

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

# Blood Price

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❖ BLOOD LINES ❖ BOOK 4 ❖

BLOOD PRICE

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**Kit Tunstall**

## Chapter 1

Atar hadn't known what to expect when the queen of Corsova summoned him. He wouldn't have been surprised if the guard escorting him led him into an archaic throne room. He certainly hadn't expected the sentry to lead him into the private chambers of the king and queen. Nor had he anticipated her serving him tea in the sitting room.

He held the delicate cup in his large hand while he watched the queen through the veil of his lashes. His gaze occasionally darted to the protector's lifemate, whose gaze never wavered from Anca. He liked that about Demi Golina, who had once been a commoner, as was Atar, though Demi had always belonged in Corsova, while Atar didn't.

"Thank you for coming." She held her cup without sipping from it. "Petru, the Chief of Security here at the castle, recommended we call on you."

His colorless eyes narrowed at the mention of Petru's name, a man with whom he was vaguely acquainted. "I have little to offer the royal family."

"Not true," Demi said. "We've heard your kind is adept at tracking."

He shrugged. "The Makheet race has a way with such tasks but I'm not a tracker. I live my days in solitude in the Bulgain Mountains." A small smile flashed across his chiseled lips when he remembered how bitterly the party searching for him had complained when finding him. They had gotten lost for two days in the mountains and the group included two werewolves. "I don't see how I can help you."

"Please." There was a trace of pleading in Anca's voice. "We need your assistance, Atar."

He leaned forward from the wingchair to return his full cup to the tray on the table. "Really —"

"It's not just for us," Demi said. "You might be saving our entire way of life and several human lives in the process."

He quirked a brow. "How so?"

The queen turned her cup on the saucer but still didn't lift it. "Few people know the whole story of what happened two years ago, when I took the Blood Oath."

Atar nodded.

"My half-sister tried to take the Oath in my place. Nikia nearly died, ending up in a coma. There are no long-term care facilities here in Corsova that were equipped to deal with her situation, so we sent her to Constanta..." Anca trailed off, her eyes appearing troubled.

He waited for half a minute for the queen to continue before saying, "What does this have to do with me?"

"She woke up," Demi said. "She escaped a high-security facility."

"She'll be coming for me," Anca added. "She believes the throne should be hers."

He shrugged. "Why not wait for her to come to you and lay a trap for her?"

Demi's brow furrowed. "She could do much damage during the time she's free. We're concerned about her killing humans. Not just because of the bloodshed, though that worries us. We're afraid human authorities might apprehend her. If the world finds out about vampires, our haven would cease to be."

Atar winced at Demi's subtle warning. Oh, yes, the man had obviously taken the time to learn about him before they summoned Atar to Castle Draganescu. Losing his sanctuary in Corsova was the only thing that could motivate him to take on this obligation. "What should I do with her when I find her?"

Anca and Demi traded a look. The queen's shoulders bowed. "Bring her back alive, if you can. If you can't..."

He nodded once and got to his feet. "I'll deal with her but in return, I want your assurance you'll never send for me again. I have no desire to be the solution to similar problems."

Anca frowned. "Petru said you've done this before."

Atar nodded. "I assisted your grandfather once. When I was a youngling, I learned all I'll ever want to know about imperial service during the reign of Charlemagne."

Anca's eyes widened. "But that was twelve hundred years ago!"

Atar nodded. "Makheet are long-lived. All I ask is to spend the remainder of my centuries in peace."

"If you do this for us, you'll be assured a place with solitude in Corsova for the rest of your life."

"You seem confident," Demi added, scowling. "How can you be sure you'll find her?"

"I have my ways. Do you want a breakdown of them or do you want me to find Nikia before she kills someone?"

Anca stood up. "Please find her as quickly as you can."

He nodded. "I'll leave tonight on the last train. I'll have her in my custody by tomorrow night." How difficult could it be to track down a lone vampire? Once he merged with her, it would all be over for Nikia. "I'll need to know everything you know about her – where she was held, how she escaped, where she's likely to go next."

He waited for the queen to send for Petru, grimacing at the inconvenience. He didn't relish tracking this fugitive but it was worth a few days' bother to assure his solitude in the future. He would deal with her quickly, bring her back to Corsova to face the queen and return to the mountains alone. That was how he liked it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nikia pushed her way through the crowd gathered in the large warehouse converted to a dance club. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled and she swore eyes followed her. She'd had that sensation for the past three days, since escaping the hospital but it had intensified tonight. Before, the sensation had come more from paranoia without proof but now it had sharpened. Her senses were warning her.

She didn't doubt someone was following her. As soon as Anca had learned of her escape, she would have sent others to apprehend her. They wouldn't be a large force, because her sister wouldn't want to draw attention. The size didn't matter, because in her weakened state, one or two vampires or werewolves might be more than she could deal with.

She hugged herself, burrowing deeper into the oversized men's denim jacket as she slipped along the edges of the crowd. A speaker nearby thundered techno music, contributing to the constant headache she'd had since awakening three days ago. Someone jostled her and she whipped around, seeking the source of attack. When she realized it was a drunken idiot, she slumped and continued on, searching for an exit out the back.

Two streets ago, when she'd sworn she heard the scrape of footsteps behind her on the cobblestone avenue, Nikia had ducked down the nearest alley, following a twisting series of streets, before reemerging in an industrial section. The only signs of life came from the club and she had gone in out of desperation.

In retrospect, it hadn't been a wise decision. The people following her must surely have realized she was inside. Even now, they were probably moving among the crowd like silent shadows, seeking her out.

She moved past the most crowded area and saw a hallway to the right. She turned sharply, ignoring the couples making out along the corridor. She saw three doors at the end of the hallway and she increased her pace.

Two of the doors were restrooms but the third was a way out. She could have sobbed when she saw the shiny padlock barring exit. If she gathered her strength, she might be able to tear it away but someone was bound to notice. It would get the attention of those following her, leaving her trapped in the hallway.

She shivered at the thought, speculating about what awaited her in Corsova. Life imprisoned in the tower would probably be the least she could expect. She wouldn't be surprised to learn Anca had ordered a death sentence.

Tears pricked the back of her eyes and she wiped them away with the sleeve of the jacket. It wasn't fair that she might be facing a death sentence when she was finally getting the chance to live, but crying wouldn't change anything. She didn't have time to mope about her circumstances right now.

She glanced behind her and froze when she saw a tall man with long hair step into the hallway. He wore a similar leather outfit to those favored by most of the other patrons but there was something different about him. He didn't fit in with this crowd

any more than she did in the cotton trousers and denim jacket she had stolen on her way out of the hospital.

Her gaze darted down the hallway before returning to the doors. She ducked into the ladies' room, praying for a roomy window or at least a few minutes to think things through.

She was disappointed to find it was a communal bathroom with stalls. There was no way to lock the main door. Nikia hurried through the restroom, checking the cubicles. She saw feet in three but the other four remained unoccupied.

Next, she examined the windows, finding just one. It was so far out of reach, she couldn't possibly get to it. If she could manage to reach it, the window was too small to squeeze through, even though she had lost her generous curves during the two years she had been in a coma.

She stiffened when the main door opened behind her. Nikia whirled around to confront the person entering. Her shoulders sagged with relief when she saw it was an unfamiliar woman in leather pants and a loose vest. She was tall, with long, dirty-blond hair and strange eyes that lacked any pigment. She didn't pay any attention to Nikia as she walked to the sink.

Nikia returned her attention to the problem of escaping the bathroom, eyeing the window again. Reluctantly, she accepted there was no way out of the room. She could lock herself in a stall and wait for them to come get her or surrender.

She twirled a lock of her short hair, toying with the idea of bursting from the bathroom and slamming through the door barring her exit. If she moved quickly enough, she could tear off the lock and run away before they had a chance to get hold of her.

If she could muster enough strength. Nikia sighed, feeling a sense of weakness in her entire body. She must have received physical therapy during her coma or she wouldn't have been able to walk at all but she was in no condition to be breaking through doors. Until she had a chance to feed, her strength would remain tenuous at best.

She jumped with fright when someone touched her arm. Nikia started to turn but the person behind her moved faster, snagging both of her arms and pulling them behind her back. They held her wrists together. She felt the cold steel of a handcuff bite into one and screamed. Nikia kicked her legs and tried to dislodge the person holding her but he or she cuffed her other hand before releasing her.

She turned around and backed away from him. Her eyes widened when she saw the same man from the hallway. She looked around for the woman who had entered but she wasn't in sight. Nikia's eyes narrowed when she realized this man had the same shade of hair, clear eyes and almost identical garments. How could that be?

"Nikia Draganescu," his voice was rich and deep, with an accent she couldn't place, "I'm here to return you to Corsova. Will you come quietly?"

Nikia bowed her head when a fierce pain shot through it. She gritted her teeth, struggling to block out the commands of Illiana that urged her to strike out at the man. She bit her tongue, hoping that small pain would help her withstand the pain in her head. The agony still thundered over her in waves, making her scream. She fell to her knees without realizing it. As the man walked forward and lifted her over his shoulder, she was barely aware of his touch. "No," she screamed, as Illiana's voice echoed in her head. She wouldn't give in to it, even long enough to get away. She knew if she lost herself in Illiana again, she would never return. Nikia sought escape in unconsciousness, willing herself to sleep. She didn't know what to expect when she returned but she couldn't let Illiana win, even if it meant she ended up back in Corsova, facing death.



## Chapter 2

She regained consciousness slowly, with a pounding thump resonating through her head. Nikia opened her eyes and saw a smooth white ceiling, with a stain in the left corner that could have been rust or old blood. She struggled to sit up and further identify her location but a sharp pain in her wrist and arms made her pause. She craned her head and saw she was handcuffed to the slats of a headboard. She lay on the bed attached to the board, with her head propped up by a pillow.

Movement from the corner of her eye caused her to turn her head in that direction. She immediately recognized the man who had taken her prisoner in the techno club's bathroom. Only now, he wore a light sweater and sinfully tight, faded jeans that hugged his muscular legs, instead of the uncomfortable leather outfit from earlier. His colorless eyes seemed to be watching her every move.

Nikia licked her lips. "Who are you?" she asked in a raspy tone.

He didn't bother to answer as he got off the other bed and walked toward her. Her insides crawled with fear and something less definable as he drew nearer. When he lifted a paper cup of soda from the nightstand and brought it to her mouth, guiding the straw through her lips, she experienced a curious sense of letdown and relief. She drank greedily, wondering why her throat was dry.

"Is that better?" He had a smooth voice and it held a slight note of concern.

She nodded. "Why is my throat so sore?"

He lifted a brow. "I imagine it was all the screaming you did." He seemed amused, as he smiled down at her with a small quirk of his lips. "I had a helluva time getting you out of the club when three young men decided to be your rescuers, drawn by your shouts."

She frowned, having no memory of that. Her stomach clenched and she wondered if Illiana had taken over again for a short time. "Who are you?" she asked again.

He returned the cup to the nightstand but didn't go back to the other bed. "Consider me an errand boy for your sister."

She had already guessed that. "Do you have a name?"

"Atar," he said, after a brief pause.

She tried to sound dispassionate when she spoke. "Well, Atar, do you know what will happen to me back in Corsova?"

He shrugged. "Nothing less than you deserve, I'm sure."

She winced, recognizing the truth in his words. Wasn't she equally responsible for the actions her body had committed, despite the fact her mind hadn't been in control?

She had learned during the past thirty-five years that life was seldom fair, so why should her opportunity for freedom be more than transitory?

Still, she couldn't help trying to escape the fate in store for her. "Whatever she's paying you, I'll double it." The clandestine account in Switzerland would more than cover the expense of buying this man's loyalty. If it didn't, she could wire funds from one of the other accounts Illiana had secreted around the world.

"The Protector is paying me nothing, aside from the assurance of solitude." Atar shook his head. "You can't top that, Nikia."

His desire for solitude puzzled her but she had spent all of her life, except for the past few days, locked in a tiny corner of someone else's mind. "Is your solitude worth purchasing with my death?"

He shrugged again. "From what I've learned of you, the punishment would fit the crime." A frown settled on his face. "Although, I must admit, your aura isn't what I expected. You're much more innocent than I anticipated."

"I am innocent —"

He didn't let her finish. "Except, there's a core of darkness in you that I can't discern. That is where the real you dwells, isn't it?"

"What are you talking about? Are you a vampire?" He didn't smell like a vampire, who usually bore the faintest trace of copper in their scent. Atar smelled like something alien. She didn't think he could be human.

"No. I am Makheet."

"What is that?"

"I am a shape-shifter but not like the werewolves in your country. I can become anything, as long as the new form's mass is similar to my own."

That explained the girl in the bathroom, whom she had dismissed in her quest to escape. "Why are you here? You obviously don't care about the safety of Corsofans. You don't even call it your country."

To her surprise, he sat on the edge of her bed. "As I said, my solitude is important to me. I want to ensure your actions don't expose the existence of vampires to the world. If humans eradicate vampires, Corsofa would be destroyed and my haven would cease to exist." He looked down at her, and his emotions seemed as bland as his eyes. "I don't care anything for you or the crimes you've committed. My only reason for coming after you is my own benefit."

Nikia tugged at the cuffs binding her, desperate to free herself. She knew this man would not relent in his duty and he would never believe her, simply because he didn't care to believe. Still, she had to try the truth before resorting to measures that were more drastic. "I'm not who you think I am."

He chuckled. "Nice try, but I merged with your aura back in the hospital. I know you're Nikia Draganescu, illegitimate but acknowledged daughter of Valdemeer

Draganescu. You're also a murderer and the attempted executioner of your half-sister, the Protector of Corsova and her lifemate, Demi Golina."

"I am but I'm not." She stopped trying to fight the cuffs when they bit into her wrist. She was too weak to break them with force, so the only way out of them was through the man beside her.

One corner of his mouth lifted. "How very cryptic. What is it that you are but aren't?"

"I am Nikia Draganescu but until three days ago, the spirit of my mother possessed my body. The coma broke Illiana's hold on me."

Atar stared at her for a moment, with a look of bewilderment on his face. Then his confusion passed and an expression of boredom replaced it. "I have no time for your lies and games. Perhaps your sister will listen to them, but I won't."

She let out a deep breath, knowing the truth hadn't swayed him. There was only one option left but she wasn't sure she was strong enough to manipulate his mind. First, she would have to penetrate his mental barriers, to let her ease inside. The fastest way to do that was through sex. Did she have any hope of seducing him?

She eyed him, searching for signs of attraction. Experimentally, she arched her back, bringing her breasts into prominent display. His eyes settled on them and there was no missing his indrawn breath or the way his silver pupils dilated. No, he wasn't unaffected by her.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on finding the link that supposedly allowed him to sense her mind. She didn't think he was reading her in the classic sense or he would have moved away from her by now, upon realizing she planned to seduce him so she could gain access to his psyche. She pictured a link between them and it clarified in her mind. The bond looked like invisible waves and she was the carrier, while he was the receptor. It was as if he had tagged her, so he could track her anywhere.

She allowed her thoughts to flow along the wave carrying back to him and she felt a slight connection, although his mind resisted. She lightened her presence, until it was little more than a burr, trying to burrow its way in subtly. She was vaguely aware of Atar muttering something under his breath but didn't open her eyes to judge his response. Instead, she concentrated on making him aroused by filling his mind with erotic images.

She was woefully lacking in heterosexual experience, so she allowed her imagination free rein. As she sent a picture of his mouth on her nipples, they beaded against the cotton scrub top she wore. She barely bit back a moan as she pictured his tongue flicking across one of her sensitive nipples.

His harsh exhalation broke the silence of the room and Nikia knew she was getting to Atar. She increased the images flowing to him, to include her mouth, painted in bright-red lipstick, cradling his cock. When she ran her tongue across the tip, she heard him moan in reality.

"Witch," he said under his breath, sounding disturbed.

Nikia opened one of her eyes when Atar placed his hand on her stomach. His cheeks bloomed with color, his breathing was harsh and a quick glance at the bulge in his jeans revealed his cock was hard with arousal. Once again, she closed her eyes and sent out a single thought, *"You won't be satisfied until you fuck me."* Then she opened both of her eyes to measure his reaction.

Atar shook his head, as if resisting her command, as his hand slid higher, to rest under her left breast. He seemed to be fighting her mental suggestion, even while he rubbed his thumb over her nipple.

Nikia gasped at the sensation. Her breast tingled and heat pooled in her stomach when he increased the pressure of his digit. Her response shook her. She would have to be careful not to get lost in his touch and forget about escaping. She took a deep breath, restored the bond between them and once again said, *"You need to fuck me. Lose yourself in me."*

His hand crept higher, until he cupped all her breast in his hand. There was a time when he couldn't have done that, even with his large hands, but she had lost a lot of weight while in the coma. Darts of electricity emanated from his palm when he rubbed it in lazy circles over her areola, pressing firmly against her nipple. Nikia drew her lower lip into her mouth and bit down to keep from crying out. She tasted her own blood and her hunger piqued. How long had it been since she ate? Surely, no one had provided blood for her during the coma. The lack of proper nourishment caused most of her weakness. Against her will, her eyes focused on the pulsing vein in his throat. She licked her lips as need assailed her.

He seemed unaware of her thoughts. His attention remained on her breast, as his other lifted the cotton scrub top. His nails lightly grazed the flesh of her stomach, pausing to trace a couple of her ribs, prior to bringing up the hem to just below her breast. He moved his hand from her breast to lift the top, before pinching the bead between his thumb and forefinger.

Her gaze wrenched from his throat to his hand. Nikia's pussy spasmed when he tugged on her nipple. Another kind of hunger temporarily supplanted her need for blood. That appetite hadn't been fulfilled in a long time and never completely. She didn't share her mother's taste for women. The lovers she'd had might have brought her possessed body pleasure but none had satisfied her craving for more.

When Atar lowered his head, she held her breath, anticipating the wet rasp of his tongue on her sensitive peak. She almost groaned with frustration when he hesitated, hovering over her breast.

He turned his head slightly to look at her, wearing a frown of confusion. "What's happening?" He shook his head. "I shouldn't be doing this."

Damn. She had allowed pleasure to distract her from maintaining the connection between them. She closed her eyes and intensified the link. His mind resisted for a second but she regained control. *"You want this more than anything."*

"I want this," he repeated in a dreamy voice, even though his eyes reflected his doubt. He turned his head and lowered his lips to her breast, sucking the turgid bud into his mouth.

She moaned when his tongue laved her nipple, wanting to lose herself in the sensation. Two things held her back. The first was knowing she had to escape Atar and the fate awaiting her in Corsova. The only way to do that was to manipulate him into a trance state. That was the second thing holding her back—an attack of conscience. How could she, who knew more than anyone did what it was like to have someone control her body, impose her will on him?

She tried to console herself with the thought that he was enjoying tasting her but that did little to quell her guilt. She too had enjoyed some of the things Illiana had subjected her body to but that didn't alleviate the sense of violation that accompanied the experiences, knowing she had no control over her own body.

As much as she enjoyed Atar suckling her breast, she knew she had to stop this. He was entranced and she focused all her power on sending him one thought. *"You want to free me. Unlock the cuffs."*

His mouth stilled on her breast and he slowly lifted his head. "No," he said, but his tone lacked conviction.

She concentrated harder, amazed at his mind's ability to repel her. Only fear gave her the edge she needed to force him to comply. *"Sex will be amazing between us but I need my hands free to please you. You want to free me."*

His internal struggle was obvious as he slowly removed a key from his pocket and brought it to her wrists. Once again, he hesitated, as if trying to throw off her control. He almost succeeded and she gasped with the effort to maintain the link. It was a relief when he slipped the small key into the double lock and the cuff opened a second later. As he freed her other wrist, she lowered her hand to her stomach, grimacing at the sting of returning circulation that accompanied the change of position.

When both of her hands were free, he sat in a semi-frozen state, as if not certain what to do with himself. Nikia sat up, smoothing down her shirt at the same time. She leaned forward, lightly grazing his lips with hers. He trembled at the touch but she didn't know if it was from excitement or revulsion. "Sleep," she whispered, moving her mouth to his ear. She didn't have to project the thought mentally. At that moment, he was completely at her mercy. The thought made her sick.

Atar slumped forward and his body fell on hers. With effort, she pushed him up and slipped off the bed, lowering him carefully and positioning his head on the pillow. His shoulder lay on his long hair, bending his neck awkwardly. She knew he would awaken in pain if she left him like that, so she moved the strands to flow down his back. As she did so, the column of his throat caught her attention again.

She moaned with hunger when the steady thump of his carotid artery beckoned to her. She could almost hear his heartbeat thundering in her ears. A compulsion she couldn't fight had her lowering her head. She traced her tongue down the vein and a

shudder of bliss racked her body. He murmured something in his sleep and it seemed to be a sound of pleasure.

There was a shift behind her eyes and she sensed a curtain descending. Nikia blinked, trying to resist the commands suddenly pounding through her, ordering her to bite him. Before she could stop herself, her bloodteeth extended and one penetrated his artery. It was only a tiny nick but a rivulet of crimson oozed down his neck. Her tongue flicked out and she arrested it in mid-flow.

Nikia hissed and backed away so quickly she fell onto the other bed. His blood was too sweet, too intoxicating. Indulging would be madness, as she would likely end up passed out on top of him. When he awoke soon, he would find recapturing her an easy task, should she drink from him.

She got to her feet, shaking her head to dispel the thirst for his blood. Never had she tasted anything so delicious. He definitely wasn't human, as he had said. She wondered what else was different about him but didn't have time to indulge her curiosity.

Her list of violations against Atar grew to include robbery when she rummaged through his small suitcase and appropriated a button-down navy-blue shirt. When she put it over the scrub top and buttoned it to mid-chest, it hid the utilitarian design of the hospital shirt, making it look like a plain cotton top. It would help her blend in better.

She rifled deeper through his luggage, pausing to borrow his brush. Her hair was so short that it took little effort to restore it to order when she stepped up to the mirror hanging above the bed. She touched it with wonder, seeing it for the first time closely. She hadn't had time to properly examine her appearance in the past few days. The shortness was a shock, as Illiana had always kept her hair long but she liked the sassiness of it.

With a wry grin, acknowledging she felt anything but sassy, Nikia turned back to the case she had opened on the spare bed, returned his brush and reluctantly took several Euros from the roll Atar had secreted at the bottom of the case, under a stack of tiny black briefs. She hated to take anything else from him but he had plenty of money left and she had no other way to secure a flight to Zurich. If she had, she wouldn't have spent the last three days hiding in Constanta.

She tucked the Euros in the pocket of his shirt she had taken, closed his case and walked over to him. She brushed the hair off his forehead and leaned down to kiss his cheek. She felt a mix of guilt and tenderness for the man. It was complicated but she didn't have time to sort out her emotions right then. Besides, if she ever saw him again, she would have another opportunity to clarify her feelings—assuming he didn't immediately capture her, sedate her and ship her back to Corsova in an unconscious state.

Without looking back, she left the hotel room and walked down the flight of stairs. The streets were quiet and her chances of catching a cab were slim at this hour. With an air of determination, she slipped down the small alley, heading toward the next main street. She froze at the scrape of footsteps behind her. Nikia's first thought was Atar had

awakened but when she whirled around, with an idiotic apology on the tip of her tongue, she saw a young man standing behind her instead.

He wore a frayed denim jacket and faded jeans. His eyes glittered with interest, as he looked her up and down. He held one hand at his side, almost hiding the switchblade in his hand.

She tensed, feeling a stir of fear. Before her coma, she wouldn't have been frightened of a human, even one with a knife, but she hadn't received blood in a long time and her body was weak from the coma and lack of blood. The tiny sip of Atar's had only served to make her more lightheaded.

He darted toward her but moved too slowly. Nikia's confidence returned and she sidestepped him, grabbing his arm as he flew past her. She arrested his off-balance, face-first trip toward the cobblestone, pushing him to his knees. He grunted with outrage and tried to slash her with the knife but she intercepted his wrist, squeezing hard enough to hear the bones grind together. The switchblade fell to the stones with a clatter.

Hunger overpowered her and Nikia bent the man lower, exposing the back and side of his neck. She buried her face against his skin, ignoring his stench of cigarettes and unwashed body. Her incisors extended and she punctured a vein, groaning with pleasure when warm blood flooded her mouth.

The would-be mugger tried to throw her off but Nikia held him easily, feeling strength flow into her as his blood filled her mouth. Her entire body tingled with awakening as his lifeblood restored some of her health. It was a struggle to pull away without draining him dry. Illiana's strident voice in her head made the task more difficult, as it urged her to keep drinking.

The man collapsed on the cobblestone, groaning. Nikia paused to check his pulse, finding it slow, but steady. She got to her feet, kicked aside his knife and hurried on her way, anxious to get to the airport before Atar awakened and picked up her trail. She could lose him once she left Constanta. She doubted he could sustain his ability to link with her once she put several hundred miles between them. After she emptied the account in Zurich, she would worry about the future. Her first priority was evading Atar and her second was banishing Illiana's dark presence from her mind permanently.

### Chapter 3

She sailed through the airport at Constanta, finding it relatively easy to convince the girl behind the computer that her name was Margaret Black and she had already produced her passport. If anyone questioned the young woman later, she would remember Margaret Black as a middle-aged woman with salt-and-pepper hair, carrying an extra forty pounds.

She was lucky to find a flight with only one connection to Zurich leaving in forty minutes. She spent that time looking over her shoulder, searching for Atar but once she boarded the plane and it lifted off, she was considerably more relaxed.

By the time she landed in Zurich a few hours later, she had almost convinced herself the tracker wouldn't be able to catch her trail again. That didn't mean she wouldn't be cautious. She looked over her shoulder all throughout the time she spent moving through the terminal. It was a relief to be moving and get outside, although the sense of safety in movement was little more than an illusion. She lifted her arm to hail a taxi and a black sedan pulled up to her right away. She opened the door and slid inside. After settling into the backseat, she leaned forward to speak to the driver. "Stoller-Zurich Hotel, please." She started to lean back into the seat but paused. "Don't take the most direct route. Circle around a bit and please let me know if you think we're being followed."

The woman driving the cab lifted a dark brow but made no comment about Nikia's request. With a brisk nod, she set the car in motion.

Nikia dared to relax against the seat. She closed her eyes and tried to distance herself from the throbbing pain in her head. When she felt rested, it was easier to ignore the pain and to fight Illiana's attempts to regain control. But as hours passed and the pain hammered at her incessantly, her control started slipping. She needed to regain her strength to continue fending off Illiana, which meant she had to take the time to rest, even if it gave her pursuer a chance to catch up with her.

She must have dozed because she had a moment of disorientation upon opening her eyes, when the driver spoke sometime later with a thick accent. "*Fräulein*, we are here."

She nodded and fished in her purse for a stack of Euros to cover the fare and a tip. Then she slid from the car, glad she wasn't hampered by luggage as she made her way inside the white, multi-story hotel. The lobby was warm and welcoming, with richly shining wood, a huge bouquet of daffodils and a smiling young woman in a crisp suit, bearing a discreet tag that proclaimed she was a Guest Services Manager and her name was Elga.



Nikia glanced over her shoulder but wasn't looking for Atar this time. Instead, she was gauging the distance of others in the lobby to herself and Elga. Assured they were far enough back, she caught the gaze of the girl, whispering, "I want my usual non-smoking room. You don't need my credit card or identification. I am Margaret Black, and you know me well."

Elga had a dazed expression when she nodded. Her smile was dreamy and her eyes were slightly out of focus. "Of course, Mrs. Black. It's always a pleasure to have you stay with us at Stoller." Her fingers clicked on the keyboard and she smiled. "Your room is available."

"Thank you." Nikia paid quickly and took the keycard Elga gave her.

"The breakfast buffet is still open, Mrs. Black. As you know, we have an excellent selection, including smoked salmon and champagne."

Nikia nodded, finding it difficult to function under the throbbing pain. "Thank you, but I believe I'll go straight up. I had a night flight."

"Of course."

Before the girl could ask about luggage, Nikia turned and hurried through the lobby, taking the nearest elevator up to the fifth floor. There were no other guests in the corridor when she walked to her room. She slid the card in the slot and slipped inside, sagging against the door once it had closed and locked behind her. Her knees trembled and her stomach churned with nausea.

She gave the room little more than a cursory examination, taking in the honey-blond furniture, oval mirror and desk built into the wall. It was familiar to her, as she had stayed here once before, in this very room. Slowly, she made her way to the bed, dropping onto it face-first, without bothering to remove the clothes she wore. They were starting to stink but she was beyond caring. The pounding in her head made it impossible to concentrate on anything. Were she in control, she would have skipped the stay at Stoller, gone straight to the Cantonal Bank of Zurich, made her withdrawal and gotten on the next flight to anywhere. But in her weakened state, she had to rest or risk allowing Illiana to regain possession.

She closed her eyes, burying her face in the pillow. She rubbed her cheek against the soft cotton pillowcase, feeling the first vestiges of tension draining away. The faint scent of lavender covered the odor of the clothes, while lulling her into a twilight state. Soon, her breathing deepened and she slept in a dreamless state.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was several hours later when she opened her eyes. She knew the morning had waned by the position of the sun coming through the blinds, right across her eyes. She sat up, cradling her head. The ever-present ache was there but had subdued to a manageable level again. With cautious movements, she got up from the bed and

padded into the bathroom, where she stripped off the filthy clothes and got under the shower, letting the hot water sluice her body from head to foot.

When her skin wrinkled, she finally forced herself from the cubicle, knowing time was wasting. Eyeing the clothes with distaste, Nikia decided she simply couldn't force her body back into them. Instead, she slipped on a toweling robe and walked into the main room, to the phone. The front desk answered quickly and the young man seemed unfazed by her request for a local boutique to send an assorted selection to her room.

She also ordered room service. When the first knock came, she was cautious about opening the door, with the fear of Atar catching up with her lingering at the back of her mind. It proved to be her food and she had almost finished with it by the time a second knock sounded. This time, it was a sales attendant from a nearby boutique, bearing a rolling rack of clothing.

The process went quickly and Nikia made several selections, which the clerk stored in a garment bag, in lieu of a suitcase. Once she paid the woman and saw her out, Nikia dressed quickly in linen slacks and a red silk shirt. She put on a large straw hat with a red scarf and left the room with the garment bag, not intending to return to the hotel.

She exited the lobby and crossed the street, darting between the cars, to the imposing building housing the Cantonal Bank of Zurich. Inside the bank, a middle-aged man in a dark suit greeted her before she had a chance to let the inner doors close completely behind her.

"How may I assist you, *Fräulein*?"

"I would like to close my account."

He didn't betray any emotion at her request. "Follow me, please." Nikia walked behind him to his office, which was actually a glass cubicle in the corner of the room. She sank into the overstuffed beige armchair in front of his massive steel and glass desk.

He slid a pad of paper to her, along with a heavy gold and black pen. "I'll need your account number."

"Of course." Nikia lifted the pen and wrote the number, hoping she recalled it correctly from memory. She held her breath as he entered it into the system, waiting to see if it would work. Her stiff shoulders relaxed when he nodded.

"How would you like the funds? Do you have another account to wire the balance to?"

She shook her head. "No. I would like it in Euros."

He lifted a brow. "That is a lot of currency to carry around. Are you certain you wouldn't prefer—"

"I'm sure." She only hoped she would have time to make currency conversions, should the need arise. She couldn't plan ahead well enough to anticipate what currencies she might need, since she had no idea where her travels would take her.

He seemed unhappy with her decision but didn't try to change her mind. He left the cubicle, presumably to collect the funds, and returned a short time later with a large manila envelope.

Nikia took it from him and examined the contents. She didn't take the time to count the money but judged it the right amount from the tightly bound stacks of large bills. "I would also like to access my safety-deposit box."

He lifted his phone, dialed a three-digit extension and spoke rapidly in German to the person on the other end. When he hung up, he said, "Ona will assist you."

As he spoke her name, the woman appeared. She was around Nikia's age, with flawless pale skin, whitish-blond hair and cheekbones that looked sharp enough to cut.

Nikia clutched the envelope against her chest and followed the woman to the elevator. Once before, she had made this trip but it had been years ago, when Illiana decided it might be prudent to have a means of escape to fall back on, should her plans to depose Valdemeer backfire. Nikia's memory of the route was hazy, as was her memory of the procedure for accessing a safety-deposit box.

On the third floor, they entered a room that bore a strong resemblance to a vault. An armed guard with gleaming ebony skin nodded to Ona. Together, they accessed the lock on Nikia's box, since she didn't have the key with her. They turned their keys simultaneously and the door hiding the box sprang open. Ona removed it and carried it out of the room, with Nikia trailing behind.

She didn't have to ask for privacy. Ona led her to a small room and slipped out, saying, "Please notify the guard when you've finished."

As soon as she closed the door, Nikia opened the box and removed the identification inside. Her hand stilled when she discovered a heart-shaped emerald pendant hanging from a silver chain. She had forgotten about the necklace, but touching it brought back memories of its origins. She had never known Elsa, Illiana's mother but knew Illiana remembered her with a combination of fear and warmth. The pendant had been a gift given on Illiana's thirteenth birthday, just days before Elsa murdered her father and killed herself.

Nikia stroked the gem and it tingled with power. It was beautiful and she reached out for it. About to fasten it around her neck, she sensed a sudden increase in Illiana's influence. With a small cry, she flung it from her. The necklace skimmed across the Formica table and fell to the carpet without a sound. It no longer appeared beautiful. Now, it took on a sinister appearance.

She closed the empty box and opened the door, not attempting to retrieve the necklace. She refused to touch it again. She must always remember her mother's people were powerful and Illiana knew most of their ways. She was also ruthless. She would do anything to regain control of Nikia's body.

She nodded to the guard on her way out and returned to the elevator, where she tucked the IDs into the envelope. When the elevator opened on the ground floor, she left the bank without anyone stopping her. Near the second set of glass doors that led to

the outside, she froze, clutching the bar in a death grip. Her eyes locked on the flash of dirty-blond hair that had caught her attention. She searched in the crowd milling along the sidewalk, convinced Atar was out there.

She scanned the street and her gaze alighted on a taxi parked against the curb. She saw two men in suits hurrying toward it and knew she had to move. With a deep breath, she pushed against the door and rushed into the crowd, running from the second her feet hit the cement and making it to the door of the taxi just before the men.

One of the men cursed and reached out to touch her arm. Nikia turned on him, hissing. He flinched and she wondered what he had seen in her eyes that frightened him so much that he backed away quickly enough to stumble. She didn't want to think about it and she didn't have time to anyway. She slipped into the back and slammed the door just as Atar emerged from the crowd. "Go," she shouted, and her voice echoed around the small confines of the car, causing both she and the driver to wince.

"Where, *Fräulein*?"

"Anywhere. Just move." Her eyes locked with Atar's as the car pulled away from the curb. She saw the frustration and anger in his eyes before the car outdistanced him. She trembled, knowing he wouldn't give up.

"Where are we going?"

"I need to get out of Zurich. What's the fastest way?"

He cocked his head. "You could take a train from Main Station. It's just a couple of kilometers from here."

"That's fine." Nikia couldn't relax as the driver wove through traffic, into the heart of Central Zurich. He followed the curve of the circular street around Limmat River, which separated them from the train station. She fought the mad urge to throw herself from the back of the car and swim across the river in hopes of shaving a few minutes off her escape. It seemed to take forever for the driver to reach the west side of the station and he got in the line of cars waiting to expel their passengers at the arched entrance of the light-brown brick building. Nikia grasped her garment bag and tossed a handful of Euros onto the front seat. "I'll get out here." She didn't wait for a response as she got out of the car and rushed down the sidewalk to the entrance. She spared a scant glance for the monument in front of the station but took no time to examine the statues. Nor did she pay much attention to the statues adorning the roof when she rushed inside. She skidded to a halt, trying to get her bearings.

People milled around the station, darting in and out of various arched entryways. Several had clustered under the timetable but Nikia didn't pause to study it. She didn't have the luxury of choosing a specific destination. She would take whatever was available and leaving immediately because Atar couldn't be far behind.

She bypassed the stairs that would take her to the second level and went to the ticket counters. A harried-looking woman with a large mole above the left side of her mouth gestured her forward. She went to the window, still glancing behind her.

"Destination?" she asked in German.

“What’s leaving right away?”

The woman glanced at her computer. “There’s a train leaving for Milan on Platform 21.”

Nikia nodded. “That’s fine.” She took out her identification in the name of Nicole Desmarteau and enough Euros to cover her ticket. She drummed her fingers impatiently against the counter while the clerk processed her ticket. The woman sniffed her disapproval and seemed to be making the transaction her life’s work. Nikia snatched up the printed ticket as soon as the woman slid it through the window and darted into the crowd.

There was a map of the train station on the back of the ticket that allowed Nikia to navigate through the crowd and arrive at Platform 21, where a large group stood, with several people streaming onto the train. She pushed between an embracing couple to board the train, taking a window seat facing the platform so she could see who was approaching.

The train whistled just as Atar came into her view. Nikia’s breath caught in her throat and she tightened her hands around the bag draped over her lap, preparing for him to board and force her off. She was determined to scream and draw as much attention as possible but didn’t hold much hope for help from authorities. He no doubt possessed extradition papers and as soon as they realized her identity was false, the police would hand her over to him.

Maybe luck was with her because the train eased forward. She closed her eyes, daring to hope it was too late for him to board. She opened them again quickly, knowing she had to keep him in sight. Her heart leaped when a uniformed employee stopped Atar as he tried to board. The train picked up speed while he argued with the man and she let her stiff posture relax slightly.

When he shook his head and turned away, she dared to breathe again. For now, she had a reprieve. The train gained momentum and she laid her head against the thickly padded seat, allowing the tension in her nerves to dissipate. She had evaded him again.

But for how long? He would keep coming. Crazy as it sounded, he must have some sort of mental fix on her as he had claimed to be able to keep finding her. Wherever she went, she wouldn’t be able to escape him.

She didn’t think geographic distance posed a problem for his ability, so even fleeing to America or Australia wouldn’t stop him from coming for her. She would spend the rest of her life on the run. If he stopped pursuing her, Anca would send someone else. She was convinced Nikia was a threat.

The pounding in her head made her acknowledge she was. Her control was tenuous and she feared Illiana would eventually overpower her again. When her mother’s mind obliterated her own, she would be dangerous once more.

She bit back a hysterical laugh. She was the only thing standing between Illiana and her quest for power. With her fledgling strength and inability to withstand the

migraines for more than a few hours at a time, what chance did she have? She should return to Corsova and let Anca deal with the situation, even if it meant her death.

Tears burned her eyes when she contemplated that course of action. It would be for the best, perhaps, but she couldn't do it. Not yet. She had barely had any time to experience life. It wasn't fair to expect her to voluntarily surrender her body just yet, even to stop her mother. She would later, if she couldn't control Illiana any longer.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. She had no way of knowing when Illiana would overwhelm her. Unless she could eradicate all traces of her mother, she had to return to Corsova while still lucid.

Nikia's eyes snapped open when she experienced a glimmer of hope. Perhaps the answer rested with her grandmother's people, in Minsk. If anyone would know how to banish Illiana, surely someone there would. They would help her. They had to.

Just having a plan filled Nikia with a sense of peace and she was able to relax completely. She closed her eyes and dozed during the train ride from Zurich to Milan, vaguely planning how she would evade Atar long enough to catch a flight to Minsk. She must have a few hours on him, so she would be able to go to the airport, buy a ticket and be in Belarus before he could orient himself to her position. Once the threat of Illiana was removed, she would have no reason to fear returning to Corsova. Surely, Anca would give her the benefit of doubt if she returned voluntarily with an account of her mother's possession and subsequent vanquishing.

## Chapter 4

The train station in Milan was busy. It was early evening, and many commuters were milling about. She kept her possessions close to her body and decided to stop long enough to buy a bag for her clothes and cash. It would be safer and more convenient to travel that way.

Despite her circumspection, she couldn't help looking up at the skylights in the ceiling, where glass covered the steel beams, allowing glimpses of the first stars in the darkening twilight. It was a beautiful sight, and the architecture temporarily enraptured her.

She tore her gaze from the ceiling when she felt someone pulling on her garment bag. A young woman stood in front of her, trying to wrestle away the carrier. Nikia held on, knowing she could afford to lose the clothes but not the envelope of money and miscellaneous identification she had put in the zipped bag right before getting off the train.

She pulled hard, knocking the woman to the ground. When Nikia saw her in the light from an overhead lamp, she realized it was just a teenager, who couldn't be older than fifteen. She looked up and saw two uniformed *polizia* headed their way. "Get out of here, kid." It wasn't entirely kindness that prompted her to give the girl a break. She didn't have time to deal with the police.

The girl just sat there, staring up at her with a look of confusion and a hint of suspicion. It was obvious she didn't understand English. Nikia tried German and garnered another blank look. She didn't bother with Corsovan, the only other language in which she was fluent. She tried to remember any Italian phrases but all that came to mind was how to say she didn't speak Italian, and *litro*, which was a liter. Neither was useful for the situation and she gave up on verbal communication.

She pointed in the direction of the *polizia*, and the girl finally caught her urgency. She scrambled to her feet and rushed off through the crowd, as Nikia turned away, seeking to avoid the authorities. She groaned when she saw another uniformed *polizia* grab the young hoodlum by the collar of her jacket.

She kept going, determined to avoid the situation but had no choice about stopping when one of the officers put a hand on her arm. He spoke something in Italian and she said, "*Non parlo Italiano.*"

"*Si, Signorina.*" He switched to English, with a thick accent. "Please come with me."

She shook her head. "Why?"

"The girl—" He pointed to the teenager trying to free herself from the other officer's hold. "You must file a complaint."

“Really, I don’t have the time.”

He frowned. “She is a repeat offender. You must.”

Nikia didn’t think she was required to do anything but didn’t know how to extricate herself. She ended up walking beside the officer into the main part of the station. She paused momentarily at her first sight of the sheer beauty of the vaulted ceiling, made from decoratively carved brown stone, interspersed with skylights in the ceiling every few feet. Suspended brass lamps completed the picture, giving the building charm.

He led her into a private office, along with the girl, who was still trying to fight the officer, even in handcuffs. She shouted and appeared to be cursing in her native tongue.

The officer sat her down at a desk and removed his hat. He was young and handsome. Nikia’s eyes strayed to the pulse at his throat and her stomach growled. It had been hours since she ate at the hotel in Zurich and even longer since partaking of blood. The craving came on so strong she started to perspire. Why here, why now? Why did this young man, a member of the *polizia*, have to be so appealing?

“This will not take long, *Signorina*.” He launched into a series of questions.

Nikia answered as quickly as she could. She was aware of the girl screaming from a nearby office, spicing up her dialog with snatches of English expletives. By the time the officer finished questioning her, his face was bright red with embarrassment. Which only served to heighten her hunger, making her even more aware of the blood pounding in his veins and staining his neck and cheeks. She whimpered and her headache increased in severity.

“*Signorina*?” He extended a hand. “Are you feeling ill?”

She waved a hand, using the other to cradle her head. “I have a migraine. Are we finished?”

“*Si*.”

She didn’t bother with pleasantries as she gathered up her bag and left the office. Her eyes fell on the large clock mounted on the wall and she cursed when she realized she had lost almost an hour. Atar must have caught the next train after hers. She didn’t know when that one had left Zurich, so she approached the ticket counter. The man behind the counter looked bored as he waited on the customers in front of her. His expression didn’t change when she approached.

“Hello. Can you tell me when the next train from Zurich is due to arrive?”

He looked at a sheet of paper. “Fifty minutes, *Signorina*.” His English was so thick as to be barely comprehensible.

She cringed. “When is the next train leaving?”

“Where do you wish to go?”

“It doesn’t matter. I just need the next train.”

He turned to his computer. “There is a train leaving for Rome in twenty minutes.”



"I'll take one ticket." Nikia fumbled for the stack of Euros she had tucked into the pocket of her pants, along with her passport. She didn't need it to pass from Milan to Rome, but the station required picture ID. It was easier to give it than try to manipulate the man's mind with her head pounding so ferociously again.

When she had the ticket and knew she was supposed to go to Platform Four, Nikia left the line and went to one of the small shops. She purchased a carryon bag and ducked into the nearest ladies' room. In the largest stall, she transferred her clothes, money and all identification into the suitcase, save for the items in her pocket.

She took time to freshen up briefly before leaving the restroom. She had just enough time to grab a sandwich from a vending machine before making her way to Platform Four. She had been onboard less than five minutes when the train pulled out. She had been so focused on the passing time and of Atar's impending arrival that her shoulders seemed to have frozen in a permanent clench. It took several deep breaths for her to relax even a little.

She sighed, knowing there was little she could do for the moment. Perhaps in Rome, she would have a greater head start and be able to give him the slip long enough to board a flight for Minsk.

She opened her sandwich and took a bite of the stale white bread and graying roast beef. She tried to pretend it was as satisfying as a glass of Corsovan "wine" would have been but the sandwich did little to curb her appetite.

She covered the sandwich and put it on her tray, intending to dispose of it in the trash when she got up. She leaned back in the seat and tried to ease the pounding in her head. She should spend the four-and-a-half hour journey resting but was too keyed up with the hunger growing by the minute.

After an hour, Nikia could no longer think about anything except feeding. The need was so compulsory that she wondered if Illiana had magnified her appetite in an attempt to weaken her. She couldn't risk getting fragile enough to allow Illiana to take over. She had to feed. When a young woman two aisles down got up and made her way to the restroom at the end of the berth, Nikia followed her, hoping she would have a chance to sup lightly from the girl.

The swaying of the car from side to side made Nikia lightheaded as she walked down the aisle. By the time she arrived in the facilities, she had to rest against the door. Her hand brushed the knob and she was relieved to find a lock on the main door. She found the strength to stand straight and walk forward, ducking down to look for feet in any of the three cubicles. Only one was occupied – presumably by the woman she had followed into the bathroom.

Nikia returned to the door and clicked the lock. Then she went to the sink and pretended to be washing her hands while the girl finished up. When she opened the stall door and emerged, it was all Nikia could do to keep from attacking her. Instead, she forced herself to remain by the sink, until the woman was within easy reach.

She grabbed her quickly, pulling her close. Nikia pushed the girl up against the wall, clapping her hand over her mouth. She caught the girl's eyes. "You aren't going to scream, are you?"

Slowly, the girl shook her head. Nikia eased her hand away from the girl's mouth. "What's your name?"

"Kieta," she said in a distant voice, as if drugged. Her eyes were out-of-focus and she seemed to be deep in the dream state Nikia imposed.

"Kieta, I won't hurt you." She spoke in a soothing tone, even as she lowered her mouth to the young woman's neck. She breathed in the mingled scent of floral perfume and blood. Her head spun. She pushed the shirt off the girl's shoulder and her teeth extended. She buried her mouth against the girl's shoulder, seeking out a less dangerous vein to feed from than the carotid. She found one with her tongue and her teeth punctured the vein seconds later, bringing a rush of sweet blood.

Nikia drank lightly, denying Illiana's commands to drain the girl. Between trying to check her own consumption and ignore her mother's orders, she lost track of part of herself. She was aware of the blood flowing into her mouth and the never-ending pounding of her head but Kieta's moans gradually filtered through her haze. She broke away from the girl when she realized they were sounds of pleasure.

Her mouth dropped open with shock when she discovered she was caressing the woman's unfettered breast through the thin cotton T-shirt. More disconcerting was the realization that her panties were damp and she was breathing hard with arousal. Her mother's commands became less demanding, more sensuous, as she whispered in Nikia's mind about how pleasurable it would be to fuck the girl.

Her hand trembled and she flicked her thumb across Kieta's nipple. Nikia sensed danger but couldn't stop herself from leaning forward to kiss the girl on the mouth. As Kieta's tongue touched hers, she moaned with need. Her mind replaced Kieta with an image of Atar and her pussy flooded with heat.

*"Drink from her. Take her. Drain her."*

The words whispered through her mind but even couched in a seductive tone, they were enough to bring instant awareness. With a cry of dismay, Nikia backed away from the girl. She had enough forethought to lock gazes with Kieta before giving in to her panic. "You won't remember this. Now get out."

When the girl had gone, Nikia slumped against the sink. She splashed cold water on her mouth, both to remove stains of copper down her chin and to wash away the taste of Kieta.

She wasn't attracted to women and the kiss scared her but it wasn't what caused the fear. Knowing Illiana had been able to almost seize control of her again was what made her blood run cold. While she had been busy feeding and trying to ignore her mother's darker impulses, Illiana had finessed her way through Nikia's defenses. Another minute or two and she would have won.

Exhaustion weighed heavily on Nikia when she made her way back to her seat. She collapsed into it and closed her eyes to slits. She paused to scrutinize Kieta, who seemed confused and upset as she spoke to the young man beside her. She didn't think the girl would remember anything but couldn't be certain of her mental powers, not after Illiana breaching them.

It was time to surrender herself to Atar and return to Corsova. She couldn't be sure she could hold off Illiana and she couldn't risk countless lives for a taste of freedom.

\* \* \* \* \*

She waited for him to find her at a coffeehouse near the train station. Nikia had been there since the train arrived at three a.m., sitting on one of the patio chairs, killing time. When the owner came down from his apartment above the shop at six, he hadn't blinked an eye. Instead, he had served her rich Italian coffee, along with a pitcher of real cream and kept the cup filled during her vigil.

It was a little after seven when she saw Atar approaching. His stance was wary, as if he suspected a trap, with her sitting out in the open as she was. She tried to give him a little smile, for reassurance. "I've been expecting you."

He arched a brow but said nothing else. She frowned when he took something from his pocket. Nikia squinted to identify the object. Her eyes widened when he lifted it higher and pointed it at her. She identified the Taser seconds before the two probes penetrated her skin. A jolt of electricity followed the sharp pain, sending Nikia into unconsciousness in a matter of seconds.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nikia experienced a sense of *déjà vu* upon waking. Once again, she was lying on her back, with her hands above her head, handcuffed to a headboard of a strange bed. There were some differences, of course—like the gag in her mouth and her complete lack of clothing. Sometime after bringing her here, he had stripped her bare. She writhed with a combination of humiliation and excitement at the thought.

She lifted her head to examine the room, deciding not to let him know how intimidating it was to be naked before him. From the furnishings in the room, such as the white carpet, gilt-edged mirror on the wall and dark-cherry furniture, she determined they were in a three or four-star hotel room. One thing her visual search didn't reveal was Atar's presence. Where was he? She craned her neck in an awkward angle and saw him sitting in the corner in a straight-back chair. His gaze didn't waver from hers. His colorless eyes managed to smolder with anger and repressed desire. She

shivered as they raked her from head to foot. She tried to speak, not knowing what she would say but the gag muffled her words, making them unintelligible.

Her attempt to talk received a reaction. He rose from the chair and walked toward her. He had the air of a hunter and she knew she was his prey. The thought inspired more desire than terror and she briefly wondered if Illiana was taking over again. She frowned when realizing her mother wouldn't have any attraction to Atar. It was purely her own urges driving her. She met that realization with mingled relief and dread. If she was the one who felt this way, there was no one to rein her in and no one to blame.

He stopped when he reached the bed, standing over her with a grim expression. His first words were a shock. "Why did you have to make this complicated, Nikia?"

Her eyes widened and she tried to speak again, to refute his claim. If she had known Illiana was so close to regaining control, she might have surrendered the first time he captured her. Since she hadn't known, why would she have? She settled for glaring at him.

"This was supposed to be easy." His hand settled on her shoulder, rubbing in gentle circles that were a distinct contrast to his almost-angry tone. "How did you get in my mind?" He frowned. "No one has ever been able to do that, not even my mother."

She tried to shrug, to indicate she didn't know. It hadn't been that difficult but she didn't think he would appreciate hearing that, especially if he was impervious to mind-control from others, usually.

His voice lowered. "I should be outraged at the violation, and I am, but that's not what bothers me most." His hand slipped lower and his fingertips grazed the top of one of her breasts. "What angers me more than anything is that you seduced me into unconsciousness, left me in a state of frustration and stole my blood." His voice had risen as he delivered the statement and it took on an icy tinge when he said, "Now, it's your turn to be teased and frustrated."

She swallowed a lump in her throat and tried to protest, not sure what she would say if he removed the gag. Should she apologize or would he take that as pandering? In truth, she owed him an apology for leaving him unconscious and taking some of his blood but what right did he have to just take her against her will—then or now? Anger fired her blood and she struggled against the handcuffs, squirming and arching her back in an attempt to gain enough leverage to free herself. To her surprise, the slats of the bed creaked, although the cuffs didn't budge. She was about to try again with even more force, if she could muster it but froze when Atar's hand settled on her breast. He held her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, pinching lightly. Nikia gasped when he pulled. Tingles radiated through her, causing her stomach to quiver and her nipples to harden.

He chuckled. "You might hate admitting it but you aren't immune to my touch." He tugged once more before gentling his hold, to lightly roll the nipple between his fingers. "Maybe it wasn't all an act when you set out to seduce me for your freedom in Constanta." His expression indicated he would grant no quarter, even if that were the

case. He seemed determined to carry out his erotic revenge before returning her to Corsova.

She refused to beg for mercy. Maybe she didn't even want to escape what he planned to do to her. Was she depraved for longing for his touch, even knowing what he thought of her? Did it matter that he was touching her for all the wrong reasons, as long as it felt good?

She closed her eyes when he cupped her breast in his hand, pressing his palm against the hard nipple. She arched her back, seeking more but he lifted his hand as she did so. Once again, the pressure was only minimal, making her writhe with need.

Nikia opened her eyes in time to see him lowering his head. She moaned when he moved his hand from her breast to her stomach and his tongue darted out to swirl around her nipple. Her pussy convulsed when he suckled lightly, while tracing one of her ribs with his thumb.

His tongue forged a wet path up her breast, across her chest and to the hollow of her throat. Atar paused to flick his tongue against the sensitive spot, causing her to bite down on the gag to keep from crying out. His mouth moved higher and his tongue traced the outside of her ear, pausing to suck the non-pierced lobe into his mouth. She whimpered at the sensations overtaking her. It seemed important to escape what he was doing—and what she wanted him to do. She couldn't let him do this, could she? She wanted him to care about her if he made love to her. She couldn't let him take her if he didn't like or trust her. And he didn't. There was no way he could after their first meeting and all that he must have heard about her. He refused to believe Illiana had possessed her, so that left him with the belief she had voluntarily committed all the evil acts of which she stood accused. How could he even want her, thinking she was like that?

The answer was obvious. He didn't really want her. He only wanted revenge for the way she had left him in Constanta. She might not be able to stop him but she refused to enjoy it.

The gentle touch of his mouth against hers undid all her good intentions. Nikia's lips softened against his and she hardly noticed the thin strip of cotton filling her mouth as he licked her upper lip.

His gaze locked with hers and her eyes widened at the vulnerability she saw there.

Atar brought a hand up to caress her cheek. He lifted his mouth from hers but his breath still whispered across her cheek. "You are a puzzle, Nikia. You have an air of innocence about you that enchants me but it makes no sense. I know what you've done. You should repulse me, and you do on many levels, but you also fascinate me." He stood up, sighing. "I don't like this attraction I feel for you. I don't trust it either."

She struggled to speak, emitting several muffled sounds through the gag.

He hesitated and then his hand moved from her cheek to the gag. "I probably shouldn't remove this. I still don't know how you got into my mind. If it was some

power using your voice, I'm a fool to remove this precaution." With a shake of his head, he pulled the gag from her mouth and left it around her neck.

The unrehearsed words spilled from her in a rush. "Please help me. I can't control her any longer. I need your help."

He lifted a brow. "What do you want from me?"

She hesitated, torn between voicing what her body urged and what common sense insisted on. She licked her dry lips. "Please take me..." She trailed off, noting the way his eyes widened at her husky invitation. She wanted to let the words hang there, to see if he would act on them in a state of desire, rather than revenge but her mouth opened once more. "To Belarus. I need to go to a village near Minsk."

The heat that had flared in his eyes dimmed and Atar eyed her dispassionately. "What's in Minsk?"

She felt a stir of hope. Maybe he was ready to listen, to help her. "My grandmother's people. Surely, they'll know how to help me rid myself of Illiana."

He snorted. "Are you sticking with that ridiculous tale? Don't you think it would be better to own up to what you've done?"

She glared at him. "I haven't done anything."

He sighed. "There is that part of your nature that vexes me. I would have an easier time dealing with my attraction to you if you weren't a manipulative liar."

"Oh, it's okay if I'm a murderer but I can't be a liar?" She rolled her eyes. "You're no help. Can we just return to Corsova and end this farce?"

He nodded. "We have tickets on a flight leaving in three hours." His expression changed to one of passion. "That gives us plenty of time for me to discover if you've bewitched me into wanting you."

Her mouth dropped open. "If I've what? Why would I do such a thing?"

He sat on the bed beside her, resting his palm on her stomach. "I have a feeling you will do anything if there's an advantage for you." His hand moved upward, to settle under her breast, flicking his thumb across her nipple. "Only this time, there's no gain for you. I'm going to discover if this attraction between us is honest and I think you'll know the answer too, before we leave this hotel room."

Nikia whimpered when Atar brought his other hand to her thigh, sliding it upward in a motion mimicking the path of his hand settling on her breast. As his right hand flirted with the curls shielding her pussy, his left grasped her breast and squeezed. He took the nipple between his fingers and pulled almost gently but with enough force to border on pain.

She tried once more to reason with him. "You don't have to do this. I'm sorry I invaded your mind but I didn't make you do anything you weren't willing to do. You found me attractive before I entered your psyche."

His hands paused and he looked thoughtful. "That's true but my knowledge of what kind of person you were helped me control any impulses I felt. It was only after

you violated me that I found myself thinking of you constantly, hungering for you." He dipped his head lower, brushing his lips against hers before adding, "I ache for you, Nikia."

"I didn't do anything." But hadn't she? She had forced him to think he needed to fuck her to be satisfied. Had she caused his need for her to increase? Was this her fault?

"Hmm." A finger on his right hand dipped between her pussy lips, seeking out her clit. "Perhaps not, but you will."

Out of desperation, Nikia closed her eyes and tried to enter Atar's mind again. She recoiled when she ran into a wall that blocked her from going further. She withdrew, opening her eyes when she heard his low chuckle.

"Not so successful this time, were you?" There was a thread of anger his amused tone didn't mask. "I don't know how you did it to start with but you won't again."

She didn't know either. Maybe Illiana had been the one to breach his mental barriers. Her mother had always been powerful, having augmented her natural vampiric psychic abilities with knowledge from Elsa's people. Perhaps the only way to reach Atar again was to surrender control to Illiana. She could escape...

No! She couldn't risk it. Nikia could feel her mother's strength increasing with each passing hour. She couldn't allow Illiana even a temporary surge in power, lest she not be able to stop her from taking over completely.

She squirmed when another question occurred to her. Did she want to escape? Atar's touch was expert and she was drawn to him. Why not have sex with him? Whom would it hurt?

She shied away from the notion that she would be hurting herself and him by allowing this purely physical interlude to take place. Why would sex scathe either of them? She wasn't in love with him and he definitely didn't love her. In fact, he seemed to almost loathe her. When his fingers circled her slick clit with slow circles, she resolved to stop thinking. This might be the only chance she had for sex with someone she found attractive and she wasn't going to turn him away because he was irate with her. In some ways, his smoldering anger thrilled her. It was empowering to know he still found her sexy and desirable, even in spite of what he believed she had done. It was a new experience for her, to personally feel sexy and want her partner.

She parted her legs wider and arched against his hand, inviting him to explore deeper. Atar's finger slipped lower, tracing her slit, until it plunged into the opening of her pussy. She moaned at the gentle invasion and thrust her hips up again, taking him in deeper, wishing it were his cock instead of his finger.

He chuckled as his head lowered, bringing his mouth against her breast. His hand gave way to his tongue. It swirled around her nipple in teasing circles, causing spasms of pleasure to ripple through her.

She tugged at the cuffs, wanting to free her hands so she could bury them in his long hair, to see if it was as soft as it appeared. She wanted to hold his head against her breast so he couldn't stop laving the sensitive bud.

A second finger joined the first in her pussy and he began to pump them in concert with his tongue flicking over her nipple. "Atar." His name was a sigh on her lips. She arched her hips and his fingers went deeper inside her. At the same time, his teeth grazed her nipple, causing it to pulse. She whimpered, wordlessly asking for more.

Perhaps he interpreted her sounds of pleasure correctly, because his mouth moved lower, tracing a wet path from her breast to her navel. He paused to press a light kiss over her belly button before moving lower. When his tongue connected with her pubic bone, shudders racked Nikia's body and she exhaled harshly. Anticipation made her dizzy and her thighs clenched of their own accord.

"Nervous?" he asked against her mound, stirring her pubic hair with his breath.

"Yes." It was like being a virgin again. Others had tasted her pussy but none she would have chosen for herself. No man had ever ventured between her thighs. In fact, she was a virgin, technically. The physical barrier was long gone but no man's cock had ever filled her pussy. Her stomach churned with excitement and a little fear when his mouth went lower.

His tongue outlined her lips without straying inside. She squirmed under the light touch and once again tested the handcuffs. They held fast but the bed slats groaned again and she thought she heard a splintering sound before Atar's tongue distracted her by dipping into her pussy, to probe her opening. "Higher," she managed to say through clenched teeth. She needed his mouth on her clit, stoking the fire building inside her. His teasing touches were driving her insane.

He lifted his head briefly. "Maybe."

She groaned with frustration. The annoyance didn't abate when his tongue returned to her pussy, as he once again moved his tongue in a line down one of her lips, paused to flick the tip into her opening and then worked his way back up the other lip. Her body shook with the force of her need, and anger stirred at the callous way he tormented her. "Haven't you gotten your revenge yet?"

His mouth stilled and he hesitated. Finally, Atar looked up. "No. I'm enjoying drawing this out." He cupped her pussy with his hand before meeting her eyes. "Your slick pussy tells me you're enjoying it too." His pinkie dipped inside, to brush against her clit. "Or is your pussy lying?"

She glared at him but didn't bother with a verbal answer. What could she say? It was impossible to deny the physical proof of her arousal. His touch made her burn but his slow, teasing pace was what had her protesting. Why couldn't he shed his clothes and fuck her until they were both mindless? It was clear that was what they each wanted. "Why draw this out? You know you can have me. I'm at your mercy, so take me. Fuck me."

His brow furrowed. "It doesn't sit well, having you at my mercy." With a sigh, he withdrew his hand.



By the look on his face and the way he seemed to draw into himself, she could see he had finished tormenting her. Her stomach dropped, because it appeared that he was finished, in general, as he got to his feet. "What are you doing?"

"I thought I could do this." He paced the narrow area between the two beds, running a hand through his disheveled hair. He paused to stare down at her. "I told myself you deserved whatever I did to you."

She licked her lips. "Maybe that's true."

One side of his mouth quirked. "Probably, but it doesn't matter. Call it rape or forced seduction—neither sits well with me."

She swallowed a lump in her throat, surprised by how his rejection hurt. "Don't you want me?"

He hesitated, and it seemed as though he wouldn't answer. Finally, as he resumed pacing, with his back to her, he said, "I don't know. I can't tell what I want and what you put in my head. My body's throbbing for you but my brain can't sort it all out."

She closed her eyes, giving up. What could she do in the situation? If she begged him for sex, he might comply but would likely be even more mistrustful of her in the morning. Atar would probably think she had forced him to fuck her, hoping to gain his compliance.

And she needed his help. She didn't think she would be able to escape from him again and her time was running out. If she couldn't convince him to take her to her grandmother's people, either she would die in Corsova for her mother's crimes or Illiana would once again take over her body. She couldn't allow that. Even death was a better option.

She still held a shred of hope that Atar would listen to her. It was the only hope of which she had to cling.

## Chapter 5

Two hours later, the ache in her pussy, from not receiving fulfillment, throbbed in concert with the migraine building in her head when Nikia accompanied Atar out of a taxi that had ferried them to Rome's Leonardo da Vinci airport. His hand fell on her upper arm and she looked up at him.

He drew her to the side of the building, out of the flow of traffic. "It would be much simpler if I can remove your handcuffs. It will be less hassle all the way around but I'm reluctant to do so." His eyes bored into hers. "I don't know if I can trust you."

She resisted the urge to beg. "I swear I won't try to escape." She had committed to returning to Corsova, if that's what it took to stop Illiana and she meant to do so. She still felt her best hope lay in Belarus but persuading Atar of that was proving impossible.

Atar's eyes assessed her for another half-minute before he reached into his pocket to remove the key. He lifted the jacket from her arms that he had used to conceal the cuffs and unlocked them.

She flexed her wrists, enjoying the freedom. In the hotel room, he had removed them just long enough for her to shower and dress, before replacing them with her hands cuffed in front of her. She rubbed each wrist in turn while Atar slipped the cuffs into a side pocket of his carryon.

When he stood up again, he put his arm through hers, drawing her close to his side. "Don't make me regret extending you a margin of trust, Nikia."

She nodded, disconcerted at the way she mentally squirmed away from disappointing him.

They proceeded through check-in with little trouble, other than a twenty-minute wait in the line. At the security station, a clerk searched and x-rayed their carryon bags. Nikia barely bit back an embarrassed laugh when the young man removed the handcuffs from the side-pocket before hastily stuffing them back in. From the way his ears turned pink and the look he gave both of them, it was clear he inferred the cuffs were used in some kinky sexual practice.

A blush warmed her cheeks when she realized the young man wasn't far off the mark. Both times she had worn them, she had ended up shackled to a bed. Her body reacted to the memory predictably enough. She tried to ignore the twinge shooting through her pussy as she followed Atar onto the plane.

Soon, they sat in the middle of the plane. The smallish seats forced a level of imposed intimacy he probably wasn't comfortable with and one she shouldn't have welcomed the way she did. Nikia shifted in the seat, bringing her knee against his. She

pretended not to see the look he shot her. The view of the tarmac drew her gaze and she watched employees scurrying about in the bright afternoon sun. It seared her eyes and increased the aching in her head. With a sigh, she turned away, resting her head against the seat, with her eyes closed.

A few minutes later, the flight attendant went through the safety protocol. Nikia tuned it out after fastening her seatbelt. Her head pounded vigorously now and she swore she could hear her mother whispering in the back of her mind, although the words were gibberish.

She kept her eyes closed and tried to ignore the pain as the plane taxied down the runway. Her stomach jolted with nausea when the plane went airborne and she tightened her hands into fists. The migraine wasn't responding to her attempts at relaxation. Relief swept through her when an attendant stopped by their seat a few minutes later to ask if they wanted a drink. "Bottled water and Tylenol, please."

She looked at Atar when the attendant left them. "What?"

He frowned, and his expression bespoke concern. "You're pale and trembling. Are you afraid of flying?"

She shook her head, regretting the movement when pain flared at the base of her neck and traveled down her spine. "No. Migraine." It was an effort to speak and even more of an effort to accept the water and package of tablets the woman brought her.

Atar must have sensed her weakness, because he took the water and opened the cap. Nikia fumbled open the packaging to free the tablets. She popped them in her mouth and gave him a grateful look when he held the bottle for her so she could drink. He still appeared concerned but there was a hint of suspicion in his gaze. It saddened her that he couldn't get beyond his distrust of her, despite his desire for her.

She leaned back again, closing her eyes. The whisper had increased in pitch, audibly filling her mind.

*He doesn't trust you because you can't be trusted.*

She resisted the urge to scream her response aloud. It struck her as insane to be having the conversation in her mind but at least no one else was aware of what was happening. *You're the one who can't be trusted.*

The laugh she had grown to hate filled her mind.

*How right you are, dear daughter but no one else believes you.*

*I don't care.*

*Aren't you tired of the struggle?*

Lead weights imprisoned Nikia's eyes. She couldn't open her eyelids when she tried. Yes. She heard the weakness in her mental reply simultaneously with feeling Illiana's surge of strength.

*Then surrender. Sleep, Nikia. Rest and rid yourself of this burden. When you awaken, all will be as it should.*

Sleep slipped over Nikia, bringing with it a sense of freedom and weightlessness. She floated on a dark cloud of worry-free joy, letting her troubles slip away. It would be much easier to give in. She was so tired of fighting, knowing she would lose. It was time to stop resisting....

“Nikia?” Atar’s hand brushed against her forehead and his voice was low, meant only for her ears. “Can you hear me? Are you asleep?”

A glimpse of light appeared in the darkness surrounding her. She no longer felt free and weightless. Instead, the shadows seemed to be closing around her, with their weight crushing her. She couldn’t draw a deep breath.

“Nikia?” The concern in his tone brought more light to the black void where she hovered. The entire world trembled when Atar shook her shoulder. Nikia reached out for his hand but seemed to be encased in molasses. She moved much too slowly to make the connection.

*Give up!* Illiana’s shriek echoed through her mind. Gone was the seductive, soothing tone she had used to lull Nikia into this trancelike state. *You can’t win.*

But she wasn’t ready to concede defeat. The fight was futile but all she needed to do was buy time. In a flash of clarity, she knew she wouldn’t meekly return to Corsova and accept punishment for her mother’s crimes. She had to get to Belarus. She owed herself a chance at life. Whatever it took, she had to go there.

Nikia struggled against the essence imprisoning her, whimpering. When Illiana tried to force her way into her mind, Nikia lashed out at her. Her newfound conviction aided her in attempting to repel her mother, giving her new strength.

She cried out when Illiana tried again, shaking her body with the force of her efforts. Nikia wasn’t sure what was reality and what was a trick imposed by her mother. Her body trembled under the onslaught and she reached out for Atar. Her hand closed around his, bringing a renewed sense of order. As Illiana tried once more, she repelled her with a shred of strength she summoned from a hidden reserve.

She was weak and exhausted. Tremors still coursed through her and darkness tried to enshroud her. Cautiously, Nikia tested the blackness to see if Illiana’s presence lurked inside, waiting to consume her. She found nothing but tranquility and allowed herself to surrender to unconsciousness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Atar stared in dismay as Nikia collapsed forward in her seat. Convulsions shook her body and he reached out for her without thought. She nestled into his arms as though made to fit there but the tremors racked through her just the same. She murmured something but he couldn’t make out what she said. He leaned forward, trying to make out her words and recoiled when they clarified.

"Atar," she said repeatedly, thrashing in his arms. It was almost as if she was trying to free herself from bonds he couldn't see.

He jumped with surprise when the flight attendant touched his arm. He looked up at her, knowing her frightened gaze mirrored his.

"*Signor*, shall I ask the pilot to return us to da Vinci?"

He hesitated, torn between the need to return Nikia to Corsova as quickly as possible, before doing something crazy like taking her to bed and the need to ensure her safety. "I..."

As his silence lapsed, her trembling subsided. He looked down again, brushing the hair off her forehead. Her pallor alarmed him but she lay quietly now, appearing to be asleep, rather than in the throes of a seizure. "No, she's fine now."

The dark-haired attendant's uncertainty was blatant in her expression. "Are you convinced?"

He nodded, brushing aside the hint of impatience she inspired. He wanted to be alone with Nikia, not have the girl hovering over him. "Yes. I'll let you know if we require assistance."

With a soft sound expressing her disapproval, the girl turned away to the next aisle, leaving Atar staring down at the woman in his arms.

Her cinnamon-brown hair was a ragged slash across her forehead, falling back into place each time he brushed it aside. Dark smudges under her eyes betrayed lack of rest, as did the lines crimping the corners of her mouth.

He traced the contours of her lips with his eyes and then followed them with the pad of his thumb. A sigh escaped her and her breath fanned over his digit, sending flutters of desire shooting through him. He shifted his position, trying to ease the pressure of his cock when it swelled against the confines of his jeans.

He should put her back in her seat. It was wrong to clasp her this way, to allow himself to feel aroused by her presence, when she was unconscious. Still, he couldn't seem to relinquish his hold.

Atar stroked the softness of her cheek, once again turning over in his mind the picture of the woman she was supposed to be, compared to the one he had seen during his pursuit. The two images didn't mesh. Could there be any truth to her assertion that Illiana had possessed her? Was he denying the real Nikia a chance at a normal life by not taking her to Belarus, as she had begged him to do? Was he taking an innocent woman back to the Protector to face life imprisonment or death?

Nikia's body relaxed completely when she slipped into a deep sleep, causing her to curl closer. Unconsciously, he tightened his grip on her. His body had decided he couldn't let her go, even as his mind wrestled with indecision.

She twitched in his embrace and he called her name. Concern filled him when another tremor ran through her and he barely bit back a gasp when her eyes snapped open. They weren't the green he was accustomed to. Instead, dark pools of matte coal

burned from her pale face. Her lips twisted into a grotesque parody of a smile. "Hunter to prey, die today." The voice was haggard and raw but rich with malevolence.

Immediately, her eyes closed again and her body relaxed. Sweat poured down Atar's body as he tried to convince himself it hadn't happened. It must have been a trick of the light. No, that didn't explain the strange voice or words.

What if it had happened? What did it prove? Was Nikia truly under the possession of another or had she picked up on his confusion and used it to further her charade? Was any of it real or was she deceiving him?

How could he trust Nikia, knowing what he did about her? His heart might be weak but his mind was not. Everything she had revealed might be true or it might be trickery. How could he follow his heart's urgings and possibly allow a killer to walk free?

With gentle but efficient, movements, Atar returned Nikia to her seat. Mulling it over, he watched her sleep—or pretend to, if she was acting for his benefit. In the end, he could come to no decision, save one. He must maintain a distance between them during the rest of their journey together. When he brought her back to Corsova, he would relate what he knew to the queen and let her make the decision about Nikia's fate.

## Chapter 6

The pain in Nikia's head had eased somewhat when she awakened. It took a moment to realize the catalyst for propelling her from deep sleep was Atar shaking her arm. He wasn't doing so roughly but there was a marked lack of tenderness in the motion too. She gazed up with heavy eyes and her heart acquired the same heaviness when she saw his closed expression. Whatever had happened between them earlier hadn't dropped any of the barriers between them. In fact, he seemed more distant than ever.

She got to her feet, rubbing her eyes. "Where are we?"

"The plane has landed at Ruzyne. The next flight to Constanta is tomorrow morning, so I've booked us into a room at the St. George in the Old Town." Atar removed their carryon bags from the compartment above the seat as he spoke in a crisp tone.

Her eyes followed the bulging muscles of his arms when he lifted the bags. She automatically accepted her bag when he held it out to her. She tore her gaze from his body and took a step around him, heading for the exit of the plane. They were the last two onboard.

She froze when he put his hand on her arm. Turning her head with what she hoped was cool poise, she asked, "What?"

"Don't get so far ahead." He pulled her against him, anchoring his arm around her waist.

Her insides melted at the contact and she licked her lips. Her chin tilted of its own accord, seeking out his mouth. As his head lowered to meet hers, she saw the resistance in his eyes. It bothered her but his lips on hers blotted out all thought. Nikia snuggled closer, threading her free hand through his long locks to anchor him against her. Boldly, she parted his lips and slipped her tongue inside. He tasted of peanuts and whiskey. The combination was pleasant, with a tangy aftertaste.

His pulse resounded through her head, piquing her hunger. She left his mouth to explore his cheek. He muttered something she couldn't understand and seemed on the brink of drawing away. Nikia tightened her hold on his hair, pulling his head back slightly as her mouth drifted lower, with her tongue tasting his skin. He smelled all male and the flavor of his skin was as unique as his blood.

Thinking of his blood caused her stomach to contract and her mouth watered, remembering his sweet taste. Acting on instinct, her mouth went lower, settling over the steady thump of his carotid artery. She was marginally aware of the way he tensed but lust and hunger mingled to blind her to anything but the delicious blood flowing through his vein, just under her teeth. Her bloodteeth descended.

Suddenly, he pushed her away. If she hadn't braced herself against a seat, she would have fallen. She blinked. "What happened?"

"Stay away from me." He snarled the command in a raspy tone. "I knew you couldn't be trusted. Whatever spell you're weaving on me, it won't work."

She shook her head. "I'm not doing anything."

He touched his neck. "You weren't about to feast on me? Steal another bite or two—just enough to incapacitate me so you could slip away?" His expression darkened. "Or perhaps you were going to drain me dry so I couldn't find you again?"

She brushed the hair off her face. "You're so wrong." Her eyes burned with tears but she refused to let them fall. "It was instinct. I'm sorry." She looked away from him, determined not to reveal her hurt feelings. She also wanted to hide the knowledge of what his blood did to her. Otherwise, he might decide to keep her drugged and docile during the rest of the journey at the cost of a bit of his blood.

He snorted, but said nothing else. With an impatient gesture, Atar motioned her to move. Nikia clutched her case, standing erect, struggling to maintain an icy façade. His arm around her came as no surprise this time. Although her body's response was no less immediate, she refused to acknowledge the surge of desire. She accompanied him down the Jetway without a flicker of emotion, though her mind was a mass of confusing feelings.

Ruzyne's terminal was a crush of busy travelers fighting to get to their gates. Nikia drifted alongside Atar, letting him find a path through the passengers meeting with or parting from friends and family. As they passed a woman in her twenties, embracing an older woman who looked very much like her, Nikia experienced a pang of regret that she would never have that type of relationship with her mother. If she succeeded in banishing Illiana's presence, there could be no relationship of any kind. Without a body to inhabit, her essence would disappear.

Flashes of the worst deeds of her mother's life came to Nikia, lessening her regret for the opportunity they never had. Illiana was evil. Had she not chosen to start over with the possession of her daughter's body at Nikia's birth, she still wouldn't have been the motherly type. Nikia had only ever been a means to an end and when Illiana realized she had incorrectly figured the time of conception to have Nikia be the acknowledged heir to the Protectorate, her daughter had failed to be useful in any capacity, except as a way for Illiana to escape the punishment she deserved.

So engrossed was she in introspection that Nikia was surprised to find they had arrived at the passport counter. Atar had released his hold on her but she knew he kept his senses attuned to her. Should she try to run, he would follow. She remained by his side as he handed over their documents, knowing now wasn't the opportune time to flee. She spoke only once, to answer a question of the attendant and then returned to her silence.

Heavy thoughts weighed on her mind while she walked beside him through the terminal, heading for the exit. The gulf between them was insurmountable. She must



accept that. He wouldn't aid her in returning to Minsk and she couldn't return to Corsova without trying to free herself from Illiana. Her decision to wait for Atar and go meekly without protest had been prompted by terror at losing control of Illiana. After her confrontation with her mother and having a chance to think, she was more determined than ever to seek out her grandmother's people. If they couldn't help her, she might be lost forever but she couldn't give up without a fight.

The most immediate and difficult task facing her was to elude Atar again. He would be expecting her to try to flee and with his damnable ability to track her telepathically, he would find her easily. In fact, he knew right where she planned to go now, so he wouldn't even need to hone in on her until arriving in Belarus.

With a frown, Nikia studied him as she preceded him through the glass doors, emerging onto the street, where FIX cars lined the curb. She was mulling over her options, discarding most, when Atar took her wrist, breaking her chain of thought. "What?"

"This." With efficient movements, he clicked one side of the handcuffs around her wrist before attaching the other to his.

A breath caught in her throat. Had he read her thoughts by some means he had kept concealed until now?

"I can feel you humming with energy," he commented with an apparent lack of interest as he tugged lightly on her wrist to get her moving. They approached a FIX car and he said, "I'm assuming you're gearing up to run again. Don't waste your time." With that, he opened the car door and slid into the backseat.

She had no choice but to accompany him. The shackle on her wrist ensured that. With a disgruntled look in his direction, she settled against the seat. Closing her eyes in a ruse of sleep, she let her mind wander, hoping to hit on a way to escape her captor.

The hairs on her neck stood up and a tingling sensation moved down her spine. Cold dread swept over Nikia and she sensed danger. She tried to focus, searching for the source but ran into a block. Illiana was deliberately distracting her. She sensed the maniacal glee in her mother and opened her eyes. "Atar..." She trailed off at his bored look. What could she say? If she tried to explain her sense of unease, he would question why she couldn't get a clear picture, with her vampiric abilities. Would he believe her normal mental powers were dulled by the constant struggle and wearying presence of Illiana? Of course not, since he didn't believe Illiana was inside her, fighting for dominance.

He arched a brow but didn't speak. Eventually, he looked away from her.

She let the silence settle. It was almost comforting, despite the tense set of her body as it reacted instinctively to a danger she couldn't clarify. In the quiet, she could pretend Atar didn't mistrust her. It could be the contentment of afterglow, as they lay in each other's arms after making love.

"What brings you to Prague?" the driver asked in thickly accented English, breaking the silence as effectively as a gunshot. He had spent considerable time

arranging each strand of his dark hair into a precise style before slicking it to his skull with some type of gel. He wore a white shirt and dark tie. Looking more like a businessperson, he presented an incongruous picture of a FIX car driver.

She jumped at his voice and her tension increased tenfold when she met his dark eyes in the mirror. His tone was friendly but the gaze directed at them was calculating. Panic cut through her and she hovered on the edge of reading the man's thoughts.

*No, not yet.*

She flinched when Illiana's voice echoed through her head. It alarmed her further but for a different reason. Previously, she hadn't been able to directly communicate with her mother unless she was in a weakened state. After her rest on the flight, she should have been refreshed enough to hold Illiana at bay, despite her lack of blood consumption. Fear of her mother distracted Nikia from her awareness of the driver and she focused on fortifying her mind as Atar exchanged small talk with the man.

The drive was short and they stopped before a tall brick structure located near the Old Town Square. The Neoclassic style blended well with the surrounding older structures in Old Town. The pointed spires of the Church of Our Lady of Týn across the street drew Nikia's gaze, making her long wistfully for the ability to fly, so she could perch on the cross positioned between the two towers before soaring away to Belarus.

Atar, obviously in no mood to sightsee, paid the driver and shoved her bag into her arms. "Come on."

She shook her head at his surly tone and followed him to the tall double doors of the hotel. An old-fashioned wood burned sign hung above the opening, suspended by brass chains. It announced in Czech: *Sv. Jiří*. She assumed it translated to St. George.

To her surprise, Atar undid the handcuffs before opening one of the wooden doors. She stood with a straight spine, attempting to scan the Square in what she hoped was a casual manner. People bustled around the Square in a parade of sightseeing and recreation. Could she run fast enough to plunge into one of the large tour groups? Her gaze settled on a small gathering of middle-aged women, all of large body frame and wearing scarlet jackets. Would they shield her long enough to dodge Atar?

A hard laugh escaped Atar, drawing her attention back to him. "If you've finished fantasizing about escaping, we can go in now."

She tilted her chin and turned her head, refusing to look at him. With every ounce of regality she possessed, Nikia swept into the lobby, not waiting for Atar. Her anger carried her to the check-in counter before abandoning her as soon as the man behind the desk asked what name the reservation was in.

Atar stepped up beside her, seeing to the details. Nikia let her gaze wander around the opulent lobby, taking in the rich patina of the hardwood floor. Different shades of the aged wood formed a starburst pattern in the center of the lobby, before giving way to a red carpet that followed the curve of the ornate stairs up to the second floor.

She turned her head to look at the corner of the room and froze when a man standing nearby in a dark suit quickly shielded his face. He gave her the same chill as

the driver, making Nikia shiver as the cold fear physically manifested itself. When she tuned into the sensation, it emanated from all around her. With deceptively casual movements, she turned her body to survey the entire lobby. While pretending to admire the swag decorating the floor-to-ceiling window, she scanned the room by moving only her eyes.

Three men in dark suits mulled around the large area. They weren't near each other but they all had the same look—slick, polished, and ruthless, with cold eyes that watched her surreptitiously without looking up from their various tasks.

She knew to trust her instincts and they told her these men were dangerous. She turned to Atar, touched his shoulder and leaned against him, hoping she gave the appearance of pressing a kiss to his neck. "We can't stay here," she whispered near his ear.

He turned his head to look at her, wearing a frown. "Why? Do the decorative bars on the windows interfere with your escape?"

She ignored the comment, sensing it was a defense mechanism. Atar must have decided to withdraw from her for his own self-preservation. It hurt but she didn't have time to address the issue right now. "We're being followed."

He laughed and returned his attention to the desk clerk, who passed him an ornate key ring with an electronic card hanging from it. "Thank you." With a nod to the man, he cupped Nikia's elbow and propelled her to the stairs. "I thought I made it clear that I'm tired of your games."

They climbed the first step together. "It's no game." She jerked away from his hold and dropped back a step. "The men in suits are watching us. Look."

He started to turn and she pressed her hand against his lower back. "Don't make it obvious," she hissed in a low tone. She didn't miss him rolling his eyes as he turned his head to glance at the lobby. She held her breath, expecting vindication and perhaps even the order to run.

His harsh laugh surprised her. "What men, Nikia?"

She ignored her own advice about being discreet and whirled around to survey the lobby. Her eyes widened when she saw the men had gone. She swept her gaze around the room a second time but came up with the same tally of guests and it didn't include any of the men in suits. Her shoulders drooped and she turned back to Atar. "Forget it. I must have imagined things." She followed him up the stairs without speaking, knowing her mind's eye hadn't conjured up a game of intrigue to distract her. Those men had been there, waiting for her but she couldn't prove it.

A disheartening possibility occurred to her. What if Atar wasn't working alone? Maybe the men were his backup, positioned there in case she escaped. Or maybe Anca had tired of waiting for Atar and decided to send more men to assist or supplant Atar. Whatever their purpose, she knew the watchers weren't innocent bystanders. She would have to be alert for herself and Atar. Most importantly, she would have to take

into account their presence when she made her escape. She would only have one chance and she couldn't let them stop her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Her wrist ached almost as much as the constant throbbing in her head that increased by the hour. Nikia rubbed the cuffed appendage with her free hand but the massage provided little relief. "This is ridiculous. Where would I go, locked in the suite?"

Atar looked away from the football game playing via satellite on the big-screen TV. His expression held no trace of pity or remorse. "I'm not taking any chances."

Frustrated, Nikia tugged on the cuffs binding her to the headboard of the bed. Atar had propped pillows to allow her to sit up but the position was uncomfortable. When the metal headboard refused to budge, she shot daggers from her eyes at him. "Do the words cruel and unusual mean anything to you?"

He chuckled before sipping the beer ordered from room service. "You aren't an American, *Princess*. The Protector told me to do whatever I had to, just as long as I returned you to Corsova." He returned his attention to the game, making it obvious the conversation was over.

With a sigh, she tried changing her tone. "Very well but may I take a bath? You could lock me in the bathroom." She hoped the hot water would soothe the migraine forming, since she was too keyed up to rest properly.

He sighed loudly, expressing annoyance with the abrupt way he clicked off the TV. "Of course, Your Highness. I live to serve you."

She was accustomed to hearing the phrase but not in such a sardonic way, accompanied by the lip curl and disgusted expression. She held off the retort that wanted to fly from her tongue, certain he was spoiling for a fight, despite his surface lack of interest in anything she did. All she wanted was some peace and quiet, along with a tubful of bubbles, so she could be alone with her thoughts.

He rose from the sofa and walked to the bathroom, leaving her cuffed to the bed. Nikia waited, trying to ignore her arm's fatigue. When he finally emerged, she shifted her position. "Well?"

"I can't secure the door to the other bathroom properly, so a bath is out."

She glared at him. "I'm tired, dirty and annoyed. A bath isn't much to ask." She pointed at his still-damp hair. "You've had a shower, haven't you?"

He shrugged. "Fine, but we do it my way." His coiled gait betrayed the tension in his muscles, making a mockery of his indifferent expression. He unlocked the cuff binding her to the bed but left the other side around her wrist. With a gentle tug, he urged her from the bed, grasping the other side in his hand.

Confused, she followed him into the spacious bathroom. A Jacuzzi tub took up a large section of the black tile floor, with an assortment of oils and gels arranged in a plastic basket hanging from the lip of the tub.

“Strip.”

Her eyes widened. “What? I thought you didn’t want me. You don’t trust me, remember?” She angled her chin up a notch, facing him defiantly. She couldn’t deny her attraction to him but wasn’t going to be his plaything, to pick up and toss aside at his whim.

An enigmatic smile flashed briefly across his stony expression. “I don’t trust you. I thought you might prefer to bathe without your clothes but it’s your choice.” He pointed to the gold handle atop the lip, in place to grasp when exiting the tub. “You’ll be cuffed there and it will be awkward to remove your clothes post-cuffing but…” He shrugged.

Flames swept through her cheeks and her eyes glittered with unshed tears. She bit down the humiliation assaulting her. “Turn your back,” she bit out through clenched teeth. To her surprise, he complied without protest, even releasing the cuffs so she had two hands.

Briefly, her eyes strayed to the door but she discarded the idea of escape almost as soon as it occurred to her. She wouldn’t even make it to the door of the suite before he caught up with her. She turned her attention to the task of undressing, finding the buttons unusually difficult to manipulate with shaking hands. When she stood in nothing but her bra and panties, she said, “I’m ready.”

He turned back to her with a bland expression. One eyebrow quirked. “That’s a new way to wash clothing.”

“I’ll be able to get them off with one hand.”

He waved to the tub. “Have a seat, *Princess*.”

She stomped forward but whirled around to face him two steps from the tub. “Stop calling me that in such a hateful tone.”

His cool laughter was as infuriating as the sarcastic manner he’d taken on when addressing her. “My apologies, *Princess*.”

Anger propelled her hand, causing her palm to fly toward his cheek. Only his quick reflexes kept her hand from connecting with his face. Her eyes widened with horror at her actions but the apology died on her lips when she met his eyes. Fury simmered there and her heart lurched at the first sign of emotion other than the cool indifference or sardonic indulgence he had shown her since the plane landed a few hours ago. Excitement stirred in her when the antagonism gave way to blazing desire so hot it scorched her skin when his eyes raked over her lithe form in the ivory set. She trembled, besieged by the surge of desire crashing over her. She relaxed her hand in his and his tight grasp on her wrist changed to a light caress. Nikia took a step toward him, hoping he would meet her halfway. A second later, he crushed her against him, his mouth devouring hers.

She parted her lips, taking a gasping breath just before his tongue invaded, sweeping through the moist recess, stealing her remaining breath. Lightheadedness swept over her but it was a pleasant sensation, born of arousal. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, using him to anchor herself. Still, she floated on a blissful cloud, tethered to reality only by his hard arms.

Atar forced back her head and his mouth moved from hers, going lower, to burrow against her neck, at the curve of her shoulder. He drew a fold of skin between his teeth, nipping gently. She cried out as pulses of electricity emanated from the spot, shooting down her spine.

He seemed to sense her reaction, because one of his hands cupped her lower back, and a single finger feathered up and down a few inches of her spine before he ventured lower, to cup her buttocks, pressing her pelvis against his. Her pussy soaked the ivory panties when encountering his hard cock. She arched her hips, wanting nothing more than to have him slide inside her. "Atar, please."

He left her neck and moved higher, swirling his tongue around her lobe. He breathed her name into her ear while thrusting forward, pressing his cock deeper against her silk-clad pussy. "Nikia," he whispered again and his breath reignited the throbbing electricity shooting through her.

He squeezed her buttocks as his other hand cupped one of her breasts. She arched her back when he drew his thumb across the hardened nipple, creating friction with the silk and lace of the bra. She buried her hands in his hair, intent on bringing his mouth back to hers, needing to taste him again.

He had other plans, resisting the direction her hands wanted him to go and lowering his head to her breast. His tongue laved her nipple, while the other received attention from his ardent thumb. She arched her back, offering more of her breast to him, while keeping her hands in his hair. The silky locks caressed her hands. Smelling of vanilla, she longed to bury her nose in his hair and lose herself. She would have done so, if it wouldn't require his mouth leaving her breast. She wanted him to stay there forever.

The Muzak version of *Beethoven's Fifth* broke them apart with a start of surprise. Atar panted, color glowing in his cheeks. His hair formed a chaotic cloud around his face and his clear eyes burned with liquid heat. "That's the cell phone the Protector instructed me to bring." He was hoarse and cleared his throat when he turned away from her to reenter the master bedroom of the suite.

Nikia walked to the doorway, straining to hear his side of the conversation over her thudding heart.

"Yes, Highness, I have acquired her."

She frowned at his succinct speaking manner, wondering how he could be so cold when she still burned so hot.

"We should return by tomorrow evening. Our flight for Constanta leaves in the morning and we're booked on the evening train to Bulgainia."

She didn't bother to listen to the rest. Turning away, she went back to the tub and turned on the water. The cuffs clinked against the faucet when she twisted the hot water but she paid them little attention. What did it matter if he kept her cuffed or didn't? Their embrace had changed nothing. He might want her but didn't trust her. Atar still planned to return her to Corsova and she couldn't accept that fate meekly. They were at an impasse and only her escape would shift the balance to her favor.

Disheartened, she listened to the water filling the basin but her eyes didn't see. She looked past it, trying to sort out her conflicting emotions. She knew very little about Atar, except he liked his privacy, was an honorable man and sexy as hell. How could that scant information lead her to the budding feelings consuming her? Why couldn't her heart stay out of the matter? Couldn't it respect her body was already confused enough, without throwing emotions into the mix?

One side of her mouth quirked. Here she was, blaming her heart, as if it were a puppet master controlling her, when she was the pulling the strings. If she felt anything for Atar—and she wasn't ready to admit it was more than a powerful attraction—only her own weakness allowed it.

She looked down and turned off the tap, realizing the water level had settled near the top. She glanced over her shoulder, noting the door was still open but Atar wasn't in sight. She didn't hear him speaking, so the phone conversation must have ended. Maybe he was extending her an ounce of trust by letting her bathe without the cuffs.

Nikia shed the bra and panties before sliding into the water. She pressed a button and the water bubbled around her. Leisurely, she lifted bottles one at a time from the plastic basket, unscrewing their caps to sniff them. She settled on a Vanilla-Hazelnut blend and tipped the entire contents of the small bottle into the churning water. Foam quickly formed, rising to her neck.

She selected the accompanying bar soap and washed quickly. Then she leaned back against the padded lip, letting her eyes close, focusing on disconnecting herself from the pulsing anguish consuming her head. Slowly, she slid under the water to wet her hair, hoping to massage away some of the tension while shampooing. When she came up, she fumbled for a washcloth to remove the bubbles from her face.

There wasn't an exact match in shampoo, so she chose the Vanilla, deciding she would smell like an exotic dessert by the time her bath was over. With a laugh that was only slightly forced but did little to relieve her anxiety, she worked a handful of shampoo through her short hair in leisurely strokes but found it did little to ease the pain. Giving up, she ducked under the bubbles again.

She worked the cleanser from her hair with her fingers, letting the repetitious movement drain some of her tension, though it did nothing for the headache. A popping sound caused her to freeze. It sounded similar to the cork in a champagne bottle releasing and she surfaced eagerly, hopeful Atar was making some romantic gesture.

Out of the water, the second popping noise sounded just like a gunshot was supposed to, followed by the splintering of wood. Before she had a chance to react, Atar rushed into the bathroom.

“Get out. Shooting...we have to go. Now!”

His urgent tone forced her paralyzed muscles to work, and she hopped from the bath in a bound, splashing water all over the floor. Atar grabbed her arm and started dragging her to the door that led to the other bedroom in the suite. “Wait, I’m naked –” She broke off as another gunshot sounded. More wood broke and the door crashed against the wall.

She didn’t worry about her unclothed state any longer. As they ran past the hooks, Nikia grabbed a hotel bathrobe. Atar hadn’t released his hold on her arm, so it was a struggle to pull on the garment with one hand.

In the second bedroom, her wet feet hit the hardwood floor and she went down hard, landing on her elbow, sending a jarring pain through her head. She cried out in pain and Atar whirled to face her. He hesitated only long enough to lift her to her feet and make sure she could stand before running again. The heavy thud of rushing footsteps followed them.

The sound of skids came from the bathroom, followed by a thud. “Fucking water,” a man shouted in German.

Atar had taken her arm again, leaving Nikia unable to massage her elbow. She turned her head to look behind them but froze when she saw slippers wrapped in a paper band on the floor beside the bed. She pulled away, saying, “Shoes,” as she hurried over to scoop them up.

She barely had her hands around them when Atar lifted her over his shoulder and ran out of the bedroom, plunging into the hall. The stunned gasp of an elderly couple greeted them and Nikia caught a brief glance at their shocked expressions from her perch on Atar’s shoulder as he ran past them.

As Atar thundered down the hallway, seemingly oblivious to her weight, she fumbled with the paper band on the slippers. When it ripped and fluttered to the ground, a twinge of remorse assailed her for littering. It disappeared when she looked up and saw three men in dark suits chasing them. They were the same men she had seen milling about the lobby a few hours ago.

She flinched when Atar threw open the door to the stairwell, knocking her ankle against the solid metal. She struggled to get down but he tightened his hold on her and kept going, making it to the bottom of the first flight before the door above them opened.

She expected him to run all the way to the door leading to the first-floor lobby but he exited on the second floor. No one occupied the hallway, so there was no one to betray their presence. He lowered her to her feet and closed the door quietly before pulling her out of sight of the glass window in the door. “Shh,” he whispered against her ear.



Tucked against him, holding a pair of hotel slippers in her hands and dressed only in a white terrycloth robe, she felt surprisingly safe. Nikia held her breath as the footsteps neared, praying the men would bypass the second floor. Every nerve ending in her body sizzled with tension as they ran by, not even slowing on the second-floor landing.

She sagged with relief and Atar's arms fell away. Nikia paused to slide her feet into the thin slippers and then followed Atar down the hall. "What are we doing?" she whispered.

"Looking."

She frowned. "For what?"

He didn't answer. His attention remained focused on a partially opened door. He approached silently, as if expecting trouble. Nikia stayed behind him, not because she was timid but because she wasn't dressed.

"Excuse me."

His voice broke the edgy silence, making Nikia jump. She peered around his shoulder and saw a maid standing by the doorway, holding a duster. The middle-aged woman wore an expression of surprise but there was a gleam of appreciation in her eyes for Atar's form.

She said something in Czech, causing Atar to shake his head. "Do you speak English?"

"Little, sir."

His smile broadcast encouragement. Nikia's mouth twisted. Maybe a little something else, too. Did he have to exude sex appeal to every woman he met?

"Is there a back way out of the hotel? An employee entrance?"

She nodded, still grasping the duster. Atar reached into his pocket, removing a folded bill. When he extended it, Nikia saw it was €100. "Can you show us?"

The money disappeared from his hand as soon as he offered it. She tucked it into her pocket and slipped past Atar, deliberately brushing her large bosom against his chest, Nikia noted with narrowed eyes. She pointed down the hall. "Way...me follow." She bustled down the hall, sorting through a ring of keys attached by a clip to her apron belt. At a door marked with a sign in Czech, she turned around, waving to them. "Hurry."

Nikia stayed close to Atar as the woman unlocked the door and led them inside. At first glance, it was nothing more than a linen closet. Either the woman hadn't understood what they wanted or she had decided Atar was an easy way to make €100.

The maid went to a stack of folded white uniforms, sorting through them. She eyed Nikia once before returning to the pile. Finally, she extracted one and tossed it to Nikia, saying something in Czech. Then she motioned to the other side of the room, to a door that wasn't immediately obvious.

Revising her opinion of the woman, Nikia tucked the white jumpsuit under her arm and followed the maid to the door, with Atar right behind her. The woman unlocked this one too and waved them through. Nikia hesitated, not sure where the woman had led them. The thought of entering a busy area in just a robe was daunting.

Atar brushed past her, apparently deciding to lead. The maid put her hand on his arm when he stepped by her. She pointed out the door and to the left. "Follow stairs down. *Vlevo*..." She waved her hand more vigorously. "*Vlevo*," she said again, frustration evident in her tone.

"Turn left?" Nikia asked.

Her flailing hand calmed and the older woman nodded. "*Vlevo*...left." She beamed at Nikia before turning away, clearly returning to work.

With flagging courage, Nikia followed Atar through the doorway, bracing herself for any possibility. They found the stairs easily. With caution, Atar descended first. She was content to remain behind him, hoping his muscled frame would provide some cover for her robe-clad body. As they neared the landing, the bustle of voices and activity reached them.

Nikia's face burned with heat when they entered the kitchen. The people who had been rushing around just a second ago all froze, with their eyes focused squarely on her. She remained rooted to the spot, unable to get her feet to move.

"Walk like a princess," Atar said from the corner of his mouth, giving her a saucy wink. His words spurred her on, letting her feet move. She straightened her spine and tried to avoid making eye contact with anyone as they hurried through the kitchen. At any moment, she expected someone to stop them and question their presence but they passed through the large room without interruption. As they slipped through a wooden door leading into the alley, the sound of laughter and raised voices resumed behind them.

"That wasn't so difficult, right?"

She shot Atar a disbelieving look. "Oh, not at all." The uniform under her arm wasn't *haute couture* but she couldn't wait to trade the robe for it. Unfortunately, an alley facing a busy street didn't seem like the best place to change clothes. "What do we do now?"

"The sun is setting, so we need to find somewhere to hide for the night. Our flight leaves in the morning. We just need to catch it." He slanted a look at her before scanning the cobblestone street where bicycles, pedestrians and cars intermingled. "You must have really angered someone. Who are the men chasing us?"

"I don't know. I thought they were with you, until they shot their way into our hotel room."

His brows arched. "With me?"

She shrugged. "Your backup or something. Maybe Anca sent them." The thumping in her head increased just thinking about the possibility. How could she evade Atar *and* another team?

Atar scratched his cheek, where stubbles of blondish-brown hairs were forming. "She didn't mention anything about sending more men when I spoke to her earlier."

Nikia experienced a pang, remembering Atar's side of the conversation and the reminder that he didn't trust her. Her shoulders sagged. "I don't know what's going on here."

Before pointing to the dead-end of the alley, he made a low sound in his throat that could have meant anything. "You can change behind the Dumpster."

She looked at the container, filled to the top of the opened lid. The smell was overpowering from several feet away. She couldn't imagine how bad it would be standing behind the bin. Well, at least no one was likely to be around it to see her changing. Together, they hurried to the trash bin. Gagging on the stench, Nikia shed the robe and slipped on the white pantsuit as fast as possible, finding the worn cotton soft against areas normally covered by underwear, instead of abrasive as she might have imagined. She left the robe on the filthy stones.

When she was finished, she stepped around Atar, who had blocked the view from the street with his body. She froze when he grasped her wrist, convinced he had seen the men chasing them. Instead, he was only taking the precaution of securing the open side of the cuffs to his wrist, binding them together. She didn't protest. What could she say? That his lack of trust cut her to the core? He didn't want to hear that, and she wasn't going to reveal the depths of her vulnerability. Better to be confined than have him know how easily he could hurt her. "Now what?"

He hesitated for a moment, scanning the alley and the street. Then he pointed to a white car stopping to let a group of pedestrians cross the cobblestone street. "There's a FIX car and the light is on. We need to flag it down before those men catch up with us."

"What will we do then?" Nikia panted as she ran a step behind him, feeling the constant tug of the cuff on her wrist as he kept up a pace she couldn't quite match. Each thud of her feet landing increased the throbbing in her head, until she was gritting her teeth to continue, forcing her body to ignore the pain and the whispery voice of Illiana creeping into the back of her mind.

"I have no idea. We're thinking on our feet."

That wasn't reassuring and she guessed he didn't mean it to be, judging from the worried tone that he used to deliver the succinct reply. She wanted to rail at him, demand to know why he didn't have an answer, since he always seemed in control. But she couldn't castigate him, since she couldn't think straight either. Even if another migraine hadn't been building, she didn't think she could have focused on anything beyond the slap of the slippers against the stone as they rushed to the car.

They reached it just as a shout sounded behind them. Nikia turned her head before Atar dragged her in the car, seeing two of the three men bursting from the kitchen entrance, as the third man rounded the corner from the front entry of the hotel. The two exiting the employee door quickly stuffed pistols in their jackets, even as they ran toward the car.

“Drive,” Atar urged the man.

“Where?”

“The Powder Tower.”

As the car moved forward, the driver easing around the last cluster of pedestrians, Nikia watched the three men in suits come to a sudden halt, standing close to confer. Their postures suggested a marked lack of worry, which increased hers tenfold. Did their pursuers somehow guess where they were going?

A chill settled at the base of Nikia’s skull and she turned to look at their driver. He was studiously avoiding making eye contact, as he turned left on a street with a name she couldn’t begin to pronounce. He wore a suit jacket and his hair was carefully groomed. The driver’s broad shoulders suggested he spent a lot of time working out. He didn’t have the frame one would associate with an occupation requiring long periods of sitting.

In addition to all that, he gave Nikia the same shiver the last driver had. She leaned closer to Atar, who seemed deep in thought. “He’s one of them,” she whispered close to his ear.

He jerked, looking down at her. “What?” he mouthed.

“The driver is one of them. I can sense it.”

To her complete surprise, Atar didn’t question her judgment this time. He leaned forward, seeming relaxed but Nikia saw the way his clenched fists lay in his lap.

“We’ve changed our mind. You can let us out here.”

The driver didn’t turn back to them or try to meet Atar’s eyes in the mirror. “We are nearly there, sir. You can see the round tower from here.” His accent wasn’t Czech. It sounded more like German or French, although Nikia couldn’t place it definitely.

“We’ll walk. It’s a nice evening.” His smile was charming, not giving the driver even a hint he was suspicious. “Besides, don’t the tours end at five? There’s no point going today.”

The driver shrugged. “As you wish, sir.”

Nikia questioned her senses when the driver turned on his signal and eased to the curb. Could Illiana be deliberately misleading her in hopes of keeping her off-guard? She swallowed thickly, wondering if somehow Illiana had engaged these men. Had her mother gained control long enough to make a phone call or contact them by other means? She turned to Atar to voice her fear but the movements of the driver in her peripheral vision froze the words in her throat.

She turned back to him in time to see the man taking a gun from his pocket and aiming it toward them. She launched herself forward, seeking to deflect the large-bore barrel. He fired before she reached him and she realized two things: Atar was the target and it was a tranquilizer gun, not a pistol.

Atar’s breath hissed between his teeth as Nikia’s hands settled around the man’s neck. She felt the pull of Atar’s wrist connected to hers but ignored the sensation.

Animal instinct took over and she tightened her hands, making it impossible for the driver to move, let alone reposition his gun for another shot.

His neck tipped to the side as he feebly tried to break her hold, exposing his carotid artery. A veil of red obscured her vision and she propelled herself closer, bringing her mouth to his neck. Her bloodteeth had already descended by the time she bit his neck, sucking eagerly. She spared no thought for moderation as she drank her fill. His blood was hot and tangy, satisfying her hunger.

As she drank, the bloodlust slowly departed and rational thought returned. They were in a car on a busy road, where anyone could pass by and see her drinking this man's blood. Not only that but the men were sure to be following them. They were probably expecting a call from the driver or had been following in their own vehicle. Either way, they couldn't be far behind.

Most importantly, she hadn't heard a peep from Atar. What if the dart had done more than put him to sleep? With his physiology, it might have poisoned him.

She tore her mouth from the man's throat, eliciting a moan from him before he returned to unconsciousness. Turning back to Atar, she felt his neck, finding a slow but steady pulse. The drug had induced a deep sleep but he didn't seem in imminent danger of dying.

She fumbled in his pocket for the key to the cuffs. Her heart jumped when she brushed against his cock but she forced away the reaction, knowing this wasn't the time. She retrieved the key and unlocked the cuffs from her wrist and then his. Holding the cuffs, she reached for the handle. This was her chance to escape Atar. It was obvious he was the target of the men, whether he believed that or not. He wouldn't find her this time, not while dealing with them.

She hesitated, torn between knowing this was probably her only chance and fearing what would happen to Atar if the men caught him. Logically, she knew she owed him nothing. Despite the attraction burning between them, he still intended to deliver her to a possible death sentence. Who would blame her for leaving him to a similar fate?

With a sigh, she opened the back door and climbed out. Instead of setting off at a run, she went to the driver's side and opened the door, pulling the slack driver out onto the pavement. She made certain he wasn't in the flow of traffic before getting behind the wheel. Disdainfully, she tossed the handcuffs into the passenger seat and drove away with a peel of rubber. Fool that she was, she couldn't leave Atar defenseless to whatever purpose those men intended.

## Chapter 7

Nikia made several random turns, taking them deeper into New Town. Pedestrians were numerous and unpredictable, darting out in traffic without a thought for the vehicles. It forced her to focus on the road every second, although she wanted to turn and check on Atar. He hadn't stirred since the dart hit him and she was at a loss for what to do. She wasn't at all familiar with Prague and had no idea where they might hide.

Slowly, a low beeping sound caught her attention. She dared to look away from the road, hoping one of the many people out to experience nightlife wouldn't run in front of the mini. She scanned the dashboard and gauges quickly then checked the road ahead again before looking down. The beeping came from the box that should have displayed the toll for the ride. Instead, it was a black screen with a red and green dot. Both were moving approximately the same distance apart. Her brow furrowed, she tried to work out what it was. Her migraine intensified with the effort, dwindling the fragile source of strength that had somehow kept her going during the incessant pain, until she wanted to curl into a ball and sob. It was tempting to stop trying to solve the puzzle to bring relief but Nikia sensed the answer was crucial, no matter how much it depleted her reserves.

Cursing and yelling caused her to look up and she slammed on the brake, stopping within inches of hitting a small group of partygoers dressed in suits and flashy dresses. One of the men cursed at her and stopped to pound his fist on the hood before they continued across the street.

A horn beeped impatiently behind her but Nikia's racing heart prevented her from moving the car. She took a deep breath, steadying her hands on the wheel, not wanting to think how close she had come to running down someone. When the horn sounded again, she resisted the urge to respond with loud expletives and took her foot off the brake. As she did so, her eyes fell on the display again, revealing the green dot was now moving so slowly as to barely register, while the red dot raced toward it.

It clicked into place that this was a display unit for a transceiver. No need to guess where the transceiver was. The men had been able to follow them from the start and now they were gaining on their position. What should she do?

The car behind her must have been leaning on their horn. The shrill noise set Nikia's teeth on edge. With a sharp turn of the wheel, she parked the car at the curb, absentmindedly returning the obscene gesture given to her by the impatient driver as he rushed past.

Her hands shook, making it difficult to open the door handle. Nikia tried to distance herself from her fear and doubt by concentrating on the moment. Right now,

she had to get Atar up and moving as far away from this car and as fast as possible. Up ahead, she could see the Charles Bridge, with a throng of people. It was the busiest group around and she hoped they could melt into the crowd as they escaped.

She opened the back door and bent over Atar, feeling his neck. His pulse was still slow but it seemed faster than the last time she had checked. He had slumped over and she heaved him to a sitting position so she could search for the dart. It was in his right shoulder and she pulled it out, not sure if it was continuing to release the drugging agent as long as it remained in him.

A line of blood trickled from the wound but her hunger was satisfied for the moment, so it didn't distract her. She shook his uninjured shoulder vigorously. "Atar, you have to wake up right now."

His head lolled and the quality of his breathing changed. When his eyelids flickered, she experienced a stir of hope. "Atar? Can you hear me?"

He mumbled something before his eyes closed again. Shaking him once more made his eyes open and a surly, "Leave me 'lone," issued from him.

Nikia looked at the terminal, alarmed to see the red dot was almost touching the green one. In desperation, she slapped Atar's cheek as hard as she could, wincing at the sound. His eyes snapped open and he seemed aware. "We have to go. They're coming. Now!"

Whether the slap or her urgency galvanized him, she didn't know. Nikia was just grateful he was reacting. He held himself upright without her assistance and slid toward her. There, his strength appeared to leave him and he required her assistance to get out of the car and stand. Atar stumbled as if intoxicated, anchoring his arm around her waist. In other circumstances, Nikia would have savored each sensation that rushed through her but she was too distracted to do anything other than notice the response. With a combination of coaxing and demanding, she got Atar's feet moving. He still leaned heavily on her, slowing them both down. She didn't dare take another peek at the terminal, for fear of Atar falling. With his weakened condition and her migraine, it would take all night to get him up again and right now, they would be lucky if they had a minute or two.

Nikia kept her gaze focused ahead, although her senses constantly searched for danger. Atar walked alongside her as best he could, although his gait was shuffling at best. The hairs on her neck prickled as they made it to the bridge, pushing through a group of people standing close together. She deliberately dropped her hand to Atar's pocket, covering his wallet and cell phone to discourage a pickpocket. That she had the presence of mind to think of that shocked her.

She didn't linger in the crowd, hoping it would hide them from view. The men were determined and would search Charles Square and the surrounding area for them upon realizing they had abandoned the car.

Their progress was slow, as those loitering about weren't eager to move. It was made slower by Atar, although he was clearly doing his best to stay awake and manage

under his own power as much as possible. She kept her arm around his waist, as he did the same to her.

A stir in the crowd behind them spurred Nikia to push through more insistently. She didn't need to turn around to know that at least one of the men was only a few feet behind them.

Perhaps those in the crowd noticed her urgency or maybe her tenaciousness blinded her to resistance but it was as though the Red Sea parted. Suddenly, they were off the bridge and moving to the park. It was shadowed in the darkening twilight and more than likely dangerous but the alternative wasn't any better.

The statues of great Czech artists, writers, and scientists scowled at them with stern visages as Nikia led Atar into Charles Park. She looked away quickly, not liking the sensation of being watched. Logically, if eyes followed them, they came from predators inside the park, rather than the statues but her mind wasn't equipped to deal strictly in the rational. Panic was finding fertile ground in her mind.

The nape of her neck prickled and she acted on instinct, pulling Atar into a clump of bushes. Her heart raced in her ears as she cautiously eased aside a branch blocking her view to search the area. First, she saw a group of young men sitting in the grass, talking loudly and bobbing their heads to punk music at least fifteen years old.

By turning her head an inch at a time, she honed in on the person causing her alarm. It was a man in a suit but not one of the three who had chased them earlier. They must have stopped for backup. This one had the same slick, sly look about him, with only one incongruous element—a huge rifle braced casually over his arm. Due to the distance separating them, Nikia couldn't discern if it was a standard weapon or meant to fire more tranquil darts. She didn't plan to let him close enough to find out.

As he turned in their direction, scanning the park visually, she released the branch and huddled with Atar, surprised to find she was blocking his body with her own. The protective instincts he stirred were dangerous. Already, they had kept her from leaving him and going to Belarus as she should have.

She held her breath as footsteps came closer, just a whisper in the grass. The sharp sound of a twig breaking made her jerk in response and Atar's muscles bunched. She rubbed his arm in what she hoped was a soothing way, while mentally willing him to remain quiet.

Her heart jumped in her throat when a shiny black shoe paused at the edge of the bush, pivoting in their direction. He had found them, although she didn't know how. Before he could act, Nikia leaped at him, allowing her human form to melt into that of a wolf as she did. Her clothes fell to the ground in a heap.

An aborted scream escaped him as she landed on him, clinging to his jacket by hooking her claws through the raw silk. Her teeth provided more of an anchor when she buried them in his throat. She braced herself for the taste of his blood, fearing it would ignite a wild impulse in her and allow Illiana to take over in a moment of weakness. Thus far, she had managed not to transform because of her worries that the



added wildness inherent to the werewolf nature would weaken her defenses. The man left her no choice except to change. She also had no option but to end his life. If she didn't, he might survive his first transformation to become a werewolf himself. She couldn't allow that to happen. It could expose everyone in Corsova.

When the man stopped struggling and dropped to the ground, Nikia loosened her jaws but didn't release him. Not until death spasms racked his body did she let go and move away from him. She trembled too, from the onslaught the violence had wreaked on her nerves. Her control remained firm and she had been aware of her actions the entire time.

She bent at the waist and vomited, expelling the taste of his blood along with her repugnance for what she had done. Doubt hammered at her, inquiring in a sly voice if she had really needed to kill him. The voice sounded a lot like Illiana's and she did her best to block it out. Later, she could deal with the guilt from her actions but now, she had to get Atar on the move once more.

The transformation had garnered an unexpected result, she mused, while hurrying to dress again. The intensity of the migraine had dropped significantly, indicating transforming had helped her heal some, to start rebuilding her reserves of strength. As she finished buttoning the jumpsuit, she scanned the area for more men with guns, seeing no others, to her relief.

A groan from Atar diverted her attention. Before returning to him, she took the rifle from the dead man, wincing at the heavy weight of the bulky gun. She used a precious second to open the chamber to see what ammunition it used. Three darts filled with liquid were loaded and ready to fire. She closed it with a click and slung the rifle over her shoulder. As she turned to retrieve Atar, she saw the group of young men watching her with mouths agape. She looked away quickly, hoping the darkness wouldn't allow them to give an accurate description of her, should they stay around to talk to the police when the body was discovered.

She tried to comfort herself with the knowledge no one would believe their tale of a woman transforming to a wolf but the bite marks on the dead man might lend credence to the story.

With a deep sigh, she walked to Atar, pleased to find him kneeling. He was making a faster recovery than she had anticipated but was nowhere near self-sufficient yet. She knelt, offering him an arm up. He made it to his feet with difficulty but seemed to find walking easier once she helped him establish a rhythm.

She brought the rifle closer to her right hand, while keeping an arm around Atar. She wanted to feel strong and capable but right then, she could have happily hid and let someone else be the hero. She was the villain-type, not the rescuer – or she was when Illiana was in control. So far, it seemed easier to be evil and power-mad.

She shrugged off the useless thoughts and put her energy into seeing them through the park. Luck might have favored them because they emerged on the other side a little while later without anyone else approaching them. The street they exited on seemed

free of the men in suits but she didn't waste time lingering to see if they showed up. Hiding was the only prudent course of option and with that intent, she veered away from the main street, following smaller streets and a few alleys in a meandering pattern, until they emerged onto Narodni Trida awhile later. It was another busy street but filled with a different type than she had seen around Charles Square. From the surrounding businesses, she garnered this was a safe place during the day, a neighborhood making the effort to restore its grandeur, with only moderate seediness. At nights the seediness re-emerged, drawing a particular breed she wasn't anxious to attract the attention of.

She would have preferred a group of boisterous tourists to the sullen, quiet types watching their progress. The gleam of interest was too bright in many of their eyes, making her senses stir with danger. As a group of three burly men and a bleached-blond girl walked toward them, Nikia took Atar down the nearest street. It was dimly lit and her slippers slapped against the cobblestone, sending out an easily followed signal.

Somehow, she managed to eke a little more speed from her aching muscles, half-dragging Atar with her. Hearing the ring of heavy footsteps behind them made her heart race and she knew she had to go faster still. Unfortunately, her body couldn't cooperate.

Fear chased her down the darkened street, accompanying her when she made a sharp left onto the next street. It offered marginally better lighting but the inhabitants didn't seem any less dangerous. Aware that the footsteps were still behind her, Nikia led Atar into the nearest doorway of a tavern named *Ranstikø*.

There wasn't anyone waiting to collect a cover but she saw a muscle-bound man in a denim shirt with the sleeves ripped off eyeing her from a darkened corner near the door. She thought briefly of appealing to him for help but the gleam in his eye was as disturbing as the presence of the men who had followed her.

Instead, she helped Atar to the nearest free table, straining her muscles to ease him into a seat. He promptly slumped forward. His eyes were blinking but it was obvious he wasn't alert yet. Before sitting, Nikia examined the small room. There was a plethora of tables, with only a few occupied. An abundance of cigarette smoke burned her throat and made her eyes water. She coughed, attracting the attention of a scruffy man two tables over. He glared at her through bloodshot eyes, mumbled something and wrapped his hand more securely around a glass filled with amber beer, as if protecting it from her.

She took the seat that best allowed her to scrutinize the entire room, although her back was still undefended. She tensed when the men who had followed her entered the bar one by one, with the blonde trailing in last. Their eyes fell on her and she held her breath, wondering if anyone would come to their aid or if they would even look up from their drinks while the men did whatever they planned?

She let her breath out slowly when the group took a table across the room. She didn't let herself relax completely because all of their eyes remained focused on her and

Atar—the men with a disturbing quality she didn't want to identify and the girl with a petulant scowl.

She started with surprise when a hand fell on her shoulder. Looking up, Nikia barely choked back a gasp at the muscled man towering over her. He made the bouncer look small in comparison. His bald pate gleamed even in the dim light provided by the sparse lamps suspended several feet apart from the ceiling. An impressive handlebar mustache covered most of his upper lip. She looked down at the hand on her arm, swallowing at the size of it. His knuckles showed signs of bruising, indicating they had been used recently for purposes she didn't want to contemplate. Only the thick wedding band on his hand provided her a slight measure of reassurance that he was a human and not some goliath conjured to torment her. Her throat was dry and she coughed, searching for her voice. "Yes?" The timid squeak didn't project confidence.

He said something in Czech but switched to English as thick as his mustache at her blank look. "What to drink?"

Relief swept through her, along with the urge to laugh. He didn't seem like the waiter type. "Water."

He shook his head. "Pay or get out."

She shrugged. "Whatever then." Despite the dryness in her throat, she didn't plan to drink anything *Ranstikø* served, for fear of what germs might be lurking in the glasses.

With a sharp nod, the man moved back to the bar, turning to the task of filling two small glasses with the contents of a bottle. The beverage didn't look like beer. She eyed it doubtfully when he returned to their table.

He set down the glasses with small thumps, sloshing the liquid in each. "*Becherovka*."

She frowned up at him. "Excuse me?"

He thumped his chest. "Czech drink. Very good." He inclined his head in Atar's direction, saying, "*Ono vůle bdící jeho ohromný dub*."

She shook her head with confusion, not missing the laughs of those close to their table. A blush warmed her face when the big man put his hand at crotch level and showed it slowly rising. There was no missing that implication. She looked away, reaching for the glass as a means of distraction. From the corner of her eye, she watched a tiny woman, almost as broad as she was tall, walk to the big man and slap his arm, giving every appearance of admonishing him. To Nikia's amusement, the man's shoulders drooped and he returned to the bar.

The glass was in her hand and she brought it to her mouth cautiously. The strong cinnamon aroma made her breathe in deeply and when she tasted it, the *Becherovka* was similar to strudel.

Atar lifted his head, seeming to find a reserve of strength. His voice was slurred but she was encouraged that he could speak. "Not safe."

She set down the glass and leaned closer, dropping her voice to a whisper meant only for his ears. "I know, but men followed us."

"The suits."

Nikia shook her head. "Other men. They're in the bar now. I didn't know what else to do, so I brought us in here."

He rubbed his head. "We need to leave."

She lifted a brow, skeptical of his ability to go anywhere at the moment. "Are you strong enough?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Head's fuzzy but improving. I think the drug is wearing off." He straightened in the chair, looking as though it took all of his returning strength to remain upright. "We have to leave."

She couldn't agree more. This dingy tavern in a seedy section of Prague was the last place she would feel safe but it was foolhardy to leave the safety of the crowd. The men in suits worried her but the other men watching from the table nearby posed a more immediate threat. She knew they were equally dangerous and were simply biding their time to act. She swallowed a nervous lump, trying not to consider what they might do when they got tired of waiting. "Yes, but not until you're stronger."

He waved a hand and tried to rise, succeeding only in sliding his chair back an inch before slumping forward slightly. "Yeah." Atar reached for the glass, sniffing it before taking a small sip. He grimaced. "It's too sweet."

"Just like your lady friend," said a gruff voice behind Atar, belonging to the burly man who had followed them into *Ranstikø*. His voice was surprisingly rich and pleasing, with hardly an accent when he spoke English.

Atar had distracted her from keeping watch on them. Nikia twisted her head, searching for the other three. One stood off to her right and the other was almost behind her. The blonde girl stood several feet away, watching with an air of mingled impatience and malicious glee.

He turned his head with apparent difficulty to look up at the man towering over him. "You're interrupting a private conversation."

"Talk?" The big man scowled. "Women need action." He placed a huge hand on Atar's shoulder. "I will borrow her for a time and return her unscathed...probably." His cohorts chuckled at his lewd announcement.

"Like hell." With surprising fluidity, Atar got to his feet, flinging off the hand on his shoulder.

Nikia surged from her seat, determined not to let Atar face them alone. His lithe muscles and way of carrying himself would have assured her of his ability to take care of himself under other circumstances but he stood little chance of overcoming three men in his drugged state.

The one behind her lunged forward, grabbing her arm. Nikia turned on him, growling low in her throat as she brought up her hand, slamming her palm against the

bridge of his nose. Blood sprayed from his wound, splattering her face and hair. She grimaced in disgust. He cradled his injured nose, cursing her as he stumbled to a nearby seat.

She turned back in time to see the other man take a swing directly at his face. Atar tried to twist away but moved too slowly and took the brunt of the man's fist against his cheek. He grunted and swayed, clutching the back of his chair for support.

Without thought, Nikia moved into the fray, standing beside Atar to keep him on his feet, while switching her gaze between each of the two men threatening them. The air was fraught with tension, heralding the violence about to escalate.

An angry voice caused all of them to jerk and turn to their right, where the short woman who had admonished the bartender was rushing to them, shouting in Czech and shaking her finger. She placed herself in front of Nikia, glaring up at the big man. She didn't betray a hint of fear when she told him something in an angry tone, punctuating her words by jabbing her finger toward the door.

The man laughed as he pushed her out of his way so hard she spun into a nearby table, crying out with either shock or pain. Nikia didn't have time to determine which while the man bore down on her. She brought up her hands to scratch his face as he lifted her in a tight embrace, cutting down on the oxygen she could draw in. She bucked and thrashed in his arms as he lowered his mouth toward hers. The stench of cigar and cheap beer emanated from his opened maw and she turned her head just as his mouth neared hers.

She shuddered when he instead licked her cheek before laughing—a sharp, cruel sound that vibrated through his chest and into her body. Nikia struggled to bring her knee up into his testicles but found herself imprisoned in his arms. “Atar,” she whimpered, finding it increasingly difficult to take in a breath as the man's arms tightened around her.

In a second, she was free and the man was turning toward Atar. Nikia looked at him, astonished to see he held a broken chair in his hands. His trembling arms betrayed his fatigue when he pointed the remaining leg at the man standing before him, unfazed from the blow of the chair. He still bore splinters of wood on the back of his shirt and shrugged massive shoulders to shake them off as he moved toward Atar.

Seemingly from nowhere, a roar engulfed the place. Before Nikia could identify the source, the man who had licked her toppled to the floor, tackled by the huge barkeep. His face, red with anger, was a marked contrast to his dark mustache as he pummeled the man with his fists.

The third one of the group hesitated, obviously prevaricating between intervening and saving his own skin. Self-preservation was his main concern as evidenced by the way he ran from the tavern, with the bleached-blonde girl following, screeching all the way.

The barkeep was still working over the other man, who seemed puny in comparison, when the plump woman came to his side. With a simple touch of her hand

on his arm, she got him to stop punching. She said something softly, meant only for his ears. He nodded, scowled down at the man under him and got to his feet. He didn't look at him again as he turned to the man on a stool in the corner and told him something in Czech.

It must have been an order to take out the trash, because the man rose from the stool and sauntered forward. He grasped a handful of the injured man's shirt and dragged him across the floor to the open door, where he heaved him outside with what appeared to be little expended effort. He only had to point at the ruffian cradling his bleeding nose to have him running from *Ranstikø* in terror.

"Th-thank you," Nikia said, wincing at the way her voice trembled, just like the faint tremor spreading through the rest of her body. Reaction was setting in.

He shrugged. "For you not, girlie. No one lays hands on my wife."

She ran a shaky hand through her mussed hair. "Regardless of your reasons, thank you."

He snorted. "Thank me by leaving. No trouble here more."

"Ivan," the little woman said, outraged. She chided him in Czech, pointing once more to the street.

Ivan rolled his eyes. "Very well." He looked at Nikia. "Maria is spotted with softness. She tells me you are troubled and men will wait for you." He grimaced. "She insists you take night in upstairs room."

Relief swept through Nikia. The men in suits obviously hadn't tracked them here, so it seemed as safe as anywhere in this area could be. If they could make it through until the morning, their chances of escape were improved. She locked eyes with Maria. "Thank you."

Maria inclined her head.

"For room is fourteen hundred Kcs."

Nikia's stomach fluttered with panic. She had no money, having had no time to grab her bag. She looked at Atar, knowing he had his wallet from having felt it in his pocket but unsure of what his cash reserves were. Even worse, did he still have their passports? Their plane tickets were probably long gone but that didn't worry her. She wasn't eager to return to Constanta. Her planned trip to Belarus would be cut very short if her real and fake passports were both back in the room at the St. George. She wasn't certain she had the mental reserves left that were necessary to hypnotize someone into believing they had already seen her passport, as she had done in Constanta.

"Will you take Euros?"

Ivan nodded in answer to his question, accepting the fifty Atar removed from his wallet and tucking it in his pocket without any indication he planned to give change. Atar didn't press the matter, apparently deciding this place was their best option for the night and it wasn't worth losing the chance over eight Euros.

Ivan returned to the bar and Maria gestured them to follow her around the bar, to a doorway revealing a set of stairs. Nikia put an arm around Atar's waist, pleased to note he was moving more steadily and leaning less on her. Surely, he would recover by morning.

Her feet automatically took the creaky stairs, missing most of their paint, as her mind mulled over her epiphany. In his weakened state, Atar would need rest to recuperate. This was her only chance to escape him and head for Belarus. Yes, she had discarded the idea of leaving him earlier but he wasn't safe then. Now, he was as safe as he could be. The thought germinated in her mind while they emerged onto the second floor, where Marie led them to a door halfway down the hall.

When she opened it and pointed for them to go inside, Nikia and Atar slipped past her solid bulk to examine the room they had purchased for the night, which she hoped would prove to be a safe haven. It contained a double bed with an iron head and footboard, a small table with a pitcher and basin, a rickety-looking chair by the table and a crooked dresser bearing an antique brass lamp. There were no light fixtures and no switches. Maria confirmed this when she followed them in and turned on the lamp. She waved her hand around the room and gave them a smile.

Nikia forced herself to return it. It wasn't a palace but it would certainly do for their purposes tonight. She nodded, which seemed to be all Maria needed. She turned and bustled out.

Immediately, Nikia led Atar to the bed, taking her arm from his waist as he dropped onto the thin mattress. In seconds, he had fallen back with his head on the pillow. His eyes closed, indicating he was well on his way back to Dreamland for a time. She didn't mind at all, as she contemplated her escape.

Guilt at her thoughts had her jumping with surprise when a knock sounded on the door. She clutched her chest and hurried to it, opening it only a slit, to see who stood on the other side. Maria stood in the hall, with an armful of something and she opened the door wider.

The other woman thrust garments into her arms, along with an extra pillow, a cake of what looked like homemade soap and two towels. "Thank you." Nikia bobbed her head in an attempt to communicate her gratitude.

With another silent nod, Maria closed the door behind herself, presumably moving down the hallway to the lower level. Nikia listened at the door until she heard footsteps moving away. Then she bolted the flimsy lock and dropped the items on the small table. Lifting the chair, she carried it to the door and wedged it under the knob, taking little reassurance from the added security measure, which seemed like no deterrent at all.

At the bed, Nikia examined Atar, listening to his deep breathing and finding a steady pulse beating under her fingers when she touched his neck. His sleep state was somewhere between drugged and natural. She had to make her escape soon but what would Ivan and Maria think if she left right now? How could she explain the

circumstances to them without earning their disbelief and possible fear? But if Atar recovered before she could leave, her last chance at escaping would slip away.

She drew her lower lip into her mouth and sucked lightly while considering the situation. As she mulled it over, her eyes scanned the room, falling on the ties for the drapes that were currently closed. She stood up and walked to them, touching one hesitantly. It was speckled with dust and tickled her nostrils when she lifted it. The material itself was heavy and well-constructed, some kind of woven linen. She tested it experimentally, grasping one end in each hand and tugging. Satisfied with its resistance, she removed the other tie as well and went back to Atar, who snored softly. She acknowledged the dart of delight as she bound one of his wrists to the iron headboard with the thick tie. Let him see how it felt to wake up tethered to a bed, vulnerable and disoriented. The pleasure the thought gave her lasted through binding his other wrist and testing the fastness of the knots. A tiny part of her wished he would waken soon, so she could see his reaction. The sensible part of her knew it would be best if he slept through the night, not waking until several hours after she had gone. She would let him worry about what to tell Ivan or Maria when they came to free him.

Remembering her plan, she searched his pockets methodically, removing his wallet and a wad of folded documents. She opened the papers, relieved to find her passport with his, along with arrest papers granting him authority over her. With a grimace, she tore the document in small pieces, leaving it lying on the bed. After flipping through his wallet, finding a few hundred Euros and a Platinum MasterCard issued to those in service of the Protector of Corsova, she took it and her passport over to the table, leaving them beside the bundle Maria had brought. Anca would be financing her escape.

As Atar slept on, Nikia stripped off the hotel uniform and filled the basin with cold water from the pitcher. With thorough attention, she wiped away the blood belonging to the man whose nose she had broken. The soap was rough but had a pleasant orange scent and lathered well.

Once she was clean, she took a towel from the bundle and found a sleeping gown. She eyed it while drying her face and hands then lifted it and smiled. It must belong to Maria. It would swallow her frame, while ending several inches short of her ankle but it was clean and soft. Nikia slid it over her head before turning her attention to the jumpsuit. She worked on the bloodstains with the homemade soap and cold water, making little progress. It would see her out of the tavern in the dead of night but she would have to find something else to wear as soon as she could. With a pang, she remembered the new wardrobe purchased in Zurich and now abandoned at St. George, along with the bankroll that had financed it. She was tempted to return to the hotel to retrieve her belongings but fear stayed the thought. What if she was wrong about Atar being the target? The men didn't seem to want her but if she had assumed incorrectly, returning to the hotel would be placing herself back in their hands. She had to accept the passport and money were gone.



Thinking about the situation brought a return of the migraine, which had lowered previously to a dull ache. She shrugged slightly, trying to dismiss her worries in hopes of easing the pain. There was a similar cache awaiting her in the Cayman Islands. Once Illiana was deposed, she could make her way there, retrieve the stash and identity and disappear...if Atar would let her.

She glared at him as a yawn overwhelmed her. She stifled it with a hand and eyed the bed. There was enough room for her to lie down, if she bunched herself into a ball. Chances were, she wouldn't even sleep anyway, being too edgy from the night's events. Her body clamored for rest. The return of her migraine proved Illiana was struggling to find a hole in her defenses again. Besides, she didn't relish the thought of standing for the next few hours and the chair was wedged under the knob. Atar probably wouldn't wake up and he'd never know she had lain beside him for a few hours. What harm could there be in lying with her eyes closed for a short time, to fortify her mental defenses?

## Chapter 8

The bed's movements woke Nikia. She was disoriented for half a second, not remembering where she was, although relieved to note the headache had faded to a manageable level again.

The confines of the dim room were frightening until the sleep-induced fog in her mind lifted. Her thoughts cleared and she turned her head to look at Atar, identifying him as the source of the creaking springs. Her eyes widened when she saw the way he was struggling against the bonds, grunting with the effort. Her tongue acted before her brain. "I tied them pretty tight. I don't think you can get out."

He turned his head to glower at her. Rage brought the faintest hint of color to his clear eyes, giving them a shadow of gray. "What kind of game is this, Nikia?"

She sat up, stretching to relieve the kink in her back from sleeping at an awkward angle—half-draped over Atar. She winced at the betrayal of her subconscious that led her to seek his body with hers. "It's no game. I'm just ensuring I have the upper hand."

He snorted. "Sure and you're not enjoying watching me squirm, trying to free myself?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, a little. It is fitting retribution, don't you think?"

"Hell, no!" He tugged against the drapery ties more forcefully. "Untie these right now."

Nikia ignored him, rising from the bed. The need to empty her bladder sent her to the door, much to Atar's increasing anger. She tuned out his snarled words as she moved the chair and eased open the door, peeking out. No sound came from below and heavy snores farther down the hall indicated someone slept. She matched the intensity of the snores to Ivan, unable to picture the tiny Maria producing such large ones. She had fallen asleep with the slippers on and they cushioned her feet from the knotholes and splinters in the boards of the hallway when she stepped out, closing the door behind her to muffle Atar's outrage. She moved down the hall in the direction of the snores, hoping the bathroom wasn't attached to Ivan and Maria's room. To her relief, the first door she came to led to a freestanding bathroom, of which she made grateful use.

In the mirror while washing her hands, Nikia looked up and caught the sparkle of desire in her eyes. Away from Atar, she could acknowledge how her breasts ached and her stomach clenched. In sleep, her body had dropped its defenses and embraced its need for him.

She looked away from her eyes and finished up, leaving the small bathroom as she had found it before returning to Atar. In the room, she bolted the door again and put

the chair under the knob. He had fallen silent and she turned to the bed, expecting to find Atar a sullen captive. The breath left her when a body plowed into hers, the momentum carrying her to the bed. An involuntary scream tried to erupt from her throat but a hand clapped over her mouth prevented it. She breathed in, recognized Atar's scent and immediately regained her calm. She was in no immediate danger.

She whimpered and reconsidered when he rolled her over and straddled her. His expression revealed the depths of his anger, clearly warring with his desire. She held her breath, not certain if he would throttle or kiss her.

"Damn you," he whispered, as his head lowered. His mouth claimed hers in a fiery, urgent kiss that sizzled with his lingering anger.

She melted against him, losing all resistance. This was what she had wanted from the start, to have Atar holding her, making love to her. Even his enmity couldn't convince her to end the interlude. Her desire was too strong, damn the consequences. Thoughts of fleeing from him faded from her mind when Atar's tongue swept between her parted lips, tasting her. She parted them further, allowing deeper access. Simultaneously, she arched her back, aligning their pelvises. His cock was huge with need through the barrier of their clothing and she writhed against its steel length.

Atar's hands imprisoned her wrists against the bed, once more returning her to the subservient role. An errant thought intruded that she should protest but Nikia brushed it away. With Atar, at this moment, it was right to be at his mercy. She had no fear of him, even in his current antagonistic state. He could hurt her by withholding his trust but never physically.

He lifted his head, revealing the anger had faded from his eyes, while arousal lingered. He sighed. "You make me crazy."

She didn't respond, other than to tentatively strain against his hold on her wrists. He didn't release her but loosened his grip. Nikia stared up at him, wetting lips plumped from his rough kisses. "I want you."

He lifted a brow. "Is that why you tied me to the bed—to have your wicked way with me?"

She shook her head, not wanting to lie to him but not wishing to verbalize her original motive. "Will you make love to me now?" She missed the look of surrender that crossed his face when he bent his head again but felt it in the way his taut muscles relaxed slightly and the way his cock nestled more snugly against her pussy. She frowned with slight concern. Was he supposed to be so big?

The rasp of his tongue on her nipple through the thin cotton elicited a gasp and took the thought straight from her mind. Nikia let her body respond to his, acting on instinct by pushing her breasts forward. As he struggled to lower the neckline using his teeth, she wanted to suggest he release his grasp on her wrists but couldn't remember how to form words. She was lost in the sensations of his every caress, movement and lick. "Atar," she said around a moan. His name was indistinguishable as a real sound.

With an impatient noise of his own, Atar released her wrists and ripped the nightgown down the length of her body, to her waist. The sound of tearing fabric made Nikia wince but she didn't rebuke him. Later, she would compensate Maria for the cost. With a man like Ivan, the older woman was sure to understand animalistic passion.

With her breasts freed, Atar slipped his hands under her back, lifting her slightly, until she was half-reclining under his imprisoning body. His proximity and strength served to heighten her desire. Her willingness to acknowledge her vulnerability was a gift to him, although she didn't know if he recognized it as such.

He buried his face between her breasts, sucking the skin between his teeth to nip her. Nikia groaned but not with pain. His trail of nibbling bites leading him to her left breast excited her to a fever pitch. She barely restrained a cry when he took the nipple into his mouth, laving the sensitive nub with the tip of his tongue, while sucking. If he planned to devour her, he would find no resistance. She brought her freed hands to his head, burying her fingers in his long hair to hold him against her.

Each flick of his tongue ignited new darts of heat. They raced down her spine, through her stomach and into her pussy, spasming in time with the rhythm of his mouth and his pumping hips as he thrust his cock against her. Moisture flooded her pussy, introducing slick heat begging for friction. She shifted restlessly, trying to cuddle his cock more intimately but finding they were as close as they would get with clothes on.

Either Atar had the same epiphany or he was responding to her movements because he leaned back to a sitting position, bringing her with him. The remnants of the gown slipped easily over her head with his assistance, breaking their contact for only a moment. Atar took the opportunity to peel away his shirt before returning to her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging to him. Her nails found purchase in the firm flesh of his shoulders and she shifted until her bare pussy was against the crotch of his pants.

He pulled her head back by grasping a handful of short hair. His lips teased the sensitive spot at the bend of her neck but he didn't nip her. Instead, he put his mouth near her ear. "I should tell you something before we go further."

She moaned with impatience, digging her nails in deeper. "I'm not in the mood to talk, Atar." Passion had turned her voice to a rasp. "I want you. Fuck me."

He sighed, pushing her away enough to leave some space between their bodies and forced her to meet his eyes. "This is important. I'm assuming you've never been intimate with a Makheet before?"

"No."

"We're different than humans, werewolves or vampires. Your races all have the same basic physiology, but mine is more...fluid."

She quirked a brow. "What, you have a squirt gun in your pants?"

He laughed but there was a note of tension to it. "No, but I want to prepare you. Should I just show you?"

She hesitated, torn between curiosity and caution. Was he so very different? Her stomach tightened with anxiety when she nodded her head, scooting off his lap so he could stand. She held her breath as he undid the zipper of his pants and peeled them away, along with his briefs. When he stood naked before her, she squinted, trying to see what was different. He looked the same... "Oh."

A tinge of red touched his cheeks. "Uh, yeah." Atar ran a hand through his long hair, as if agitated. "Some women really like it but others are frightened. I can change my cock to be familiar to them but the size when I do frightens them as well."

She wet her lips with her tongue. "Why two?" With scientific interest, tinged with raging desire, she leaned closer to examine his genitals. Atar accommodated her by parting his thighs wider. She stared with fascination at the thick, shorter shaft resting above a second one. The top cock was identical in appearance to a man's "standard" equipment, complete with bulbous, uncut head and a deep red stain of arousal. Without thought, she leaned closer still so she could lift the first cock to better examine his second one. This cock was different from any she had seen before, being long and thin in shape, with no head. It lacked the purple color indicating arousal, although it was hard, responding with spasms to her light touch. She slid her fingers deeper behind his secondary cock, discovering he had no testicles.

"It's our biological function. One is for pleasure and procreation, while the other is for biological elimination."

She stroked the second cock, marveling at the smooth skin and lack of veins compared to his primary cock. "Can you feel sensation?"

He nodded. "Yes. It feels good to have you stroke me but I can't orgasm with that cock. It merely enhances the pleasure of the first, where most of the nerves are concentrated."

She looked up, still holding his second cock. "What did you mean when you said you could change it?"

"Let go and I'll show you." A muscle ticked in his cheek when she released his cock. Nikia gasped when his two cocks melted together to form one. Her pussy quivered at the sight of the gigantic cock now confronting her. She trembled at imagining it sliding into her. A large part of her reaction was fear of pain. "I like it better the other way."

He laughed again, although still sounding strained and two cocks reappeared. "So, you don't mind that I'm different?"

She shook her head. "No, of course not." After years of forced lesbian encounters, the universe was obviously repaying her with cock karma, by giving her a lover gifted with two marvelous cocks. "Differences make us interesting." She winked at him before stretching out on her back and holding out her arms. "What will you do with the second cock while the first is buried deep inside me?"

Atar groaned, his face flushing. In seconds, she was in his arms again, with his cock hovering above her. "It will stay out of the way unless I put it to use."

“How would you do that?”

He trailed a hand from her hip to her buttocks, where he stroked her crease, pausing to push lightly against her anus. “Here.”

Her eyes widened, imagining how good it would feel to have him fill her completely. She let her eyes reveal her excitement at the thought, in case her rapid increase in breathing didn't clue him in.

“You want that?”

She nodded, straining against him. “I want all of you.”

Atar's response was to rise a few inches, so his secondary cock hovered at the entrance of her pussy. “You're dripping for me, aren't you?”

She blushed under his gaze, not missing the arrogant pride in his colorless eyes or teasing in his tone. “I have been since day one.”

He seemed ill at ease by her revelation and broke eye contact, ostensibly to look down at where he was slowly fusing their bodies but Nikia didn't think that required his full attention. Hurt welled inside her but she pushed it away as the pleasurable sensation of his thinner cock sliding into her pussy swept through her. In many ways, this cock was like a dildo, although softer and more velvety. Also warm from the blood flowing through his veins, instead of the cold, impersonal plastic she was accustomed to.

He teased her with a couple of thrusts before pulling away. “You're sure about this, Nikia? The complications—”

She opened her eyes wide. “Fuck the complications right now and just fuck *me*.” She held her breath when he aligned his cocks against her openings, easing the thinner one into her anus first. She was tense but he entered easily, finding her body welcoming despite a hint of anxiety, the passage eased by her own natural lubricant he had made use of. Then his cock was pushing into her pussy, entering her. She put a hand on his chest. “Stop.”

He halted immediately, with beads of sweat forming on his brow. “You've changed your mind?”

She shook her head. “No, but what about protection?” She couldn't get pregnant, not knowing if Illiana would regain control of her body or if Anca would put her to death if she had to return to Corsova should her grandmother's people be unable to help her. Besides, she had Atar's lust but not his love or even his trust. What kind of environment was that in which to bring a child?

“Don't worry.” Atar shook his head. “It isn't my fertile time and my species has a notoriously difficult time mating with each other, let alone someone outside the Makheet. That's probably why our race is dying out, despite lifespans of a couple thousand years.”

“I see.” She frowned. “Your time? What does that mean?”

“Makheet women are always fertile and ready to breed but our males go through fertility cycles. I am in the latter quarter of my lifespan, meaning my cycles come farther apart now. I probably won't be capable of impregnating a mate for at least four more decades. It's been twenty years since my last heat cycle—a frustrating one, spent alone. There are some drawbacks to my race's preference for solitude.”

Her interest focused on his explanation, even as her hips rose, taking his cock deep inside her. “How do you know when it's your time?”

His eyes twinkled. “I'm driven solely by the need to mate. It consumes my mind, blocking out all other concerns. If I have a partner at that time, she can expect to spend at least three months doing little else besides being in my bed, with my cock inside her.”

Nikia shivered with anticipation at the thought, even as her insides withered. His noted use of the word “if” hadn't escaped her. He certainly wasn't extending the invitation to her to be his mate.

As he began thrusting in and out of her, she banished the depressing thoughts and let the rhythm he set sweep her away. She strained against him, matching each movement of his body, alternately accepting and rejecting his cocks, while gasping with the pleasure at the way he filled her so completely. As her orgasm overwhelmed her, she clung to him, pulling him closer and pretending the drops of moisture in her eyes came from the sweat on her brow and not the pain of not having his love and trust.

\* \* \* \* \*

She slept curled against him, with her body pliant against his. Atar stared down at her, absently stroking the strands of hair sticking to her forehead. Confusion filled him, as he tried to reconcile the woman she was supposed to be with the woman she had been thus far. Could she maintain her pretense so well for so long? Was there truth to her claims of her mother's possession?

Even if there weren't and she was as evil as he had heard, could he turn her over to Anca to for execution? She needed to be punished for her crimes if she had been the one to commit them but after making love to her, how could he even think of being the one to hand her over to justice?

Nikia sighed in her sleep, cuddling closer. Atar put his arm around her, pulling her tighter to him, wondering what he could do. If she was being honest about Illiana, she needed to go to Belarus. Yet, it wasn't safe for either of them to travel around Europe until they discovered what interest the men had in them. She believed the men were after him but why would they be? Atar had lived quietly in his mountain cabin the past four centuries. As a youngling, he had made a few enemies in the service of various kings or in errant pursuits of adventure but those men were long dead.

No, the men had to be after Nikia. The dart in the tranq gun had been for him but probably only so he wouldn't give any resistance when they took their quarry. His

stomach churned with nausea, imagining what secret she was keeping from him. What had she done to attract the attention of those men? Would she confide in him if he confronted her? How could he trust her until she was honest about everything?

His mouth tightened when he looked at her peaceful expression. She slept the sleep of innocents but her life had been anything but. As much as it pained him, he had lost his heart to a woman who, in all likelihood, was pure evil. There could be little doubt to the contrary. Her manipulative nature made it easy for her to try to trick him. His attraction to her had allowed him to let her fool him long enough to slake his physical need for her. He squirmed at the thought, wondering if he had used her just as cavalierly, despite the emotion behind his desires. Was the emotion genuine? How could it be? He didn't think he knew the real her. She was too much of a contradiction for him to sort out how he felt about her, whatever her real personality was. Maybe if he had a hundred years with her, he would feel as though he really knew her. Part of him wanted to take her back to his mountains and keep her there for the rest of her life. Never in fourteen hundred years had he experienced the urge to permanently introduce another person into his solitary existence. That it would be someone as ambiguous as Nikia, when it finally happened, scared him.

Regardless of what he wanted to do, he had to take her back to Corsova. There, she might stand a chance of rehabilitation at Anca's mercy. There might even be a future for them someday. After all, he had an excess of time and patience. But in the hands of the men pursuing them, he knew not what fate she faced and cold shivers raced down his spine when he speculated.

Firm with resolve, he slipped from the bed, careful to disentangle her body from his and hopeful of not waking her. In the dim glow of the single lamp, he searched for his pants, finding them discarded in a heap in the middle of the room. A quick search through his pockets revealed his wallet, their passports and the tickets were missing. By some miracle, the tiny cell phone Anca had assigned him was still in his back pocket and he pressed one to autodial the queen's private chamber.

She answered on the third rang.

"Your Highness, this is Atar. We've had some trouble."

"What's wrong?" Underlying her business-like tone was a note of concern.

"You didn't send another team after your sister, did you?"

"No. I trust you implicitly, Atar. I know you'll bring her back and I've respected your wishes to work alone."

Her confidence might have moved him, if the aching hole in his heart hadn't swallowed all emotion as it registered. "I didn't think you had sent them. Men are hunting us. I don't know their intentions but we need to get back to Corsova as quickly as possible."

"Has your flight changed? Are you coming sooner?"

He paced around the room, stepping quietly to avoid waking Nikia. He tried to tell himself he was being considerate of her need for sleep and wasn't trying to sneak



around to arrange things she wouldn't be happy about behind her back. His heart wasn't in believing that. "No, but we've lost the tickets, passports, credit card...everything. You'll need to sort this out." He stopped speaking when his random pacing led him to the table, where he saw his wallet. "Hold on."

He bent his neck to secure the phone against his shoulder while opening the wallet. The credit card she had given him was there, along with cash. Lying next to the wallet were their passports but no tickets. "Never mind the passports and funding. I've found those. The tickets are still missing." He turned to look at Nikia, curled with her front turned away from him, her back moving up and down as she snored softly. Had she destroyed them in a vain effort to keep him from taking her back? "I believe the airline can issue replacement tickets when we arrive."

"I'll handle it, if you still plan to fly back to Constanta alone. Would you rather wait where you are for an extraction team to assist you?"

He hesitated, tempted by the thought of turning over Nikia to authorities of the queen, turning his back on the situation and returning to isolation. His brow furrowed as he wondered if their hiding place was suitable for an extra day's occupation. Going with instinct, he said, "No. I don't think we're in a secure enough location to stay here very long. It's best to stick with our original plan of flying from Prague to Constanta."

"Very well. I'll have Sorin and Lucian meet you there with a security team."

"Yes, Highness."

Anca's tone warmed a bit, as she switched from matters of state to a more personal subject. "Watch yourself. This worries me, Atar. I'm frightened my sister is attempting to carry out a scheme to escape your custody. I would hate for you to be injured while doing my bidding."

The thought hadn't even occurred to him. Atar grimaced at the way his heart squeezed when the queen suggested the possibility that Nikia was in collusion with the men pursuing them. "I am always cautious. I know I can't trust Nikia. Your warning is appreciated but unnecessary."

"I'm pleased to hear you haven't dropped your guard. She can be...charismatic."

The queen didn't know the half of it, Atar mused, as he ended the call and placed the phone beside his wallet. Absently, he picked up the passport of Nikia and examined the face staring back at him from the small photo. There wasn't a trace of warmth in her green eyes. The tilt of her lips suggested a malicious smirk more than a smile. Looking at her gave him a chill, while confounding him at the same time. How could she be so warm and responsive in his bed and still be so ruthless? It made no sense.

With a deeper sigh, he dropped the document beside his and started to turn back to the bed, thinking he would join Nikia for a while longer. He wanted to hold her, whether or not her warmth was a front. She drew him like a moth to the flame and if he was going to burn because of her, he wanted the fire to be all consuming. He attempted to ignore the voice of conscience whispering it was wrong to make love to her without

trusting her, knowing he planned to betray her. Maybe it wasn't betrayal in the strictest sense of the word but she would view it as such.

He didn't see what hit him but pain exploded through his head, eliciting a cry and breaking his chain of thought. He reached out blindly, touching Nikia's smooth skin as he fell forward. Atar was vaguely aware of the careful way she helped him land. Her fingers were soft on his forehead when she stroked it, a marked contrast to the rough carpet against his cheek. He thought he heard her whisper, "Sorry," as consciousness slipped away from him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nikia checked Atar's pulse, finding it steady and strong. He would have nothing more than a headache from the blow to the head. She cringed with guilt but what choice had he left her? His conversation with Anca had driven knives through her heart. After everything, he still didn't trust her. If he hadn't seen and felt her love while they made love, he never would, meaning he could never trust her.

She left him on the floor, deciding not to try to wrest him back to the bed. Her heart burned with love for Atar but she was also sizzling with anger at his betrayal. Aside from the renewed intensity of the migraine building behind her eyes limiting her ability to lift him, his comfort wasn't her primary concern right then.

The passports and his wallet were still on the table. Nikia availed herself of his available cash, leaving the credit card and phone untouched. There should be enough Euros to fund a plane ticket to Minsk. Once there, she would need only enough to pay for a room if she couldn't find her grandmother's people right away.

She shrugged off the tattered remains of Maria's gown and slipped on the uniform she had worn before. Hesitating, she put five Euros back on the table, atop the nightgown, hoping Atar would realize the money was to compensate the woman.

With a brief glance at Atar, whose eyes were moving rapidly under his lids, she walked to the door. A pang in her chest caused her to hesitate with hand on the knob. She turned back to look at him, wondering if she would ever see him again and then wondering if she cared. The pang deepened, forcing her to admit she would. She opened the door and stepped through, closing it quietly behind her. There was no wrenching sense of goodbye assailing her. She knew Atar would find her. He knew just where to look and he was determined to return her to Corsova. She just needed to stay a step ahead of him until exhausting all chances of ridding her mind of Illiana's presence.

## Chapter 9

Belarus in general and Minsk in particular, surprised Nikia. She had expected a primitive country existing in obscurity. Instead, she found a bustling capitol city with a population of nearly two million. In other circumstances, she would have been charmed by the curious mix of modern and ancient architecture, culture and technology, old ways and new. But in her current predicament, she had no time to focus on such things. The large population was a frustrating deterrent to finding her family. Three fruitless hours of searching had contributed to the migraine feeling as though it had expanded to encompass her entire body. It had also led her to this tavern on the edge of town. Nikia eyed it doubtfully as she picked her way through the soggy street, where tenacious reeds shot up in places. Unlike most of the municipality, no one had made an effort to beautify this area of the city. Perhaps it was out of official jurisdiction.

A series of rough planks led to the opening of the tavern. The door was open, allowing the cool breeze of the crisp summer night to blow in. A cloud of smoke emitted from the top of the doorway and Nikia took a deep breath of fresh air before entering.

Every eye focused on her, and she got the sense her new outfit of jeans and a rough wool sweater the shade of oatmeal did nothing to help her blend in as a local. The tavern was a mix of men and women but all had a similar look of despair.

She held her head high and walked to the bar, taking a stool after eyeing the wooden surface for stains. It wasn't pristine but she sat anyway, needing a chance to rest. Like the rest of the room, the bar was shabby, made of rough wood losing its smooth sheen and complete with a surly bartender eyeing her with unfriendly eyes. She nodded to the woman and asked for a beer in English, hoping she would be understood. Within seconds, a draft beer in a clean mug appeared before her.

Nikia took a sip, hiding a grimace at the bitter taste and leaned forward to speak with the bartender. "I'm looking for a Kosmistan who might work here." The owner of an antique shop had directed her to this place after she followed an old address from the public records' office to his business, only to learn the Kosmistans had moved out long ago.

The woman frowned and her distrustful expression turned suspicious. She said something harsh in Russian and crossed herself. Before Nikia could blink, the woman whisked away the beer and made a shooing motion with her hand.

She didn't budge. "Please, I need your help. I must find the Kosmistan family."

"ведьма." She made the sign of the cross again, much to Nikia's consternation. As she repeated, "ведьма," in a louder tone, the bar fell silent, with every eye blatantly focused on the drama playing out at the bar.

The hairs on the back of her neck rose and Nikia whirled away from the bartender to examine the room. Several patrons were crossing themselves and all watched her with a combination of fear and loathing. She heard someone murmur, "Witch," in English. Apparently, her family wasn't well-regarded in this area.

The tense silence held, with the seconds ticking past audibly from a crudely carved wooden clock on the wall. Slowly, Nikia slipped from the barstool, knowing she would find no help here. All eyes followed her slow movement to the door. She tried to hurry without appearing to hurry and her heart sped up as she neared the open door. She could taste freedom and took a larger step. An arm blocked her way and she came to an abrupt halt.

An old man stood there. His slight build and hunched posture indicated he was no threat to Nikia. She could have shoved past him and been on her way but his expression gave her pause. He didn't look at her with fear. Curiosity filled his eyes and he inclined his head, saying in broken English, "I Yuri Kosmistan."

She sagged with relief and barely kept the story from pouring from her in a tidal wave of words. Weakness swept through her, prompted by a surge of relief and she had to restrain the urge to throw herself into the old man's arms. "Please, can you help me?"

He hesitated for a long second before nodding. "Come, ребенок."

Although she had no idea what he'd said, Nikia had no qualms following the man from the tavern to a rusted out Chevy truck at least forty years old. His intentions seemed pure and she placed her trust in him by climbing into the truck. He joined her in the cab, got behind the wheel and started the engine after half a minute of the starter grinding. The gearshift crunched gears when he shifted but he seemed unconcerned.

They left the tavern via the muddy road, traveling almost a mile before Nikia spoke. "Do you know of an Elsa Kosmistan?" She watched the old man's face, not missing the flicker of surprise in his eyes. He shrugged and said something but it was Russian and beyond her comprehension.

She tried a different question. "Where are we going?"

"Temhoe. Kosmistans."

She sighed and gave up conversation with the man. He didn't speak enough English to answer her questions and she spoke no Russian. Once they reached the village—Temhoe, was it?—she hoped there would be someone in residence who spoke better English.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was good she hadn't expected a warm welcome. Her first sight of Temhoe was depressing. Vast marshland surrounded the entire small area that had been cleared for crude wooden dwellings with hand-cut wooden shingles. A general state of disrepair

affected everything, lending an even gloomier cast to the already sad atmosphere. At first appearance, Temhoe was unwelcoming.

Her first introduction with another Kosmistan proved to be equally unwelcoming. Nikia hung back near the doorway of the cramped kitchen as Yuri conversed with a woman even older than he was, with broad hips, stark white hair scraped into a bun, leathery skin, and cold, black eyes that never deviated from Nikia, even as she appeared to berate the man.

Yuri nodded his head to the woman, turned to Nikia and bowed at the waist. "Mother will speak." Then he slipped through the doorway leading into the rest of the small cottage, leaving her on her own with the woman eyeing her so disdainfully.

She cleared her throat as she forced her feet to take a step forward. "Do you speak English, ma'am?"

"Enough." Her voice was as sharp as her eyes and as glacial as the ice on the poles of the Earth. "Who are you?"

"My name is Nikia..." She trailed off when the woman's expression closed.

"Get out. We not need your kind here."

She held out a hand. "Please, won't you listen?"

The woman crossed her arms, pursed her lips and stared at her. She didn't repeat her directive to leave, so Nikia continued.

"My grandmother came from this village, I guess. Her name was Elsa and she married a —"

"вампир," interjected the old woman. "Bloodsuckers."

She nodded, not about to quibble over terminology while the woman was somewhat listening. "She had a daughter named Illiana. I am Illiana's daughter."

"Pure evil," the woman whispered. Her eyes focused more sharply on Nikia. "You are pure evil. Yuri should not have brought you. Leave this place."

A tear spilled from her eye and she brushed it away. "You're my last hope. My mother has controlled my body for thirty-three years of my life. Only after awakening from a coma was I able to take over but she's fighting me." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "She's winning." The migraine flared in intensity, as if Illiana was reveling in her triumph.

The woman kept up her icy façade. Nikia stared at her for a moment, hoping she would change her mind but the woman held fast. With dropped shoulders, she turned to leave the kitchen, not knowing what else she could do. She had exhausted her last option. Atar would be coming for her, so all she could do was take a room somewhere near the airport and wait for him. She wouldn't try to escape her fate again, she vowed. It was too important to stop Illiana, even if it meant dying.

Lost in thought, with her feet methodically leading her to the crude mud road Yuri had driven her down, Nikia didn't see someone approach. It wasn't until a hand fell on her arm that she jerked and looked up to see a woman close to her age standing slightly

behind her. She had long hair the shade of maple, with large green eyes. Her features were familiar, although Nikia had never met her before.

"I am Oksana...your cousin."

Nikia's eyes widened at the revelation. "How did you—"

"I heard your discussion with Gran." She shrugged. "She is old and set in her ways. Elsa betrayed the family when she left our village and went to marry one of the vampires. Gran curses whenever she hears her name. She is even more angry now that a woman tricked her into learning a binding spell last year under the claim of trying to control Elsa's evil ways." She shook her head. "The truth was revealed, but not until this Sian already had the knowledge.

"Gran does not forgive." Oksana's lips curved into an indulgent smile. "But she forgets a child shouldn't be held responsible for the sins of its parents. I will help you."

Her cousin's rapid speech in English thick with an accent, especially the mention of Sian, made Nikia's head spin. She latched onto her last words. "How? What can be done?"

"Illiana must be banished. There is a spell I can perform that will allow you to confront her in your mind." She paused, scanning the area. "We cannot do it now."

Disappointment burned through her chest. "Why not?"

"You need support, someone to keep you linked to this realm. If you defeat her, Illiana's essence will depart from this world but your spirit might follow, unable to give up the fight."

Nikia shook her head. "I won't. Please, I need you to do this."

"No, we will wait."

"For what?"

Oksana nodded her head in the direction of the road, where a motorcycle was approaching. "We wait for him."

Nikia turned, gasping when she saw Atar. How had he caught up with her so quickly? She turned back to Oksana, taking the woman's hand without thought. "Don't tell him I'm here. He wants to take me back. He doesn't believe me. He'll never let me go through with this." She swore Illiana's cold laughter echoed through her brain, although the migraine hadn't attained the severity of the last time she had spoken with her mother.

"Shush." She patted Nikia's hand. "Have some faith in him, Nikia. You need a link strong enough to draw you back and who better than the one you love?"

\* \* \* \* \*

How the hell had he gotten himself into this? Atar shook his head at the situation, wondering why he was in the middle of it. The woman, Oksana, had been too

persuasive and he hadn't been able to turn away from the pleading in Nikia's eyes. She really believed her mother had controlled her, meaning she was probably mentally ill. Dissociative Identity Disorder, wasn't it called? If that was the case, how could the archaic spell the cousin was casting do anything to help her? She needed medication and counseling, not magic and ceremonies.

He intended to make sure she got the help she needed when he took her back to her sister. In the meantime, it would do no harm to let her have the ceremony. It might help her stay focused long enough to reach Corsova, without taking off on him again.

"Atar?"

He looked down at her when she clutched his hand and spoke his name. "Yes?"

"How did you get here so quickly?"

"Anca chartered a jet. It's at my disposal from this point." He forced a lighthearted wink. "It's more convenient for chasing after you."

Her expression remained serious, almost grim. "I won't run again. I promise you that. If this doesn't work, there's only one way to banish Illiana." She flinched but her resolve didn't waver. "I'll have to die."

He couldn't draw in a breath for a long moment at her pragmatic words. Grasping her hand, Atar said, "That's crazy. You just need help. I'll make sure Anca takes care of you."

Her eyes were sad but she must have decided not to argue. Instead, she brought his hand to her face and rubbed her cheek against it. "I'd rather have you taking care of me."

He swallowed, not sure what to say. To delay a response, he shifted from a kneeling position to sitting Indian-style on the hand-woven rug beside the pallet where Nikia lay. He blinked when fragrant smoke from the incense entered his eyes. What could he tell her? He wanted to be there for her but if she was mentally ill, she needed a lot more help than Atar could give her. Finally, he said, "I'll be there if you need me." *As much as I can without interfering*, he added silently.

Oksana's return interrupted their conversation. She wore a simple outfit of cloth trousers and a white shirt. Their ceremonies must not call for any special garb. Atar had never participated in a vampire or werewolf ritual but he had heard the vampires liked robes and the werewolves preferred nudity.

He looked down when Nikia squeezed his hand again but her eyes weren't on him. They were focused on a plain wooden cup Oksana held and wide with fear. "What is that?" he asked, eyeing it suspiciously.

"A dram." She didn't elaborate, except to say, "It will put Nikia in a deep trance, so that she can find her mother in her mind and banish her."

"How do I do it?"

Oksana shrugged. "The manifestation is different for each person. Just remember what you're experiencing is real and it isn't."

He scowled. "What's that mean?" The words to halt this nonsense hovered on the tip of his tongue.

"Whatever happens inside her mind will be very real to her, even though it's not real for us. If she's injured during the confrontation, physical marks will appear on her body. What happens to her mind happens to her body but she is in control, as long as she remembers that." Oksana knelt on her knees to hand the cup to Nikia. "You are in control of the scenario. If you need to alter something, you can do it, as long as you don't get caught up too deeply in the world created in your mind. Most importantly, you have to keep Illiana from defeating you because then she is in command."

Nikia nodded but didn't speak. Her manner was meek when she took the wooden cup and drained the contents. Her complexion turned ashen and she blinked repeatedly, as if trying to keep open her eyes.

"Don't fight it," Oksana said in a soothing tone. "Let the dram work. The sleep state is necessary."

Atar brushed the hair from Nikia's face, biting his tongue to keep from protesting. Her hand in his grew slack and her eyelids closed. While her eyes twitched rapidly under the lids, her breathing was faint and she looked close to death. He leaned toward the cousin, wishing Nikia hadn't put so much faith in her upon such short acquaintance. "What have you done to her?"

Oksana's mild reply indicated she wasn't angry about his suspicion. "I'm helping her. This is her only chance to rid herself of Illiana."

He scoffed. "You don't really believe that, do you? It's something she's created in her mind, to escape the knowledge of what she's done."

Her brow quirked. "You are entitled to your skepticism. All I ask is you remain emotionally available to her if she needs you, despite your disbelief."

"I'll be right here until she wakes up." No way was he leaving Nikia alone with this woman in such a vulnerable state. Because she claimed to be a family member who wanted to help didn't mean she was. Who knew what her intentions were?

\* \* \* \* \*

Where was she? Nikia's head spun when she opened her eyes. A perplexed frown flashed across her face, as she surveyed the shadowed landscape. Dense patches of fog shrouded the ground she was sitting on, so thick that she couldn't see any part of her body below the waist when she looked down.

A memory teased the back of her mind, whispering in a voice she couldn't place. She focused on it, trying to pin down the elusive message. Just as the words started to clarify, another voice intruded.

"Do you think this is wise, Daughter?"



She jerked at the sound of her mother's voice, bounding to her feet. Her eyes sought out her mother's presence and she gasped when Illiana stepped closer, providing illumination with the torch she plunged into the ground. "What's happening?"

She didn't answer. "I didn't expect you to have the courage for this." Illiana shook her head, rustling lustrous waves of cinnamon-red hair so similar to Nikia's. "How foolish, to push us to this point. I would have allowed you to exist in a small part of my mind. Now, I'll have to destroy you."

The memory returned then, of taking the draught and preparing for this confrontation. Nikia straightened her spine. "Your generosity overwhelms me." She curled her lip, eyeing her mother with distaste. "I'd rather die than share a body with you again."

Illiana nodded her head. "If that is your wish."

Holding herself tensely, Nikia braced herself for attack. She had no idea what to anticipate. Would Illiana strike out at her with bare hands or a weapon? She held her breath, determined not to act rashly, thus giving her enemy the advantage. And there was no doubt her mother was her enemy. One of them had to die tonight.

Illiana chose a more insidious method of attack. She flooded Nikia's mind with images of violence, combined with overwhelming pain. She clutched her head, falling to her knees as she screamed. The torture didn't end. The images intensified as Illiana replayed the night Nikia's body had been used as the instrument of her father's death. Valdemeer's conflicted expression of rage and sorrow as he lay on the floor, with his lifeblood pumping from him, ripped into her soul. He had died thinking she was as evil as her mother.

She shook her head, trying to rid her mind of the visions playing through them. The attack on Anca was next, when she had bitten her as a wolf. Before she could dwell on that, another memory rose to take its place, of the day she tortured and murdered a couple touring Corsova, just for fun. No one knew about that, except she and Illiana.

The worst image that stayed in her mind was of a young Nikia, barely more than a toddler, preparing a poison under her mother's direction and putting it in a baby bottle, along with sugar-water. Then she crept into the nursery and fed it to her infant brother, Julian. Nikia could still recall how warm and soft he had been in her arms, even as her mother's dark glee at removing the heir to the Protectorate combined with her emotions. She cried out when it came time to relive the way Julian had stiffened and thrashed as the poison took hold. His last strangled cry echoed through her mouth and she slumped to the ground, burying her face into the mud, trying to shut out the images and accompanying pain. "No more," she whispered, taking in a mouthful of mud as she did so.

Illiana's cold laugh sent shivers down her spine. "Why did you think you had the strength for this, Nikia? You are weak. You'll always be weak. There is nothing of me in you."

She managed to gain a shred of strength, enough to lift her head. "I'm thankful for that much." The pain still drilled into her brain but Oksana's voice was rising above it. She struggled to make out the words.

*"You are in control."*

Her mouth firmed with resolve and she stared at Illiana's feet. Her posture suggested subservience and she didn't look up at her mother, not wanting to dispel that image. Instead, she focused her gaze on the ground under her mother's feet, forcing herself to see through the fog, until she could make out the muddy ground below. Thunder cracked from somewhere above, followed by a flash of lightning. Nikia briefly wondered why her mind had chosen this setting but pushed aside the thought when realizing it had distracted her.

Rain started pouring from the sky in a torrent, soaking her in seconds. Illiana screeched at the annoyance but didn't show signs of seeking shelter. She moved closer to Nikia, standing over her. Her hand settled on the back of Nikia's head, in almost a caressing gesture. The rigid set of her fingers and the way her nails dug into the flesh of Nikia's neck, gave a different interpretation to the touch. "It ends now, Nikia."

"Yes," she said so quietly she didn't know if Illiana heard her. With all her strength, she focused on the ground, imagining a deep hole opening under Illiana's feet. A rumbling sounded but it might have been thunder. Her mother paid no mind to it, as she lowered her hand to the side of Nikia's neck and started squeezing. Her other hand came to join its mate, cutting off Nikia's air supply.

She didn't let her gaze waver, knowing she had to finish this. The rumbling returned, much louder this time and definitely originating from the ground. Illiana's grasp slackened when she looked down. An expression of shock crossed her face and she screamed when a hole appeared beneath her, swallowing her.

Nikia's vertebrae jolted under the strain of Illiana's hold, as she anchored her hand into her daughter's hair and brought her into the hole. Together, they fell into the bottomless pit. Illiana's screaming didn't cease but Nikia closed her eyes and turned her thoughts inward. She hovered on the edge of oblivion and reached for it. Quiet darkness beckoned and she wanted it more than anything.

Pain shocked her eyes open, as it emanated from her arm. She looked down and saw a jagged cut there, as if made from a small knife. Whoever had carved it meant it to serve as a message. *Return.*

Atar! What was she thinking? Illiana's essence was drawing her away with it but she couldn't go. She had to return to herself. She jerked away from Illiana's hold but found it wasn't so simple as that to escape. Invisible bonds anchored her to Illiana, who seemed to find a measure of satisfaction in ensuring Nikia's destruction along with her own.

Panic seized her and she thrashed, still falling. She reached out, searching for something to grasp in the pit. The sides were smooth and slippery, as rain flooded the

trench. It was more difficult to breathe but she drew in a lungful of air and shouted, "Atar, help me."

She looked up and a hand extended into the pit, although they must have fallen too far by now to let anyone reach them from the ground above. She didn't question it further when she was able to reach up and grasp his hand. Her descent arrested immediately and she flinched when the bonds binding her to Illiana snapped with a sharp throbbing sensation. Illiana's screams of rage carried to her but her mother's body continued falling, into the oblivion from which she couldn't return.

Meanwhile, the hand offered was Atar's and he pulled her up, despite her lack of resources to assist him with the task. As he brought her out of the hole, her feet touched ground and the stormy landscape disappeared, morphing into the confines of the small cabin where Oksana had brought her. Atar crouched over her, concern evident on his face, mingled with shock.

Her hand trembled when she reached up to touch her head. It had been so long since she had known a day without even a light headache that she had nearly forgotten what it was like to be pain-free. Her thoughts were clear, despite a bit of lingering confusion and she was whole. Not a trace of Illiana remained. A smile creased her mouth and she reached for Atar, placing her palm on his chest. "She's gone."

He stared down at her, perplexed. The silence lengthened between them, until he muttered something and rose, hurrying from the cabin.

Nikia's brow furrowed when she turned to her cousin, who seemed unmoved by the events. "What's wrong with him? Does he still doubt me?"

A faint smile showed through her cool exterior. "I'm sure he believes you, Nikia. He was drawn into your mind when you called for him. I think his ability to answer is what has shaken him."

"How so?"

Oksana shrugged. "I told him only someone who cared deeply for you, who had a connection with you that was more than superficial, could bring you back if you needed help. Only someone who believed could answer your cries for help." Her smile widened. "When cutting your flesh failed to bring you back, he acted instinctively, reaching out to you in a gesture that should have been impossible with his mindset. I don't think he knew he believed you until that moment when his spirit joined yours and brought you back from oblivion."

Nikia blinked, struggling to process what her cousin shared. Did that mean Atar loved her, had faith in her before Oksana initiated the spell? Had he been standing beside her even before he knew it? Again, she questioned if he loved her. Could it be possible that his feelings were the same as hers, despite the adversities plaguing them? Had a reciprocal bond formed between them during the short time they had known each other, instead of being one-sided, as she had believed? She asked the question aloud.

Oksana shrugged. "I don't know if he loves you. Only he can tell you that. You should go to him." She waved her hand around the small room. "You may sleep here tonight. Gran doesn't need to know."

Nikia nodded, swallowing the sodden ball in her throat. She gathered her courage and sat up, waiting for some physical sign of the battle her mind had waged to impose itself, other than the stinging pain in her arm where Oksana had cut her. She looked down, noticing for the first time she was soaked to the skin, with her hair hanging in wet strings in her face. The taste of mud befouled her mouth and clumps of sludge clung to her sleeve when she wiped her face. Prior to confronting Atar, she needed to wash.

Before she could make her request, Oksana said, "There is a small bathroom down the hallway, if you go through the kitchen. I'll bring you a change of clothes, since those are ruined."

"Thanks." She got slowly to her feet, hesitating when she stood. "Do you think I should speak to him first?"

Her cousin shook her head. "No. Give him time to think through the situation. When your body is refreshed, you will feel more like undertaking the task before you."

## Chapter 10

All through her shower, Nikia had dreaded searching for Atar and confronting him about what Oksana revealed. She hoped his response would be affirmative, that he would agree with her suggestion to recover the money from her other accounts, travel far away from Eastern Europe, find a place to settle into a quiet life and live happily ever after for the rest of their days. The more likely response would be a denial of his feelings, followed by the information that he was still taking her back to Corsova.

She emerged from the small bathroom wrapped in a gray towel, to go in search of the clothing Oksana had promised. Nikia froze in mid-step when she saw Atar standing with his back to her, staring out the small window of the bedroom. The set of his shoulders suggested resolve.

He whirled around when she took another step. Their eyes met and a loaded silence fell between them, with each waiting for the other to speak first. She moistened her lips, searching for the right thing to say.

He must have found the words first. "Had she really controlled you all that time?" He took a step closer, his expression revealing he wanted to believe her, needed to. "Illiana planned the crimes you're accused of. It wasn't you?"

She shook her head, taking another step toward him. "I was aware of what she did, but it was as if my presence was squeezed into a tiny cage in the back of Illiana's mind. I could see through my eyes, feel through my body but couldn't stop her." She closed her eyes, reliving the futility of her struggles over the years, how painful it was to stand by and be able to do nothing.

His hand on her cheek opened her eyes and she saw the tenderness in his gaze. Everything she wanted to say bottlenecked in her throat, refusing to emerge as anything other than an incoherent moan when he traced his fingers down her throat, pausing to stroke her neck.

His arms were comforting when he drew her inside them, holding her in an embrace that demanded nothing but offered everything. Atar's heart thudded against her ear and she snuggled closer, letting the sound lull away her remaining pain. She pressed her hands against his back, anchoring him. Her brain urged her to confront him about the future but her heart wanted only to bask in his touch.

She turned her face and craned her neck, to put her lips against his neck. Hunger stirred but it was secondary to her need to prove his trust in her. Her nerves sang with tension when her mouth hovered over his carotid artery. He stiffened but didn't pull away. Very slowly, she licked the spot, straining for each telltale signal his body emitted. He shivered but she didn't know whether from pleasure at the sensation or lingering mistrust.

Nikia allowed him to feel the point of her teeth, pleased when he didn't draw away. His breathing increased slightly but he stayed still when she scratched his skin delicately with the tip of her fang. Immobile under her mock assault, his heart betrayed him by thumping even faster. She still didn't know if it was pleasure that caused the reaction, so she sank her teeth through his skin. His indrawn breath clued her in to his surprise and possible pain at the action but he withstood it.

She lifted her head, examining his expression. Her stomach quivered when she saw the warmth in his eyes. Fear and mistrust weren't visible. Only...she hesitated to identify the emotion and her brow furrowed when she considered it.

He didn't give her time to analyze further. Atar lowered his head, taking possession of her mouth. Unlike her cautious advances to test him, there was nothing hesitant about his touch. His mouth devoured hers, his tongue surging through her lips to sweep around the confines of her mouth, exploring every inch. He tasted of the *Lavazza* coffee and *draniki* Oksana had served them before they undertook the process of banishing Illiana. A faint hint of peaches from the compote offered as dessert offset the bitterness of the coffee and buttery potato flavor of the pancakes. Blended together, the flavors were all exotic and sensual, piquing her appetite further but for him, not blood. The peppermint of her toothpaste brought a refreshing contrast to the mix and she thought, as he lifted her into his arms, that she had never tasted anything so divine as him.

He carried her to the pallet, kneeling and placing her atop it in one smooth motion. She reached for him again when they separated during the change in position, finding him immediately. He followed her onto the pallet, supporting his weight on his arms as he stretched out over her.

Nikia stroked a strand of his hair, staring deeply into his colorless eyes. "I need you."

He turned his head to kiss her hand, licking her palm, before speaking. "I need this too." A slight grin teased his lips. "I hope I'll be conscious afterward this time."

A blush warmed her cheeks. "I promise not to hit you with anything again."

He let more of his weight settle on her, bringing his face close to hers. "I'm more concerned that you'll still be here."

"I won't leave you again."

The unnerving intensity in her gaze must have convinced him because he dropped the serious expression and leaned close enough to nip her bottom lip. She parted them in anticipation of another kiss but his mouth ventured lower, nibbling a path down her neck, to her chest, where beads of moisture from her shower still glistened. She moaned when he licked them away with tiny swipes that gradually lengthened, until his tongue was flitting into her cleavage under the towel.

He was much closer for a second, as he relaxed his arms, before his legs took over supporting him. Nikia wrapped her arms around his back to hold him close but he pulled away enough to make her miss him, even though they were still touching.

"I need to touch you."

She nodded, closing her eyes when his fingers sought out the folded triangle of towel and loosened it, letting the terrycloth fall open. She shivered when he licked one of her breasts, carefully avoiding the nipple. His breath whispered across the sensitive bead and she squirmed, arching her hips. He breathed a husky laugh before transferring his teasing attention to the other breast, which he cupped in one hand and lifted. His tongue wriggled against her nipple just long enough to make her grunt with frustration when his mouth slid lower, away from the nipple begging for attention.

He buried his face against her stomach, inhaling. Her skin muffled his voice when he said, "You smell delicious, like strawberries. I could eat you all up."

The idea of him eating her flooded her already wet pussy and she arched against him again. "I used the pump hand soap on the sink for my shower." She hadn't wanted to use the opened bar she had found in the shower.

He ignored her explanation, letting his mouth do more creative things than form a reply. She moaned when his tongue reached her mound, lightly stroking it. Fire burned inside her pussy, igniting liquid heat in her pussy. "Please taste me."

He was slow in complying, moving his tongue in tiny increments as he went lower, until his appendage finally reached her slit. It slipped inside, taking a taste of her, before moving out again, parodying the thrusting motion his hips would make soon. "More," she said through a groan.

Atar's tongue surged into her, evidencing he was finished teasing. He circled her clit with small licks, pausing to flick across the tip of it several times, until she was almost screaming with pleasure. Her hands had buried themselves in his hair and held his head against her as close as she could get him. She thrust her hips to meet each surge of his tongue when he licked her slit, alternating between her clit and opening.

His tempo increased, as did the wetness of her arousal. She pushed against his face, raising her hips in a futile attempt to get his tongue deeper, although he was already in as far as he could get. Her thighs tightened around his head when convulsions started deep inside her, building in intensity as they radiated outward, causing her pussy to pulse in time with the beat of her heart as an orgasm swept over her.

She cried out at the strength of the pleasure, trying to hold him against her as he shifted. She thought he was pulling away and murmured a protest, clenching her fingers tighter in his hair, until she realized he was only sliding up her body. When his cock hovered at the entrance of her still throbbing pussy, her eyes widened with shock. Could she? "Atar?" Her uncertainty was as clear in her voice as she knew it must be in her expression. "I don't know if I can take all of it."

"I'll go slow." True to his word, he eased the head of his merged cock into her opening, stopping when her body showed any sign of resistance. "If it hurts, I'll stop." As he spoke, he rolled over, holding her close, so that their positions were reversed. "On top, you can control the thrusts."

Nikia held her fear at bay, giving Atar the same amount of trust he had finally displayed to her. She nodded, signaling both that she heard him and that he could continue. For good measure, she added, "I'm ready."

Unhurriedly, Atar lifted his hips, letting his engorged cock fill her pussy. He stretched her to the limit but in a pleasant way. She burned at the unaccustomed length and breadth of his cock but it wasn't exactly painful, especially when he began moving in and out at a slow pace. Soon, Nikia had adjusted to his size and was meeting each thrust with her own, pumping against him, setting the pace. It was almost instinctual when she led them into an ever increasing pace, bringing his cock as deep inside as she could. Another orgasm was building in her and she clutched Atar's waist, digging her nails into his flesh. "I'm close."

Sweat beaded his flushed face. "Me too." His clenched teeth made his words difficult to discern. "I can't last much longer in your hot, tight pussy."

She rotated her hips in a circle as she bore down on him. Her pussy convulsed around him and his cock spasmed. Their cries mingled together as his first spurt of satisfaction spilled inside her. Their hearts pumped in synchronicity, causing their genitals to spasm in concert. For a moment, they were one being, a consciousness split into two bodies but each half of the whole. Not complete unless together.

The fanciful thought flitted through her mind as the wave of euphoria took her away from the world for a few minutes, to where they were soaring together, above the clouds.

\* \* \* \* \*

They must have slept for several hours. Nikia awakened abruptly to the sound of helicopter blades overhead. It was such an incongruous sound to the peacefulness of Temhoe that it awakened fear immediately. Atar was spooning her from behind and she turned to waken him but found his eyes already open, alert and full of wariness. "Do you think it's those men?"

"Who else would it be?" He rolled into a sitting position, gaining his feet to move to the window. Over his shoulder, as he parted the curtains, he said, "You have to tell me why those men want you, Nikia. What did your mother do to provoke them?"

She shook her head, aghast. "Nothing. It's not me they want. What have you done?"

"It can't be me. Time has killed off my enemies." He cursed then, letting the drapes close as he hurried back to her. "Hurry and dress. The chopper landed, letting off four people. They seem to be carrying rifles or submachine guns."

Nikia got up so quickly her head spun. She rushed from the bedroom, searching for the clothing Oksana was supposed to have left. She found a stack on the kitchen table and began dressing as she returned to the bedroom. She found Atar fully clad as she



entered the room, struggling with the buttons on the wool slacks. The matching black sweater was itchy but she wasn't going to complain. "My boots. Have you seen them?"

He shook his head. "Come on."

Abandoning the idea of shoes, she went to him, following him dubiously into the bathroom, where he locked the door and braced it with a small vanity table that would do little to keep out anyone. Her doubt grew as he pried open the small window. "We can't fit through there."

"Yes, we can. I can shift to a leaner shape and you can transform to a wolf if you have to."

She bit her tongue to silence any further protest and stepped forward when he held out a hand. He boosted her up to the window when she was in front of him and Nikia gripped the sill. Her head fit without difficulty but her shoulders at first refused to go through. She slithered and wriggled as fast as she could, somehow forcing them through. The rest of her body fit through easily and she tumbled headfirst to the ground, twisting at the last moment to avoid a head injury.

She moved out of the way and waited for Atar, who was changing his physiology to fit through the small opening. She saw a leaner version of his head and shoulders slip through the window before the sound of cracking wood in the bathroom caught her attention. She saw Atar struggling and his shape began to morph back to normal as he disappeared through the window. She ran toward the front of the small building as the sounds of running footsteps thudding through the house moved away from the bathroom.

She skidded to a halt upon reaching the porch, where she found a man dressed in camouflage, with his face covered, standing guard. He pointed a nasty-looking rifle in her direction and his finger hovered on the trigger. Instinct urged her to rush past him to get to Atar but reason prevailed as three men emerged, dragging her struggling lover.

His movements were sluggish, indicating they drugged him during the capture. She watched with horror when they dropped him on the rough surface of the wooden porch with little regard for protecting the parts of his skin bared by his partially buttoned shirt. She winced when they jerked his arms behind him and clapped him in handcuffs. She couldn't stand by any longer, watching this. Instinct propelled her forward, letting her pass the man with the gun trained on her without fear.

She was growling unintelligibly when she closed in on the men surrounding Atar, so enraged she couldn't utter anything coherent. Who were they? What did they want? She hoped she was screaming those questions but didn't think so. All she could hear was a stream of animalistic sounds coming from her.

They ended abruptly when the man behind her caught her around the waist, squeezing so hard on her middle that he pressed against her diaphragm, cutting off her air supply. She struggled in his arms but he was surprisingly strong. Her vampire blood made her more than a match for any human but this one held her immobile.

“What shall we do with her, sir?” he asked the man standing slightly back from the two who were lifting a limp Atar between them. “Shall I dispose of her?”

Black spots danced before her eyes and she struggled for a breath, wanting just one more before she felt a bullet. Her eyes clung to Atar, hoping for one last visual connection between them. She wanted to communicate with her eyes how she felt about him but he didn’t stir.

“No, I’m certain Herr Koenig can find some use for her. Sedate and load her in the helicopter.” His accent was thick and Nikia couldn’t place it over the noise of the helicopter they had left running but presumed it was German, by his usage of “Herr.”

She tried to twist away when the man holding her loosed one of his arms from around her middle to get something from a pack on his hip. The ability to breathe came back and her first lungful of oxygen brought a return of mental clarity. Peripherally, she was aware of Yuri, who had brought her to Temhoe, approaching the man on the porch. To her shock, Oksana was a step behind him, appearing much too calm under the circumstances. “Help me,” she said, catching her cousin’s eyes. Her voice was weak but audible.

Oksana hesitated. “I already did.” There was a trace of guilt in her eyes, which made no sense. “Remember, I didn’t have to do anything for you.” Then she turned her back, keeping her gaze focused on Yuri and the man in black.

Nikia frowned with confusion, until a jab in her neck diverted her attention. She turned her head in time to see the man holding her drop a syringe onto the porch.

“Very good.” The man who seemed to be in charge handed over a small pouch to Yuri. “I had doubts you would call if she showed up, but Herr Koenig assured me you would.” He smirked. “Money outweighs blood every time.”

Nikia gasped when the realization sank into her mind, which was becoming fuzzier by the second. They had betrayed her to these men. Her eyes fell on the bag Yuri clutched. *Blood money*, she wanted to shout but her tongue was too thick to wield for speech. She tried to kick her legs when her captor lifted and carried her to the helicopter but couldn’t be sure her body moved at all. A black fog crept over her vision and by the time she was lying on the cold metal surface of the helicopter’s floor, she couldn’t see anything at all. Complete loss of senses followed within seconds, until she was unconscious.

## Chapter 11

The familiar mind-numbing fog that was a remnant of whatever drug they used accompanied Atar from sleep. His blurred vision made it difficult to distinguish characteristics of the room but he thought it looked antiseptic, like a hospital room. *Or a lab*, suggested a voice in his mind and it felt like the right analysis.

His vision gradually cleared, allowing him to focus. The equipment nearest him appeared to be portable imaging equipment, such as an X-ray machine, ultrasound and a C.T. scanner. An assortment of painful-looking tools on a metal rolling tray had his stomach rolling with dread. They had stripped off his clothes, save for his briefs and his skin crawled when he pictured all the things they might do to him. Torture was on their minds but he couldn't imagine what information they wanted to extract from him.

A sound made him move his head to the left, as much as the strap across his forehead would allow. His blurry eyes widened when he saw an armed guard at the door, standing fully alert, with a gun aimed at him. Reflexively, Atar tested the straps around his wrists and ankles, finding them unbreakable in his weakened state. The man responded with a further coiling of muscles and by inching up the gun higher.

He fell still, trying to think. Completing his inspection of the room, he became convinced it was a lab, not a treatment room. There was an exotic mix of paraphernalia one didn't usually find in a clinic or hospital room. Most of it, he had no name for and all of it alarmed him.

The bright light overhead seared his eyes when he looked straight ahead and he squinted, turning away. Once again, the guard was in his line of sight and Atar spoke in a raspy tone. "Where is Nikia?" As he spoke, he tried to hone in on Nikia's aura but found nothing—only a black void before his mind's eye swam hazily out of focus.

The guard didn't respond.

"Is she alive?"

Silence.

Anger sizzled through him, helping to clear the remaining fuzziness in his mind but not sufficiently. He still couldn't sense Nikia and didn't know if it was a side effect of the tranq or if she was dead. "Dammit, answer me. Is the woman I was with when you bastards took me still alive?"

The guard shrugged, giving him a surly, "That is for Herr Koenig to decide."

"Who is—"

"Shut up." The guard waved the rifle and Atar realized it was too big to shoot standard bullets. It must hold tranquilizer darts. He let the silence lengthen between

them, having no desire for another dose of sedative. He had to be mentally clear to escape and find Nikia.

He closed his eyes, trying to recall the events leading up to the moment of capture but found sections of his recollection were spotty. The last fully cognizant memory he had was of making love to Nikia. The reminiscence filled him with warmth, warding off some of the chill brought on by his state of undress and the icy temperature of the room.

His eyes snapped open when the heavy metal door swung open to the outside, admitting two armed men who immediately aimed their guns at Atar. He wanted to ask them what they thought he could do in this state but couldn't risk provoking them. His best chance was a shift when he was alone again with the guard, unless these men had come to transport him somewhere. Then he would have to risk morphing in the presence of two men with machine guns. Either way, he didn't want them incapacitating him.

His hastily thrown together plan of escape faded to the back of his mind when another man entered. This one was different from the soldiers surrounding him. He was old and frail, with a shock of white hair and faded blue eyes that still chilled Atar when he met them. The old man's wheelchair motor hummed almost imperceptibly across the spotless tile floor when he approached the bed where they had strapped Atar.

His gaze was impassive, with a note of detached curiosity that made Atar feel like a pinned frog about to have its guts split open.

When the old man broke the eerie silence, his English was flawless but thick with a German accent. "You are indeed a fine specimen, Atar."

"Who are you?"

What might have been a brief smile crossed his face, making his white mustache tremble. "Rolf Koenig is my name but what I am is a pile of putrescence, slowly rotting."

Atar cocked a brow but didn't respond to the man's odd words. Apparently, Koenig required no active participation to continue.

"Old age ravages my body. Cancer devours the shell but not the essence." His faded blue eyes burned brightly for a moment when he leaned forward in the chair, gripping the arms so tightly his age-spotted hands shook and the knuckles turned white. "That is where you come in."

Nikia had been right. The men had come after him, for whatever purpose. He ignored the man's ravings. "Where is the woman who was with me in Belarus? What have you done to her?"

Koenig grimaced but settled back into his chair, losing the demented gleam in his eyes. "She is unharmed. My team will evaluate her for harvesting before any decisions are made."

Atar's stomach rolled. "Harvesting? What the hell does that mean?"

“She is a vampire and probably a wolf-hybrid. Her blood will be useful for one of my programs. Beyond that, she may have nothing of value or she might be suitable for a breeding program.” Koenig shrugged. “She is of no interest to me right now. I have studied a hundred subjects like her.” He licked his cracked lips with a pale tongue covered in white, suggesting he suffered from thrush. “You, on the other hand, are a rare specimen. I have only had the privilege to study one other Makheet in my lifetime. I trust you will teach me more than she did.”

Fear skittered along Atar’s nerve endings, for both himself and Nikia. They had fallen into the clutches of a madman. His aim seemed to be to experiment on the rare and unusual. That he knew of the Makheet race was remarkable. That he had subjected one of Atar’s species to experimentation was almost unbelievable. After leaving his mother’s den as a youngling, as was his species’ custom, Atar had met only two other Makheet in all his fourteen hundred years. Both times, the females had come to him, transient partners tracking the pheromones he produced during a heat cycle, wanting only sexual fulfillment and possible offspring. After the mating frenzy ended, they had disappeared, returning to their dens alone.

By nature, their race lived in solitude, so it wasn’t unusual for him to have known so few of his own kind. Indeed, that he had met any other Makheet besides his mother was rare. He certainly couldn’t underestimate the danger Koenig posed if the old man had been able to find and capture two Makheet in his human lifespan.

He worked up enough saliva to wet his mouth so he could ask the question weighing most heavily on his mind. “What do you want from me?”

“Immortality.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Nikia shook off the last traces of haziness left from the drug they had used to sedate her, examining the room where the men had brought her, leaving her lying on the stone floor. She shivered at the chill seeping into her body, grateful for the wool clothing her deceitful cousin had provided. Forcing her mind from her discomforts, Nikia rose to a sitting position, surprised she wasn’t handcuffed. No one stood guard inside the small stone room to ensure she remained where she’d been put. There were no windows to escape from, so she eased toward the door in a stealthy crouch, not wanting to attract the attention of anyone who might be standing on the other side.

The door was thick metal but with a viewing glass. With exaggerated caution, Nikia eased herself into a standing position to peek out the window, expecting the glass to be one-way and not allow her a view of the hallway. It was frosted but not so obscured that she couldn’t see vague shapes. Rather, the lack of shapes standing by the door when she craned her neck. No one awaited her in the hallway either.

She frowned, knowing it was too easy. There was something she was missing but what?

Still puzzling over the situation, Nikia touched the smooth silver panel of the gray door, where a handle hung on the other side. She pushed lightly, testing the door's strength. It didn't budge, so she pushed more forcefully, putting all of her weight against it. The door rocked slightly and Nikia cried out in agony as an electric charge surged into her body. The current sizzled through her, even her teeth and she tried to wrench away her hand, only to have spikes protrude from the seemingly smooth panel, keeping her from withdrawing.

New pain spread through her when the spikes speared her flesh. From the burning pain, she knew they were silver. This room must have been designed to hold in a werewolf or hybrid.

She was screaming with agony when the charge abruptly cut off and the spikes retracted. She fell to the stone floor, cradling her burning hands against her stomach, sobbing. A computerized voice said, "The preceding was a demonstration. Repeated attempts at escape will result in an escalation of voltage."

Crazily, Nikia half-expected the impersonal voice to wish her a pleasant day but it faded away, leaving only her soft sobs and harsh breathing to break the silence. She inched away from the door and lifted her hands away from her stomach to examine them under the light provided by the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. The holes were already healing, although the wounds were nasty. The spikes must have been tipped only, instead of being solid silver. Otherwise, the punctures wouldn't close so rapidly.

Her strength was returning, although her teeth still ached from the shock she had taken. The stone wall provided rough support for her back when she summoned enough strength to drag herself over to rest against it. Her head buzzed with an agony different from the migraines that had plagued her. This was sheer pain, a remnant of the warning issued by the security system.

She stared at the door broodingly, wondering how she might escape. There were no windows, as she had previously discovered. The only thing besides bare stone was an old blanket in one corner that appeared to be older than she was. No way was she touching it.

Nikia was still mulling over the situation when she heard a scraping sound outside the door. Acting on instinct, she dropped to the floor in a heap, positioning her head so she could peer through eyes narrowed to slits when someone opened the door cautiously. She didn't move, waiting for them to come deeper into the room. The first person through the door was a big man in fatigues. He had a pistol in the holster strapped to his thigh but carried no rifle or other weapons.

Her eyes wanted to widen when she saw a short man in a white lab coat entering the room behind the soldier, holding a sleek rod before him. A crackle of blue at the tip

indicated it held a charge of electricity. His timid demeanor bolstered her courage. She let her gaze subtly scrutinize the other man, discounting the small one as a threat.

The soldier had a deep voice, with an accent that sounded similar to Anca's. He might hail from New York, in America. "Don't be a pussy, Jaharra. She's out."

He had a prissy voice to match his demeanor, thick with an accent unfamiliar to Nikia. "Might I remind you she is a vampire, Del Torro? She has the strength of several humans."

Del Torro shrugged. "She's a woman."

"Don't be a chauvinist. She is a threat to both of us."

His laugh was derisory. "Some threat. She ain't even conscious." He smirked, taking a step closer to where Nikia lay. "I'm not worried. I'm undergoing the bloodsucker treatment, remember?"

A wheezy breath escaped Jaharra. "You've only had one exposure to the enzyme, not a direct bite from one of them. You're no vampire hybrid yet." His voice turned shrill when Del Torro took several more steps toward Nikia. "Watch out, now. Let me shock her before you transport her."

Del Torro waved a meaty hand as he knelt beside Nikia, who concentrated on keeping her breathing even and squeezed her eyes shut before catching more than a glance at his slab-like face and short buzz cut. "There's no need." The leer was obvious in his tone when he added, "Besides, I want to see her face...maybe the rest of her before you mad scientists drain her."

Nikia's insides writhed at his words, both at the horror of having him touch her and fear of what the procedure of draining might entail. It was a struggle to remain limp when Del Torro's hands fastened on her arms. She didn't move as he rolled her on her back and leaned over her, close to her face.

He whistled through his teeth. "She's a looker. Any chance she'll go in the breeding program? I wouldn't mind pairing with her."

Jaharra's voice dripped sanctimonious superiority when he replied. "Herr Koenig will determine what's to be done with her. Should she be a breeder, you will not be paired with her. You have nothing unique to bring to the program. You're just a human receiving gene therapy with small quantities of vampire DNA. We hardly need to breed a half-human, half-vampire mongrel."

"Then this is my only chance. You going to be a man and have a turn or do you need to go powder your face while I spend some quality time with her?"

"You're disgusting. There's no time. Once Herr Koenig finishes evaluating the Makheet specimen, he'll want to examine this one —"

"The old fucker will be all night with his new toy." Del Torro bent closer, until his mouth was over Nikia's and his foul breath washed across her face. It wasn't truly foul, smelling of coffee and spearmint but there was a less tangible odor to him. Perhaps it was the essence of iniquity seeping through his pores and saliva.

She barely held in a gag when he touched his lips to hers, grunting in passion. Hoping for a better moment, when he would be vulnerable, she tried to stay still when he squeezed her breast. If he didn't stop soon, she was going to have to act anyway, just to get him away from her.

His mouth hardened on hers, trying to pry her lips apart. His tongue squirmed across her lips, like a wriggling worm, seeking entrance to her mouth. She exhaled, letting her mouth soften. It took every ounce of willpower to hold down the bile when his tongue swept into her mouth, going almost to the back of her throat, to explore her moist recesses.

She bit down suddenly, with as much force as possible, trapping his tongue between her teeth. He tried to scream but couldn't manage any volume. His grunts were an obscene parody of the passionate ones he had issued just moments earlier and he struggled to pull away.

Nikia opened her eyes, meeting his terrified blue ones. Rage underlay the fear and she knew if he got loose, he would do his best to kill her. She wrapped her arms around him, digging her nails into the back of his neck while continuing to bite. Blood filled her mouth, exaggerating her gag reflex. She had no desire to feed on him. He tasted foul, not sweet and coppery.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Jaharra lunge forward with the rod extended, evidently finally gathering enough courage to act. As the prod approached, she rolled, taking Del Torro with her, cradling him close, as if embracing a lover. When he was between her and the rod, she let go of his tongue and shoved him away from her, toward the prod, while breaking physical contact with him.

Del Torro screamed when the electricity surged through him and his body spasmed. Jaharra withdrew it as quickly as possible but not in time to keep the soldier from feeling some of its effects.

Nikia got to her feet, approaching Jaharra carefully. He stood staring at her with a shocked expression. Feebly, he brought up the stick, shaking it at her but his movements lacked coordination and the rod fell to the floor. His eyes widened when he found himself defenseless.

Nikia watched him eye the stick and then the door, waiting to see which he would go for. He was closer to the prod but cowardice must have urged him to flee rather than confront. He broke into a gangly run and she had little trouble intercepting him before he reached the door. He squawked with fright when she grabbed him around the nape of the neck and dragged him backward.

"Please." He might have said something else but if so, it was lost in his incoherent whimpers when Nikia forced him to the floor beside Del Torro. He lay there trembling while she scooped up the rod and approached him. A stain spread across the crotch of his charcoal slacks when she stood over him, bringing the wand close to his chest.

"Vampire setting...too strong..." He covered his eyes with his arm. "Don't kill me."



She couldn't muster sympathy when she touched the blue flame to his white coat. His body jerked and spasmed as Del Torro's had and he slumped to the floor. As soon as he was completely down, she withdrew the prod.

Visual examination revealed both of their eyes fluttering under their lids. They were stunned but not dead. She relieved Del Torro of his sidearm before turning to the other one, bending to search his pockets, hoping for a set of keys. Instead, she found a magnetic identification card clipped to Jaharra's coat and pocketed it before leaving the stone room. Nikia peeked into the hallway to ensure no one lurked there before stepping out, wincing at the chill stone against her bare feet. She thought about going back in to borrow shoes from one of the two men passed out on the floor but reconsidered. She lacked time and doubted either of their shoes would fit her. Del Torro had huge feet and Jaharra's were smaller than hers.

She used the magnetic card to close and lock the door, feeling a twinge of satisfaction at turning the tables on them. She paused long enough to expel several mouthfuls of bloody spit onto the floor, until her saliva was clear again. The unpleasant taste remained but there was nothing she could do about it.

With exaggerated caution, Nikia set off down the hallway leading to a pair of swinging metal doors at the end. The place was like a combination castle and hospital but she doubted any beneficial treatments went on here, judging from what Jaharra and Del Torro had revealed.

She had to find Atar. No telling what they were doing to him. He had been the target of the soldiers' acquisitions and obviously the focal point of interest in this madhouse. She didn't think he would be alone in a room, left unguarded save for an automated security system. No doubt, soldiers surrounded him, while the mysterious Herr Koenig "examined" him. She shuddered, imagining what that might entail.

She set as fast a pace as she could while still being careful. She still remembered the man who had held her so easily during the kidnapping. He must be one of the hybrid experiments Jaharra mentioned. She had no desire to run into him or another like him while trying to rescue Atar. He was too strong and she was still weak from banishing Illiana. Fortunately, her mother no longer blunted her senses. They were awake and leading her to Atar. She could feel him calling to her so clearly it was as if he was screaming her name in her mind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Atar flinched when the young woman in the white coat inserted the needle into his arm, drawing blood from his vein into a large tube. The needle didn't bother him. Rather, what they planned to do with his blood was what concerned him. He turned away from the phlebotomist to look into the sharp eyes of Koenig. "How do you think I can give you immortality?"

He brought up a palsied hand to smooth down the white tufts of hair sprouting from his head. "It's in your blood. Your DNA, to be specific. Once I map it, I'll discover how your race lives so long, while mine withers and dies in a century."

The woman finished, snapping the tourniquet when she removed it from his arm. She disappeared through the second steel door leading to a smaller room adjoining his prison/lab, from which she had appeared just a short time ago at Koenig's summons.

"I'm not immortal."

"From a human perspective, two thousand years is close enough to be counted as such. Think what I can do in two thousand years." His eyes glistened, either with unshed tears or madness. "All I can accomplish...by then, I might find the answer to true immortality."

Atar wanted to refute the man's assertions but how could he? Science might make it possible for the lunatic to map his DNA, figure out the biological reason for the Makheets' long lifespan and use it to his own benefit. A cold sweat broke out over his body thinking of the possibility. He had to escape before any more of Koenig's experiments could proceed but how? All three guards held rifles. From the larger bores of two, he knew they must be tranq guns but the third was definitely a machine gun of some type.

He tried a different track. "How will immortality benefit you, stuck as you are in that frail body? Do you want to live the next two millennia as an invalid?"

Koenig's mouth tightened and his mustache slashed downward. "Soon, I'll be able to repair this body. I just need more time. Time that you'll give me, Atar."

"I won't help you."

The old man laughed, although it was more of a raspy wheeze. "You don't have to. You can't escape. I can have my scientists do whatever I wish to you and how will you fight them? Perhaps you plan to morph to a different form?" His expression turned sly. "I learned enough about your race from the Makheet female I studied before to develop an inhibitor to prevent your transformations."

Real fear welled in Atar then. He fought back the sense of helplessness, knowing if he gave up trying to escape, he never would get out. "I don't believe you. If you had that, you'd have given it to me by now." The cold sweat turned to liquid fire gushing down his face and soaking his armpits. He had been unconscious for who knew how long. How did he know they hadn't already given him the inhibitor?

"I want to collect samples of your normal physiology before tampering with your biology." He glanced at the clock on the wall as the woman who had drawn his blood returned in the company of an older woman. Both wore white scrubs, with masks shielding their faces below the eyes. "In fact, it's time to collect samples." He nodded to the doctor, who approached Atar, wheeling an ultrasound machine behind her.

Atar tried to twist away when she squirted cold gel on his chest but had nowhere to go. Seconds later, the wand glided over his slick flesh and a picture of his hearts appeared on the monitor hanging on the wall.

“Excellent. I wondered if dual organs were a characteristic only of your females or if it was a redundancy system built into your kind by evolution. Your female counterpart survived nicely without one of her hearts, so I presume it will be the same for you.”

Atar gritted his teeth, refusing to respond to Koenig. He endured the doctor’s scan of his body silently, conserving his strength for an opportunity to escape, should one arise.

A few moments later, the doctor put away the wand and her assistant whisked the machine back to its place against the wall.

“Tell me, Dr. Harding, what did you learn?”

Her crisp English accent lent an air of intellectual distance to her words that Atar was far from feeling. “Comparing this scan to the records of the female my predecessor studied twenty-five years ago, they are nearly identical, except for reproductive organs. The male specimen has more lung capacity than the female, with a primary heart that is twelve-percent larger —”

Koenig waved his hand. “I don’t care about that right now. How is he different from me? Can you find the secret?”

Harding hesitated. “The male has two hearts, three lungs, extra ribs, significantly different reproductive organs, a larger liver, two spleens, four kidneys and a digestive system that is foreign to me. It will take time to unravel how it works. I think the answer lies in his brains. Most likely the primary brain but possibly in the auxiliary.”

“Then take them.”

Harding shook her head, disturbing the pixie-cut of the silvery-blond strands. “That isn’t wise at this juncture, Herr Koenig. If you’ll recall, the female specimen died within hours of removal of her auxiliary brain. I’m not familiar with the structure of the Makheet brain. It would be better to study his anatomy and examine his brains with C.T., MRI and PET scans before removal.”

A coughing fit seized Koenig, shaking his frail body unmercifully, leaving him weak and red in the face when it passed. “I don’t have time for that. Weeks, Harding. You said it yourself. I need the answer now or I’m going to die. Take his goddamn brains or I’ll find someone who will.”

Atar’s eyes widened as the discussion played out. Their aloof act made him feel as if he didn’t exist, although it didn’t remove him from the fear of what they planned. Bile crept up his esophagus when the doctor’s shoulders slumped forward and she nodded.

“Very well, but understand I can’t accept responsibility for the consequences if I don’t find an answer before the subject dies. This might be your last opportunity to study one such as him.” She licked her lips, as if nervous. “Perhaps if you would reconsider taking the vampire-werewolf enzyme, there would be more time to study —”

“You know I’m too weak to survive the transformation. It has to be him. You had better find the answer or I won’t be the only one departing this world, Dr. Harding. Do I make myself clear?”

Atar watched her expression, searching for a sign of fear. She hid it well but her lips trembled slightly. "Yes, Herr."

The old man turned his wheelchair to the door without another word, obviously satisfied with the outcome of the confrontation between he and the doctor. His guards preceded him from the room and Atar closed his eyes, listening to the quiet sound of Koenig's wheelchair crossing the floor, wondering if it would be the last sound he ever heard.

Why hadn't he told Nikia how he felt about her? It seemed unlikely he would ever see her again and she would die thinking he hadn't loved her, had only used her for gratification. Would knowing he believed in her and had been there during the banishment be enough to let her know how he felt?

His eyes snapped open when a commotion erupted, the beginning signaled by the rapid crack of automatic gunfire. To his astonishment, one of the guards in front of Koenig went flying backward through the air, crashing into the wall. He fell to the tile floor with his neck bent at an awkward angle.

His next shock was to see Nikia step through the door, holding Koenig by the front of his shirt, with his feet suspended off the ground. His heart sang and his first thought was of holding her again, not of escaping the terrible fate planned for him by Koenig.

## Chapter 12

Nikia's eyes spat fire. She could feel them burning as she looked at the man who had kidnapped and planned to torture them. For good measure, she gave him a shake, initiating a round of coughing that turned his face gray and racked his body. With a sound of disgust, she dropped him on the floor, where he curled into a ball and continued coughing.

The soldier with the tranq gun had watched it all with horrified fascination and just as he started bringing up the rifle, Nikia leaped at him, transforming to a wolf as she went. An aborted scream issued from his throat when she knocked him to the floor and took his neck between her teeth, biting down forcefully. His blood flowed into her mouth, reminding her of her earlier hunger and she lapped it up, taking her fill.

Reason returned with the edge of her hunger blunted and Nikia padded away from him, returning to her human form as she moved toward her clothes. Peripherally, she saw the horror on the face of the two women standing beside Atar. She bared her bloodteeth to the older one before bending to retrieve the slacks and sweater.

She dressed quickly and took the magnetic card from her pocket, using it to lock the door in case one of the guards had somehow triggered an alarm before she dealt with them. The third one she had attacked still lay in the corridor, bleeding from the shot his partner had fired into his stomach when Nikia deflected the barrel as it was aimed at her.

She turned around, fastening her gaze on the younger of the two women. "Free him. Now." The woman scrambled to work the straps as Nikia addressed the one she thought Koenig had called Harding. "You, where are his clothes?"

Her hand trembled when she pointed to the smaller room adjoining the lab. "I'll get them."

"No." She waved the sidearm she had taken from Del Torro. "Come to me."

With a sob, Harding slowly approached, staying a step out of reach when she stopped. "What do you want? I'll give you anything."

"How do we get out of here?"

Her pallor faded slightly at Nikia's words. "I will show you. There is a passage for easy movement between the labs and main area. It goes to the garage."

Moving quickly, Nikia lunged at Harding, putting her arms around the woman, while pressing the gun to her temple. "You won't try anything while acting as our guide, will you?"

Harding shook her head, dislodging the gun slightly.

Nikia looked up as Atar stood, swaying for a moment and bracing his hand against the table. "You should get dressed." Her voice was remarkably calm, considering how she was shaking inside.

He moved into the other room, emerging a minute later wearing his own clothes. He looked at the phlebotomist. "What about her?"

"We can't have her raising the alarm." She glared down at Koenig, who lay on the floor in the fetal position, shivering with fear. "Him either, should he get control of himself. Tie them up, I guess."

Atar searched through the various drawers, finally holding up an industrial-size roll of surgical tape. "Think this will work?"

"Yes."

She moved the gun against Harding's side while Atar taped Koenig and the young woman's hands and feet together before running strips of tape across their mouths. When he stood up, he appeared unsteady but wasn't in the same state he had been when they drugged him in Prague. Either they had used a smaller dose or he and Nikia had been out a long time.

He tucked the tape in his pocket and they left the lab, going through the smaller room, which led to a set of double doors. Nikia gave Atar Jaharra's card but the display box failed to change when he scanned it.

She jabbed the gun deeper into Harding's side. "What's going on?"

"Take my card. Only Herr Koenig and a few of the doctors have access to this passage."

Atar took the card from the clip on her coat and ran it through the reader. The red light turned green and the doors slid open with a hydraulic whoosh.

They stepped forward and Nikia stumbled when the floor under them moved. Her finger tightened on the trigger and she craned her neck, looking for the source of attack.

"It's an auto-walk," Harding said, apparently picking up Nikia's tension.

Atar put a hand on Nikia's shoulder. "Do you want me to hold her?"

"No, you don't look steady enough." Not that she was feeling very steady herself. The surge of adrenaline that had accompanied her this far was fading fast and it took great effort to hold Harding. If the woman had struggled at all, she probably would have broken free. Nikia didn't want that to happen because she didn't want to shoot the doctor. Not yet, anyway. They needed the heartless bitch to lead them to the exit.

They walked on the walkway, adjusting to the movement within a few steps. It seemed to speed up their progress, making Nikia doubly cautious. She saw Atar's eyes constantly scanning the way ahead and behind them as they moved through the corridor, past multiple steel doors that all seemed to be in the locked position.

"What are you doing here?" Nikia asked when they passed yet another room with opaque glass and an even thicker door than the others.

“Experiments. Herr Koenig has an interest in genetics. He believes the proper combination of DNA will yield the perfect weapon.”

“You’re creating living weapons?” Atar sounded as horrified as Nikia felt. They traded a look that spoke volumes.

“Herr Koenig has vision—”

“Save it,” she snarled, urging Harding forward as they approached another set of doors. “Where do these lead?”

“This is the garage.”

She was skeptical and pushed the gun deeper into Harding’s flesh. “Convenient. Why does this secret corridor lead to the garage? Are you certain it isn’t going to open to a room filled with security?”

Harding shook her head emphatically. “Herr Koenig renovated the warehouse to serve as a garage for the vehicles. The other half is the cryo-storage area, where we keep samples not actively being studied. Please think about it. Doesn’t it make sense to have the medical corridor lead to biological storage?”

It did make sense. After sharing a look with Atar, she returned his nod and he opened the door. They tensed, expecting an ambush but it was a quiet room they stepped into with caution. Nikia shivered at the chill of cement against her bare feet. “Are there lights?”

“There is a panel on the wall by the door.”

Atar looked and must have found it because several overhead lights flickered on, revealing a large garage, with an assortment of vehicles—everything from a Cadillac to a tractor-trailer, even a Hummer.

“Keys?” Atar asked Harding.

“In the safe against the wall. You will need my card.”

Nikia watched Atar as he made his way to the steel safe mounted to the wall, sliding her card through to open the door. As he sorted through keys, she examined the room again before speaking to Harding. “You’re being very cooperative. I can’t help wondering why.”

“You have a gun. Herr Koenig pays well and the work is intriguing but I am not going to die for this.”

“You might,” she said in a whisper, hoping it sounded sinister enough to terrify the doctor. She didn’t plan to kill her but didn’t mind making her sweat. From what little conversation she had heard between Koenig and Harding, both were high on her list of people who should die to do the world a favor.

Atar returned. “Let’s go.”

Nikia nodded, releasing Harding gradually, who was smart enough not to make any sudden movements. “One more thing. Where are we?”

“Prague.”

She shook her head, not believing Harding. "Koenig is German. We must be somewhere in Germany."

"No. His experiments were a disappointment to the German government and the Herr fled his native land." Harding nodded for emphasis. "Prague is a city where rules are more...flexible."

Atar snorted. "Shall I tape her?"

She shook her head, bringing the pistol up quickly and smashing it against Harding's head. "No, let the bitch have one helluva headache."

\* \* \* \* \*

Two hours later, they waited at the airport as the jet Anca had chartered taxied down the private runway toward them, arriving ninety minutes after Atar called for it. She couldn't help thinking again of how smoothly their escape had gone once they were in the Hummer and past the sole guard at the gate. No one had chased them upon leaving Koenig's compound. It had been easy. Too easy, Nikia feared, not dropping her guard yet, even though the jet was only feet away.

She kept expecting another group of armed men to arrive and try to take them again. Should they manage to not regroup before Nikia and Atar were out of Prague, she didn't think they would give up. Koenig would keep pursuing Atar. Even if the old man died within a few weeks as he'd stated in the conversation Atar had repeated for her, there might be another wacko out there who would have a similar interest in Atar. His blood was still in that lab. If anyone came across it, they would want to know more about the Makheet.

She sighed as the jet stopped and the door opened. Employees of the airport pushed a staircase over to meet the jet and she grasped Atar's hand, walking with him to board. As she climbed the steps, she had to admit there was nowhere safe for her lover, except Corsova. Her plan to leave the country of her birth far behind wouldn't work any longer. If she wanted to be with him, she had to go to Corsova. Her stomach gurgled with acid at the thought.

Fear filled her. What if Anca wouldn't believe her about Illiana? What if she was banished or even worse, executed immediately upon return?

As they entered the jet, she looked at Atar, who was discussing their destination with the copilot standing by the door. A different kind of fear filled her, imagining parting from him forever. She would rather face her half-sister and whatever fate awaited her in Corsova than to simply give up Atar and go into hiding. He was worth fighting for.

She let her gaze wander around the plush interior as Atar continued speaking. The furniture consisted of recliners and a sofa in beige leather. A sturdy table centered



between the recliners could be used for dining or work and it included a beige lamp bolted to its surface.

She looked down at the floor, seeing beige carpet that was a perfect match for the furnishings. Trapped by Illiana's essence, she had ridden on a private jet several times as her mother carried out various machinations. That one had been so opulent as to be embarrassing, while this jet personified understated elegance.

She turned when Atar tapped lightly on her shoulder. "Yes?"

"What is our destination?" He leaned closer, dropping his voice to a whisper. "I suggest we go somewhere we have no intention of staying, so it will be more difficult for Anca to track us."

Her insides warmed at his willingness to living on the run. With a small smile and tears wetting her eyes, she shook her head. Looking at the copilot, she said, "We're going to Corsova. There is no airport in the country, so you'll have to land in Constanta."

He nodded. "Very well. Have a pleasant flight and please let us know if you require anything."

Atar tried to speak but Nikia put a hand on his arm, letting the copilot take his leave. He closed the door to the cockpit behind him, giving the passenger area of the plane the illusion of total privacy.

He turned to her as soon as the pilot was out of hearing. "What are you doing? We can't go back to Corsova. The Protector will never believe us about Illiana."

"We have no choice." She touched his cheek. "You won't be safe in the outside world. The borders of Corsova are carefully monitored and outsiders are watched even more carefully. No one can get to you there. We have to go home." As she said it, the word home resonated in her heart. The castle was her home, despite all the bad things that had happened there. She had the right to return and could only hope Anca would give her a chance to defend herself before summarily ordering imprisonment or death.

"We'll be fine." He took her in his arms. "I don't want to take you back there without knowing what will happen to you."

She snuggled against him. "It doesn't matter what happens. I'm prepared to accept whatever Anca decides, as long as I know you're safe."

"I'm not prepared. I couldn't stand by if she tried to execute you. I couldn't bear it."

She tilted her chin to look up at him. "And I can't bear the idea of Koenig or some nut like him coming after you. Be honest. Why did you settle in Corsova originally?"

He shifted with discomfort. "It was a long time ago..."

She nudged him gently. "Tell me."

A long sigh escaped him. "It was during the Renaissance when I knew I had to move completely away from civilization. Even the mountains and secluded areas where I spent my time always belonged to some government. I knew with the interest in science flourishing, I would be an oddity. That was an improvement over the possibility

of being labeled a witch and executed but only marginally. If anyone realized what I was, I would be in danger, regardless of how they reacted. I spent years searching for a place and when I came to Corsova, I knew it was a haven."

"It still is." Her smile turned down at the corners. "We have no choice, Atar. Besides, I miss the castle and my home. Never before was it just mine but now that my mother's essence is gone, I can make a new life for myself there, if Anca gives me the chance." She brushed her fingers against his brow. "A life with you, if that's what you want."

"Of course it is." His arms tightened around her. "When I was strapped to that table, facing death, all I could think of was that I hadn't told you how I feel about you. I love you, Nikia. Don't ask me when it happened but it was an epiphany when I reached out for you during the banishment of Illiana and you came back for me. I knew then that I had been denying what I felt. I should have told you when we made love."

Tears clogged her throat and she cleared it, searching for words. Finally, a simple, "I love you," was all she needed to say, along with the action of lifting her head higher to kiss him.

His lips were soft and gentle against hers, lacking the urgent hunger that had driven them earlier. She put her arms around his neck as his pulled her closer. He smelled delicious, despite everything they had been through. She nipped his lower lip gently, receiving a retaliatory swat on the fanny in return.

He broke the kiss to stare down at her. "What did I do to deserve this? I thought I wanted solitude. I never expected to feel this way about anyone."

"I'm the one who should be asking that. After all the evil things I've done..." She shuddered, remembering her baby brother. It would take years, if ever, to work through the lingering guilt, even though her body had been the instrument, not the impetus, of the act and countless others like it. "How did I find you?"

A shadow of sympathy colored his eyes but his tone was light. "I found you, remember? The moment I merged with your aura, I was so confused by you." He shrugged. "Not anymore."

She glanced at the clock on the wall. "How long until we land in Constanta?"

"At least an hour."

A sexy grin slid across her face. "Have you ever made love in a Lear jet before?"

He shook his head, his expression taking on the same sexy glint. "I haven't but that couch folds out into a bed." He rolled his shoulders as if reflexively. "It's not comfortable for sleeping but we don't plan to sleep, do we?"

Once again, she stretched to kiss him, with his mouth meeting her halfway, as he lifted her into his arms. It made her feel cherished as he cradled her against him to carry her to the sofa. There, he had to set her on her feet and they worked together to open the bed.

Atar sat down on the edge, patting the space beside him but Nikia shook her head. "Sit there." She grasped the hem of her sweater, pulling it up an inch at a time, revealing the flesh underneath to his hungry eyes. As she revealed her breasts, sans bra because Oksana hadn't provided one, he growled low in his throat. Nikia shook her head when he tried to reach for her, moving a step backward. "Not yet."

He glanced at the clock. "We only have an hour."

She sighed, realizing her striptease would have to wait for another time. She just hoped there was another time. She unzipped the trousers and shucked them off, hearing his indrawn breath when she bent with her buttocks pointed toward him while picking up the pants and sweater to neatly fold them over a chair.

Before she stood up completely, he was behind her, caressing the cheeks of her buttocks. She continued to lean forward, angling her bottom toward him. She closed her eyes when his hand slipped lower, seeking out the opening of her pussy. She was already slick with arousal and the lightest touch of his thumb brought a renewed surge of desire.

His digit found easy passage into her opening and his index finger slipped higher, caressing her clit as his thumb thrust in and out of her. She reared back with each movement, meeting him, stretching her pussy to take more. She wriggled against his hand, seeking release. Nikia fumbled a bit with her hand, sliding it between their bodies and into his trousers, to caress the smooth shaft of his primary cock. His fluid was copious on her fingers when she rubbed the head, thumbing the bundle of nerves centered at the V.

He groaned and then said, "Let's go to the bed."

It was difficult to let him remove his hand from her weeping pussy and even harder to let go of his cock so they could lie down. Atar paused to strip off his clothes while Nikia stretched out on the mattress that was as uncomfortable as he'd said. She spread her thighs, bending one of her legs to give him unrestricted access. With a lazy motion, she tweaked her nipples and licked her lips. "Are you coming?"

"Not yet but I'm close." He joined her on the bed, settling on top of her. His mouth sought out hers, as his pelvis aligned with hers. Her pussy cradled the head of his primary cock and she could feel the secondary cock nestled lengthwise between her cheeks. She arched her hips, taking him in another inch.

He moved his head to her breast, taking the nipple into his mouth and circling it with his tongue. She moaned as the tingling sensation of desire centered in her nipple, while managing to somehow still course through her body. Her pussy was spasming, begging to be filled and she lifted her hips higher still, until a third of his cock was inside. "Why are you torturing me?"

He laughed around her nipple, stirring the taut bead with his breath. He let another inch of his cock slide inside but stopped, not moving.

She tried to take more but his hand slipped between their bodies, keeping her from lifting higher. She groaned with impatience. "We only have an hour." Perhaps his own words would end his teasing thrusts and get him to bury his cock to the hilt inside her.

His eyes locked with hers. "No, we have all the time in the world. Whatever happens, we'll face it together." Finally, he thrust deeply into her. "I'm going to love you for the rest of my life."

Moisture blurred her eyes at his words. He was making a serious commitment, vowing to love her for another six hundred years, when she would die within one hundred and fifty years. For a millisecond, she wanted to abandon sex and just have him hold her.

Her body wasn't in agreement with that idea. Nikia's pussy hugged his cock, convulsing around the length of him. She met each of his thrusts with her own, straining to find fulfillment at the same time as he. Atar's hands slipped under her buttocks, lifting her to get even deeper inside her pussy. She cried out at their union, finding no words to express her pleasure. She clung tightly to him as an orgasm ravaged her.

The convulsions of her pussy milked every drop of satisfaction from Atar's cock and their hearts pounded in unison as they lay together, basking in the afterglow. She pushed strands of hair off his forehead before stretching her neck to kiss him. When she broke the sweet contact, she said, "Thank you."

He frowned. "For what?"

"Everything." She buried her face in his chest, not verbalizing what she felt. It was too raw to share with him that he had given her something to cling to should she be facing death in Corsova. The words would only depress him or inspire promises she didn't want him to keep. If execution was her fate, she didn't want Atar to fight Anca. The only way she could face the possibility of death was by knowing he would live, keeping their love alive in his memory, if they could have nothing else.

## Chapter 13

Nikia experienced low-grade nausea as they entered the throne room, hand-in-hand but wasn't afflicted by full-blown terror, as she had imagined she would be. Seeing Anca and Demi in their thrones didn't intimidate her in the way she had expected. They held her fate in their hands but she was ready to face their decision.

Petru hovered in the corner, along with Starr, dressed in resplendent red robes. Nikia experienced a surge of discomfort when her eyes briefly met the spiritual leader's. Their last meeting hadn't been pleasant. Nikia had murdered Starr's mentor, Ylenia, during her mother's bid for power.

The discomfort carried over when they stopped a few feet from the throne and Anca's cool eyes assessed her. She let the silence remain, not sure what to say if she spoke first.

"I'm surprised to see you returning with her this way, Atar." Anca looked at their linked hands. "I thought you were impervious to her seduction."

He inclined his head. "Your Highness, I stand by Nikia's side and not as her captor."

Demi shook his head. "How can that be? You know what she is...what she's done."

"It was Illiana —"

Nikia squeezed Atar's hand and he broke off. She looked directly at Anca, hoping her half-sister could see her sincerity. "I have done terrible things but I wasn't me." She sighed at Anca's look of confusion, knowing she was muddling the explanation. "May I start at the beginning?"

"Please do."

She didn't miss the way Anca nodded almost imperceptibly to Petru or the way he inched forward as she began speaking. "As you might remember, my grandmother was a witch. My mother inherited her powers and Elsa honed her skills during Illiana's early years. If Elsa hadn't killed herself when my mother was thirteen, I have no doubt Illiana could have been incredibly powerful." She shuddered, fathoming her mother with any more power than she'd had.

At Anca's discreet nod, she continued. "After Illiana murdered Magda and drugged Father to seduce him, she realized she had miscalculated the conception time and I could never take the Blood Oath with official sanction. She spent her last days locked in the tower, plotting how she could still wrest power from Father. Eventually, she realized the answer was death. Death was the only way for her to seize power. For her, death was always the answer."

Anca recoiled. "Is this a threat? Are you here to tell me you've inherited your mother's sorcery skills and will kill me? Hasn't there been enough death caused by you and your mother in a mad bid for power you can't wield?"

She flinched at the anger and weariness in her sister's tone. "Please, let me explain. The death required was her own, so she could assume control of a new form. Me. To her way of thinking, I would serve no other useful purpose. I couldn't be the acknowledged heir and Father had already made it clear he would never marry her, which would have given her at least a measure of power.

"To my mother, I was an empty vessel, waiting to fill with her essence. As an infant, what chance did I have of fighting her for control? Her plan worked perfectly and she was able to seize my body with a spell."

Demi made a scoffing sound. "Convenient."

Nikia ignored his skepticism, keeping her gaze locked with Anca's. "That's where she stayed until the night of the Blood Oath, when the ceremony sent me into a coma. When Sian awakened me two years later, it was the first time I had the upper hand. I was in control but she wasn't giving up easily." She rubbed her head unconsciously, remembering the horrible migraines.

"Is she still trying to control you?" As Anca asked, Petru's hand hovered on the hilt of his sword.

Nikia shook her head. "No. I sought out my mother's people and they helped me banish Illiana. She's gone now."

"Why come back?" Demi obviously didn't believe her. "If you're free of her now, I assume you have no interest in taking the Protectorate from Anca, so why would you risk returning?"

"For me." Atar summarized their capture by Koenig quickly, ending with, "Corsova is the only safe haven and Nikia loves me enough to risk returning here to face whatever you might put her through, so that I will be safe." He turned to look at Nikia, ignoring the others for a moment. "And I love you enough to follow you anywhere, regardless of the risks." Their eyes locked and she forgot about everyone for a long moment, until Anca cleared her throat. Together, they turned back to the queen.

"I want to believe you, Nikia but how can you prove this? I can't take your word on blind faith." Anca shook her head. "I'm sorry but I can't allow you to remain free. I can't trust you not to plot against me and endanger countless lives in the process."

She swallowed her disappointment, trying to accept the dictate stoically. "I understand. What will you do with me?"

Anca and Demi traded a look and he grasped her hand when she replied, "I have to order your death."

Atar surged forward, stopping only when he found the tip of Petru's sword pressing against his throat, barring the way to the queen. "You can't do this. She's telling you the truth. I was there. Her mother is gone."

Nikia touched his arm. "Don't do this, Atar. I don't want you to die for me. Go back to your mountains, please. I don't want you to see me executed. I just want you to remember me the way I am right now, free of Illiana. A woman in love."

He shook his head. "I won't let them do this. I'd rather die with you."

Tears spilled from her eyes. "I can't do this if you die too. Give me the strength to do what I must by letting me know you'll live." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Please."

He still hadn't backed down when Starr stepped forward, curtsying before Anca. "Your Highness, let me read her. I can verify if she's telling the truth. If not, you haven't lost anything."

Anca appeared relieved by the suggestion and she nodded immediately.

Starr approached Nikia, and Atar relaxed slightly as she passed him. Nikia stood still as a statue while Starr looked her over. She flinched without thought when the other woman's hands came toward her but forced herself not to back away. She couldn't betray any fear or doubt, lest it influence Starr's reading.

The woman's hands were cool against her face but hummed with power. Nikia didn't remember Starr being so potent and her brow furrowed with confusion. The thought fled her mind when Starr's eyes closed. Of their own accord, her eyes followed suit and the process of banishing her mother returned to the forefront of her mind, as crisp and vivid as if it had just happened.

It didn't take long for the events to play out and Starr soon stepped away, turning to Anca with a nod. "She's telling the truth. I saw the spell unfold and there isn't a hint of evil in her aura now."

Anca's shoulders sagged and she waved Petru away from Atar. "Very well. What is it you want, Nikia?"

She licked her lips as her stomach churned. "I want the life I should have had. I want to be a princess whom the citizens love, not fear. I want to help you in any way I can. I want us to be a family." She bowed her head, awaiting a rebuff from Anca.

Instead, the queen rose from her throne and walked to Nikia, touching her shoulder. "I think that is all reasonable."

At her words, Nikia lifted her head, meeting her sister's eyes. "I don't want to usurp you. I never cared about being the Protector." She glanced at Atar. "I just want to have a normal life. Get married, have babies and do my royal duties as you want me to do them."

Perhaps to both of their surprise, Anca embraced her, whispering in her ear, "I was lonely as an only child. I'm happy to finally have a sister." Then she stepped away, composing herself, once more regal. "Now, why don't you two leave us? I'm certain you have much to discuss."

Nikia nodded and Atar bowed. Hand in hand, they turned away from the thrones and walked out the way they had come. She focused on keeping a stately bearing until

the huge doors closed behind them. She let her spine relax and turned to Atar, throwing herself into his arms. He held her close, squeezing so tightly they were almost one being. No words were necessary right then. They had already spoken of the future, pledged their love and knew they would spend the rest of their time together madly in love. As his lips settled on hers, they sealed their promises with a passionate kiss that spoke words of love they didn't need to utter aloud.



### **About the author:**

Kit Tunstall lives in Idaho with her husband, near family and friends. In addition to books available through Ellora's Cave, she is the author of *365 Days of Lara Branson* (available late October, 2002), and *Undercover Mother* (available by September, 2003). Her shorter works have appeared in more than a dozen markets, including *Sex on the Edge*, *Boise Weekly*, *Epiphany Magazine*, *BloodLust-UK*, and *Bridges Magazine*.

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