with his fingers, watching their hands, and he waited some more. He took a moment to appreciate the differences between them. She was fine-boned, delicate in appearance, although he knew better than to underestimate her strength, and her skin was much fairer than his. Deke liked their contrasts, and in other circumstances, he would have been happy to think of nothing else until he was ready to sink into Ryne again, but they had something to discuss. "If I'm not human, what am I?"

Slowly, she met his eyes. "You're a dormant. That means that you're the descendant of Gineal who've ceded their powers."

"Like your sister."

"Yeah. If she has children—even with a Gineal—they'd be dormants because both parents need to have their magic. But in that type of situation, likely the father would help his child come into his power at a young age."

"Whoa, back up." Deke found himself momentarily distracted by her breasts and he had to shake his head to get himself

on track. "What do you mean, come into his power? Are you saying I have magic?"

"Yes, but it's lying inert inside you."

He didn't know which question to ask next. There were dozens flying around his head, vying for prominence, and what he did say, surprised him. "My parents never told me anything."

"It's unlikely that they knew. The odds are that your magic comes from Gineal who ceded their powers centuries ago during one of our periods of persecution. The knowledge was probably lost within a few generations."

That made him feel better—his parents hadn't lied by omission. Ryne shifted slightly and he found his gaze back on her breasts. With a groan, he jerked his eyes up and said, "Babe, you need to put something on. I can't think clearly when all I want to do is lean forward and lick a nipple."

"Men," he heard her mutter as she got off the bed, and Deke grinned. She had a point. The topic was serious enough that he should be able to stay focused.

Ryne grabbed her panties off the floor and stepped into them before she went digging in a drawer. Deciding maybe he'd better follow his own suggestion, he found his briefs, yanked them on, and got back into bed. When she was covered by a long-sleeve tee, she returned to his side. "Better?" she asked.

"No, but this is more conducive to conversation."

They stared at each other quietly for a long time before Ryne finally said, "You're accepting this with amazing calm."

Deke smirked. "I've been trapped in a cartoon for four-plus years, and since you freed me ten days ago, I've seen you create images out of thin air, transform our clothes into expensive stuff for the apartment tour, throw fire, open transits, and do assorted other things. I've discovered that there are monsters out there—crogaids, amadans, baines, and probably more I haven't met yet. After everything else, the fact that I'm descended from Gineal and have magic isn't as earthshaking as it would have been a week ago."

"I guess that's understandable." After a moment's consideration, Ryne said, "I can probably anticipate some of the general questions you'll have. The Gineal don't look for or keep

tabs on dormants, and when we do come across them, we don't tell them what they are." She gave him a wry smile. "You're the exception."

"Why not? You don't want them shooting a burst of fire someday and not knowing what the hell they did."

Reaching for his hand again, Ryne twined their fingers. "It doesn't work that way. There's an incantation a dormant has to recite before he can do almost any magic. As for why we don't approach them, there are a number of reasons, including keeping our society secret and our belief that if their life path were meant to include their powers, they'd find their way to us without prompting."

Deke decided Ryne hadn't mentioned one of the big things. "You also couldn't be sure of the moral integrity or how someone would react to suddenly having powers."

She nodded. "From the time we're born, we're taught the ethics of magic. We need to have a solid foundation to know when to use it and when not to. The decision isn't always easy and the subjectiveness is part of what can turn us to the dark forces." Ryne shook her head. "Troubleshooters are busy enough without hunting wayward dormants who've come into their powers."

"But there are good people out there, people who would only use their magic to help others."

"You're looking at it from a human perspective. Did you ever watch *I Dream of Jeannie*?"

That came out of the blue, but Deke cautiously said, "Yeah."

Ryne's lips turned up, but she didn't comment. "There was an episode that had one of the best explanations on the ethics of magic that I've heard. I think Major Nelson had Jeannie's powers temporarily and he was talking about stopping a war or something. Jeannie told him that by ending one war, he could start ten others. It's a real threat. Even if a new Gineal had the best of intentions he could cause incredible havoc."

"So most live their entire lives thinking they're human."

"Almost all of them." She paused, shrugged, then said, "As for you, your energy read completely human to me. I didn't know you were a dormant until a little bit ago, I swear. I wasn't hiding it from you." She clasped his hand with both of hers.

"I never thought you were, Ryne."

She relaxed, and with a smile, brought his hand to her mouth and pressed a kiss in the center of his palm. Deke felt the touch of her lips all the way to his cock.

"I've been trying to figure out why I was fooled about what you are because I should have known. That's what had me pacing. I only came up with one answer: Anise."

"How? Why?"

"How? There must be some spell and I think we broke it when we made love. I won't know for sure until I find the incantation and read how it's worded. As for why? I only have conjecture, but I think she didn't want us to have sex. Yeah, I know," Ryne said quickly, "but it's the only thing that makes sense. She's aware of how I feel about taking a human as a lover and I wouldn't have the same reservations about a dormant."

Deke had that Alice-down-the-rabbit-hole feeling again. "I can't come up with a single benefit that she gets from our abstaining from sex."

"That's because you're rational. Anise isn't. I told you, using the dark forces is like taking a drug. How logical is a long-term addict on a nearly continual high?"

It made him feel better that Ryne didn't get it either, but it shouldn't. If they didn't understand why Anise did things, they were at greater risk of being taken unaware. He liked to be prepared, to anticipate from which direction his adversary would strike. His fireball, though, seemed to take the uncertainty in stride. He supposed that in her job, she had to.

In truth, Deke wasn't sure how he felt about this dormant thing. He wasn't even sure he liked having the potential to do magic, but one thing was clear: he wasn't useless any longer; he could help Ryne. "Get the spell to bring me into my powers and then start training me until I know enough to fight beside you."

She shook her head and Deke scowled at her.

"I can learn the ethics, babe."

"I know you can and I'd trust you to be cautious, to take it in steps, until you were up to speed. That's not the problem."

"Then what the hell is?"

Ryne leaned toward him, rested a hand on his thigh, and lightly stroked his leg. "Because the incantation I used to free you from the cartoon is only temporary, you're still under

Anise's power. You can't call forth your magic while you're bespelled by another. No dormant can."

Which meant he *was* fucking useless. That just sucked.

For the past two days, Ryne had watched Deke try to control his frustration. He was successful more often than not, and when he slipped, he always apologized quickly. She knew how he felt, hell, she was frustrated herself. It seemed as if for every step forward, they were knocked back again.

Ryne got off her stool and stretched before heading into the stacks of books for another volume. Deke was continuing to go through his cases—the man had reams of paper on each job—but in her opinion, they'd already found the only important puzzle piece in his notes—Anise had tried to kill Deke and failed. Failed! And she hadn't approached him since, sending other beings after him instead. Ryne had a suspicion about that.

She found the next book she wanted to go through and brought it back to her worktable. Instead of opening the text, she paused for a moment and drank in the blessed peace. She'd never take it for granted again. Sex with Deke had done more than remove the camouflage that made her think he was human; for some reason, it had also made the dark forces go silent.

In the past, even when they'd been more or less quiet, she'd felt them just below her consciousness, lurking. Waiting. They weren't there right now. Her mind shield had somehow been rebuilt and it was stronger than before. That was another thing Ryne wanted answers for, but she'd look into it later.

Although it was damn close, the mental serenity wasn't the best part about Deke being a dormant. The thing she liked the most was not needing to worry about dominating him in bed. Sure, she could still overwhelm the man, but she'd have to work harder at it—hard enough that she would realize what she was doing and stop herself. The freedom to simply enjoy touching him and being touched by him were incredible gifts.

It continued to bother her, though, that Anise had concealed his dormancy. More than concealed it. She'd invaded Ryne's head, and had deliberately reminded her why Ryne couldn't

trust herself with a human. In the end, it had backfired, but it seemed as if her mentor had been dead set on preventing her from sleeping with Deke. Why?

That question ate at her, demanded attention. She'd told him that the reason could be irrational, but Ryne wasn't sure of that. Most Gineal had no problem enjoying humans, so hiding what Deke was had to be related specifically to her aversion. It had to mean something. If she only knew what.

Could Anise have known that the act would silence the dark forces? Ryne shook her head—even if she was aware of that, there had to be more to it.

With a sigh, Ryne pushed thoughts of her mentor from her head and concentrated on someone much more pleasant. Deke. Damn he knew what to do with his hands and lips. He had a thing for kissing her. A man who enjoyed kisses and didn't hurry through them to get to sex—amazing. And addictive. He didn't limit himself either. Last night, he'd spent forever on her breasts, loving her with his mouth and hands until she'd been begging him to make her come.

He'd liked that.

Then there'd been this morning in the shower. She'd never used her handheld massage head on herself the way he'd used it on her. Deke had actually made her scream. Twice. He would have gone for three except she'd been too sensitive for another round.

Thinking about that had her squirming in her seat and Ryne made herself flip open her book. She had to pay attention to her reading. Throughout the ages, various Gineal had studied dormants and documented their findings. These case histories had to hold the answers she needed.

Ryne was about thirty pages into the text when the smell of something good reached her. Since they'd eaten dinner a couple of hours earlier, this must be dessert.

Taking a last, appreciative sniff, she returned to reading. This was her fifth and final book on dormants, and next, she'd have to start calling forth titles from the Gineal holdings. But she thought she'd read something as a kid that would explain Anise's fear of Deke, and since she had her entire family library, it had to be in her collection.

Ryne went through another twenty pages before she found

what she wanted. The volume was old, the handwriting faint and spidery, so she read it twice to be sure. “Bingo,” she murmured.

As she mulled over the information, she stared off into space. She’d have to test it to be positive, but whatever she chose to do would have to be something relatively innocuous. If she were wrong, Ryne didn’t want to hurt Deke. If she were right, she didn’t want to—

“Hey, babe, thinking about the way I lifted you onto the counter before dinner and had my way with you?”

Ryne turned and saw Deke leaning against the doorjamb, his hands tucked behind him. “No. I was remembering the way you finally let me go down on you this morning after we showered.” She licked her upper lip. “You taste good.”

With great satisfaction, she watched his eyes heat. He closed the distance between them, and when he stood in front of her, Deke asked, “Do I taste better than a cookie?”

She dropped her eyes to his crotch, then looked into his eyes again. “It depends on the cookie.”

He brought his hands into view. “Chocolate chip, fresh from the oven.”

Leaning forward, Ryne opened her mouth. Deke broke off a chunk and popped it in. She chewed slowly, swallowed.

“Well?” he prompted.

“Let’s see . . . warm, rich, sweet. That’s two out of three for you and three out of three for the cookie. Chocolate chip wins.” She snagged the rest of the treat from his hand.

“Yeah, but can the cookie make you moan in pleasure?”

“Nope.” She paused, let him have a moment to gloat before she added, “But *crème brûlée* can.” That wiped the satisfied expression off his face, and grinning, Ryne finished the last bite of the cookie.

“You know how to wound a man.”

For an instant, she feared he was serious—it hadn’t been her intention to hurt him—but then she read the mischief dancing in his eyes. Leaning farther over, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him slowly. When she pulled back, she traced her thumb over his lips. “Great in bed and in the kitchen. What did I do to deserve this?”

Deke nipped the pad of her thumb. “You got lucky, babe.”

He looked around then whispered next to her ear, "Do you want me to show you I'm good in the basement, too?"

She laughed. Damn, she enjoyed him.

"I love it when you laugh," Deke said. "You don't do it enough, you know."

That was probably true. "Maybe I never had much reason before this."

"Yeah." He looked grim, then shook it off. "You seemed pretty serious when I got down here. What's up?"

"I found something, but I need to test it out . . . on you."

He stepped back and spread his arms. "Be my guest."

Ryne felt her heart stutter. He had to trust her—really trust her—to offer himself up like that. Deke had seen what she could do and throwing fire was only the tip of the iceberg.

"Stand on the opposite side of the work area," she directed, pointing to the spot she meant. "You don't have to do anything and you don't need to worry. The worst you'll feel is a sharp jab, I promise."

Getting to her feet, Ryne gathered herself and pointed her finger at him, but she was the one who got the hard poke. "Yes!"

"I didn't feel anything."

"I know you didn't." Ryne grinned at him. "I did!" She crossed over to him, took his hands in hers, and said, "This is fabulous! You have mirror protection in place."

"Start talking."

"Some dormants have passive magical abilities. Very few, and most don't have much. Maybe they can read tarot cards well or they know when the phone is going to ring before it does. Real simple stuff. But then there are those who have more—like you. Mirror protection is exactly what it sounds like. Any negative magical energy directed at you is mirrored back at the sender, so when I tried to jab you, I'm the one who felt it." Ryne grinned again. "It's why Anise failed when she tried to kill you. It boomeranged back to her. She must have been royally pissed off about that."

"If she was trying to kill me, and it was mirrored back at her, why is she still alive?"

"Because it takes a lot more to kill a Gineal than it does to kill a dormant. She was likely hurt, but not enough to slow her down for long. This explains why she put you in 'toon town."

Deke shook his head. “It doesn’t explain anything. If she directed that spell at me, why wasn’t she put into the cartoon?”

Ryne drew a deep breath and tried to think of the easiest way to describe what had happened. She decided to just go for it and hope he got it. “There’s two reasons that I can think of—both might be valid or only one. The first is that your shield didn’t consider the spell negative. It did nothing to harm you, it simply moved you into another state of being.”

He broke away from her and paced up and down the length of her workspace, muttering the entire time. There was a lot of profanity involved, but the gist of it was that Deke considered the spell to be damn negative.

She waited until he settled down before she said, “The second reason could be that the spell wasn’t precisely directed at you. Instead, it was one that drew you into it.”

From the expression on his face, she knew he didn’t get it and she tried again. “Think of explosive decompression on an airplane. The breach in the fuselage might be in first class, but if you’re standing in the aisle ten rows back, you’re still going to be sucked out.”

“So Anise directed the spell off to my side and it was potent enough to draw me into it.”

Ryne nodded. It wasn’t exactly right, but he was close and that was good enough at this point.

Deke hauled her against him and wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly. It wasn’t a conscious decision to project his thoughts, Ryne knew that, but she could hear them as clearly as if he were speaking aloud. She felt his stomach churn as he recalled how much he hated being a cartoon and she heard him wonder if it maybe wouldn’t be better to die fighting than to return to that existence. She hugged him more firmly.

She loved him, and if he loathed it that much, Ryne had to make certain Deke didn’t get stuck in *DSPI* again—no matter what she had to do. His thoughts calmed, and she wondered if on some level, he’d picked up on her promise to him. At least she wondered that until she discerned a stray visual image. Deke was thinking about bending her over her worktable and tugging her jeans down. She nearly laughed. Leave it to a man.

Deke eyed the table over Ryne's shoulder, but decided it was too high. Unless he laid her on top of it and climbed up after her. He was giving that some consideration when the doorbell rang. She immediately stepped away from him and he sighed.

"Gineal," she told him and headed up the stairs.

He followed her, unwilling to let her face whomever it was alone. Deke was in position to see both Ryne and the person who stood outside when she pulled open the door. He almost growled. Why the hell hadn't she looked out the damn peephole?

In a flash, Deke sized up the man standing there and decided he was dangerous despite the pretty-boy appearance. They were about equal in height and weight, but Ryne said he was Gineal so he had magic. That gave the other man the edge in a fight.

"Creed!" Her voice held delighted surprise and that was echoed on her face.

Deke's mood soured. It went even farther south when she invited the asshole in and threw herself into his arms. Pretty boy held her too close and too tight. The bastard had five seconds to let go of her, or magic be damned, Deke was putting him on the floor.

It was Ryne who stepped back and moved to his side. Deke immediately slung an arm around her shoulders. She was his and he was staking his claim. Something inside him calmed when her arm went around his waist, reinforcing his message.

Pretty boy challenged him with his gaze and Deke met it head on. If he wanted to fight for Ryne, Deke would fight.

"Creed Blackwood," Ryne said, "this is Deke Summers. Deke, this is my friend Creed."

He didn't extend his hand and neither did Blackwood. Deke heard Ryne sigh. She tried to step away from him, but he tightened his hold slightly. "Creed, would you mind shutting the door?" Pretty boy didn't move. "Creed, it's cold outside."

Reluctantly, the other man turned and closed the front door. While his back was to them, Ryne gave Deke a warning look and mouthed the words, "Be nice."

Deke nodded, but he didn't mean it. Ryne thought of Blackwood as a friend, but the man wanted more than that from her. She might not realize it, but Deke didn't have a doubt in his mind.

“Do you require assistance with your task?” she asked, voice formal. Protocol, Deke remembered.

Pretty boy shook his head. “Thanks, but no.”

“Can you tell me what’s going on?” Deke heard the thread of annoyance in Ryne’s voice and figured it was because this was her territory and she didn’t know what the problem was.

“My assignment isn’t in Minneapolis.” Blackwood’s answer indicated that he knew Ryne well enough to pick up on her irritation, too, and Deke fought the need to scowl.

“How long are you in town?”

“Just overnight. I’m catching a plane to Tokyo tomorrow.”

“Flying rather than using a transit?”

The other man shrugged. “It’s necessary.”

Ryne didn’t ask about that; instead, she moved on to another question. “Do you have a need to stay here?”

A growl nearly escaped, but Deke swallowed it. “Babe, I’m sure Blackwood would sleep better at a hotel than on our couch.”

The challenge was back on the bastard’s face, but this time, Ryne saw it, too. “Oh, for God’s sake!” Neither one of them backed down. “Let’s at least move the pissing match into the great room where it’s warmer and more comfortable.”

She put her shoulder into his side and pushed. Reluctantly, Deke moved. They stood in the middle of the floor, about three feet apart and picked up where they’d left off.

“The council claimed you had a human here. Where’d you find the dormant, Ryne?”

Deke stiffened at the slur in the asshole’s voice and Ryne squeezed him. “Deke was the human, or at least we thought he was human. Anise had some kind of illusion spell on him.”

“Shit. You let him fuck you.”

There was disbelief, disdain, and something else Deke couldn’t name in the other man’s voice. He put Ryne behind him and moved a step forward. “Don’t talk to her like that,” he warned.

“How do you know that?” Ryne demanded, moving to Deke’s side. It pissed him off that she wasn’t ripping into the asshole for speaking to her that way.

“Because there’s only one damn illusion spell that will make a dormant appear human and a single condition under which it can be lifted. It happens to involve sex.”

"Why would any illusion spell be tied to sex?"

"Answer something for me," Blackwood said, ignoring Ryne's question. "Has your mind shield been wavering?"

"It was." She took Deke's hand. "It's solid again, though, and stronger than it was before."

Pretty boy didn't look so arrogant anymore. "And have you been inadvertently reading the dormant's mind or had him pick up on your thoughts when you weren't projecting?"

"Yes, that's been happening, too. And he's not *the dormant*. I made introductions, so you know his name. Use it. Are we clear?"

"As crystal." The other man jammed his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and scowled. "You don't have a clue what's happened, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Blackwood shook his head. "Congratulations, Ryne, you've developed a true soul pairing with the dor—with Summers."

Deke looked at Ryne, but she seemed confused. "I've never heard that term before," she said. "What is it?"

"I'm not surprised," pretty boy said. He pulled his hands free and went around to sit on the couch. Ryne joined him, but to Deke's relief, sat on the opposite arm. When she was settled, Blackwood added, "The council doesn't want it to become known, but I found out about it when I stumbled across a reference in an ancestor's journal."

"You keep dancing around," Ryne accused, "but you don't give me a straight answer. What is it?"

Blackwood leaned back and stared at the dark television screen. "A true soul pairing can only happen between two troubleshooters—or I guess I should say, between two people with that level of power. As a dormant, Summers isn't an enforcer."

Ryne shifted impatiently and Deke ran a hand down the length of her hair, wanting to soothe her. Things had taken a turn for the better as far as he was concerned. Not only did this true soul pairing thing sound as if it were going to make the other man back off, it also seemed that Deke's magic—if he could access it—was going to be as powerful as Ryne's. Equal

was good. Equal meant he wasn't going to have to look to her for protection forever.

"I'm guessing that the stronger mind shield and reading each other's thoughts is part of it," Ryne said, unable to wait any longer for Blackwood to explain.

"Yes, you're ri—"

The doorbell sounded again and Ryne groaned as she got to her feet. "The two of you behave. I don't want so much as a baring of teeth while I get the door."

Deke shifted, wanting to watch out for Ryne, but he relaxed when he saw it was Galen. It was only then that he realized pretty boy was beside him, also standing guard. "He looks more like a member of Hell's Angels than a librarian," Deke said. He could be magnanimous; after all, Ryne was his.

"No shit." The man's lips curved and Deke guessed the olive branch had been accepted. "He's why the Gineal are never slow to return books to the central library."

"Ryne said it's because someone else might need them."

"That might be why *she* returns everything promptly."

"Point taken," Deke said and smiled, too. That was his fireball, conscientious to a fault.

Blackwood glanced over at the entry, saw Ryne and Galen headed toward the great room, and voice low, he said, "You hurt her, Summers, and there'll be no place you can hide from me. I'll hunt you down and kick your ass, got it?"

"Yeah, I got it."

"Good." The other man walked toward the door. "I'm going to head out and look for a hotel since your couch is about a foot too short. Galen," he inclined his head and then hugged Ryne again. "Take care of yourself," he told her.

"You, too." Ryne walked with him and Deke went along. When the door closed behind Blackwood, she took a glance over Deke's shoulder, then demanded softly, "What did you say to him?"

"Nothing, babe. Pretty boy and I reached an understanding."

"Pretty boy? Creed?" Ryne laughed. "Deke, your face is prettier than his." She patted his cheek and walked around him.

Nonplussed, he stood in the foyer, staring at the door. Ryne thought he was better looking? Well, hot damn. With a grin, he

pivoted and went to join her and the librarian. His smile disappeared in a hurry, though, when he saw their expressions. "What's wrong?"

"Fia's not doing well," Ryne said softly and Deke knew she was still riddled with guilt over what had happened to the other woman. He sat behind her on the couch and put his arm around her shoulders. "Galen said the healers fear Anise put some spell on her that prevents her from recovering."

"That isn't the only bad news I have."

Ryne's muscles tensed even further. "You've hit a dead end in your hunt for the incantation."

Galen shook his head. "I did find one spell that will free him permanently. You'll have to bind Anise's powers first, but once you recite it, Summers will resume human form—er, dormant form—with an alternate set of memories for the time he's been imprisoned." The big man tugged his beard. "There might be a few Gineal who've met him and will remember the true situation, but the only person for certain who'll recall that he was imprisoned in a cartoon is you, Ryne."

"Wait a second," Deke said. "Are you saying I won't remember anything about what really happened these last four and a half years?"

"That's exactly right."

"Not even this time now, while I'm out of the cartoon?" The librarian shook his head and Deke felt a clenching in his chest. He wouldn't remember Ryne? That wasn't possible. She was too vibrant, too full of fire and intensity. "I don't want to forget anything."

"Not your choice," Ryne said thickly. "The incantation was written that way for a reason."

"You can rework spells, right? Adjust it so I remember."

"She can't," Galen interjected. "It's a short, potent proclamation that doesn't allow much room for variation. Change one word and it might not work."

"Can I look at it?" Ryne asked.

With a nod, Galen extended his hand and the book appeared. He opened it to a page marked with a ribbon and handed it to her. Deke kept his eyes on Ryne's face as she read, and when she bit her bottom lip, he felt hope leach from him. "You can't do it."

“No.” Ryne closed the book and crossed her forearms over it. “Galen’s right. It’s too brief and every word counts. But it gets better, hotshot.” Her chin quivered and he thought he saw tears well in her eyes, but before he could be sure, Ryne looked away. When she met his gaze again, there was no sign of emotion. “I have to perform this spell before you return to *DSPI*—there is no second chance at the next equinox. It will only work the first time you’re freed. If I don’t defeat Anise before the full moon, you go back to the cartoon world forever.”

21

CHAPTER

WAXING GIBBOUS
92 PERCENT OF FULL

The words swam in front of her eyes and Ryne had to blink a couple of times to clear her vision. Damn it, she didn't have time for this. When she'd been an apprentice, Anise had told her that no matter how much studying she did, one day Ryne would face a situation where she simply didn't know enough. Her mentor had claimed it happened to every trouble-shooter.

It was her turn now.

Ryne needed to learn more and she needed to learn it fast. The problem was putting her hands on the knowledge. Galen was trying to help her, but even the librarians didn't know all of the information the Gineal had or where to find it. If she lived through this, Ryne was going to push the council for the texts to be databased.

Doggedly, she read the paragraph again, hoping it would make sense now. She felt a kiss on the side of her neck and jumped before she realized it was Deke. "Stop sneaking up on me!"

"I'm not sneaking, you're just too intent to hear me come down the stairs." Deke leaned a hip against her worktable. "I called you twice to tell you dinner was ready."

"I don't have time to eat." But something smelled good.

“Yeah? Too bad—you’re taking it anyway.”

She scowled. “You can’t force me to eat if I’m not hungry.”

“Look at it this way, you can come upstairs peaceably, spend a half hour eating dinner, and get back to work. Or you can keep me here arguing with you, then come upstairs to eat dinner and lose more than half an hour.”

Deke was stubborn enough to do it, too. Ryne tried to figure out a way to dissuade him, but her stomach growled, undermining her position. She expected him to give her that self-satisfied smile of his, but he stayed sober.

“I might not be able to help you fight Anise,” Deke said quietly as he smoothed the hair off her cheek, “but I can take care of you. How long do you think you’re going to last in battle if you don’t eat and get enough sleep?”

He held his hand out for her, and reluctantly, Ryne accepted it. “I hate it when you’re right,” she muttered as they headed toward the stairs.

Now he smirked, but that was Deke, and hell, she’d miss that expression when he was gone. Her throat tightened up—there was barely any time left. The full moon was April 5 at precisely 5:03 A.M., and God help her, it was already April 2.

Less than sixty hours until she lost him forever.

It was the only possible outcome. If Anise defeated her, Deke would spend the rest of his life as a cartoon. If Ryne won, he’d return to L.A. with no memory of her or his time in ’toon town. There’d be no point in seeking him out then—she knew that without question.

Ryne pushed aside the pain. She refused to let it darken the days they had left together. Until he disappeared from her life, she was enjoying every second she had with him.

“Sit down,” Deke told her, preventing her from going with him to the kitchen. He wasn’t gone long. “Sorry it’s fajitas again.” He put a plate down in front of her. “It was the only thing I knew how to cook that we had the ingredients for.”

“Crap. Groceries.”

He grinned at her. “Give me directions to the nearest store and I’ll head out tomorrow and replenish our supplies.”

“Go online—I have it in my favorites as *food*—order what we need and they’ll deliver tomorrow.”

“You just don’t want me driving your SUV,” Deke teased.

“Wrong. I hate grocery shopping, and since I already have an account with them, we don’t have to worry about cash.” She smiled and leaned forward to kiss his cheek. “You’re sweet to volunteer, though.”

“Like I said, I can’t do much, but I can take care of you.”

Something in his tone stopped Ryne. “You’ve said that before, that you can’t do much, but it’s not true.”

“Yeah, babe, it is.” Deke pushed a piece of red pepper around his plate with his fork. “I stand around like I’ve got the lead role in the fucking *Perils of Pauline* and you arrive to save the day.” One side of his mouth quirked up, but there was no humor in it. “You’re going to say my problem is that I’m threatened by a strong woman, but that’s not true.” He looked up and met her eyes. “I love that you’re tough and can handle yourself—what I hate is that in your world, I’m helpless.”

This time Ryne leaned forward and kissed his lips. “You’re far from helpless.” He looked skeptical. “You fought and killed the amadan without me. I expected to find you dead when I ran outside the house that night. And what about the baine? You held your own with it.”

“Bullshit. I was this close to the end.” He held his index finger about a quarter of an inch from his thumb. “If you hadn’t arrived when you did and turned it into flambé, I’d be dead.”

“Most humans—or dormants either for that matter—wouldn’t have lasted until I got there. You ever think of that?”

He grunted.

“You’re the one who found that attempt on your life in your notes, which helped me figure out you have mirror protection. And you got the ghost to leave when we were in L.A.” Ryne still felt sick when she thought about it. Since Deke was a dormant, it explained why his aura was bright, but according to the spirit, hers wasn’t as brilliant. How tainted by dark magic was she?

“Big deal, I told a ghost to go to the light. He wasn’t a threat.”

Ryne put aside her concern. “You’re a hard sell. What if I told you that your support of me has been an enormous help? It makes me feel as if I’m not alone, as if I actually matter as more than an enforcer.” She put down her fork and scooted out from under the coffee table, but before she could walk away, Deke wrapped a hand around her ankle.

“You matter.” He got to his feet and stood in front of her. For a moment, he gazed into her eyes, then he reached out and framed her face with his hands. “You matter. Your people—the ones who don’t appreciate you—they’re the assholes. You’re special, Ryne. I’ve never met a finer person than you.”

She brought her hands up and clasped his forearms. He didn’t know what he was talking about. “I’m not good.”

“The hell you aren’t. I’m not just saying this to make you feel better. You are a damned excellent example of humanity or whatever you want to call it.”

Drawing his hands away from her face, Ryne shook her head and turned from him. “You don’t know some of what I’ve done. There are things in my past I’m ashamed of.”

“So? Everyone’s done things they wish they hadn’t, it’s part of being human—Gineal—shit, you know what I mean.” Deke came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, cuddling her against his chest. “Did you murder someone in cold blood? Swindle senior citizens out of their retirement funds?”

“Of course not.”

“Then mark it down as a learning experience and put it behind you.”

“But when I lived with Anise—”

“That means you were a teenager.” Deke shifted her around until she faced him once more. “I don’t think anything we do when we’re young and stupid should count against us as adults.”

“But I—”

“Babe, you start recounting your stories, then that means I’m going to have to tell you some of the things I’ve done that I wish I hadn’t, and personally, I prefer not to remember them, let alone share them with anyone. Not even you.”

“But—”

“But what?” He leaned closer to her. “But you don’t get to make mistakes like everyone else? What makes you superior? If the rest of us have to fuck up, you do, too. Deal with it.”

“I didn’t claim I had to be perfect, but you said I was good and I’m not. You have to know that.”

Deke shook his head. “Because you’re not a saint and made a few choices along the way that you regret, that means you can’t be considered a good person now? Sorry, it doesn’t work

that way. Our life experiences shape us—both what we did well and what we wish we could do over. You wouldn't be who you are today if you hadn't made those errors in judgment."

The Gineal philosophy agreed with what he'd said—her people were firm believers in life being a journey and that each path chosen shaped the traveler. Ryne shared that viewpoint, but she'd never applied it to what she'd done while she lived with Anise—at least not in a positive way. "You might be right," she said grudgingly. "I'll have to think about it."

"Good, you do that," he said and steered her to the coffee table. "Now, let's get back to dinner while it's warm."

They didn't talk much as they ate, but Ryne was content with the silence. Maybe Deke thought she was mulling over what he'd said, but she wasn't. She was enjoying him—the brush of his arm against hers, the shift of his muscles against her thigh—and trying to memorize the sensations for when she was alone again.

It didn't seem right that her time with him would be measured in days, but in Ryne's experience, life seldom was fair. She took a deep breath and tried to force the ache aside. No matter how much it ended up hurting, this time with Deke was a precious gift, more than she ever thought she'd have. Even if her heart was ripped out when he left, it was worth it.

"You know, I was thinking. My memories of you will be replaced with others, but you'll still remember me," he said and Ryne wondered for a split second if he'd read her mind. Before she could worry over that too much, Deke took her hand. "After the spell's reversed, come out to L.A. and find me. We don't know where I'll be living, but I'll write down the personal information I think will help you track me down."

Ryne choked up again. Deke wasn't ready for things to end between them either and that meant everything to her. "I wish I could," she said thickly.

"Why can't you?"

"Because you won't be who you are now. Just as my time with Anise made me who I am today, your time in the cartoon shaped you, too. With a new set of memories, you'll be different."

"I doubt I'll be too much different. I was nearly thirty when I was hexed and my personality was pretty set by then."

She shrugged. That could be true, but she'd considered this the night Galen had passed along the information and weighed the pros and cons of looking for Deke. There hadn't been much on the plus side of the equation.

"Are you afraid?" he asked without inflection. "Is that what this is about?"

"That's part of it, but it's more than being fearful that you'll reject me." Ryne scrambled out from underneath the table again and paced, trying to find the words to articulate her concerns.

Deke had moved onto the couch, and on one of her pivots, he patted the cushion beside him. The message was clear—he was done being patient. Once she was seated, he said, "Talk to me."

"Do you remember that first morning when you woke up in bed with me?" Ryne waited for his nod. "You didn't believe it when I told you about being spellbound. In fact, you thought I was in need of psychiatric care."

"That didn't last long."

"No, because I showed you a DVD of *Deke Summers, PI* and you remembered your time as a cartoon character. What happens if I find you in L.A. and we're both still interested in each other?" She leaned toward him, hoping he understood what she was trying to say. "You won't recall being bespelled, so do I tell you and hope you don't have me committed? Or do I live a lie and never bring up what I know? And if I do decide not to tell you, what happens if I slip? What if I mention something we did together that you don't remember?"

Ryne paused, but she could tell Deke didn't have any answers for her. "It goes beyond this," she added quietly. "Not only are my powers a big part of me, I'm also a Gineal troubleshooter. How do I tell you that? It's not something I can hide, not for long. How many parlor tricks would I have to do for you before you believed I was more than a talented magician?"

He bent forward, bracing his forearms on his thighs. "I'd like to tell you that you're worrying about nothing, but you're right—I wouldn't believe you about Anise and *DSPI* and if you kept it a secret, it wouldn't take me long to realize you were trying to hide something."

Ryne sighed. "And that would make it impossible for you

to trust me, which would doom any kind of relationship between us.”

“Pretty much, yeah. Shit.”

Scooting closer, Ryne stroked his back, ran her hand over his nape, his hair. “I’ve been thinking about this and I haven’t come up with any method to make it work. I wish I could.”

“Once I learned you could do magic—” Deke stopped abruptly and muttered another curse. “I probably wouldn’t believe it. No matter what you did, I’d try to find some excuse to explain it away, and if I couldn’t, it would make me uneasy.”

“Uneasy enough to want to avoid me.”

Deke shrugged, but she had her answer. It wasn’t a surprise. Humans generally reacted one of two ways when faced with Gineal magic—either they stayed away from what made them feel threatened or they eliminated it. And Ryne wasn’t human, she never would be. “I can’t cede my powers. If I did, I’d end up resenting you.”

“I would never ask you to give up your magic. As far as I’m concerned, that’s not an option.” He turned to her, cupping her cheek with his palm and running his thumb over her lips. “But I was hoping there was a way around this damn spell’s amnesia clause. I don’t want to lose you. I love you, Ryne.”

For an instant, her entire world froze. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. Her pulse slammed into overdrive and she struggled to believe she’d heard what she thought she had.

“You don’t have to say anything. I just wanted you to know how I felt before things got crazy.”

Beneath his calmness was a stab of pain; she could sense it as if it were her own. That drove everything back into focus for her and Ryne said the one thing that would fix his hurt. “I love you, too. I didn’t want to, but you’re damn hard to resist.”

“Yeah?” There was both hope and pleasure in his voice.

“Yeah, hotshot.”

He kissed her slowly, reverently, letting her experience how deep his emotions ran. It was a bittersweet moment.

It didn’t take long for an edge of desperation to appear—they were both too aware of the deadline. His control slipped and their kiss became wild. Ryne felt that frenzied need fill her, too. She tugged his shirt from his jeans and pushed it up until she could get her hands on bare skin. The tactile sensations she

felt as she traced the hard muscles of his belly made her gasp as if he were the one stroking her. Deke broke away and yanked off his polo.

As soon as it was gone, she leaned forward to trail her lips over his chin. She nuzzled his neck and nipped his pulse point. Ryne went lower, followed his left collarbone, and bit gently at his pecs. He liked that so she did it some more. His taste, his scent had her moaning. Deke Summers was hers and she was claiming him in the most elemental way possible.

His hands slipped into her hair as she moved farther down, and this time, she used her tongue to tease his hard abdominal muscles. Ryne rimmed his navel and lightly nipped the skin just below it before kissing away the sting.

The waistband of his jeans was in her way. She opened the button and lowered the zipper, being as careful as he'd be. "Lift," she ordered him the same way Deke had ordered her, and when he obeyed, she jerked his jeans down to his thighs.

She stared. The bulge in his briefs mesmerized her. Ryne curled her hand around the hard column of flesh and stroked him through the cotton. It wasn't enough. She knelt in front of him, kissed along his shaft, and when she reached the end, she sucked the head of his penis.

Between her saliva and his natural lubrication, it didn't take long to soak the fabric. Satisfied, she moved the briefs out of her way and put her lips on bare flesh. The feel of him in her mouth had her clenching her thighs. Damn she loved doing this with him. Ryne locked her eyes on his and used her tongue to tease the underside of his head.

Deke cursed, then eased her back. "Not this time," he said. "Stand up."

She did. "Now what?"

"Get your shirt and bra off, I'll take care of the lower half." She laughed over his division of duties, but part of her was thrilled he wanted her so badly that he couldn't wait even the extra few seconds it would take for her to undress on her own.

When they had her naked, she tried to close the distance between them, but he held her back. "You're gorgeous; let me look for a while." She couldn't stop the small growl and he grinned at her. "I know. You get impatient. I like that."

He teased her breasts, making her gasp, then ran his hands

down her sides. When Deke released her, Ryne started to take a step forward, but he stopped her again.

"Widen your stance for me, Ryne. I want to see all of you."

Slowly, wanting to torture him like he tortured her, she complied. After a moment, she decided she could do better and slipped a hand between her legs. With two fingers, she separated her folds, letting him really see everything.

Deke's penis jerked.

She'd never considered herself an exhibitionist, but as he stared at her, Ryne felt herself become wetter and wetter. He wasn't touching her and she was hardly touching herself, but she was almost as hot as when he went down on her. "Deke, you have one more minute to look, then I'm jumping you, got it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Instead of using that time to stare, he stood, fished a condom out of his jeans, and pushed his briefs down. He didn't bother to step out of anything, simply left his clothes bunched up at his thighs. It was sexy as hell and showed a hastiness she appreciated.

When he was sheathed and sitting again, he said, "Okay, jump me."

He didn't have to tell her twice. Ryne straddled him, winding her arms around his neck and rubbing her breasts across his chest as she kissed him. Deke found the center of her pleasure. He circled, teasing her, then his fingers moved lower, slipped inside her to make sure she was ready for him. She felt his head nudge her.

Looking down, Ryne saw him holding his shaft, guiding himself into her. She moaned quietly and leisurely sank down, not stopping until she had him as deep as he could go.

His hands went to her hips and held her still, but she wasn't ready to move yet anyway. Aside from when they came, her favorite moment was when Deke was first inside of her. That sense of fullness always made her sigh, but it was more than that. When they were joined, she felt as if she were more, as if together they became greater than either of them were alone.

But the sense of wonder couldn't last indefinitely, and before she was ready, her body demanded she move. Ryne rocked into him and a new feeling of awe bubbled within her.

He kept his eyes on hers as he helped her find their rhythm and she lost herself in the motion. In him. Deke loved her. He loved her.

When he nuzzled her breasts, she arched, offering him more of herself. Damn, the man knew how to use his mouth. Between that and the way his body stroked into hers, she was on the verge of an orgasm in no time.

“Ryne,” Deke said softly, his lips brushing her skin, “you realize you’re on top, don’t you?”

Her hips slowed, but he curled his tongue around her nipple and made her gasp. By the time he finished teasing her, she didn’t care who was in the dominant position as long as she got to come soon.

Ryne shifted and bent forward to press her lips to his. *Deke, come with me.* And she let him feel how close she was.

His hands settled on her waist, and moved her more firmly into him. *Look at me.*

Bracing herself against his shoulders, she opened her eyes far enough to meet his gray-blue gaze. His need of her was obvious and Ryne felt satisfaction that she could do this to him. There was more than passion there; Deke’s expression also held love, and now that she knew how he felt, she realized she’d seen that emotion there for days.

That pushed her over the edge and he was only a split second behind her. She clung to him as she came and Ryne tried to keep her eyes open, tried to share this with him, too. It wasn’t until she started to calm down that she let her eyelids shut.

“I think I lasted longer our first time,” Deke said awhile later.

Ryne pushed herself off his chest and gazed at him. There was so much love there, more than she believed anyone could feel for her. But there was more, too—caring, affection, tenderness, respect—everything a woman wanted from her man.

And in less than three days, she was going to lose him. That hit her hard, made her ache in a way she’d never hurt before. “I love you,” she whispered, barely able to speak.

“Don’t, babe. We’re together today and we love each other—let’s enjoy that.”

She nodded. He was right; she’d told herself that same thing earlier tonight, but it was harder now that she knew Deke loved

her back. Before he'd told her how he felt, Ryne could convince herself that things between them would end anyway, but now, if it weren't for that damn entrapment spell Anise had put on him, they might have had a future.

They might have had forever.

Deke flipped through the channels, not paying much attention to what was on TV. He wasn't going to lose Ryne, he couldn't. Even if he didn't consciously remember her, he knew there'd be an empty spot inside of him for the rest of his life if he wasn't with her. And that was nothing compared to how torn up Ryne would be. She was the one who'd have to deal with the memories.

He knew her. She'd been hurt too profoundly in her life to love or trust easily, but once she'd fallen, she'd given him her whole heart. Ryne did nothing halfway.

Shit, there had to be something he could do, some way to get around that spell. Ryne was isolated, alone, and odds were she'd withdraw farther after he was gone. He didn't want that for her. Even if he couldn't have her, he wanted her to be happy.

At least she'd answered the phone when Maia had called. Ryne needed someone and Deke was pretty sure her sister wouldn't allow her to cut herself off completely from life. The conversation had been going on for more than half an hour; that had to be a good sign, right?

Still zipping through the channels, Deke tried to come up with a plan to keep Ryne. What if he wrote himself a note and always had it with him? He scowled. That wouldn't work. He'd appeared in Ryne's bed naked, odds were he'd return to his life with nothing but his bare skin, too.

He could write Ryne's name and phone number on his arm in permanent marker. But what if it disappeared when he was returned to his life? That seemed too iffy. Deke wanted something as close to 100 percent certain as he could get.

Of course, he was assuming that he'd stay a living, breathing person and there was no guarantee. If Anise avoided Ryne until after the full moon, he'd be a cartoon for the rest of his

life. His fireball insisted that wasn't going to happen, but he already saw evidence that was exactly what the woman had planned. After all, the one time she'd made an appearance, she'd projected herself.

And even if Anise did show up to fight, Ryne might not win. Just the idea was enough to send a shudder through him. He'd rather go back to *DSPI* than have Ryne dead. Fuck, if someone offered him the choice, he'd beg him to put him in the cartoon as long as she wasn't hurt.

“—domain name and ten free e-mail accounts—”

Deke was already past the channel when the words from the commercial registered. He flipped back, but couldn't find which station it was. It didn't matter.

E-mail. What if he e-mailed himself?

He could explain what had happened and tell himself about Ryne. Hitting the power button, Deke tossed the remote onto the coffee table and rubbed his hands over his face. What were the possible pitfalls?

One, he might not believe the note. But if he included information in there that only he knew, even he'd have to wonder, right?

Two, if he sent the note before Ryne performed the incantation that made him human, would it disappear? Deke frowned and decided that was a possibility. There might be a way around that, though. It would be easier if Ryne had the kind of computer equipment he'd had, but even without it, he could probably manage to delay the note and make sure it wasn't sent until after the full moon. He'd check into that, and somehow, he'd make it work.

Three, his e-mail accounts were probably deleted by now. Even if the spell somehow restored them, he couldn't be sure what the addresses would be. It took him a little longer to come up with an answer for this problem. He had a friend who'd kept the same e-mail address for the last ten years. Odds were good he'd have it no matter what the incantation did and Deke knew he could trust Masato not to read the attachments once he knew the note was to be passed along.

Four, the magic. Even if he was curious enough about the note, would the Deke he'd be at that time believe the part about

Ryne and her powers? As much as he wished otherwise, it was a longshot that gave them the same problem she'd brought up when he'd suggested Ryne look for him.

Shit, this sucked and he couldn't think of a way around it. Without his memory of living as a cartoon character, he'd have to have pow—

Wait a second. Deke grinned. He was a dormant and he still would be after he was restored to his life. If he recited the incantation to become Gineal and acquired powers, he'd have to believe in magic, and once he believed, he'd buy into everything else he'd put in the note. How could he not? But he needed to get his hands on the spell.

But what if the e-mail never made it to him? There were always glitches in cyberspace. E-mails bounced, landed in spam folders, or disappeared into some black hole, never to be seen again. The best answer he could come up with to this problem was to send multiple notes at different times. Ryne's computer was always on and hooked to the Internet; that wasn't a problem. Deke would have to hope that one of those notes made it to Masato and then on to him.

He came up with several other potential problems, but compared to the big ones, they were easily solved. Deke felt better than he had since Galen's visit. His idea might not work, he knew that, but at least he and Ryne had a chance now.

From the corner of his eye, Deke picked up motion and turned to check it out. Ryne. He started to tell her his brainstorm, but stopped. What if she got her hopes up and something happened? He couldn't do that to her. "Hey, babe, how'd your conversation go with Maia?" he asked instead.

Without prompting, she walked over and settled beside him on the couch. He put his arm around her shoulders and she leaned into him. God, his plan had to work. Deke wanted to snuggle with her like this every day, he wanted to share her problems and her successes. He just plain wanted to be with Ryne.

"It went okay. We patched things up from the other day and that's what matters most."

"I'm glad. Family's important."

"Yeah." She put her head on his shoulder and wrapped an arm around his waist. "I should go downstairs and keep working."

“You can do that in a while. Sit with me.”

Instead of answering verbally, Ryne relaxed into his side. They were both quiet and he wondered if she was trying to impress this moment soul deep the way he was.

“You put away your notes.”

“I finished going through them and there was nothing else there.” Deke shook his head. “What a waste of time.”

“No,” she said, squeezing him. “You discovered Anise tried to kill you, that’s definitely important. It’s too damn bad, though, that we don’t know why she wants you out of the way.”

That was one of the reasons Ryne had freed him—to help her defeat her mentor. Only it had turned out that he knew nothing and she didn’t have the surefire weapon she’d been hoping for. “How much of a disadvantage are you facing?”

She sat up straight and turned to look him squarely in the eye. “Don’t worry, no matter what it takes, I’ll defeat her. I won’t let you spend the rest of your life trapped. Trust me.”

“I wasn’t asking because I was concerned about myself. Damn it, Ryne, I don’t want anything to happen to you!”

“I know that. It’s just that my focus is on you and I’m used to the risk I face.” She reached out and stroked the inside of his thigh. “How much of a disadvantage am I at? I don’t know; it depends how much more powerful she’s become. The last time we faced each other, it ended in a draw, but she was holding the spell she’d put on you and I was hurt badly enough that I couldn’t work for almost a week afterward.”

“Don’t fight her. Let me go back to being a cartoon.”

“But—”

“No, don’t you get it?” he asked. “I’d give up my life to keep you safe. I love you.”

Ryne moved her hand to his face and caressed his cheek before she leaned over to kiss him lightly. “You think that by letting the full moon pass I’m going to avoid confronting my mentor, but that’s not true, Deke. It’s my job to hunt her, and sooner or later, I’ll have to battle her again. The only thing your deadline does is speed up the time frame. I’m at a bigger disadvantage the longer this drags out because Anise becomes more dangerous and more unpredictable.”

Deke wanted to argue, to insist she do whatever it took to

stay out of harm's way, but he couldn't. Ryne was a fighter and the surest way to lose her was to try to wrap her in cotton.

"Then do what you can to stay safe and go out there and kick her ass." Deke tried a smirk. "My money's on you."

Ryne grinned and he read her relief. "That's the plan, hot-shot." She gave him another, longer kiss and stood. "Now I need to get to work."

"Before you go, could you do me a favor?"

"I thought I already did one for you." She dropped her gaze to his cock and licked her upper lip. Deke twitched.

"Keep it up, babe, and you're going to be flat on your back."

"Promises, promises."

He pushed to his feet and lunged for her. With a shriek of laughter, Ryne jumped out of reach and he grinned. The woman he'd met two weeks ago never would have played like this and he loved this side of her every bit as much as the intense warrior. Hell, he just loved Ryne, period.

"I can wait." Deke glanced at the time. "You have three hours; if you're not back upstairs by eleven, I'm going down to get you and I'll carry you to bed if I have to." He wasn't joking. Ryne hadn't slept much in at least a week and he wanted her rested before she fought Anise.

"What's that favor you wanted?" she asked. He didn't miss the fact that she'd ignored his warning, but he let it go.

"I want to see the spell a dormant uses to become Gineal."

Ryne immediately looked wary. "You can't wield it."

"I know, but I want to look at it anyway." He waited for her to start the inquisition, but she simply stared at him. "How much trouble can I get into?" he coaxed. "If I can't do anything, it'll be like reading a poem or something."

"You're not going to find it very interesting."

Deke shrugged. "I'll take my chances."

After another moment of consideration, she held out her hand and a slim book appeared. Ryne opened it and handed it to him. "This particular spell has been translated into English so you'll actually be able to understand it."

Deke skimmed a few lines and nodded.

"You'll be okay?"

"Sure, babe."

She hesitated, but finally headed for the stairs.

To ensure Ryne didn't catch him, Deke waited ten minutes before he hit the computer and started scanning the pages of the incantation. With a little luck, a few days after the full moon, he'd be standing on her doorstep and claiming his woman.

22

CHAPTER

Twelve damn hours left. Deke paced the great room, his eyes locked on the digital clock. Minutes seemed to fly by, but he couldn't drag his gaze away. Maybe if he had something else to do, something that would keep his mind occupied, he could stop watching the time, but there was nothing.

Since he didn't read the Gineal language, he couldn't help Ryne research. It was too early to start dinner and he had his delayed e-mails ready.

Deke wasn't taking any chances. He had six messages queued to go after the full moon via two different methods. One was a program he'd downloaded. The free trial was only a couple of weeks long, but that was all he needed. The second thing he'd done was set up a scheduled job that told her e-mail program to send the notes. This had to work. Had to.

If someone had told him five years ago that he'd fall in love this hard and this fast, Deke would have scoffed. Not only was he suspicious and skeptical by nature, he had a hard time imagining a woman who could handle him.

Ryne could.

He'd pushed her hard when they'd first met, but she hadn't hesitated to meet him head-on. She'd seen through his facade

easily, something that rarely happened, and Ryne wasn't fazed by anything he said or did. Maybe that was what he'd been looking for, someone who could take him in stride.

Or maybe it was the way she handled her inner demons that had gotten behind his defenses. Despite everything, Ryne endured. Not just endured, she kept fighting, and that was something he admired.

Deke made another circuit of the great room. The amazing thing was that she loved him back. Despite the fact that he wasn't pulling his weight in this situation, despite the fact that she'd had to save his sorry ass more than once, and despite the fact that he didn't know anything to help her in the battle with her former teacher, Ryne loved him.

She put up with him when he was being a smart ass, she understood why he sometimes went quiet, she wasn't offended when he used hard language, and she was sexually adventurous. Well, except for her one hang-up, but he'd gotten her on top of him once, so he figured they were making progress there.

Less than twelve hours left.

He knew Anise was going to avoid the fight, but Ryne insisted that wouldn't happen. Maybe she knew her mentor well enough that she could be certain, but damn it, he had a bad feeling his fireball was up to something that he wouldn't like.

How many times had she asked him to trust her? How many times had Ryne told him she wouldn't let him down?

No matter how frequently he said to her he'd rather have her alive and well than to be free again, Deke knew Ryne had made up her mind. That's what had him so fucking terrified. She would fight too long. Even if she were getting her ass kicked, Ryne wouldn't withdraw this go-round. It was in her eyes. Calling her on it hadn't done him any good, though. She'd simply assured him she wasn't stupid and gone back to studying.

His hands went clammy, but the thought of her injured or killed twisted him up inside. Deke wiped his palms on his thighs and battled the urge to go downstairs just to drink in the sight of her. He made one more trip around the room before he caved.

At the bottom of the stairs, Deke stopped and leaned against

the doorjamb to look at her. Ryne had tucked her dark hair behind her ears to try and keep it out of her face while she read, but she wasn't having much luck. He enjoyed pushing it off her forehead, off her cheeks, and letting the silky strands flow through his fingers, but Deke really liked that she didn't get prissy while they were making love. He could muss her up, bury his hands in her hair, even drag his fingers through it and she didn't complain.

She was wearing form-fitting black pants that allowed him to appreciate her long legs. Deke shifted as he remembered settling between them and having Ryne wrap them around him.

Deciding that line of thought would only get him in trouble, he gazed at her face. Beautiful. Stop-a-guy-in-his-tracks gorgeous and she didn't believe it because of the idiots scared off by her intensity. What a bunch of morons. Didn't they realize she'd bring that same passion into the bedroom? When Ryne made love with him, Deke didn't have to wonder if she was thinking about what she was going to wear the next day or if she should have chicken or fish for dinner. She was 100 percent focused on what they were doing.

Maybe it scared those losers to know Ryne wouldn't fake anything. She sure as hell wasn't shy about telling him what she wanted, but Deke loved that, too. Of course, it helped that she was just as vocal about letting him know what she did like. Her gasps and moans frequently pushed him to the edge of his control.

And he was thinking about sex again. Deke smirked at himself. He loved Ryne for more than what she was like in bed, but if she were picking up his thoughts right now, she'd have to wonder about that.

The idea sobered him. The last thing he wanted was her doubting how deeply his feelings for her ran. *I love you, Ryne*, he thought, uncertain if he was projecting or not. *I love your tenacity, your resourcefulness, the way you give your all when you take something on—there are a million different reasons—but I think what I love most is the way you smile at me.*

She lifted her head. "Yeah, you're sending. You really like my smile?"

Deke went over to her and gave her a slow kiss before he said, "Babe, I love it, especially the one you save only for me."

“I have different smiles?”

He gave her another quick kiss. “Yep. Mine’s more intimate than what you flash at other people—even pretty boy.”

Ryne sighed. “His name is Creed and he’s my friend, Deke, one of the few I have.”

“He wants to be more than your buddy.”

Turning on her stool, she put both arms around his neck and said, “You’re seeing stuff that isn’t there because you’re jealous. It’s sweet that you think he wants me, but it’s not true. In the six years we’ve known each other, Creed’s never even tried to kiss me.”

“I know what I saw,” Deke insisted and moved between Ryne’s thighs. “The way he looked at you, the way he held you, was not the way a guy acts with a pal.”

“You’re edgy, I understand that,” Ryne said quietly, “but if you’re looking to relieve some tension, let’s have sex rather than you picking a fight.”

“I’m not trying to pick a fight, I’m pointing out what you’re too stubborn to see.” She didn’t believe him—Deke had no doubt about that—and it came back to her not realizing how downright irresistible she was. “When I’m gone, he’s going to try to move in and get you on the rebound. Watch for that.”

Ryne shook her head. “Creed won’t have any memory of you and he won’t know I’m on the rebound—not that he’d make a move anyway.”

Deke didn’t argue with her, but he had a feeling Blackwood would damn well remember everything. Galen had said there might be other Gineal besides Ryne who retained their memories. He changed the subject. “You have that furrow between your brows again.”

“You were irritating me.”

“It was there before I started bugging you.” Deke lightly rubbed his index finger over the lines. “What’s going on?”

“I must have picked up a headache from all the reading I’ve done.” She nodded toward the book and tightened her thighs around him. “This handwritten stuff is tough on the eyes.”

He was distracted for a moment by the feel of her pressed against him, but he shook it off and looked down at the page. The words were in a kind of calligraphy and the ink was darker in some spots and lighter in others. As for the actual writing,

Deke found it cramped and the letters difficult to decipher. No wonder she had a headache.

"How many more books do you need to go through?"

"If I had six months," Ryne said with a scowl, "and read twelve hours a day, I still might not make it through the stack."

That reminded him of how little time was left and Deke felt his stomach knot up again. "We don't have twelve hours total," he said thickly.

"I know. Believe me, I know." Ryne pulled him closer and they held on to each other.

After his mom had died, it had taken a long time for his dad to start dating again. Even then, he'd never gotten too serious about another woman. Deke had asked once why he didn't remarry, and his dad had said it wouldn't be fair because he could never love anyone as much as he'd loved his wife. Deke got it now. He knew he'd never meet anyone that he'd love even half as much as he loved Ryne. She fit him on every level.

He cleared his throat and asked, "You getting hungry?"

"Some."

"I'll get started on dinner then." Before Deke could step back, something strummed at his head. "What was that?"

"What?"

"For a minute it was like something was whispering inside my mind. It wasn't you."

"No, it wasn't," Ryne said and she shifted. Not much, but that small movement had them rubbing intimately against each other. Deke moved his hips in response, then stopped.

"I better get out of here." If he didn't, Ryne wasn't going to be reading anything for a while and he wanted her to have as much of an arsenal as possible if she faced Anise. "Food will be ready in about an hour."

"Okay." He tried to step back, but she kept her legs around him. "Kiss first, hotshot, then you can leave."

He took her mouth slow and deep, savoring every brush of their lips.

It was only later, while he was chopping a pepper, that Deke realized why Ryne had the lines between her eyes. She'd lied to him; it had nothing to do with reading. That noise he'd heard hadn't been inside his head—it had been inside hers. The damn dark forces were back and calling to her.

* * *

Ryne propped herself up on her elbow and watched Deke sleep. She longed to reach out, to touch him and kiss him, but she didn't dare. The last thing she wanted to do was wake him.

She'd used sex to wear him out, getting him hard and making him come over and over until she'd exhausted him. Deke thought her insatiability was desperation because their time was drawing to a close. That was part of it, but it wasn't the primary reason. She needed him unconscious and unaware, but she was unwilling to use magic on him to achieve it.

She took in his tousled, sable-brown hair, the high cheekbones and his full lips, and felt an ache deep in her chest. A little over two weeks ago, she'd been in bed with a stranger. Now Ryne loved him with everything she had, with everything she was, and she'd sacrifice whatever she had to for Deke Summers. That decision was already made.

This damned mess was her fault. After she'd found the first incantation, she should have researched it and made certain it was what she needed. Instead, Ryne had assumed it was the right one and she'd rushed impatiently forward. A stupid mistake that could cost Deke dearly.

The worst part was her motive for acting hastily. It hadn't been fear over what Anise could do to innocents or concern that her mentor would kill her before the next equinox. No matter what she'd told herself, Ryne knew the real reason she'd been in such a hurry—she'd wanted to defeat Anise to prove something. Not only to the Gineal people, but she'd also needed to prove to herself that she wasn't like the other woman.

Co-aigneach. Deep in her heart, that's exactly what Ryne had dreaded was true. It wasn't. She believed that now.

Reluctantly, she slipped out of bed. She held her breath and checked on Deke, but he remained sound asleep. It was twenty till twelve; she couldn't dawdle, but Ryne didn't want to leave. The last time. This could be the last time she was able to stare at him while he slept. She blinked hard and reminded herself that troubleshooters didn't cry.

"I love you," Ryne whispered, her voice not even a breath of sound, then she forced herself to walk out of the room.

She didn't need to turn on any lights to make it to the basement. Only when the door to her workroom was closed behind her did Ryne reach for the switch. The sudden brightness made her blink, but she adjusted quickly.

Lifting the hinged seat of the bench, she retrieved the clothes she'd stashed earlier. She pulled off her T-shirt and dressed in black Lycra leggings, a long-sleeved clingy black top, black socks, and black tennis shoes. The close-fitting clothes would make it difficult for Anise to grab and hang on to her in the unlikely event they fought hand-to-hand, and the dark color would help her blend into the night. Ryne pulled her hair into a ponytail and tucked it beneath the collar of her shirt.

She looked at the clock, but only a couple of minutes had passed. Going to her cabinet, Ryne opened a drawer and removed a belt with a sheath attached to one side and a pouch to the other. Once it was around her waist, she slid her dagger home and filled the pouch with a few needed items.

Deke believed that Anise would avoid a confrontation until after the full moon and Ryne agreed with him—she would. But she wasn't giving her mentor a choice about it.

That's where her spell came in to play. It would force Anise to appear at a place of Ryne's choosing and she'd worked out the wording so that it would keep her teacher there—and unable to call in reinforcements—until one of them was victorious. It was skating damn close to black magic, but she had no other option, not with the full moon mere hours away.

Ryne intoned an incantation that reinforced her protection, strengthening it as far as possible. She hated to waste the power, but there was no alternative. If this battle went as their others had gone, she'd have to endure a number of hard hits. Closing the proclamation, she exhaled sharply and felt the barrier around her fortify itself. It had to be enough.

Quickly, Ryne spoke the words to open the transit, stepped through, and started walking. The area was lightly wooded with a few enormous rock formations scattered around. She wanted cover during this battle and enough space to maneuver.

Ryne glanced back at the transit, but left it open. It was a calculated risk. If Deke found the portal in her basement, he could cross. Dormants had the ability.

But she'd be low on magic if she defeated Anise, Ryne was

sure of that, and she wanted to conserve wherever she could. No matter what, she needed enough power to return Deke to his life.

For that same reason, she wasn't going to conceal her use of the gray incantation she'd memorized. There was no doubt a monitor would pick it up and report it to the council and that meant she had a limited amount of time before a tracker homed in. Another calculated risk. The battle should be finished before anyone found her.

When the portal was out of sight, Ryne stopped and looked around until she found a flat rock maybe four inches across. She picked it up and put it next to another one at least double its size. On the small stone she arranged some twigs into a pyre and put dead grass beneath them.

Precisely at midnight, she began. Carefully, methodically, she chanted the words. The dark forces became louder, but Ryne ignored their call and the way they tried to physically arouse her. Deke had shown her what real sexual need felt like and this was a pale substitute. Without pausing, she opened the pouch on her left side and removed a box of matches. She crouched down, lit the kindling, and honored fire.

Ryne reached beside her and grabbed a fistful of dirt. She scattered that on the larger stone, giving earth her due. The rock itself could be considered an element, but she preferred soil. Dipping her hand back in the pouch, Ryne brought out a small flask and sprinkled water over the dirt.

Her hands shook as she put the bottle away and she fisted them briefly. The dark forces were closer than they'd ever been, their power barely out of her reach, and the yearning she felt to embrace them frightened her. Ryne tried to push their presence from her mind and continued with the spell. Time was short.

For wind, she blew over both rocks. It made her feel silly, but she couldn't afford to squander magic by calling up a breeze. With the four elements given tribute, Ryne moved to the next part of the spell. She reached for the dagger.

Blood magic.

It had never been outlawed, but this was dangerous territory and tonight's spell was far riskier for her than what she'd done when she'd freed Deke. She sliced her palm and let drops of

her blood fall on both stones. The fire shot higher, teasing her hand with its flame, but her affinity was with this element, and instead of searing her flesh, it was a welcoming.

Ryne lowered her hand closer to the fire, and when she drew it back, the slice she'd made to her palm was closed. Her lips turned up even though the dark forces swirled around her, promising her power beyond what she'd ever known.

Images filled her head. Anise vanquished, Deke returned safely to his life, and she'd be stronger than she'd ever been.

She was special. Not like the other Gineal who'd erroneously believed themselves worthy of such strength. Only she could control them. The power slid over her like hot lava and Ryne's lips curved.

She *could* control them. The Gineal had lied to her about the dark forces. There was nothing evil about them, they'd merely been misused by the weak. She could master them without perverting them as others had—she'd use them for good.

Ryne stumbled over her words. She *would* use her power for good. After all, she wasn't like Anise.

Sweat beaded her brow and her hands clenched as she fought the urge to welcome the dark forces, to answer their call. Think of Deke. She had to remember her purpose.

The spell was long and the small pieces of wood had burned to ash before she reached the end. Instead of immediately closing the incantation, she moved, taking up a concealed position away from the two stones she'd been using. With a deep breath to center herself, she said, "And so it is."

Energy shimmered as the proclamation was invoked and her mentor appeared in the clearing. Ryne remained hidden in the trees. She only took enough time to register Anise's position before firing at her with full power. As soon as the shot was off, she ran, staying crouched down as far as she could. She kept her eyes on her teacher, though, and saw her absorb the hit with no visible consequences.

"*Mo cridhe*, I'm disappointed," Anise said as she looked around trying to locate her. "I thought those who fought on the side of right warned their quarry before shooting."

Her mentor didn't bother to take cover herself. Arrogant. Of course, Ryne's first salvo appeared to have done absolutely no

damage so maybe it wasn't egotism. How strong had Anise grown since the last time she'd faced her?

"Ah, there you are," the woman said as she finally sensed Ryne's position. Anise let loose with a lightning bolt.

Ryne jumped clear in the nick of time, but there was enough power that the blow didn't need a direct hit to affect her. Her shield shook, but it held and she hurled a burst of flame.

She moved again as soon as the shot was off.

Energy pulsed, telling Ryne that her teacher was trying to leave. Anise would be infuriated to learn she was trapped here. Sure enough, the woman's outraged roar echoed through the night and Ryne peeked through the foliage.

Her mentor turned in a circle, her face contorted with fury. She brought up wind and sent it hurtling toward the forest about ninety degrees from where Ryne stood. Trees in its path toppled like someone had knocked over a row of dominoes.

When the wind died down, Anise released a random barrage of shots into the surrounding area. Some came close enough to Ryne that she had to drop to the ground to keep from being hit and she was pinned down for a while as the woman unleashed her fury. Then everything went still.

"Interesting choice of incantations," her teacher said calmly as if she hadn't just thrown a tantrum. "Very gray magic. It won't be long until you join with the dark forces. I look forward to that moment and I promise I won't gloat for more than a brief moment over how the mighty have fallen."

Ryne was on her belly, looking through some bushes, when Anise picked up on her location. Ryne rolled to avoid a shot, but she wasn't fast enough. This one hit.

About ten gazillion volts of electricity screamed through her body. Ryne grit her teeth to keep from crying out and worked to disperse it into the earth. Her muscles quivered as billions of needles seemed to be stabbing into her and the pain burned.

The other woman's laughter rang out.

When it ended abruptly, Ryne made herself get up and move. Anise fired again and Ryne dove out of the way. The shot put a hole in the earth about thirty feet long. Crap.

As she leaned against a tree, trying to stop her legs from trembling, Ryne heard her mentor start chanting. She only

caught a phrase here or there, but it didn't take more to figure out that Anise was calling forward reinforcements. Her teacher was not going to be happy when she learned there'd be no help.

Ryne turned her head and watched Anise wait for her army to arrive. It only took a moment before understanding dawned on her face. The woman's features twisted, but her mentor quickly regained control of her temper.

"So just the two of us then, *mo cridhe*?" Anise asked with sugary sweetness.

"Why should I have to fight demons and you?" Ryne asked before sprinting as silently as possible for a new position.

A burst of lightning struck a tree behind her. Pieces of wood hit her, the force almost dropping her to her knees. Impatiently, Ryne wiped away the trickle of blood running down her cheek and ignored the cuts to her scalp. She had to think.

Shooting back and forth like this was the OK Corral wasn't in her favor. Anise was absorbing her blows easily while Ryne was still shaking, her shield weakened from the last hit she'd taken, and her magic was being depleted faster than she could replenish it. A lot faster.

Ryne fired again anyway and Anise shook her head. "You're at a disadvantage. Your strength is so great that you've won your previous battles by hammering at your opponent, but I'm more powerful than you. What do you plan to do? Run in circles around this clearing, firing stray shots until I kill you?"

The damn thing was, Anise was right. Ryne had never had to learn subversive fighting techniques because eventually, either through her strength or her stubbornness, she always prevailed.

Anise's distraction had worked, Ryne realized as the next bolt caught her dead-on. She fell to the ground, her body convulsing.

As the spasms subsided, she noticed her left hand had hit a pointed rock, gouging a chunk of flesh from her palm; her shirt had ridden up and briars ripped at the tender flesh of her stomach; she had more cuts, probably with dirt embedded, and more bruises. Her biggest problem was that her shield was wavering, but it continued to hold despite how weak it was.

Deke. She had to win for Deke. *Think!*

And the dark forces surged back, louder now. Were she to

unite with them, she could overpower her mentor and free him forever. After all, she had more innate power than Anise.

She didn't need to suffer like this. Victory was so close, so easy—she only needed the courage to take what was offered.

"No!" Ryne stumbled to her feet, staggering like a drunk as she moved. She wouldn't believe this crap, she wouldn't!

Another shot winged her, spinning her around.

It was all she could do to stay upright, but she wasn't ready to concede. Ryne checked her power level and decided she had enough for a few more attacks.

If magic alone wasn't working, maybe magic combined with the physical might do something. Her hand brushed over the dagger on her hip. It wasn't meant to be used as a weapon, but Ryne was desperate.

She moved into position. There'd only be one opportunity—she couldn't miss. Anise was searching for her, but Ryne wanted her mentor facing her. She drew the dagger, checked its balance, and shot a burst of fire to catch the other woman's attention.

As Anise yanked her hand back to return the volley, Ryne hurled the dagger at her teacher's chest, added a small magical push, and ran. Her battered body protested the exertion, but Ryne pressed on.

The shot hit behind her, far from Ryne's original position. She looked over her shoulder in time to see Anise yank the blade from her arm. She'd caught the woman around her biceps, damn it.

With a quick flick, Ryne fired at a large tree branch over her mentor's head. There was a loud crack as it started to fall, but Anise directed it away and it hit the ground some twenty feet distant.

"You were born for the dark forces," Anise told her.

"No." The word was a whisper, but her mentor heard.

"Yes, we're *co-aigneach*. I recognized it when you lived with me. When we combine our talents, we can take control of the Gineal and compel them to pay homage to us, and once our people have fallen into line, we can take over the human world."

If she wasn't so damn tired, Ryne would have rolled her eyes. Instead of commenting on how irrational the other woman was, she decided to try pushing Anise's buttons.

"You've boasted over and over about how strong you are and yet you need my magic to rule the world? You're weak, Anise. Pitiful."

She moved, expecting the woman to fire where her voice had come from, but no lightning bolts appeared.

"You misunderstand," her mentor said, and instead of sounding enraged, Ryne heard amusement. "I merely offered you an opportunity because I love you and don't want to kill you, but you've left me with no other choice."

It was bullshit. The Anise that might have felt tender emotions for her was long dead, leaving only this puppet of the dark forces in her place.

Lifting her hand, Ryne prepared to open a chasm in the earth, but she stopped when she felt eyes on her. Slowly, she turned and felt the swipe of a fleshy tail against the bare skin at her ankle. With a whimper she was unable to block, she leaped backward, trying to put herself out of its reach.

Anise laughed gaily. "Yes, I remember how you feel about rats and mice. You disallowed me demons or other creatures of the dark forces, so I'll have to make do with forest animals."

Ryne turned again, but it was too late—they were everywhere. The rodents stared at her with feral delight—there were thousands of them, maybe even hundreds of thousands—moonlight glinting off their repulsive eyes. With a shudder Ryne backed farther away.

They kept pace, closing in around her. What if they swarmed and attacked her en masse? Hysteria bubbled up and she fought to keep it at bay. If she didn't maintain control, she was dead and Deke lost his chance to return to his life. She had to hold it together.

Their beady eyes stayed riveted on her. What if they knocked her to the ground and gnawed at her flesh? Rats did that and there were enough of them to eat her alive in minutes. Ryne swallowed another whimper as they marched toward her.

She tried to drive them off, but they wouldn't leave. Shooting fire, she charred the rats and mice on the front lines, but more simply came up from the rear to replace those she'd killed. She couldn't continue wasting magic like this.

There was another push by the dark forces. She could wrest control of the rodents away from Anise with their help. She'd

be safe and could defeat the other woman. Then her man would be safe as well.

Ryne shook her head, denying them.

Anise zapped her with a lightning bolt so strong that Ryne's entire body sagged. Only the knowledge that the rats would get her if she went down gave her the strength to stay on her feet. She couldn't fall.

Her protection was down to maybe a quarter of what it had been and Ryne chanted the spell to fortify it. She wasn't able to improve it much, but she'd bought herself some time.

Shifting, Ryne shot at Anise, but she was tired, her body heavy, and it took more effort than it should. Everything hurt and her physical condition was contributing to the depletion of her magic. She raised her hand to rub a bump on her head and her hand came down bloody. Crap.

Deke, remember Deke. She couldn't let him down. He believed in her. He loved her. She had to win.

Her heart was pounding loudly enough that she could barely hear Anise laughing over the staccato thuds. In her peripheral vision, she saw her mentor pull her arm back.

Ryne hobbled toward a tree, kicking at the rodents in her way. She cringed as her feet connected with the fleshy bodies and each time she was sure one of them would bite her.

As she spun away from Anise's blast, Ryne nearly fell over rodent bodies. *Oh, God!*

She made it to the tree and ducked behind it. The wood absorbed the worst of Anise's next shot, but enough got her to make her shield wobble. One more hit and it would be gone.

There was no way to bolster her protection again. She was shaking, not just from fear, but from fatigue and the blows she'd absorbed. She was panting—again only partially from anxiety—and she had to reserve power to do the spell to free Deke.

The dark forces were calling her, more insistently than they ever had before. It was time to make the decision.

If she waited too much longer, there'd be no point—she wouldn't have enough magic left.

She had to do it now, had to do it for him. It was the only hope she had of defeating Anise and returning Deke to his life. He was her heart, her soul, and he'd never know what she'd become.

Anise's next shot brought down her protective barrier. Time had just run out. Clutching the tree firmly, Ryne slowly turned. She was gasping for air as if she'd run a mile and trying to keep tabs on the rodents, but she met her mentor's gaze. The woman's eyes were filled with knowing—and triumph. Anise was aware that Ryne's shield was gone. She felt her teacher draw energy for the final blow.

She went with Plan B.

Ryne called for the dark forces.

23

CHAPTER

Half awake, Deke reached out for Ryne. He liked her tucked against his body while they slept and there was something comforting about having her close to him. Right now he felt anxious, uneasy, and he needed to assure himself that she was okay. His hand touched cool sheets and he stretched out farther. When his fingers curled around the edge of the mattress and he still didn't find her, he opened his eyes.

She wasn't there.

Reluctantly, he pushed himself up on his elbows, but he wasn't surprised to see the bathroom door open and the room dark. Deke knew where she was—downstairs trying to come up with a last-minute solution to his curse.

How much time did he have left? Almost afraid to turn his head, Deke looked at the clock. Quarter after twelve. Shit.

With a groan, he got out of bed. Since he only planned to be gone long enough to retrieve Ryne, he didn't bother to pull on any clothes. He hit the light when he reached the great room, groaned again at the brightness, and headed down the stairs.

Sure enough, as he descended, he saw the glow coming out from underneath the door. Turning the knob, he said, "Babe, for heaven's—"

Deke stopped short. The room was empty except for that gate she referred to as a transit. "Fucking son of a bitch," he growled. He should have known she wouldn't give up on freeing him. He should have damn well known. The way she'd kept reaching for him in bed made sense now. Ryne hadn't been saying good-bye, she'd been plotting.

He made a quick search of the basement anyway, in case she hadn't ducked out yet, but it was empty and his gut clenched. Deke stared at the transit, circled it, trying to discover some clue where she'd gone. He must have just missed her because that thing closed when she reached her destination.

Only it wasn't shutting.

Last time it had only taken seconds for that gate to disappear. Maybe Ryne had forgotten about it? Or maybe she was worried she'd need to make a quick escape? He scowled. Smart money was on the second option. His fireball was far too conscientious to simply forget and she'd talked about Anise injuring her severely the last time out.

Heart pounding in triple time, Deke dragged his hands through his hair. Damn it to hell, he wished he wasn't such a liability. He wished he could cross that fucking transit and help her. Why did he have to be hu—

Wait a second.

He wasn't human. Ryne had said a human couldn't cross, but she'd never said a dormant couldn't. He took a step forward. What was the worst that could happen?

Ryne endangering her life to defend him—again.

And she would be worried about him getting hurt if he showed up. He muttered a few more curses. It was beyond lame when a man couldn't fight for or with his woman because he was helpless against anything magical.

Mirror protection. He was safe from magical attacks. Ryne wouldn't have to risk her life for him.

Deke was almost to the transit when he realized he was nude. Why hadn't he taken the time to dress? He ran upstairs and started yanking on his clothes as fast as he could. For all he knew, that gateway could close any moment and he had to be in time to cross it. He had to be in time to help Ryne.

Maybe it was nerves and nothing else, but the way adrenaline was pumping through his body, Deke feared she was in

serious trouble. He yanked on his shoes and raced out of the bedroom.

In another lifetime, he would have been freaked out by this connection they shared—mind reading, empathy, the rest of that shit—but in a world where he'd spent more than four years as a cartoon and he'd seen Ryne shoot fire, Deke figured it was handy.

He took the stairs two at a time, not bothering with a jacket or a weapon. Part of him relaxed when he saw the transit there and glowing. Without slowing, he ran through it—and found himself outdoors. Somewhere.

Immediately, Deke searched for Ryne, but he didn't see her. His gut continued to churn, though, and when the odor of burned flesh reached him, his stomach clenched. His instinct was to start running and yelling for Ryne, but intellect overruled. Something like that could distract her and that was the last thing she needed.

Using their connection, he tried to locate her. At first he got nothing and he was terrified she was dead. He calmed down and did another scan. Over the rise. She was over the rise.

Not sure what he was going to find, Deke headed cautiously up the hill. As he reached the crest, a flare of lightning illuminated the night and it allowed him to see Ryne clinging to a tree. Shit, she could barely stay on her feet. He quickened his pace, but before he could get down the incline, he felt a triumph fill him. It didn't belong to either of the women, he was certain of that; in fact, it seemed inhuman.

"Oh, fuck. No!" Deke yelled, running full-out now. "Ryne, don't do it!" She couldn't do it. "God, please no."

He had to wade through rats to reach her, but as soon as he made it, he put himself between Ryne and Anise, acting as her shield. Mirror protection. If the woman tried to fire at Ryne it would hit him and bounce back at her. "Don't," Deke said, putting an arm around her to help Ryne stand.

"But—"

"No." A sudden fear hit him. "It's not too late, is it? You didn't turn to them yet, right?"

"No, but—"

"No buts. Damn it, don't be stupid."

"I can't beat her. She's too strong now."

Deke frowned. If Ryne didn't defeat Anise tonight, she'd only have to face her some other time and the woman wouldn't be any weaker then. Ryne had already taken a beating. The bright moonlight allowed him to see the blood and dirt on her face and there were likely other injuries under her clothes. His chest ached thinking of her hurt.

He felt something and shifted quickly. When he heard the hiss of pain, Deke smirked. "She got hit with her own lightning bolt, didn't she?"

"Yes. You can't protect me forever, though. Eventually, she's going to find an angle that will get me."

"I know. What's with the rats?"

"I loathe them."

"So the pied piper surrounded you," Deke said. He didn't need Ryne's nod to know he got it right. "Okay, I can't shield you indefinitely and you can't beat her. What are our options?"

"There's only one."

"Your turning isn't happening—think of another way."

"I would if I could," she grouched and he grinned. If she was crabby, she couldn't be hurt too badly, right?

Even though he had his back to Anise, he could feel where she was and Deke moved again, keeping his body in front of Ryne. There had to be something they could do. They could retreat, but the idea of leaving Ryne to face her teacher on her own later didn't sit well. He couldn't do much, but at least right now, he could protect her.

"What are you doing?" she asked as he shifted them.

"Keeping you away from Anise."

"I mean, how do you know where she is?"

Deke shrugged. "I just know."

Ryne became steadier and leaned on him less. She looked up at him, her brow scrunched. Did she appear to be more energetic? Deke thought so.

"You can't hide behind him forever, *mo cridhe*," Anise said. "Once he's gone, you'll have to find some courage."

He stiffened, offended on Ryne's behalf, but she didn't react. "What are you doing?" she demanded a second time, voice barely above a whisper.

"I already told you. Why are you asking again?"

“Because my magic has been refilling itself slowly since you put your arms around me and it’s almost back at a full tank now. That should have taken hours to happen. Same with my physical energy. It has to be you, there’s no other X factor.”

Whirling suddenly, Deke got Ryne out of the way in the nick of time. He heard Anise yelp and figured they’d bought themselves a couple of minutes. “What do you think it means?”

“I don’t know. Open yourself to me.” She must have read his puzzled look. “Like this,” Ryne said and he felt her in way he hadn’t before. This was more than how their minds brushed from time to time—it was all of her.

Intrigued, Deke gave himself to her, holding nothing back. This was Ryne and she already had his heart, mind, and body. Now he gave her his soul, too.

“Holy crap.” Her voice was awed.

“What?”

“I’m sharing your magic. When my well refilled, I bet you were unconsciously sending it to me. This is different, though. Holy crap, Deke.” She looked up at him, appearing as amazed as she sounded. “I think with your magic and mine, that I’m stronger than Anise now.”

“Strong enough to kick her ass?”

Ryne grinned. “Probably.”

“Then let’s do it, babe.” He returned her smile. “Do you have my mirror protection, too?”

“No, I don’t, and my own shield will still only be able to take so many strikes before it falters. How do you feel about my shooting around your sides?”

“I don’t have a problem with it. Anise, by the way, is coming up on our ten o’clock position.”

“Let’s shift that way then.”

Deke turned, put Ryne at his back, and eased the direction the other woman was coming from to face the threat.

Hold steady, Ryne told him and Deke stopped. Her hand went to his waist, she leaned around his right side, and hurled a blast of fire that lit up the night.

What happened next was the most incredible shootout Deke had ever seen. Lightning bolts and fire. Every time Anise let loose, he tried to get in the path of her shot, not only to protect

Ryne, but because if it hit him, it was mirrored back at the other woman. Between the bounce backs and Ryne's flame, they had to be giving the woman a battering.

"What's she doing?" Deke asked. He noticed Ryne move into his head, trying to read what he'd picked up.

"She's sending the rats after me."

Ryne said that calmly, but because of their connection, he felt her absolute abhorrence at the thought of those things touching her. "Why don't you transport them away from here?"

"She's so strong, I can't do— Let me try."

Deke didn't hear a word, but he knew Ryne was chanting, and when she relaxed against him, he figured the rodents were gone. "Three o'clock," he said abruptly and shifted, trying to block the shot. The lightning missed him, but he heard Ryne swear. "You okay?"

"Just winged. It hurt a little, but my shield's up."

Leaning around him, Ryne released a rope of fire and kept it going longer than he'd seen her shoot before.

"Take me closer."

He wanted to argue with her, but instead Deke nodded and began to slowly close the distance between them and Anise. Ryne was a warrior; he had to remember that and trust her to know what she was doing.

She told him to stop when they'd narrowed the space to about half what it had been. Before Ryne could fire, though, he heard a crack above them. She sent the tree branch flying off.

"Watch out," Ryne warned. "She's going to start directing physical things your way since magic can't harm you directly. Anise," Ryne called, raising her voice, "you're copying me. Should I be flattered or should I tell you how pathetic that is?"

The other woman didn't respond verbally; instead she used magic to toss objects at him. So much came his way so fast, it was like a tornado kicking up debris.

"Shit, babe, this isn't good."

"Turn so you're facing me and wrap your arms tightly around me."

Deke did as ordered. Ryne held him close and he almost heard the words in his head, that's how tightly bonded they were at that moment. Something hard hit his lower back, and he cursed, but he didn't let go.

“There, you should be shielded now. I’m going to shoot over your shoulder. Whatever you do, don’t straighten, okay?”

He nodded and held on to Ryne. His little ninja was doing the hard work, but he wasn’t worthless. Because of him, Anise wasn’t delivering direct blows. Because of him, Ryne had recouped her strength. Because of him, she had more magic to use in battle. So what if he was her version of body armor? Deke could live with that because he was a vital part of this fight.

A roar of outrage echoed through the night, but Ryne didn’t let up on the shooting. “Crap! Hang on to me real tight.”

He felt them floating. “What the hell?” Deke looked down in time to see a huge boulder roll through where they’d been standing. “I knew you could levitate.”

Shaking her head, she ignored his comment. “Anise is using up magic fast,” Ryne said, lowering them to the ground. “It shouldn’t be much longer before she’s weak enough that I’ll be able to contain her and her ability to use her powers.”

Deke grunted, but he knew desperate people did desperate things. They might not be finished here as quickly as she hoped. A tree exploded next to them, but the fragments scattered harmlessly to the ground. That brought another shout of anger.

He continued to block Anise’s shots and Ryne kept on firing. Deke wasn’t an expert and he couldn’t feel the magic hit his protection, but somehow he sensed the other woman’s power was growing weaker. On the other hand, his fireball wasn’t losing any strength as she did her flame throwing. When would the older woman’s powers be low enough for Ryne to restrain them?

No sooner did he have the thought than Ryne began to chant. This time she wasn’t silent, in fact she seemed to be deliberately intoning so that Anise would hear it.

Deke eased back far enough to see Ryne’s face and the smug expression there said clearer than words that was exactly what she was doing. He tried to turn so he could face Anise, but Ryne’s hold tightened and he subsided. It wasn’t until she finished that she released him.

“I’ve got her powers bound and her arms and legs locked. She’s helpless now.”

He turned and gazed at Anise. The blond woman looked haggard—her face was contorted in rage, her hair damp and stringy, and her makeup running. As Ryne walked up to her, Anise tried to spit, but it landed on her sweater and that seemed to make her even angrier. “Ready to meet with the council, Anise?” Ryne asked.

The woman tried to spit again, and this time, it ran down her chin. “This isn’t over,” she vowed.

“Yes, it is. We both know they’ll strip you of your powers, and once that happens, it’s bye-bye dark forces.” Ryne closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them again, she said, “I let the ceannards know you’re coming. They’re eager to see you again.”

What Ryne chanted next was short, but that was all it took for Anise to disappear. She walked away, bent to retrieve something, and Deke saw her slide a dagger into the sheath at her waist.

“Congratulations, ninja woman,” he said when she reached him. “Score one for the good guys.”

“Ninja?”

“Look at the way you’re dressed.”

Ryne glanced down, then rolled her eyes at him. “If you ever call me ninja woman again, I’ll hurt you.”

“No, you won’t, but don’t worry, you’ll always be my babe.” Deke grinned, then he put his hands on Ryne and tried that healing energy thing again. His palms didn’t stay hot long.

“That’s because,” Ryne said, answering his unspoken question, “you were unconsciously healing me from the time you arrived. What injuries I have left are surface cuts and scratches.” She shrugged. “Maybe a few bruises.”

“You’re okay?” She nodded. Deke slung his arm around her shoulders and gave her a brief hug before he asked, “Do you think this is why Anise imprisoned me? Because she knew you could combine my magic with yours and use it against her?”

Ryne shrugged. “Maybe.”

Deke knew he’d have to be satisfied with that. Ryne didn’t know much more than he did. “Anything else we need to do here?”

“No, I told the council what the land looks like. They’ll decide whether the Gineal clean it up or leave it for nature to handle. Let’s head home.”

As they walked toward the transit, Ryne sent another message. He couldn't hear the words, but he felt that, too. Now that the heat of battle was over, this might take a little getting used to. "Who'd you call?"

"I let the healers know that Anise's powers were bound. It might help them treat Fia. And yeah, the kind of connection we have is new to me, too. The Gineal only read each other when we deliberately project specific thoughts. With you, it's almost like we're sharing a brain."

Deke started to make a joke, but before he could say anything, Ryne asked, "What time is it?"

"Nearly 1 A.M." And suddenly nothing seemed funny anymore. Four hours left with Ryne. He wanted forever.

Ryne clutched Deke tightly, but then he was holding on to her the same way. They'd made love several times after they'd arrived home, worshiping each other with their hands, mouths, and bodies. The goal hadn't been orgasm so much as trying to demonstrate how deeply their feelings for each other ran.

He loved her. She knew it. And he knew how much she loved him, too. Their time remaining could be measured in minutes now, but neither one of them spoke. Deke's hand lightly ran up and down her arm and she had her thigh tucked between his, but there was a desperation to the way they clung together. It hadn't been long enough. She needed more than fifteen days.

When the clock hit 4:45, Ryne said, voice thick, "We have to get dressed and head for the basement."

"Yeah." But he didn't let go of her.

For a couple more minutes, she let herself sink into him—Deke's scent, the heat of his body, the love in his gray-blue eyes. It was the last that gave her the strength to move from his arms and get out of bed. She might not want to let go, but Ryne couldn't hold him. He'd either be a cartoon or he'd be back in his own life, but Deke Summers wouldn't be with her. Fate, she decided, was a heartless bitch.

"Come on, hotshot," Ryne said, "we can't delay any longer." Pulling the covers back, she took his hand and tugged.

She kept her eyes on him as they donned clothes. Their

gazes caught and Ryne tried to smile, but she suspected it was a poor effort. So many people were no longer a part of her life—too many. Her parents had died when she'd been a teenager; she'd lost her sister twice, once when she'd left home to train and again when she'd ceded her powers; her friends had turned their backs on her when the truth had come out about her mentor.

And then there'd been Anise. With her teacher captured, the fight over, it was the sweet memories that were returning and she didn't like it. Hate was easier. Simpler.

But she'd withstood those losses—Ryne wasn't sure she could survive Deke's departure. He was the only man she'd ever love and a part of her would die when he left. For a few brief, shining days, she'd had everything she'd ever wanted, everything she'd ever needed, and in some cruel trick of fate, it was being yanked away from her.

If she thought she'd been alone before, Ryne knew it would be a million times worse after Deke because she'd be aware of exactly what she was missing.

"Don't, babe," Deke said, wrapping his arms around her.

Splaying her hands on his back, Ryne pressed her face against his shoulder. She wouldn't cry, not when it would make him feel worse. Her love wasn't leaving her because he wanted to, he was leaving because there was no choice. None.

"I know," she whispered against him. "I know." Her chest was tight and couldn't hurt any worse if an axe had been buried in it. Her throat was constricted, her eyes burned, and she couldn't seem to take a full breath. Somehow, though, she had to function. It was up to her to send Deke back to his life. "We have to go," she said, more to remind herself than him.

"I know."

They walked hand in hand, their shoulders brushing in her narrow hallway. Ryne tried to memorize everything because after he was gone, she'd have nothing but her memories. She didn't even have a pic—"Hang on! I'll be right back."

She hurried for her computer and snagged her digital camera. There was time to snap a couple of shots of him, something she could look at when she was reliving their time together.

"I want a couple pictures of you, okay?"

“Sure. I wish I could take some images of you with me when I go,” Deke said quietly. “I can’t, can I?”

Ryne shrugged. “Probably not. I think you’re returning to your life without anything from this one, including the clothes you have on. Let’s hope you wind up in bed rather than in the middle of Venice Beach.”

“Yeah,” Deke agreed with a smirk, “although I’d be willing to bet I wouldn’t be the first man wandering naked there.”

They reached her workroom and Ryne flipped on the lights. She only had a couple of minutes to spare for pictures. The incantation was short, and she had until 5:03, but she didn’t want to take chances. Her plan was to start early so that if something went wrong, she’d have time to repeat the spell if necessary.

“Want to smile for me, hotshot?” Ryne asked raising the camera. She snapped a few images before he took it from her.

“You’ve got a timer. Let’s get a couple of us together, okay?”

Ryne nodded and watched Deke fiddle. He set the camera on her worktable. “I think we’re going to need to kneel.” He indicated a spot. “Let me line up the shot. Okay.” Deke hurried to her side. He barely had time to put an arm around her shoulders before the flash went off. They did another where he kissed her and a third where neither one of them was looking at the camera.

Reluctantly, she stopped him from setting the timer for a fourth shot. “I have to start the spell,” Ryne told him. They were already cutting it closer than she felt comfortable with.

“One more thing,” he said. “You’ve got a movie function.” Deke helped her figure out how to work that, then he stood back. When she had the camera rolling, he said, “I love you, Ryne.”

Her chin wobbled then, but she hoped he didn’t see it with the camera in front of her face. Deke’s words would mean everything to her after he was gone and now she’d have them forever. If she ever needed something to cheer her up, to remember that he’d loved her with his whole heart, she could play the clip.

The digital movie filled the remaining space on her memory card and she pushed the button to turn it off. “Thanks,” Ryne said quietly.

"No, don't thank me." Deke took the camera from her and put it down on her table. "It's selfish. I want you to remember how I feel about you when pretty boy makes his move."

Ryne smiled shakily and went up on her toes to kiss him. "You've got a one-track mind." Her smile disappeared when she looked at the clock. "We're out of time. Stand here." She indicated a clear spot between her bookcases and her worktable.

Before she could step back, he pulled her against him and kissed her. She could feel Deke's desperation, knew it equaled hers, and Ryne struggled to remain cognizant of their deadline.

She broke the kiss. "I love you, Deke. I love you, but it's 5 A.M. We can't wait any longer."

Calling the book forward was a backup measure; she knew every word of the incantation. After she said the first line, Ryne put her hand over his heart for the second. For the third, she rested her hand on his forehead, and the last line was said with her hand back over his heart. Ryne brushed a quick kiss over his lips—she couldn't resist—then she stepped away.

Their eyes locked.

Voice thick, almost unintelligible, she closed the spell.

Deke disappeared.

For a split second, she couldn't comprehend it, then her legs gave out and she hit the floor. Moisture welled in her eyes and she tried to blink it away, but she couldn't stop it from pooling, then overflowing. She gave up the struggle, and for the first time in twenty years, Ryne cried.

She sobbed out her pain, wailed about the unfairness, and still the tears came. Wrapping her arms around her knees, Ryne rocked, trying to find comfort, but there was none. The man she loved was gone and he'd taken her heart with him.

24

CHAPTER

APRIL 19
NEW MOON

Deke stood and gazed out his kitchen window as he waited for the coffee to finish brewing. It was nearly eleven in the morning, but he'd arrived home yesterday after ten days in Japan and his body clock was all screwed up.

He could see the city of Los Angeles below and he smiled faintly. Who'd have thought that he'd end up owning half the rights to one of the biggest hits on television? Shit, who'd have thought an animated series based on his career as a private investigator would interest anyone? Yet here he was, living in a mansion in the hills above L.A. and flying to Asia to make merchandising deals. Amazing.

Or it should have been amazing.

He had money, more than he could spend in a lifetime; enough fame to get the perks, but since he wasn't an actor, he didn't have to deal with the paparazzi or being stopped on the street for autographs; and he had his choice of beautiful women. Why the hell then did he feel so fucking empty inside, as if something vital to his happiness was missing?

The coffee gurgled to a stop and Deke turned from the window to fill his jumbo mug to the top. He took a few gulps, snagged a bagel, and headed for his home office. Even though

he was officially off today, he had a bunch of mail, e-mail, and phone messages to wade through.

His housekeeper had put his mail in a box in his absence, and Deke dumped it on his desk and started sorting—bills in one pile, invitations in another, junk mail in a third. The crap went right in the shredder, so did invitations for parties and premieres that had happened while he'd been away.

The pot of coffee disappeared about the same time he finished with the mail, and Deke contemplated brewing a second one. He didn't need any more caffeine, but he still felt tired and irritable. Maybe he'd wait.

Neatly piled on the credenza behind his desk were his messages. His housekeeper was efficient, accurate, and bless her, she was happy to answer his phone while she worked. About half the calls were from women he'd seen socially, but as he went through the stack, Deke couldn't remember what they looked like. Not only that, but he had no desire to pick up the phone and talk to any of them.

Why wasn't he interested? His brain flashed an image, but it was gone before he could grasp it. The only thing he'd sensed was that she was brunette. Deke's heart thudded in double time and he went through the messages again, trying to decide if one of these names was *her*. He drew a blank.

"Who are you?" he muttered. This woman was important, he knew it, but the harder he worked to remember her or details about her, the further her memory slipped away from him. He tried to focus on what shade of brown her hair was and he began to feel tantalizingly close to . . . something. Then the phone rang and drove the almost-glimmer out of his reach.

Deke cursed. "Summers," he snapped.

It was his partner and Deke scowled. This call wasn't going to be quick. "Damn it, Fred, can't it wait until tomorrow? I'll be in then." He sighed, brought up his e-mail window, and started wading through the notes. "No, I know."

He deleted the spam without opening it. Fortunately, his ISP had a good filter and there wasn't a lot of it. "How much are they offering for the video game rights to *DSPI*?"

Five messages from Masato sent on five consecutive days. Strange. His college buddy was one of the few people with his

private phone line; he'd call if it were something critical. Curious, Deke opened the first message.

"No way. If they want to have the exclusive gaming rights, they're going to have to come up with more money than that."

He didn't remember asking Masato to forward on any notes to him, but maybe it was something from when they'd been in school. Deke opened the attachment and scanned it. "What the fuck? No, sorry, I was talking to myself. If you agree with me about the dollar figure, why are you calling?"

This had to be some kind of joke. Deke opened the other notes, but they said the same thing. He shook his head. Masato had a hell of an imagination, but there was no such thing as magic, a society called Gineal, or dormants. It was weird, though—he'd included stuff that Deke thought only he and his dad had known.

"Are you out of your mind?" he snarled into the phone. "I'll never agree to the Deke character being part of a cartoon porn magazine. Why? Because kids watch the show, that's why! Damn it, you've seen our demographics and right after women eighteen to thirty-four, are kids twelve to eighteen."

Fred backpedaled and Deke sighed. Shit, he didn't have time for odd pranks from college friends. He eyed the notes, then hit the delete command again and again and again.

Ryne sighed when the doorbell rang and scanned. Gineal. As much as she wanted to ignore the summons, she put aside her camera, wiped her hands on her sweatpants, and pushed to her feet. If she didn't rush, well, so what? She wanted to be alone. She opened the door and found Taber standing there.

"Ceannard," she greeted him, inclining her head, before she invited him inside. She took his coat from him, hung it in her foyer closet, and joined him in the great room.

"This looks nice," Taber made a sweeping gesture with his hand indicating the decorating she'd done. "Are you finished?"

"I am, but is Maia? Who knows?"

The councilor smiled and moved to her windows to open the drapes. Bright sunlight poured in and Ryne recoiled from it. "Your sister always was strong willed," he said as if she hadn't

reacted. "It's a shame . . ." Taber's expression sobered. "But Maia isn't who I wanted to talk about."

"Who is?" Ryne asked, but she didn't really care.

"Your friend Deke."

Her body jerked. For an instant, she couldn't process it. "You remember him?" At Taber's nod, joy surged through her. At last! At last there was someone she could talk to about the man she loved, the man she'd lost.

Her elation was short lived. She couldn't share the things about Deke that she wanted to, not with a ceannard. The disappointment sat heavily in her chest and Ryne struggled to reclaim her apathy.

Taber slowly took a seat. Only then did Ryne sit herself. "The council," he said, "has finished its work with Anise. I thought you might appreciate some of the information we learned."

Ryne nodded. She guessed the ceannards had put her mentor through some kind of debriefing, but she wasn't sure she wanted to hear the particulars. "I'm surprised to be told anything."

"You won't hear much." His candor almost made her lips curve. Almost. "But I thought you might like to know why Anise concentrated heavily on Deke."

Now that she did want to know. She leaned forward. "Why?"

The councilor folded his thick fingers in his lap. "Her limited precognition told her that he would be the cause of her defeat. She couldn't see how, though, and she didn't realize that her own actions would be the catalyst. First, she tried to kill him, but discovered she couldn't do it magically. Anise then tried to influence a few humans to murder him for her, but Deke was able to avoid those attempts. That's when she resorted to putting him into the cartoon world."

"Why?" she asked again.

"You're aware of more than you realize. You shared magic with him to defeat her. Do you know how that happened?"

Ryne shrugged. She'd given her report to the council a couple of days after Anise's capture, but the information had gone only one way. They'd told her nothing.

"True soul pairing." Ryne straightened in her seat. "It only happens between two troubleshooters and it's rather rare, but

it's also a boon to those who are fortunate enough to share it. The couple can call on each other's powers, making them stronger in battle. It gives both an unassailable mind shield, something that all but guarantees that neither will turn to the dark forces since they don't hear the enticements, and without projecting, they can send thoughts to each other. It's an advantageous situation for both enforcers as well as for the Gineal. Your parents had this, Ryne."

She nodded, but her brain was stuck on one fact. Creed hadn't told her she and Deke could share power.

He hadn't told her!

She'd wondered whether or not he'd been aware of it, but with Taber's information, Ryne was certain now that Creed had known. He was supposed to be her friend and he understood how strong Anise was, how dangerous. If he'd given her this information, she could have brought Deke with her when she'd faced her mentor. Why had he kept it secret?

"My mom and dad still lost," she managed when she noticed Taber was waiting for a response.

"They faced someone far more deadly and powerful than anyone comprehended. You understand after battling Anise."

"Yes. Do I still have any of these perks even though Deke and I are apart?" Ryne wasn't surprised when Taber shook his head. She hadn't heard the dark forces since defeating Anise, but she'd had long streaks of silence before.

"It's ironic when you think of it," Taber said quietly. "She put Deke into the cartoon so the two of you wouldn't meet and yet it was that very thing that brought him to your attention."

"If she'd seen more . . ." Ryne let her voice trail off as something occurred to her. "She hedged her bets by concealing the fact that Deke was a dormant. Anise knew I'd keep my distance from a human." She didn't mention sex, but when Taber looked away from her, seeming to be uncomfortable, she guessed he knew how that was tied in.

The councilman changed the subject then, telling her about Anise's punishment. It wasn't a secret—any Gineal who turned received the same penalty—but when Ryne asked more questions about Deke, he refused to answer them. It irritated her that the man could be this stubborn. He was the only person who remembered Deke—the only one!—and she wanted

to talk about him. Taber wouldn't budge, though, and she slid back into disinterest. If she couldn't be with the man she loved, nothing mattered anyway.

Ryne listened to Maia gush about the changes and tried to work up some enthusiasm. It had been her sister's suggestion that she paint and get some furniture, and she'd gone along with it. Hell, it gave her something to do besides play that movie of Deke saying he loved her over and over.

She'd revoked Maia's free pass into her home, but her sister had been showing up continually and unexpectedly for the past two weeks anyway, knocking and ringing the bell until Ryne let her inside. Unfortunately, Maia had walked in the morning she'd returned Deke to his life, and when she'd found her curled on her basement floor, blubbering, Maia had freaked out. If her sister could remember Deke, maybe she'd understand, but she didn't and Ryne couldn't explain it. Troubleshooter business.

But Taber remembered.

That was some consolation, but she wished it was her sister instead. She couldn't tell the ceannard how much she missed sleeping beside Deke, how much she ached for the warmth of his body next to hers. Ryne sighed, caught Maia's worried glance, and forced her lips to turn up.

It wasn't only the physical she longed for. Deke had listened to her, teased her, laughed with her, and shared with her the way no one else ever had.

Maia gestured toward the room and Ryne blinked. The paint was a rich gold color and the curtains were a bronze that complemented the walls. Her sister had picked those; Ryne would have put up blinds or something. The only thing remaining from her original great room was the flooring and the big television.

Her breakfast room had a table and chairs and so did her dining room. Her computer equipment had been moved to one of the spare bedrooms and everything was finished now even if Maia did have to make threats to get the kitchen table delivered.

The only room that hadn't been touched was her bedroom. Ryne had adamantly refused to change anything. Maybe she'd

get over Deke faster if she wasn't surrounded by his memory every time she walked in there, but she didn't care. She wanted to remember him, to sink into replays of their time together.

"Maia," Ryne interrupted, "I don't know the first thing about art, that's your area of expertise. If you think I need paintings, pick some up for me. I'll give you my credit card. Just please, don't drag me out looking, okay?"

"You need to get out of the house."

"I've been out. I've done more shopping in the last two weeks than I have in the previous twenty-seven years of my life. I'm done shopping for the next twenty years or so."

"Good."

Ryne frowned, but Maia's comment didn't make sense to her. "What's good?"

"Good, you're complaining and putting your foot down." Maia settled beside her on the new, extralong sofa. "Ryne, you've been so agreeable the last couple of weeks, you were scaring me. And when I suggested shopping and you said yes, I thought— Well, you don't want to know what I thought."

Slowly, Ryne smirked. She couldn't help it. Maia did know her and how she felt about shopping.

"Are you ready to talk about what's going on now?" Maia reached for her hand and hung on. "It must be about more than my telling you that I ceded my powers because I'd turned to the dark forces."

Her sister said that confidently enough, but Ryne picked up on the question she had lingering in her voice. "What's going on with me has nothing to do with you. We both know how alluring the dark forces can be and the miraculous thing is that you noticed how far you'd gone in time. You were right, hunting you would have destroyed me."

"If that isn't it, then what's bothering you?"

She hesitated. The council would reprimand her if she shared anything with an outsider, but Ryne found it hard to care. So what? Her sister wasn't going to sell out the Gineal. "A few things," Ryne admitted. The words didn't come easily despite her apathy about getting chewed out. "I caught Anise."

Maia gasped and her grip became almost painful. "When?"

"Two weeks ago."

"That's why you were crying?"

Pulling her hand free, Ryne got to her feet and started pacing. "No, not because of her." Damn, getting caught sobbing was embarrassing enough without Maia bringing it up. "I always thought I was too similar to her. I worried about that for years, but I'm not like her. I know that now."

"Well, I could have told you that," Maia drawled. "Anise was all about the glory of being a troubleshooter. For you, it's always been a responsibility, a job. I don't know how you ever believed you had anything in common with that woman."

That stopped Ryne in her tracks. "We thought a lot alike. It's one of the reasons why I had such a hard time with her."

"Maybe you came up with the same answers, but your motives were different and I bet the paths you took to reach your conclusions were different, too." Maia got up and took her hands. "I don't think you ever saw Anise clearly. At first, it was because she was your mentor and you looked up to her. Then when it was known that she'd turned and it became your job to hunt her, you hated her so passionately. I guess that was because you were scared you were destined to turn, too."

Ryne shrugged. "The council stripped her of her powers and her memory of the Gineal."

"And her memory of you."

"It shouldn't make a difference." Ryne pulled free and paced again. "I know what she was, but now that it's over, I keep remembering the nice stuff she did for me. Then I'll think of the horrible things she did and who she hurt."

"It's natural that your feelings are mixed. Everyone has both good and bad in them, and that includes Gineal who've turned to the dark forces—at least until they're too far gone."

"I know."

Maia leaned against the back of the couch and watched her. Ryne knew the silence wouldn't last forever. Reluctantly, she stopped moving and leaned beside her sister.

"Are you ready to tell me what had you inconsolable?" she asked quietly.

Ryne started to claim it was Gineal business, but she stopped. She wanted to talk about Deke with someone she could share some of the intimate details with, wanted it so badly, she ached. "I'll be right back," she said and dashed for her bedroom. She grabbed one of the pictures they'd taken before he'd left.

Maybe she couldn't pass along the whole story to her sister, but there was no reason the council should care if she told Maia she'd fallen in love. She'd leave out the parts that involved her role as an enforcer—those weren't important anyway.

Maia was on the couch when Ryne got back and she sat next to her. "I met someone," she offered tentatively as she met Maia's gaze. After a pause, she held out the picture. "His name is Daniel Summers." Ryne looked down at the image. Deke was turned toward her and she could see the love he had for her on his face, in his eyes. The tears pooled and started falling again, only this time her sister was there to hold her as she came apart.

25

CHAPTER

The doorbell rang and Ryne cursed.

Maia. Again. It had to be. Aside from one visit from Taber, no one else stopped by, and in the ten days since she'd told her sister about Deke, Maia had started visiting even more often. Ryne could imagine how frequently she'd be seeing her if she'd mentioned Deke's time as a cartoon. Although it might have been fun to throw that out there to observe her reaction.

She sighed when the doorbell rang a second time, and surrendered to the inevitable. God, she wished Maia would back off—at least a little. She stopped the movie and got to her feet. Ryne didn't hurry—let her sister wait.

Habit had her scanning as she reached the foyer and it surprised her to sense a Gineal, not Maia. She took a moment to clear the irritated expression off her face, then she reached for the doorknob.

Ryne froze and gaped.

“Aren't you going to invite me in, babe?”

She scrunched her eyes shut, trying to clear the hallucination, but when she looked again, he was still there. “Deke?”

“Yeah, it's me.”

She stared some more, certain this was a mirage.

“It’s chillier here than in Southern California. Could you invite me in and gawk indoors?”

How could he be here? How could he remember her? How could he be Gineal? She managed to force out one word, “How?”

Deke reached in his jacket pocket and held out a medallion. “The council said I should give this to you.”

Ryne looked between his face and the gold disk. It sank in then—this was real. Deke was really here. Her eyes filled and she blinked hard. She’d cried enough the last few weeks, she wasn’t crying anymore, not now. Not now.

When she had some control, Ryne slowly smiled. Carefully, she took the medallion from him and put the chain around her neck. “What I know, I gladly pass to you,” she answered formally. Then, throwing protocol to the winds, she launched herself at him.

He caught her against his chest, wrapped his arms around her, and held her tight. She clung to him, savoring the warmth of his body, the scent that was only his. God, he was back. He was back!

Deke tipped her face to his for a kiss. Ryne felt his desperation, his wildness, and her own reared up. Almost a month without him, almost a full month so alone, she thought the ache would destroy her.

“Your neighbors,” he said between kisses, “are not going to like it if I do you on the front porch.”

“So why don’t you come inside?”

“Because you haven’t invited me. I remember—only those you allow entrance to can come in.”

Ryne threw her head back and laughed. “Hotshot, how do you think you walked in and out of my house while you were living here? You have access and I never took it away.”

“Why the hell didn’t you say so?” he complained as he dragged her into the foyer and shut the door behind them. His irritation quickly faded. “I need you, Ryne. I love you.”

There was a hesitancy in him as he waited, and belatedly she realized he wasn’t sure of her. Deke wasn’t sure if she still wanted him. “I love you, too, Deke Summers. It’s been hell living without you.” She reached beneath his jacket, found the button of his jeans, and slipped it loose.

That was all the encouragement he needed. Pushing her hands aside, he reached for her, and grabbing the waistband of her leggings, he pulled her pants and panties down in one big yank. She stepped out of them, not sure whether to laugh at his impatience or to be flattered by it.

"I'm sorry," he said as he fished out a condom. "This first time is going to be hard and fast. I'll show you how much I love you later, but I need you too badly right now to wait."

"I told you this before—I don't care if you come fast as long as you make sure I come faster." She grinned as he shoved his jeans down. "Think of it as a challenge."

Deke put her back against the wall, reached for her hips, and lifted her. "Wrap yourself around me," he ordered.

As soon as she did, he sank into her and she exhaled slowly, enjoying his size, the sense of fullness she'd missed. Ryne expected him to start moving immediately, and when he didn't, she drew back far enough to see his face. There was heat in his gray-blue eyes, but there was also incredible tenderness and a look of complete awe. Only then did he stroke into her.

Ryne put her head back and enjoyed him. Deke was impatient, he hadn't lied about that, but despite the pace, he was careful with her. That aroused her almost as much as his thrusts.

He started teasing her with images. Naughty little fantasies of what he wanted to do to her and have her do to him. That was all it took. With a low groan, she tightened her thighs around him and started to come. In the nick of time, too, since Deke was a split second behind her.

It was awhile later, after she'd donned her pants and was sitting on his lap on the tile floor of her foyer, that Deke said, "We'll have to do some commuting for a while. My alternate life is complicated and there are times I'll have to be in L.A. to take care of things."

Ryne shrugged. "We've got the transit. You never answered my question. How are you here?"

"E-mail, insatiable curiosity, and the fact that I didn't empty my deleted items folder." He grinned and wrapped his arms around her. "I e-mailed a friend and included an attachment of the spell to become Gineal. As soon as I repeated it, my memories returned. Actually, I have two sets of memories now;

what really happened and the second version I acquired when you did that last incantation.”

“You’ll have to tell me about this other life of yours.”

“Yeah, I will. My memory, by the way, wasn’t that bad. A lot of the episodes of *DSPI* are based on actual cases that I worked.”

“And I kept telling you that it wasn’t real, but TV. Sorry about that.” Ryne snuggled closer and hugged him more tightly.

“No apologies necessary.” He was quiet for a moment, his own hold firming. “I would have been here a few days ago, but as soon as I became Gineal, the entire damn council showed up. Their tests took forever and then they weren’t going to send me to you. Taber and I took care of that, though.”

Deke sounded so smug, Ryne had to laugh. “I missed you.” And she twisted around so she could give him a loud smooch.

For a long time he stayed silent, then, voice jagged, Deke said, “I’ve been empty inside without you. Even when I didn’t remember you, I knew something crucial was gone from my life. That medallion gives me seven years with you as your apprentice, but I’m going to ask you for more.” He reached for her hand and linked their fingers. “I love you, Ryne—promise me forever.”

With a smile, she pressed her lips to his. “I love you, too, and forever sounds like it might be enough time. Maybe.”