

Damian's Oracle

By Lizzy Ford

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This book contains explicit language that may be inappropriate for children under the age of 18.

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CHAPTER ONE

"So ... did the doc say you're turning into a vampire?"

Sofia dropped her purse on the desk in her cube without removing her sunglasses. The early December sun couldn't set fast enough to prevent her pounding headache from growing worse on her drive to work. She ignored the hunk in her cube, hoping he'd take the hint.

"Vampiress," Jake pressed. "I brought you something."

He held out a bottle of red water.

"You can pretend it's blood."

"You have five minutes to leave my cube, or I'll bite *your* neck!" she retorted.

"Really, what'd the doc say?" Jake grew serious and sat in the spare chair in her cube.

Sofia rubbed her temples. She was better off pulling a random diagnosis out of a hat.

"No brain tumors," she replied. "Probably not the neurological issue they thought. They're looking at other ideas."

"Do they know what makes you allergic to light and eat raw steaks covered in peanut butter for every meal?"

"They're not raw, and I only eat them for dinner."

"Did the doc explain your mood swings, too?"

She gritted her teeth. She'd known Jake since her junior year of college. They dated in college, parted ways mutually, and ended up working for the same financial planning firm in Virginia. Normally, she felt privileged that he still gave her the time of day, what with the way he'd turned out – formed like a Greek god with hazel eyes so pretty their boss swooned every time she spoke to him. But today, she didn't want to be reminded that she'd changed from a normal human being into a sunlight intolerant, moody bitch in the two months since her 28th birthday.

"Think you can talk the boss into letting me come in an hour or two later?" she asked.

"Yeah, easy. I just smile pretty. Doesn't work on you, but it does on her."

"Thanks, Jake. The headaches are getting worse."

"Sofi, I'm worried," he said, softening. "What's going on?"

"The doctors don't know," she said with a sigh. "They're flying in a specialist from overseas. They said it might be some sort of rare blood disorder."

"What the hell does that mean? That they really don't have a clue?"

"Pretty much."

"I googled your symptoms," Jake said and unfolded a piece of paper. "A lot of bullshit posted by wannabe vampires and Twilight fans. But I found this, too." He handed her the page.

"This is fruit punch, by the way," he said, nudging the bottle of red water towards her. "Your favorite, right?"

"I don't remember telling you that."

"Anyway, among the wacko postings, I found this site."

He held up the paper to reveal a link to a website with a single name and phone number written on it.

Damian Bylun

"What is this?" she asked, accepting the paper.

Jake wiped his mouth the way he did when he admitted to cheating on her eight years ago. She lifted her sunglasses to squint at him.

"It's a blog this doctor guy keeps. In it, he describes what you're going through."

"For real?"

"Yeah."

"How did you find it? I spent days surfing the net. Even Katy tried to help."

"Aw well, you and your BFF just aren't as good as The Jake. She's still a bitch, by the way."

She rolled her eyes. He'd never gotten over her BFF refusing to date him after she dumped him. Jake's ego was as large as his size sixteen feet.

"What does he say my symptoms are?"

"I don't know. His blog is firewalled from here, though, so you should just call him."

Damian Bylun. It struck a cord deep within her, as if she should know it. Struck by something else, she removed her sunglasses and eyed Jake.

"You know you haven't spoken to me more than to say hello in five years. I haven't been able to get you out of my cube for the past two weeks. What's up with that, Jake?"

He chuckled and rubbed his mouth again.

"I've been doing a lot of soul searching and am just trying to ... be a better person."

She could almost see him standing before his mirror practicing the line before going to the bars to pick up chics. But, whatever he was hiding couldn't be that important.

"I'll look at this later," she said. "Go forth and leave me be, The Jake. Leave the punch."

"Sofia, I really think you should call this guy," he said, looking her in the eye.

"Please."

A sense of uneasiness ran through her at the gravity in his normally light tone.

"Fine, I will."

He flashed a smile and strode from her cube. Sofia looked at the paper again. She retrieved her cell and tucked the paper into her pocket. Snatching her sunglasses, she almost made it to the door before she heard Lacy's voice.

"Sofia, can you come see me?"

She grimaced and turned to see the tall blond retreating towards her office. Lacy wore a skirt too short and tight for office wear, but when you're the boss ...

"I noticed you've been taking a lot of sick time lately," Lacy said as she entered.

"Yeah, I'm having some issues," Sofia replied.

"Jake told me. HR passed it to upper management. I need you to bring in some sort of paperwork from your doctor stating what's wrong."

"They don't know what's wrong. I can bring you another one of the notes verifying that's where I am when I'm missing work."

Lacy looked up from the memo in her hands.

"What do you mean? They're doctors. Of course they know what's wrong. And those notes aren't good enough."

"They really don't know," she said again.

"I can't make reasonable accommodations for you if I don't know what's wrong."

"That makes no sense, Lacy. If I have a doctor's note saying I'm under their care, isn't that good enough until they figure it out?"

Lacy arched a delicate eyebrow.

"No, it's not," she snapped. "I need a diagnosis, and I need a treatment plan."

"A *what*?"

"You deaf now, too?"

Sofia bit her tongue. She lacked Jake's golden tongue, and her bluntness had gotten her in trouble more than once. Normally she acquiesced in favor of a paycheck, but Lacy's demand was bizarre, even by Lacy-standards.

"Look, Lacy, I'm not trying to be difficult. I'm so frustrated right now. I just came back from a battery of tests that said nothing's wrong with me."

The moments the words left her mouth, she knew her mistake. Lacy's eyebrows shot up.

"What do you mean there's nothing wrong? Are you making this up?"

"No, Lacy, what I meant is that whatever is wrong - "

"So you're a basket case. One of those aphrodisiacs or something."

"Hypochondriac, not aphro - "

"I meant, you're making it up!" Lacy snarled. "Aphro, hypo, who gives a damn. They're the same thing! You've been lying to me!"

"No, Lacy - "

"Worse, you've been lying to Jake, too? Oh my God, what - "

"Lacy, stop!" Sofia snapped, standing. "I haven't lied to you. They don't know what's wrong, and I'm not making it up!"

"You've always thought yourself soooo much better than the rest of us, and I'm sick of your attitude. Now you're lying to me about being sick. You know what? Until you can prove you've got some damn disease, you're on leave without pay."

Stunned, Sofia stared at her.

"Lacy, I'm - "

"Shut up and get the fuck out!"

Surprise, then fury lit her insides.

"Fine," she said, wrenching the office door open. "But Lacy, everyone knows you're screwing Jake."

Lacy's mouth dropped open. Dimly, Sofia knew she'd never work there again after that low blow. She snatched her bag and hurried home, not reflecting on her behavior until she tossed her coat on the bed.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

Her cell rang. She dug it out of her pocket.

"Hey, Katy," she said, kicking off her shoes. "What's up?"

"Hey hon, Jake told me you quit work?"

"Jake?" she echoed.

"He's still a dick. You're not seeing him again, are you?"

"Katy, I have a headache. I'll call you later."

Sofia hung up, frustrated. She emptied her pockets and tossed her lunch in the fridge. When she retreated to the bathroom, she flipped on the light, cringed, but forced herself to stare at her reflection in the mirror over the sink.

She was going to die. She just knew it. Whatever her disease, it had eluded the doctors for months. By the time they found out what it was, she'd probably be near-dead, like stage four cancer. She stared at her reflection, caught by something else that didn't seem right. She leaned forward, staring at her irises. Her eyes had always been a pretty shade of turquoise, her favorite feature. But instead of a rim of darker blue surrounding her irises, they were rimmed by a thick band of iridescent silver.

"Oh, my God," she whispered.

As she stared, the silver seemed to flare into a deep glow and swirl around her irises like cars around a racetrack. She closed her eyes and opened them again. The silver was still again.

"Hallucinations!"

She ran to her desk and pulled out a journal, jotting down her latest symptom.

Sensitivity to light, enhanced hearing so I can't sleep without noise cancellation headphones, aversion to fish, crave meat and broccoli, nails growing faster, HEADACHES, HEADACHES, HEADACHES, stuffy nose, addiction to peanut butter, weight loss, general weakness ...

The strange symptoms went on for three pages. She read the list until panic stirred in her breast. Claustrophobic in the dark cave that had become her home, she grabbed her coat and purse and set out into the cold, brisk night. She didn't want to die, and she didn't want to spend the rest of her life without ever seeing the sun again like Brad Pitt in *Interview with a Vampire*.

She joined crowds of people milling through downtown Crystal City to see the Christmas displays and shop. The sight of such normalcy calmed her, until someone brushed against her.

A man's face, a woman in the hospital on her death bed, their children surrounding them.

"I'm so sorry!" someone said, steadying her as she staggered under the impact of the sudden image.

Her vision cleared, and she looked into the face of the man from her vision, though he was much younger standing before her.

"I'm ok," she said, forcing a smile. "Thanks."

He continued on his way, holding out his hand to the woman awaiting him. The woman who would die in twenty three years from ovarian cancer.

Sofia shrugged the sense of foreboding away and stuffed her hands into her pockets. Her fingers brushed the folded paper Jake had given her. She pulled it free and stared at it, once again compelled to the name written there. She made her way to a coffee shop and sat at a table in the darker end of the shop, hot cocoa in hand. Someone careened into her as she pried her cell from her pocket.

"Toby, watch where you're going!" a mother scolded the five year old sprawled on the floor.

Sofia reached for him, helping him to his feet.

Toby, sprawled in the middle of the street after being hit by a car, blood trickling from his skull into a nearby storm drain. His dark eyes were open and staring.

"Sorry about that," the young mother said, flashing a smile.

Sofia blinked out of her stupor.

"No problem."

Yet another symptom of her illness: insanity! She looked again at the name on the paper and dialed.

"This is Sondra. How may I direct your call?" a pleasant voice answered.

"Um, hi, I uh, found this number on Dr. Bylun's blog. I'm not sure he can help me, but I would really like to speak to him."

"We have a Mr. Bylun, but he doesn't have a blog. Perhaps you have the wrong number?"

"Ok, I admit someone else said they found this on his blog and said I should call."

There was a moment of silence, and she could almost see Sondra assessing what to do.

"Why don't you leave me your name, and if Mr. Bylun believes it in his best interest, he'll return your call."

The cryptic response made her hesitate. Sofia sighed and raked a hand through her hair.

"Why not. I don't have anything to lose. My name is Sofia Fast from Crystal City, Virginia."

"And what is your call regarding?"

"I'm sick. I have some sort of disease no one can diagnose, and one of my coworkers gave me this number to try."

"Who referred you?"

"Jake Hampton."

She heard the secretary typing.

"I'm afraid he's not in my system," she said. "I'll deliver your message. Please don't be surprised if Mr. Bylun opts not to return your call."

She hung up and stared at the number on the paper, wondering if Jake had lied to her or if he flat out screwed up the number. He really wasn't a man of detail, which was why she was so surprised to see him working as a financial planner. She'd definitely never trust her money to him.

Her cell rang, and she recognized her doctor's number.

"Ms. Fast, this is Linda from Dr. Mallard's office."

"Hi Linda."

"Dr. Mallard wanted me to give you a call and schedule an appointment for tomorrow morning, first thing."

"Oh, God, what's wrong now?"

"The specialist he flew in from Zurich arrives tonight. He's apparently really interested in meeting you."

"Really? I'd love to come in. What time do you open?"

"Seven. I'll schedule you for 7:15 so Dr. Mallard can get his first cup of coffee."

"That's awesome, Linda. Thank you so much for calling!"

"No problem. We'll see you tomorrow at 7:15."

Hopeful, Sofia crumpled up the paper with Dr. Bylun's information. If Dr. Mallard's international guest was that anxious to see her, he must know what was going on! She sipped her cocoa, cheered by the thought of soon knowing what was wrong with her.

The sound of screeching tires and a scream soon drew the patrons from the coffee shop to the window. Sofia stuffed Dr. Bylun's paper into her empty cup, tossed it, and joined the onlookers lining the street. Somewhere a few blocks away, an ambulance wailed. A drunk man staggered from a dark blue BMW. She walked up the street to a better vantage point, curious to see what he hit.

She froze at the sight straight out of her vision. The little boy, Toby, spread-eagled in the street near the storm drain. His mother was hysterical, screaming at once at the driver and her dead son.

Coldness seeped through her as she watched the familiar scene before her. In the distance, she heard her cell phone ring. It ceased and began to ring again. As if in a dream, she pulled it free and answered.

"Ms. Fast?"

The deep baritone voice pierced her thoughts.

"This is Damian Bylun. You left a message with my receptionist?"

Her world was beginning to spin as she realized her vision had come true. Her legs felt weak, and she sat heavily on the curb, struggling to control her breathing so she didn't pass out.

God, what's wrong with me? I saw him die ...

"Pardon?"

Realizing she clenched the phone in her hand, she flipped it closed and sat staring at the asphalt. Someone touched her, and visions flared across her mind. *A pretty brunette, mugged in a back alley, raped and killed.*

"Miss, are you alright?"

Someone else touched her, took her arm to help her stand, and more visions flooded her. *An older man with dementia left to rot and finally die in an old folk's home.*

"Get away from me!" she cried, tearing away.

She fled, staggering as she bumped into more people and more visions flashed. She ran until the cold air burned her lungs and the people were far behind her. She retreated to her apartment, breathing raggedly with cold tears stiffening her cheeks.

She closed and locked the door behind her. She froze when she saw the disaster that was her apartment. Everything was overturned or shredded, from the furniture to the bookshelves to the TV lying on its face. The windows were open and the apartment cold.

Her headache was now a migraine, and she shielded her eyes against the light from the street that filtered past her honeycomb blinds. She all but staggered into her bathroom. She wrenched open the medicine cabinet for the most powerful of the drugs Dr. Mallard prescribed for her and slammed the cabinet shut.

Her eyes were fully silver, swirling and glowing in the dark.

"What is wrong with me?" she screamed, slamming her fists against the mirror.

Her blood splattered on the wall, and buzzing filled her ears. She sank to the floor. Her phone began to ring again as she slid into a dead faint.

CHAPTER TWO

Sonoran desert, Arizona

The White God's Headquarters

Damian Bylun stared at the phone. It was a cold day in hell when someone dared hang up on the White God, the Defender of Mankind, the Tamer of Evil. Or, in the words of his BFF, the BS Master of the Universe.

His phone rang, and he answered, expecting the woman to return his call with a few dozen apologies.

"Damian, I'm one of your ... employees. My name is Jake H, employee number 0092841."

He opened his PDA to do a quick search on the number. He didn't know the names of everyone in the latest generation of his Guardians yet, especially not those working in the field.

Jake H. Organization year: 2000.

Only his undercover agents contained such little information in his database. Jake was risking getting caught to call him.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"NOVA Sector HQ."

"Stay there."

He hung up and looked at his executive officer and sparring partner.

"Han, I'm going away for a few to the Northern Virginia Sector. Don't hold up dinner on my account," he said, trotting into the 20,000 square foot mansion in the middle of the Arizona desert he called home.

"Say hi to Laney!" Han called.

He changed into all black and strapped a sword to his back before closing his eyes and envisioning the interior of NOVA Sector. In a blink, he'd transported himself there. One foot was immediately soaked. He looked down as two of his Guardians hopped up from their positions.

"Who the hell put a pool here?" he demanded, pulling his right foot out of the shallow end of an in-ground pool.

The two men looked at each other.

"It was a brutal summer," an amused voice responded.

He turned to see one of his oldest Guardians and the station chief – Han's brother – leaning in the doorway to the main house.

"Laney, good to see you," he said warmly, clapping him on the arm. "One of your boys called me."

"Yeah, he's been pacing like a madman for a couple of hours. He's a newbie. Be gentle."

"It's fucking cold here," he complained as he walked into the two story house in the suburbs Washington DC.

He saw the man who called him pacing as Laney had indicated. Jake turned and stared at him, dropped an awkward bow, and straightened, his mouth lax. Damian sat down on the arm of a leather couch, accustomed to the reaction, and pulled off his boot to drain the water.

"You gonna talk or stare?"

Jake looked at Laney then at him.

"I found someone," Jake said.

"A Natural?" Laney prodded.

Jake shook his head then nodded then shrugged.

"I don't know what she is. I was embedded at this company we know is operating as a cover for Czerno's operations. I ran into someone I knew from college."

Damian looked from his boot to Laney, who shrugged. Seeing the exchange, Jake began to pace again.

"She's something. I don't know what."

"Can you expand a little?" Laney asked.

"She's started having symptoms that the doctors can't figure out what's wrong. She turned 28 two months ago, and started having all these issues, like she's a vamp. She can't go out in sunlight ... "

He trailed off, deep in thought.

"You're going to think I'm crazy - "

"Already do," Damian said. "You wanna tell me why I'm here?"

"I recently gained access to this database that the company's owner uses. They have a file on her. Her phone and computer are monitored. They have records of her vitals – like her body temperature and shit like that – and copies of her medical records. I found an email the owner sent to an email address we know Czerno uses. It says they want to force the transformation."

"She's a Natural," Laney said, frowning at him. "Treat her like any other. We'll assign her a Guardian and bring her in."

"No," Jake objected. "The email said she'd be ready soon for the procedure Czerno wants her to undergo. A medical procedure where he's going to drain all her blood and replace it with his."

Damian held up his hand. He'd begun to think their recruitment standards were slipping, until Jake mentioned the operation. Surprise trickled through him.

"Did it say why?" he pressed.

"No. Just said he wanted it done soon, because he wasn't taking any risks, even if she hadn't started transforming yet. I gave her your number, but I doubt she called."

Only an *oracle's* blood was drained to force her to bind with her master. The measure was taken to give him unfettered access to her visions. Century-long wars had been fought in his father's time over who claimed a discovered oracle, no matter how competent the oracle turned out.

He met Laney's gaze.

"It's virtually impossible," Laney voiced his same thought.

"There haven't been any in tens of thousands of years," Damian said slowly. "What else, Jake?"

"That's it. I just have this feeling ... "

"You have a Traveler assigned to station, Laney?" he asked.

Most stations had one of the Guardians – or Naturals – capable of traveling great distances the way he did. Laney lifted his chin towards Jake, who nodded.

"Watch her. If anything funny happens, bring her in, straight to my headquarters outside of Tucson. Don't take any chances with this one. Got it?"

Jake nodded again.

"Laney, tell Dustin what's going on. He gets pissy when you all call me directly without letting him know," he said.

"Will do."

Damian closed his eyes and opened them, materializing in his suite in Tucson. He stood before the low burning fire, golden eyes swirling as he thought quickly.

A few Naturals were found every year, and he didn't bother to remember their names in an organization his size, leaving that level of detail to the regional and sector commanders. An oracle ... now *that* was worthy of his attention. There had been none since Claire, whose powers had been so weak, she was useless to them.

He who binds the oracle, binds the future, his brother had once told him.

His phone dinged, and he flipped it open.

Bro, ur supposd 2 tell me when u visit.

Damian grunted, expecting Dusty's message. There were only two people in the world who would challenge him: the cold master assassin in charge of the western hemisphere and the warm master negotiator in charge of the eastern hemisphere. As

different as night and day, they were his best friends – and the only men in the universe he trusted with his life. Of the two, Dusty was more likely to call him to the floor when he crossed into his business. As their king, Damian owed them nothing. As his adopted brothers in the war against evil, he owed them everything.

He typed a response.

Next time, boss.

He left his room for his office. The quarterly conference held four times a century with the major regional commanders was coming up soon, and he had more pressing issues to resolve before it launched. He entered his office and froze.

“Y’all need to learn to ask before setting foot in my house,” he warned.

The middle-aged man with bright green eyes standing in his study looked harmless. His frame was slight, his hair silvered, his smile fatherly. Damian knew better than to trust the deceptive appearance of this type of creature. They were some of the most ancient beings in the universe, those whose first war created the universe.

Their second war almost destroyed the universe and ended in the Schism, the divorcing of the divine world from the physical one and stranded the White and Black Gods on earth, preordained to be at each other’s throats for all eternity. The Watchers relegated themselves to the role of audience in the basketball game that was Damian’s war.

“Forgive me, ikir,” the Watcher said with a bow of his head.

“You’re here to fuck up my life, aren’t you?” Damian challenged.

He crossed his arms to display roped forearms and sat on the edge of his desk. The Watcher smiled, genuine mirth in his unblinking gaze.

“I’ve always enjoyed this era of the White God,” he admitted. “You have a spark your forefathers didn’t.”

“I’m glad I entertain you,” Damian said flatly.

“No disrespect meant, ikir.”

The Watcher’s eyes went around his study, as if this was his first visit in a great while. Damian didn’t trust the beings that saw all, knew all, and yet spoke in riddles - if they chose to speak at all.

“You here just to visit?” he prodded at the Watcher’s silence.

“No, ikir. I will be in your territory for some time.”

The words were the first sign of something very, very wrong. Damian’s unease grew.

“There is a disturbance in the uh, basketball game, as you call it,” the Watcher continued. “One of the teams is cheating.”

“Czerno. How bad is it?”

“Bad enough to change the final score.”

Damian mulled his words, waiting for more.

“There are Watchers who have left the crowd for Czerno’s team. They’re coaching him,” the Watcher said softly.

“Fuck,” Damian breathed. “The last time you all got into a war, you nearly destroyed the universe.”

“Our war has again spread to yours,” the Watcher continued. “I am bound by the oath of non-interference I took at the Schism. I, too, can only ... coach, though I will choose when and where.”

"So I shouldn't be surprised to see you in my territory, and I shouldn't expect shit from you."

"Yes, ikir."

"How long will you be coaching in my territory?"

"It may be awhile by earth standards. Those coaching Czerno are shifting the future daily."

Damian hadn't expected his day to be so eventful. If the Watchers were once again bringing their battle to earth, it meant the Original Beings imprisoned by the Schism were stirring up old divisions again. He was too young to know much about those beings or much about the Watchers. Jule, his other BFF and the oldest of the three of them by far, had come from the same world as the Watchers but refused to talk about it.

"That is all I will say, ikir, except to remind you that the White and Black gods cannot kill one another directly. To do so would release the Original Beings, and then things would really be bad."

His jaw clenched. He didn't often feel helpless, not when he held the powers of a god among humans. But Watchers played on a different level. He was restricted to the physical world by the Schism despite his god-powers. By and large, the Watchers did whatever the hell they wanted. That this one had come to him with a warning was the most he could expect. And he didn't like it.

"By your leave, ikir," the Watcher said and bowed his head again.

"Try not to screw up too much of my shit," he returned.

The Watcher nodded and disappeared in a wink of light.

First a possible oracle, then a Watcher. He had a feeling the war was just starting to get interesting.

* * *

She awoke stiff and cold on the bathroom floor. Sunlight streaming through the blinds, making her head pound harder.

"Oh god, Sofia!" Jake's voice came from the doorway. "I've been trying to call ..."

His voice trailed off as he took in the pills scattered all over the bathroom floor and her bloodied hands.

"You tried to kill yourself," he whispered.

"No, Jake," she mumbled and pushed herself up.

She sat on her knees for a long moment. Jake reached for her, and she recoiled.

"Don't touch me!"

He paused, and she saw the conflict in his gaze.

"We're going to the hospital," he decided, grabbing her arm.

The visions started. *Jake cleaved in two by a maniacal man with a sword.* She shoved him away, landing hard on her backside while he careened into the bathroom wall.

"No, Jake. Leave me be!"

She pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, hiding her face from the light. She shivered from cold and pain. He brought her a blanket and draped it over her.

"Jake," she said, voice cracking. "Something is really wrong with me."

"No, really?" he retorted. "Did you call Dr. Bylun or not?"

"He didn't want to talk to me."

"Even when you told him your issues?"

"I couldn't get past his secretary."

She saw Toby's broken body again in her mind and pushed it away. Every vision she'd had, even when Jake touched her, had been of death.

Her phone rang, and she saw Dr. Mallard's number flash on the screen.

"Hi Linda," she murmured.

"Sofia, this is Dr. Mallard. We were expecting you at 7:15."

She glanced at her watch. It was 9.

"I'm sorry, doc. I overslept."

"It's important Dr. Czerno sees you this morning. Can you come in?"

"No, no, my eyes are too sensitive."

"Why don't we do an old-fashioned house call and come to you?"

Surprised at his persistence, she remembered the shape her apartment was in.

"Doc, I'll come in tomorrow. I'm not having a good morning."

"Hon, this is important. Dr. Czerno believes you'll begin to have more symptoms soon, ones that might indicate the disease is accelerating."

"Symptoms, like what?"

"Hallucinations. Paranoia. Sense of doom."

His words hit her hard.

"Doc, I ... " she couldn't bring herself to tell him about the visions.

"Here, let me put you on with Dr. Czerno."

There was the sound of a phone being shuffled from one person to another, then a flat, deep male voice.

"Sofia, this is Dr. Czerno. It's imperative you see me at the earliest opportunity."

"Doc, what's wrong with me?" she asked.

"I can explain in detail in person, but it's important I see you now."

She hesitated. There was something about his tone – flat and free of human warmth like the talking computer her blind coworker used – that made her uneasy.

"I'll be in when I can, doc," she murmured. "Can you tell me what other symptoms I might have?"

"Have you experienced any of the symptoms Dr. Mallard described?"

"Yes."

"And more?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about them."

No. Her instincts were restless, and every fiber in her body warned her not to respond.

"I'll come see you right away," she said, knowing this alone would pacify him.

"Very good. I will be here. How far out are you?"

"About an hour."

"I will see you soon. And Sofia, I don't appreciate being stood up."

There was a warning note in his voice that made her more uncomfortable. She hung up. Her last hope for understanding what was wrong with her was someone she innately knew she didn't want to meet.

"Who was that? Dr. Bylun?" Jake asked hopefully, reappearing in the bathroom door.

"No. Dr. Mallard. He flew in a specialist," she responded, pulling the blanket over her head to shield her further from the sunlight. "I don't think I like him."

"I thought Dr. Mallard was the only doctor you hadn't fired yet."

"Not him. The specialist. He sounds like he's from Russia. His name is Dr. Cicero. Or Zirno Or something."

"Czerno?"

"Yeah, that's it."

Jake was so quiet, she thought he left until he spoke again.

"Sofia, will you come with me somewhere?"

If not for the painful sunlight, she'd have looked up at the hushed note in his voice.

"No."

"I promise, it'll be worth your time."

"Not during daylight."

Her body was beginning to ache more, from her battered hands to her bruised cheek from where she'd fallen after fainting the night before. A deeper ache, as if she had the flu and every muscle in her body were on fire, was made worse by sleeping on the cold floor. She was in pain she didn't understand. A tear trickled down her cheek.

She'd never been moody or wimpy or weak! In high school and college, she played co-ed soccer and basketball. Since leaving college, she'd stayed in shape through the local gym, where she lifted weights twice a week and forced herself onto a cardio machine twice a week. She wasn't in tip-top shape, but she wasn't *weak*!

"What the hell happened to your apartment?"

"I don't know."

"Are you going to get up?"

"No."

"You've always been so fucking stubborn. I'm trying to help you!"

She hurt too much to move. If she were perfectly still, she could deal with the pain.

"You want something to drink?"

Her head ached too much to respond. He returned a few minutes later, and rustled her blanket, setting a cup beside her.

She drank the cool fruit punch down, grateful as it chilled her parched throat. She soon felt relaxed and drowsy. When her phone began to ring again, she stretched for it and found she couldn't move.

"Sorry, Sofi, but I gotta take you somewhere safe," Jake's voice warbled.

White God's Headquarters

"D, you coming down for the festivities? It's pretty interesting. They're acting out some bizarre kid's story for the cancer kids," Han said, ducking his head into Damian's office.

"No. Talking to Dusty and Jule," he answered without turning. "Save me some cake."

"Sure."

The door closed softly, and he returned to the instant messages popping up on his screen.

"Dusty, can you hear me?"

Dustin typed a yes.

"What the fuck's wrong with your mic?" Jule, the commander of the eastern hemisphere, demanded with a laugh.

Don't know. IT issues.

"At least it's just IT," Jule responded, growing serious.

Damian pulled out a map, his gaze roving over Jule's European front. It was slowly being decimated and fragmented by Czerno's blood sucking vamps.

"You've got a rat," he said, reviewing the past hundred years of battles depicted on a map. To humans, it would look like the natural give and take of a long battle. To the three of them, the drastic changes that occurred over such a short time span after thousands of years of no change were a warning sign.

Or two.

"I think Dusty's right," he agreed. "You've got more than one rat to worry about."

"I have Antoine under surveillance. I have no leads on anyone else," Jule replied. "Thanks to Antoine, my spy network is shit right now. I'm rebuilding as fast as I can, but it ain't easy finding new Guardians let alone those who make good agents."

"Discretion isn't a natural trait to Guardians."

Just like their supreme leader.

"What'd you do to him, D? He's been cranky all night."

"Chill, Dusty, it's not that serious," he answered.

An oracle????? Not serious? Are you fucking insane?

"It's not confirmed."

"Wow. Why didn't you tell him?" Jule scolded. "In fact, why didn't you tell me?"

"Dude, I just found out!" Damian snapped. "One of Dusty's newbies called me. If one of our guys calls, I'll go. They usually need something – they don't call just to chat. When someone gives me some more definitive info on her, I'll tell you."

"Back to my issue. I'm out of ideas for dealing with my traitor issue, unless Dusty can send a few spies my way."

I'm short, but I'll send you a couple on loan. Want me to talk to Antoine?

"Cool, bro, thanks. Fuck no on talking to Antoine. I need him alive and preferably in one piece, Dusty, unlike the last time I sent someone to talk to you."

"I'll come to you after the Quarterly with some reinforcements. We may need to make a couple of less-than-discreet strikes at Czerno's strongholds to push him back and give us some time. Can you hold things down for two weeks?"

"I'll do my damndest. Hey - is it just me or is recruiting getting harder and harder?"

Definitely.

"Yeah. I think our traitors have some influence on that, too. I'm getting reports from the recruitment team that a lot of their newly flagged Guardians are getting whacked as soon as they make the list," Damian said.

Ask Claire what's going on.

Damian grimaced, recalling the last time he'd seen the beautiful woman, his slain brother's wife. They never got any work accomplished when she was with him. They'd had a falling out a few hundred years before and hadn't spoken since. He wanted to

keep it that way. Sleeping with her made him feel ... guilty, like he was betraying his brother's memory. Yet, she was all that remained of his brother, and he cherished the connection. He preferred to know she was alive and well - and somewhere else.

"I'll assume you're still not talking," Jule said.

"Nope."

I'll give her a call. Maybe she can come to the Quarterly.

"Fuck you, Dusty," Damian said acidly.

"Damn women," Jule said. "I don't know why they say you can't live without them. I'm doing quite well."

Amen.

Damian snorted, gaze lingering on the map. Something was really wrong in Europe, and he needed to figure out what, before the European front was overrun by vamps. His thoughts returned to the Watcher, and he wondered just how much of his problems were caused by traitors influenced somehow by the beings coaching Czerno. With any luck, his Watcher wouldn't fail him.

His phone rang. He glanced at the number and let it go to voicemail, not recognizing it.

"I've got two rotating to Tucson," Jule said. "They're en route. I want Han, though, D. You promised."

"I know, I know. He's sick of it here anyway."

A crash came from the hallway. By the sound of it, it was one of his favorite, *priceless*, Ming vases. With his luck, the kids were loose in the house.

"Dusty, can you - "

A scream jarred him.

WTF?

"What he said," Jule echoed. "Everything - "

A second scream. Damian rose. His door flew open to reveal a huge, furry monster with fangs.

"What the fuck is going on? And why are you dressed like a sadistic teddy bear?" he demanded.

Sadistic what?

The Guardian pulled the head off the costume.

"You need to see this, D."

By his tone, something was more wrong than the horrible costume.

"Guys, we'll talk later. D out," he said into the mic before tossing it on the desk. "This better be good."

CHAPTER THREE

The in-between place where Jake's drugs put her were filled with horrifying, visions of Toby and other strangers dying and Dr. Czerno screaming at her to return to him.

And *him*. The dark monster in a dark corner whose sobs were so loud, she thought them real. Once, she thought he was calling for help, until he swiped at her, and she tried to free a scream from her frozen body. He retreated to the corner and sobbed some more while she fought the effects of the drug. The drug wore off, leaving her in

the dark, hot and sweating with a different kind of headache, the kind she got after taking a lot of Dr. Mallard's drugs. Only she didn't remember taking drugs.

Jake.

Furious, she pushed off the bed coverings and stood, teetering dangerously before deciding to sit again. Moonlight drifted in through a window, and she stared in confusion. Her window was on the other side of her room. Disoriented, she stood up again and stumbled to the door.

She *hated* the headaches and feeling like shit! She couldn't remember the last time she felt halfway decent. Determined first to wash the taste of drugs down then to kill Jake, she wrenched open the door, blinded by the hall light she didn't recall leaving on. She walked down the carpeted hall, stopping when she realized her hallway didn't have carpet.

Her vision was too blurry for her to see much beyond hazy shapes and colors. The carpet was a deep maroon, soft and cushy, the walls around her brown. She squinted through her fingers and braced herself against one wall to counter the affects the drugs had on her equilibrium as she moved down the long hallway.

"Jake?"

Suddenly, her bracing arm hit air. She tried to balance herself only to find herself toppling over and over and over down a stairwell.

She landed hard on a cold floor. Pain roared through her, and she sought both to shield her eyes from a crystal chandelier blinding her and grab her burning leg. She wore only a long shirt to her knees that twisted to her stomach with her fall.

"Oh, God!" she grated, pushing herself into a sit.

Her blood was a slash of stark red against a white marble floor. The pain in her leg cleared the haze of her mind, and she realized whatever was happening wasn't a dream. Panic piqued as she looked around her. There was nothing familiar about her surroundings - *nothing!!* Down one hallway, she heard the ring of a phone.

Phone, police, help. Her first step was disastrous. She careened into a table and heard glass crashing as the table corner tore a stripe down her forearm. Her eyes hurt too much to make sense of the world around her.

Voices prevented her from losing herself to her pain. They came from the same direction as the phone. Whoever had brought her here was coming for her.

Dr. Czerno. The monster in the corner.

Fear flew through her. She turned, slammed into something twice her size, and fell backwards. Her hand fell away from her eyes to reveal a furry, fanged monster from a nightmare framed against the light.

Sofia screamed. It swiped at her, and she backpedaled, hopping to her feet. Disoriented and mostly blind, she ran into a wall, shoved herself off and smashed into another monster. With another scream, she bolted and careened into a door that gave.

The room was dark aside from curtains opened to allow the moon to shine through. She staggered up, cursing the drugs and Jake for her inability to balance, and slammed into several pieces of furniture as the monsters chased her. The lights went on. Blinded, she tripped over a stool and hauled herself into a corner, chest heaving and body slick with sweat and blood.

"What happened?" a muffled voice asked.

She hugged her knees to her chest and peered through her fingers. One of the monsters pulled off its head to reveal a man. She squinted, realizing the two furry brown monsters were men in costumes from *Where the Wild Things Are*. Several more men entered the library, all staring at her in nothing short of total surprise. Either they were all huge enough to come straight out of an action movie, or her drugs had not yet worn off.

"Gods, are you all right?" one asked finally, moving towards her.

"No!" she shouted. "Don't touch me, don't touch me, *don't touch me!*"

The last thing she needed was more of the gruesome visions!

"Sofi?"

While surprised to see him there, it struck her how well Jake fit in with the other men. He was built from the same mold – large and muscular, the kind of man more fitted to military special forces or UFC prize fighting than financial planning.

The man approaching her had nearly reached her, and she huddled into a tighter ball.

"Han, don't!" Jake called. "Leave her be."

"She's bleeding to death!"

"Trust me. She'll go ape shit."

Sofia wanted to pound Jake's face in. Her heart raced to the point of pain, and she felt sick enough to puke.

"Go get D," the man called Han said.

He squatted near her.

"You ok?"

Sofia's gaze cleared, and she focused on her surroundings. Her first impression was confirmed – the men in the room were UFC material, all well over six feet and solid. They were all dressed for a white tie party in expensive tuxedos.

"I gave you enough drugs that you should be asleep until next week," Jake said, joining Han.

He was also dressed for the exclusive party. Seeing him well rested and well dressed pissed her off even more.

"Can I help you up?" Han asked, extending his hand as if approaching a wounded animal. His brown gaze was friendly but cautious.

The others fanned out, and she suddenly felt like a lamb surrounded by a wolf pack trying to decide what to do with her. She didn't know these men, but her instincts told her they were 100% predators. They moved in tandem without looking at each other, their movements controlled and efficient. If she flinched, they'd snap in unison.

"What did you do to me, Jake?" she demanded.

"We'll wait on that," Jake responded. "There's a lot of blood. You ok?"

"You drugged me."

He rubbed his mouth.

"She's little, pick her up before D sees the blood all over the floors," another of the men urged.

"Don't touch me!" she warned again.

Despite being able to bench press two of her, the men actually listened.

"What happened to my floors?" another voice demanded.

If the men around her were predators, the man who entered next was their alpha. Unlike the others dressed for a white tie event, he was dressed in leather pants with a tight black Pearl Jam t-shirt, his hair braided, a chain from his spiked belt to his wallet, and heavy black boots. She didn't miss the way the others moved out of his way or the way the aura of command around him filled up the room. His gaze swept around the room methodically, coming to rest on her. He approached with a slow, steady gate, like a predator inspecting its disabled prey before going for the kill.

She tightened into her ball. He was as large as the others with olive skin, long white-blond hair, and golden eyes the unusual color of honey. His features were firm and chiseled. He was not a pretty boy but a man with rugged, bad-boy beauty and a slow sensuality about his movement that made her heart skip a beat despite her pain.

He knelt beside Han. She tensed.

"You got blood all over my floors," he told her, golden eyes taking her in.

"You can blame the Wild Things, D," Han said. "They scared the shit outta her."

D reached out to her, and she recoiled, pushing herself farther into the corner.

"Sofi, you shouldn't – " Jake started, eyes going nervously to the newcomer.

"Not gonna hurt you, ok?" D said, holding up his hands.

A sense of power swirled around him that scared her. She felt it circle her, prod her, and retreat. His honey gaze was similar to Han's: warm but wary. She ducked her head and braced herself as he reached for her again. His large hand was warm against her arm. No visions pierced her thoughts.

"See?" he said.

She looked up at him, surprised. By the look of understanding on his face, he knew what she expected to feel. Relief flooded her, and she flung her arms around his neck. She'd never known the power of a single touch until everyone who touched her hurt her!

"Sofi!" Jake exclaimed.

He touched her arm to pull her free, and she jerked as dark visions crossed her thoughts. Sofia wrenched away from both and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes, trying to stop the visions. D touched her, and the visions fled as if at his command. The warmth of his hand drifted up her arm and through her, comforting her.

"She's ... special, isn't she?" Han asked D.

"Very," D replied. "Nobody touches her."

His command was quiet and firm, but she knew no man in the room would disobey a man like him. His hand lingered on her arm, and she rested her forehead against his fingers, comforted for the first time in months.

"Jake, clean up the floors," D ordered. "Let's get you upstairs."

He lifted her and carried her down the hall, and up the stairs. Sofia's heart fluttered as she tried to take in the world of blinding lights and blurry colors. He turned the lights in her room on low and sat her down on the trunk at the bottom of her bed. She drew her legs up, feeling vulnerable and scared in the strange place.

"Han, get me some warm water and washcloths. I'll clean her up."

She didn't miss the surprised look on Han's face. He obeyed. D disappeared into the bathroom adjoining her room and washed his hands. When he returned, he pulled a chair from the wall nearer her and dipped one cloth in water, tugging her arm away from her.

"I can do it," she said, resisting.

He gave her a look that said he didn't have all the patience in the world then pulled her arm free again.

"Han, bring up some food," he said without turning to look at the blond man in the doorway.

Han disappeared.

Sofia was afraid to ask where she was, who the man was before her. Instead, she watched a man many, many times her strength gently clean the blood from her arm in unhurried, methodical strokes. His touch sent a tremor of fire through her, and she was embarrassed to feel her hormones stir.

Here she sat, covered in blood, drugged, one day from being all out crazy, kidnapped, and the sight of the man before her turned her on. What was wrong with her?!

He was the sexiest man she'd ever seen, and the swirling aura of command only amplified his physical appeal. It didn't take much for her to imagine what the body beneath the tight shirt was like. Wide shoulders, chiseled chest, rippling abs ... even his scent – of pure man mixed with the mystery of night – lured her like an animal falling for a hunter's bait. His attraction was inhuman.

He glanced up at her, amusement in the upturned corner of his full lips.

"You ok?" he asked, his quiet, gravelly voice making her heart quicken.

She met his gaze with a nod, and they looked at each other until her face flushed. She cleared her throat and looked down. The wound on her arm was gone. She pulled her arm from his grip and stared at it, twisting it left and right before lowering it.

In fact, she felt no pain at all, anywhere. She kicked out her wounded leg. It, too, was healed. All that was left was to clean was the blood.

"I'm going crazy," she said, voice tightening. "Oh God, I'm going crazy!"

Her vision blurred with tears, and she stood precariously.

"You're not so good on your feet yet," D said.

She felt his arms around her and leaned into him, surprised at how natural it felt to be held against a complete stranger who made her want to flee for the hills and strip naked at the same time.

"You're not going crazy," he assured her. "When you're well, we'll talk."

"You know what's wrong with me."

"Yes."

"Who the hell are you?"

His warm chest vibrated against her cheek as he chuckled.

"Damian Bylun. If I'm not mistaken, you called me for help."

Suddenly, she wasn't so sure she wanted his help. Damian Bylun was not a doctor. Hell, she had serious doubts he was even human. She didn't know what he was, and she had a feeling he'd welcomed her into a world that only he could grant her leave from.

God help me.

He wasn't sure how someone going from the second to first floor had managed to get bloody enough to look like she crawled through a warzone. Most women were too intimidated to go near him, let alone get close enough to throw their arms around him. This one clung to him as if he were the only thing preventing her from being swept

overboard. He'd watched her thoughts of him naked, flattered and turned on. It'd been too long since a *normal* woman got over his first impression.

He reflected on the images in her mind when Jake touched her. The instincts of the newly minted spy were dead on. She was the greatest find since he'd taken over the war from his slain brother.

He tried to move away, unaccustomed to anyone touching him. She tightened her grip around him, and he was amused to think of himself as any sort of comfort to *anyone*, let alone a little human like her. He'd not held a woman in too long, and he'd never held one for the sole purpose of comforting her. She needed him. He was surprised to realize he liked the feeling.

Damian breathed in her scent, brutally aware that all that lay between her tight little body and him was a long t-shirt. He'd never been mistaken for a gentleman, but the woman shimmered with a sweet, pure aura that made him feel obliged to behave. Her turquoise eyes had been so lost and confused, he couldn't help but take pity on her.

Her eyes shimmered with more than tears – they swirled with silver, the way the eyes of ancient oracles did. He'd not seen anything like her since he sat in his father's court as a child.

"You're safe," he told her.

She sighed. With her large, two-toned eyes, flawless skin, and long, straw-colored hair, she resembled a doll. Hers was a cool beauty, and her gaze belied intelligence. That she was an oracle was fantastic. A sexy oracle? Nothing short of miraculous!

"She ok?" Han asked.

Damian heard the laughter in his voice. None of his men had ever seen a human woman throw herself into *his* arms. His own Guardians stayed out of arms reach of him, and humans picked up and ran.

"Yeah, I think so," he said, drawing away.

To his surprise, she'd passed out. He scooped her up and placed her on the bed, gaze sweeping over her toned, shapely frame. He felt unusually protective of the small, vulnerable human on the bed before him. Not sure what to make of her, he led Han out and closed the door.

"I think know the answer, but do we have any records that survived the Schism?" he asked, moving away from the door.

"Is she ok?" Jake asked anxiously.

"Kid, back off," Han warned.

Jake obeyed and darted to the bottom of the stairs, pacing.

"Not that I know of," Han answered. "There aren't any living oracles to mentor her, either."

"That could be an issue," Damian said, gaze returning to the door he'd just left. "I don't know shit about training oracles."

"I don't think anyone living does, except maybe Czerno. He knew enough to find her and plot to bind her to him."

The idea of something so sweet in Czerno's depraved hold irked him. He wouldn't let someone like her get stuck in the middle of their war.

"Most oracles don't live long to be of use," Han added. "Or they're terrible."

Not this one. He felt it in his bones, just as he felt a soul deep connection to her the moment he'd touched her.

He pulled out his cell to text his confidantes.

U still online?

Both Dusty and Jule responded with smiley faces.

B on in a sec.

"Han, until I let you go back to war, you'll be her bodyguard. She knows Jake. If he doesn't drive her as crazy as he does me, divvy up shifts with him," he said. "She's gonna have a rough time ahead of her."

"Most Naturals get a little more notice before transforming. I think she's already started?"

"Yeah, and she knows shit about us or what she is."

Han nodded. Damian felt the unusual urge to look in on her again, to feel her soft skin against him once more and make sure she was safe. Shaking his head, he retreated to his office.

"Either of you know anything about oracles?" he asked as he picked up the headphone-mic combo.

Fuck no.

"Nope," Jule seconded. "We were just discussing HQ. You having any issues?"

"You mean, like an influx of vamps to Tucson?"

Bingo.

"Yeah. If Dusty doesn't object, I might reorganize the southwest sectors. Something is up."

Do whatever you want. You always do.

"Damn, Dusty, you're a jackass today," Jule said, amused. "You sure you don't have a woman plaguing you?"

Damian smiled, waiting for Dusty's response. He could guess what Dusty was pissed about, and it didn't have anything to do with him rearranging his sectors.

Today's my birthday, dick. You forgot again.

"Oooooooooohhh," Jule breathed. "Another birthday? Not sure why you'd count at this point."

"I remembered," Damian said promptly. "You'd think after oh, a few thousand years, you'd remember, Jule."

"I'm sorry, bro. I owe you one," Jule said, chagrined.

No, you owe me about thirty. Thousand. It's not every day your BFF turns 300K.

"I forgot you're still a baby. I passed that mark a few hundred thousand years ago. I'll send you this video game I'm addicted to," Jule offered. "You might like it."

If you love me, you'll send me the blu-ray versions of the Blue Collar Comedy Tour.

"Ah, my love, your wish is my command."

Damian chuckled. At more than double both their ages, Jule was as old as the Watchers, exiled to earth after pissing off someone somewhere just before the Schism. He'd never said why, and Damian didn't ask.

"You happy, Dust-man?" he asked.

Yes.

Han knocked, and he looked up.

"Rainy from the Tucson Sector is here. They're having issues," Han said.

"Gotta go, boys," he said. "We'll chat tomorrow."

He pulled off the headphone-mic combo and rose. Ruling an empire wasn't getting any easier; he rarely had a minute to himself anymore.

"Let's go."

CHAPTER FOUR

*Northern Virginia,
The Black God's summer retreat*

Two rolled from his place on the concrete floor in the corner and unwrapped the ratty blanket he used to keep himself warm. His skin was cold to the touch; his breath hung in the air as he moved. His master didn't believe a slave deserved heat. He dressed himself mechanically and deliberately, hiding away the scarred body his master hated. Every day he awoke wondering what happened to him, but he remembered nothing beyond waking up the day before. The scars covering him from head to toe were from more than his master's beatings. They were too deep and knotted to be from the daggers or the whip or the hand strikes of his master and his master's men.

Pants, socks, shoes. T-shirt, sweater, gloves. He made a rhyme out of the process, though he'd forgotten it again this morning. He put on his hood last and tucked its edges into his sweater. Above all, his master hated his scarred face. He flew into an abusive rage when he saw it.

He left the basement and entered the heated first floor. It was time for his master's breakfast, so he went to the kitchens to fetch his food. The cook was afraid of him and left everything in one corner. He took his bread and canteen of water – the morning sustenance for a slave – and tucked them into a cargo pocket. He lifted his master's tray. It held breakfast for two, and he racked his mind for who the other was. He couldn't remember – he never did.

He climbed the steps to his master's chamber and knocked.

"Come in, Two," his master replied.

He obeyed. The air of the dark bedroom smelled of sex and blood. He opened the windows, which did little to shed light into the stone room with its masculine, black décor.

"It's so creepy," a woman's voice complained.

He recognized it. When he turned to place their breakfast on the table near the patio, he thought he recognized her. Maybe when she came in. He must have seen her then. His master said a slave didn't need to remember anything but his master, and he didn't try too hard to remember her.

His master emerged from the bed, naked. His hair was silver, his body broad-shouldered and muscular. His visitor wore a t-shirt and had hair the color of last night's sunset.

"I don't know why you bother with *it*," she said in disdain, looking at him the way his master did.

"Your breakfast is served," Two said automatically.

"I see that, you fucking idiot," his master said and slapped him.

Two took his place in the corner, where he stood all day, no matter which room his master was in, in case his master needed him.

"Now that you're here, my lovely Claire, you can help me nail that son of a bitch for good," his master said.

"Anything for you," she said.

They looked at each other. His master looked to make sure he was in his corner, then pulled off the visitor's clothing. Two looked without seeing.

"I want him to watch" his master said "while I fuck you every way I know how."

His woman laughed huskily and approached Two naked. Her body was beautiful, curvy, with large breasts. He thought he remembered seeing her naked before, maybe when she arrived last night. He didn't know for sure.

"This is for you," she said then returned to his master.

Two watched them tumble into bed and fuck for hours, wondered why it seemed familiar, then decided master was right – slaves were too stupid to remember.

The monster in the corner of her mind was a man, shrouded in darkness. He wasn't a vision - this much she knew. She heard him even when she was awake, and his crying made her head pulse, as if he were trying to pry his way into her unwilling mind.

"You're still pissed at me?" Jake asked.

She focused on flipping through a magazine. The mansion's heavy drapes on the ground floor were closed and the lighting in the library dim enough for her to tolerate. She'd roamed the ground floor before adopting the library as her favorite room and settling in front of a deadened hearth with a stack of celebrity magazines.

"I brought you here, didn't I?" he tried again.

She gave him a withering look, wondering what crack he was smoking to think he did her any favor by bringing her here instead of to a hospital.

"Come *on*, Sofi, I'm trying to help you."

"Ok fine," she said, tossing the magazine. "Tell me where I am, why I'm here, and what's wrong with me."

"I can't."

"Then leave me alone."

Han chuckled from his position near the window. He was pretending to read a book, though she suspected he'd been emplaced as her bodyguard. He'd followed her all around the house earlier like a bored puppy.

"Han, you following me to the bathroom, too?" she challenged, standing.

He snorted. He remained in the same spot until she returned. So did her lying, cheating bastard of an ex boyfriend. If she could slap him, she would.

"You're in Arizona," Jake said as she resumed her defensive position in the library's most comfortable chair. "This is one of D's compounds. It's where we come to ... be safe."

"Who is we? Safe from what?"

"You've always had this problem," he said, standing. "You're stubborn, suspicious of *everyone*, and you ask so many damn stupid questions."

"I have every justification to be suspicious of *you*, Jake."

"Here we go again. Maybe if you didn't suffocate me, I -"

"Suffocate? You sleezeball! You couldn't keep your hands off -"

"You two know each other?" Han asked, lowering his book.

"Unfortunately," she snapped.

"Hey, now, I did bring you here and try to help you," Jake pointed out.

He was right, but she didn't want him to know she knew it. She'd long since forgiven him for cheating on her. They'd dated only for a couple of months, and she knew he wasn't right for her the first date. But he was so handsome, and she so amazed he wanted to go out with her that she ignored her instincts.

"And it didn't last."

He rolled his eyes at her.

"You're a pain in the ass," he said with no heat.

She sighed.

"I'm sorry, Jake," she said. "I don't hold our past against you at all. I'm just ... really frustrated right now."

"I'm a target of opportunity," he said. "I know. It's ok, really. I just wish you'd trust me. I'd never hurt you, Sofi, and I hope you know that and can trust me enough to know you need to be here."

She nodded and chewed her lip.

"Our past," Han mulled. "Anyone care to share?"

Jake ignored him, and she shook her head. Her gaze turned to the curtain, where not even a lost sunbeam could enter the room. Struck by longing, she gave a soulful sigh.

"Can I ever go outside again during daylight?" she asked.

"Yeah, after the transformation is complete," Han responded.

Jake shot him a look.

"Transformation?" she asked.

Han opened his book again, jaw clenched.

"Han, what do you mean?" she prodded. "What am I transforming into?"

At their silence, another thought hit her.

"Jake, am I a vampire? Were you joking?"

"You're not a vampire," he assured her. "They're not intolerant do daylight like you are. We'd have to kill you if you were anyway."

He was serious, and she gaped at him.

"They are *not* cool," he added. "Right, Han?"

"Yep."

"Who can tell me what's going on?" she demanded.

"D," the two responded simultaneously.

Damn. The thought of him made her feel like a girl in junior high being asked to her first dance. Or a drugged rabbit wandering into a hungry bear's den. She wanted to see the mysterious D and yet couldn't repel his magnetic draw. Even now, her heart quickened and her thoughts raced to the image of him in tight black clothing.

"Most people react like that," Han stated. "Not many willingly confront him, especially when he's in one of his moods. Smart girl."

She wondered what he meant. She didn't fear him – she wanted him. Did most people want him? What if he was the only person on the planet who could ever touch her again because of her wacky visions?

"Where is he?" she asked.

"Outside," Jake said. "If you're brave enough, you can see him when he's back."

"And why should I be brave? What's wrong with him?"

"You're right – she does ask a lot of questions," Han said.

"See?!" Jake exclaimed. "I told you!"

"New rule, Sofia. If you have questions, ask D. We're not at liberty to discuss much with you."

Frustrated, Sofia stormed out of the library. Standing in the hall, she couldn't stop the fear that slid through her. This world ... *their* world ... was nothing like what she knew. She felt like she stood at the door of a plane fifteen thousand feet in the air getting ready to sky dive, only she didn't remember packing a parachute. Her headache was gone for the first time in months, though she felt cold inside.

She put on her sunglasses and started towards the one part of the house Han had warned her away from: the patio that led into the gardens. God help her, she was going into the sunlight no matter how much it hurt!

The light beyond the solid French doors made her flinch, but she forced herself through. The shaded patio was as wide as the mansion with two small outdoor bars and groups of chairs around tables. Signs of the party the night before still remained from the garbage bags awaiting pick up to one table with two wine glasses still present.

She began to sweat before reaching the door leading from the patio to the green blur that was the gardens over which the patio overlooked. She couldn't make out what was in the garden, but she heard the sounds of fountains and saw the dark green blur of a forest in the distance. By the time she reached the patio door, her skin was clammy and her heart racing.

She emerged into the bright light of a warm December afternoon and began to melt. There was no denying the sensation of sweat dripping off her body. She closed her eyes against the sunlight and took another two steps into the garden. Grass tickled her toes.

It was *hot!!*

She retreated to the patio then fled into the house, relieved when the sun was gone. Tears stung her eyes.

"You ok?" Han asked.

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?" she growled. "No, I'm not ok! What normal person can't go outside? You all kidnapped me, drugged me, dragged me to Arizona – if I'm really in Arizona – and you won't tell me why or what's wrong with me! And you know what else? I hate peanut butter. Hate it, hate it, hate it, and I can't stop eating it! I hate it!"

Embarrassed by her words and the tears streaming down her face, she ran past him to the stairs and up, issuing a cry of frustration when she realized she didn't know which of the three wings led to her room.

"Turn right, three doors on the left," Han called.

She followed his directions, slammed her door closed, and locked it. She collapsed onto her bed and sobbed, the man in the corner sobbing with her.

Outside her room, Han whipped out his phone with an irritated sigh.

Your oracle's a pain in the ass. Damian glanced at the text message from Han before his gaze returned to the small base camp tucked between two ridges in the Tucson Mountains.

"Wish you had good news for me," he said.

The base camp housed the emergency response helicopters for Tucson and neighboring sectors and was manned with a skeletal crew of Guardians and one on-duty pilot, a Natural who'd been trained to fly.

Rainy, a brooding Guardian with striking green eyes and a shock of dark hair, was his youngest station chief at a youthful two thousand years old. Damian followed him across the dusty landing pads to the helo-hangar. His phone dinged, and he looked down at one of the zillion text messages he received from any number of his Guardians every day.

Logistical arrangements for Quarterly completed.

He tucked the phone away.

"We didn't catch on until one of the new Naturals we just discovered was able to track them," Rainy continued.

"A tracker?" Damian asked, impressed. "Impressive. Haven't seen one in a few thousand years."

"That's what Han said. Good timing. Had to be a woman."

Damian looked at him, touching his thoughts long enough to realize Rainy'd *volunteered* to take on the bodyguard assignment to the beautiful woman in his thoughts. He hid a smile as Rainy turned to him.

"Four safehouses in six days have been destroyed," he said. "All in Tucson."

Damian sobered, troubled by the news. It was how the destruction of the European front started. The safehouses dropped like flies, then the spy network, then the sector headquarters. The pattern was dangerous, especially since he didn't know where the leaks were coming from.

"How many men you need?" he asked.

"To maintain our operations, three more. To get ahead of the vamps ... " Rainy shook his head. "At this rate, I don't know. Trac - the Natural tracker was able to identify patterns in the attacks. Ikir, they're using our tactics against us."

Damian crossed his arms. It was the worst news yet. One of his Guardians was training the enemy.

"Traci's found signs of the vamps' surveillance around two more of our safehouses. None at your HQ yet or Sector HQ."

No one could find his HQ unless they were on the guest list, or one of his Guardians revealed its location. He maintained a shield around it that made it invisible to those who didn't know where it was.

"Burn the safehouses. That's six. How badly is it impacting you?"

Rainy rubbed the back of his neck, pensive.

"It leaves us with two, plus Sector HQ. Ikir, I think Tucson Sector is going to be completely compromised by Christmas."

Damian was coming to the same conclusion.

"The Quarterly is coming up in a week," he said. "I relocate HQ after each one for security reasons. We'll evac all Naturals and Guardian assets from Tucson Sector after the Quarterly and send in a clean-up crew."

Rainy nodded, a look of relief crossing his features, and Damian saw his mind was on his Natural ward, Traci.

"I love clean up duty," he said with a cunning smile.

Most Guardians did, including Dusty, who personally oversaw every one in his hemisphere. Damian issued few clean-up orders, for there was no way to maintain the discretion his Guardians needed to mask their shadow operations protecting humanity. It was loud and dirty, the type of work they'd ceased two centuries before when human civilization exploded and globalized.

He thought hard. First Europe, then Tucson Sector. His mind traveled to the sexy oracle, and he wondered if she'd be anything like the oracles from his father's time. If so, he might have the key to crippling the cancer afflicting his operations.

If she survived her transformation, that is.

"Keep me updated, and alert the neighboring sectors," he ordered. "How many naturals you got in Tucson?"

"Two."

"If you need to send them to HQ or want to evac Sector HQ, go ahead. Don't worry about knocking. I'll let Han know you all may be in."

"Thank you, Ikir," Rainy's voice was quiet, and Damian sensed his heartfelt gratitude.

"Gods, she's got you mewling already," he couldn't resist saying.

Rainy tensed.

"No disrespect, Rain-man. Happy for you."

"You're not upset?" he asked warily. "Dustin says ..."

"... women are the true scourge of mankind. I know," Damian replied. "He tells me all the time."

"Actually, he said no relationships with Naturals," Rainy said, giving him an odd look.

Damian laughed.

"If there's one thing that drives Dustin crazy, it's being kept in the dark. Let him know *now*, before he accidentally finds out," he advised.

"Yes, Ikir."

Even the younger Guardians referred to him by the ancient title that meant *my king*. He'd long since lost any lofty delusions, but Dusty was a stickler for discipline and details.

His phone dinged with a message from Han.

I don't know what to do with a crying woman.

He snorted.

"Gotta go, Rain-man. Call Dustin. I'll arrange for evacs and a clean-up crew."

"Yes, Ikir."

He started to transport himself to the oracle's room but thought better of it. She was scared enough. He opened his eyes to face Han outside her closed door. His normally stoic XO appeared irritated.

"She won't come out, won't eat," he said. "Gods, I forgot how difficult it is raising Naturals."

Damian clapped him on the arm and opened the door. Her curtains were down to seal away the sunlight, and she was curled up in a ball in the middle of her bed with her back to the door. She wore jeans and a t-shirt, and her blonde hair fanned out over a

pillow. The unusual sense of tenderness unfurled again in his breast. He sat down on the edge of the bed, brushing one blonde lock from her face.

Her eyes were swollen and red, the silver glowing in the dim light of the room. Fear and uncertainty crossed her features. The images in her mind were of a little boy dying in the street, of Jake's death, of the deaths of many others. At his touch, her visions quieted.

She closed her eyes and uncurled. He'd expected her original reaction to him to be born of shock, but she wrapped her arms around him once again. His body responded with a surge of desire he gritted his teeth against. The woman in his arms was too delicate, too vulnerable to face the lusty beast within him. Instead he shifted and wrapped an arm around her.

He was beginning to like these peaceful encounters. He'd never known anything like them in his long existence.

"You need to eat."

"No."

"If Han hasn't told you, when I give an order, no one disobeys me," he said firmly. "Even crying women."

"Do you make many women cry?"

"You'd be surprised."

She withdrew her face from his chest and looked up at him, her silver-blue eyes filled with emotion. He couldn't recall seeing anyone as much as an open book as this woman. Her gaze was unusually steady and clear, as if she were already a legendary oracle capable of seeing through whatever was before her. The air around her shimmered with subtle, calm power that thrilled him.

No, this oracle wasn't another Claire, full of potential but unable to use most of her abilities. This was an oracle the world hadn't seen since before the Schism, the type of oracle that belonged at her king's side.

Darian.

The woman in his arms ducked her head again and closed her eyes, missing the flash of darkness that crossed his mind and face. He pushed the thought of his slain brother away but couldn't escape the lingering sense of unease. There were only two men in the world he'd entrust with his life. He'd seen from burying his brother that a king's greatest weakness was the woman at his side.

Something about the woman made him think of things he'd not thought about in ages. There was a reason he banned thoughts of Darian and Claire from his mind, an instinct he'd never been able to face in all the years since Darian's death.

I don't know if I trust my wife, brother.

Darian's words haunted him again, and he quickly suppressed the memories.

"Sleep," he whispered, releasing a warm burst of power into her.

Her body obeyed. He held her another minute, resting his chin on her head. His new oracle was dangerous. He'd almost forgotten that the word for oracle in his native tongue also meant soul-reader, the dual nature of a woman with her talent allowing her to see a person's soul and future with a simple touch. Her presence alone was already prodding free memories he'd thought he'd buried.

His heart skipped a beat as he realized that the last great oracle, his mother, appeared just before the Schism, when the universe was almost destroyed.

CHAPTER FIVE

The clang of steel and sound of jeering drew her from her book to her window. Several of the beefy men living in the house were in the grassy, well-lit courtyard, sparring with swords, knives, and other weaponry that looked like it came straight out of the Middle Ages.

Three pairs of two fought while the others cheered or jeered them on. Her gaze swept over them, stopping to rest on Damian. D wore judo pants low enough on his hips that she blushed as her gaze followed the trail of hair that disappeared into his pants. His tapered waist and hips and washboard abs were on display, along with the wide chest and thick back. She watched him move, his swordplay as graceful and fluid as it was lethal. A sheen of sweat coated his body, and his white-blond hair was back in a braid.

Even from a distance he drew her, and it was not just the chiseled body of a god. She could see him sitting on a golden throne or commanding legions of soldiers.

In fact, she *did* see him in those positions, and in many more. The visions were less invasive than those from others, like background music at a department store. She closed her eyes, watching the disjointed, fuzzy home videos playing in her mind. She saw a time before the emergence of human civilization and his people ruled, a time when he was a prince among kings who grew up in the shadow of a war she couldn't see. Then there was the Schism and an era of disaster and grief, where his world collided with - then severed from - the human one, centuries where he was forced into the underground world as a prostitute, a beggar, a thief.

As silence fell from the courtyard, she opened her eyes. The men were dispersing, and her heart leapt when she saw Damian's gaze riveted to her window. His look was intense, much different than the warmth he'd displayed the day before.

The images in her mind were too real to be imagined. Nothing like that could be true!

By the look on Damian's face, he wasn't happy. She wondered if he knew what she saw. She snatched her jacket and pulled it on as she raced down the stairwell and down the hall to the front door. She jerked it open only to have it pushed shut by an olive hand planted above her head. She cringed at the thick forearm brushing her ear.

"I'm sorry," she said immediately.

"For what?"

His tone was measured. His scent drove her body wild, the mix of sweat, darkness, and man.

"I don't know."

His hand dropped, and she faced him. He stood before as he had in the sparring ring, sans any clothing but judo pants. She felt dwarfed and delicate next to the mass of roped muscle and taut skin.

Heat rose to her face as she stared openly. His chiseled features were unreadable and hard. The sword was still clenched in one hand. The honey eyes were intent, his face flushed from exertion. She'd had never felt overwhelmed by a man before, and she'd certainly never been a woman who felt weak-kneed!

She leaned back against the door, mouth dry and legs shaky.

"I'm not angry at you," he said at last, taking a step back. "You have a rare ability among our kind. I didn't realize you were as ... capable as you are."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm not going to eat you, so you can stop looking at me like that," he said with a bitter edge that was lost on her.

She looked down, near tears again.

"That didn't come out quite right," he said.

"Han said you're moody."

"Did he?"

She nodded.

"He's usually right. C'mon. We'll talk."

She trailed him up the stairs, taking in every inch of his perfectly round butt to his slender hips and thick back. She'd never seen a man so strong, and she couldn't imagine talking to him without remembering how beautiful that body was. Thoughts of his sweaty body poised above hers made her want to swoon for the first time in her life, and her core ached so much from the vision that she gripped the handrail.

"My god, I'm a man," she whispered.

"A what?"

"Nothing."

He led her to his private suite, which took up half of one wing. She sat in the living room as masculine as he, surrounded by wood, wool and leather in dark colors. The window to a balcony was open, allowing in a cool night breeze that made the fire in the hearth dance. She pulled her knees to her chest, feeling small and vulnerable once more.

When he rejoined her, he'd put on a t-shirt and sandals. He leaned back in a chair across from her with muscular, feline grace, managing to appear both at ease and ready to pounce. They gazed at each other until she felt red creep up her neck. She looked towards the fire.

"Why can't I touch anyone else but you without seeing ... horrible things?" she asked as the silence grew uncomfortable.

"In my world, you'd be called an oracle, one who can see a person's future by touching them."

She stared at him.

"It's a rare gift, trust me," he said. "And a treasured one. You'll eventually be able to see other things besides their deaths. Death is the only definite, and so it's the first vision you see until you hone your skills."

Her throat tightened.

"As for me, well ... " he trailed off. "That shit doesn't work on me. We'll leave it at that for now."

"I saw you ... I saw ... " she didn't know how to say what she'd seen without seeming like the craziest person in the world.

"That is what we have to talk about," he said, leaning towards her. "You will see my past. You will say nothing to anyone about what you see about me."

"I'm not doing it on purpose," she whispered, distraught. "I don't even know what I'm doing."

"I know. However, there are boundaries to your gift that I must give you now. It's better you learn them from the beginning. One, no matter what you see, you are forbidden from telling the person exactly what you see. If you are asked, you can give them insight into their future, so long as you do not reveal everything. Two, don't fuck with fate."

"I can't keep such horrible things to myself."

"Three, you can't save the world," he replied. "You can tell me what you see, if you need to talk about it. Does that work?"

She frowned, unconvinced. He rattled off more rules, and she listened without registering any of them. What the hell was an oracle anyway? How did one just morph into one? Maybe it was the mercury in the tuna she ate or the excessive amounts of chocolate. Could eating fake sweetener turn her into something like this? If so, what would hard water do to a person?

She laughed.

Damian stared at her.

"Sorry. I was thinking ... it's stupid," she said. "I'm overwhelmed. One day I'm a boring financial planner, and the next day, I can't go out in sunlight and I see the future."

"You'll be able to go outside once you transform."

"What does that mean? Transform into *what*?"

"One of us. Our kind tend to live much longer than the average human. You'll finish transforming soon and will be like a human, just with a very, very long and extended life. Except ... " he trailed off, giving her a considering look.

"Except what?" she demanded, panicking. "I have three eyes instead of two? I grow a tail?"

The corner of his lips curved up in amusement once more.

"Nothing like that. One day, I'll tell you. You'll eventually have additional requirements to sustaining your body."

"When can I go outside?" she asked again.

"Soon."

They gazed at each other again, and she tried her damndest not to look away. A slow, languid smile crossed his features, one that made her body flush and ache for him. The vision of him on top of her protruded into her thoughts again. She looked away.

"I'll always win that game," he warned.

You have no idea, she mused. There were a great many things she'd let him do to her to win the game in her head.

"Like what?"

She jerked, eyes returning to him.

"You really can read minds," she whispered, stricken.

"Damn straight. I'm willing if you're willing," he said with a lazy smile that set her blood alight. He clasped his hands behind his head, giving her an unobstructed view of his body.

"I'm not some sort of floozy," she snapped, though she couldn't help wishing she was. "I don't sleep with random men, especially those who aren't ... you're not even human, are you?"

"Nope."

His response chilled her ardor.

"You're not?"

"Nope."

"What are you?"

"I guess you could say I'm a divine spirit of sorts."

"A ghost?"

"Not that kind of spirit."

He didn't expand, and she was too afraid to ask.

"Good-bye," she said, standing and all but bolting out of his suite.

Her head hurt again, this time from trying to digest what he was telling her. She could see the future and he was a ... what the hell was he?

He could read minds.

It made no sense, but neither did the sudden craving for peanut butter that dragged her to the kitchen, where yet another man she wanted to avoid was lounging. She snagged a jar of peanut butter and a spoon, retreating to her library. Jake followed, and Han was already waiting for her.

"What are you doing?" Jake asked.

Irritated he continued to disturb her peace, she leveled a glare on him.

"Transforming. Can't you tell?"

He stalked off, and Han glanced down from his bored stare at the ceiling. She didn't care if he was miserable or not - *she* didn't order him to babysit her.

"Is it dark yet?" she asked him again.

"Yes."

Jake returned with a jug of water.

"Your shift," Han said and rose.

Sofia rose and retreated to her room. During her day, she'd found quite a few treasures, to include a dusty backpack, a flashlight, and Jake's wallet, which happened to have a credit card she used to book a flight from Tucson to Virginia.

"I want to go out," she said.

"Great," Jake said, rising from his seat in the library with more enthusiasm than she'd seen all day.

"To the airport."

His smile faded.

"That's a no-go, Sofi."

She pulled out a set of keys and walked down the hall to the front door.

"Sofia," Jake called, trailing.

"You're not allowed to touch me," she reminded him.

"D is."

"D's in town. Remember?"

He frowned but followed her into the cool evening towards the garage. Damian had a lot of cars, and she found the black BMW whose lights flashed when she clicked the keyfob. Jake slid into the passenger seat beside her, pulling out his cell as he did.

He dialed and spoke in a different language to the man on the other end. Her grip tightened on the wheel, and she assumed he spoke to Damian. He didn't appear out of thin air to stop her, and she made it to the airport terminal, where she stopped in front of the Delta sign and handed Jake the keys.

If she failed to make it on the plane, she didn't doubt D would drag her back. She was pretty sure he would find her no matter where she tried to go.

Damn them all.

She strode into the airport and checked in, very careful not to brush up against anyone for fear of the jarring visions. She didn't relax until her plane was in the air, and only then was she able to relax only when she sat pressed against the window to prevent her elbow from touching the man beside her.

Several hours later, just as dawn was breaking, she entered the disaster that was her apartment. Sofia dropped her backpack onto the kitchen counter, taking in the damage.

"Hello, Sofia."

She froze at the familiar voice.

"I was worried when you didn't show for your appointment."

She turned, startled to find the man in front her of the same make and mold as Damian's men. The doctor's eyes were the color of cold steel, his face stoic and large form tense. His hair was silvered.

"Dr. Czerno?" she managed. "You're not a doctor, are you?"

"No, Sofia."

She stared at him and edged around the kitchen island. Sofia darted for the door, but he snatched her arm. His visions were more than just his death; they were the first person experience of torturing and killing of many, many others, as if *she* were mutilating others. She staggered under the weight of them, dropping to her knees.

He released her.

"I think you see what I am about," he said.

Tears streamed down her face as screams echoed in her mind.

"I can carry you or you can walk out."

"Walk," she managed, shuddering at the lingering visions that left an acrid taste in her mouth.

"Let's go."

She pushed herself off the floor and rose. The kind of creature that could do such things to other men left her no doubt he'd do the same to her if she didn't obey. She shivered and hugged herself as they emerged into the cold Virginia dawn.

A chauffer opened the door to a town car as they neared the street.

Run! Run!

As if hearing her thoughts, Czerno gripped her arm again. Sofia sagged, crippled by the burning visions. He shoved her into the car, and she crawled as far from him as she could.

They merged into traffic. Czerno raised the privacy glass with the push of a button.

"Tell me, love, just how powerful are you?"

She shook her head.

"Still transforming, I see."

And he smiled, a cold smile that did not reach the death in his eyes.

* * *

Damian turned the cell back on and emerged from the Marriott's conference room, the random place chosen by his spy chief for this week's intelligence briefing. The

situation in Europe plagued him, as did the declining number of Guardians. This would be the first year he'd gone into the negative in a thousand of years. He was losing established Guardians – mostly in Europe – and an entire class of new recruits.

Dusty's suggestion of bringing in every regional commander and station chief for interrogation was sounding better. As a former assassin and interrogator, Dusty didn't much care for people to begin with. Dusty's skills were legendary, but Damian had held off on what he considered a reign of terror for his regional commanders. Dusty's interviewees rarely lived through the ordeal, and he wasn't yet ready for that step.

His cell rang before it could upload the number of voicemails and texts.

"I'm done, Han. What's up?"

"This message is from Dusty. He wants to know what the fuck you were doing that you couldn't answer your phone."

"I'll call him," he promised.

"We have a serious issue," Han said in a flat voice. "You need to get to NOVA *now*."

"Consider me there."

Han had never led him astray in the thousands of years as his XO. He waited until he was out of sight of the hotel's cameras before blinking.

"'bout time," Dusty said.

Damian accepted his hand in greeting, looking around. The room was as still as a graveyard despite the dozen Guardians there. Dusty had called in the entire sector. If he were personally involved in the operation, something was very, very wrong.

"I think this is yours," Dusty said and handed him a few surveillance pictures taken of one of Czerno's safe houses in northern Virginia and an apartment building.

Damian froze as he saw the photo of Czerno dragging Sofia to a car.

"How the fuck did she get to Virginia?!" he roared.

"She flew," Dusty said, leveling a look on Jake, who stood in a corner with his head bowed.

Furious his order had been disobeyed, Damian started for the young Guardian. Dusty planted a hand in his chest.

"D, we need to get to her now. We know what he's planning," he said quietly, calmly. "You hear me? We know where he's taking her."

Damian met Dusty's clear blue eyes, blood boiling.

"C'mon, bro. If he finishes with her before we get there ..."

They were *fucked*. Damian forced himself to calm down, though he wanted nothing more than to wrap his hands around the newbie's neck. The thought of Sofia in Czerno's hands did worse than anger him – he felt *fear* for the first time in millennia.

"You know where she is," he said.

"Yes."

"We'll do this your way, Dusty. We raze the place. No survivors."

"We'll drop you in first," Dusty said. "Whatever you don't destroy, we will. I called in the DC Sector for support as well."

"He's going with me," Damian said, indicating Jake.

"Agreed. Jake, prep yourself. You've got half an hour."

It was a death sentence, and Damian saw the realization in Jake's eyes before the newbie left for the weapons room. The other Guardians filed out in silence befitting a funeral.

"He's the only one at station who can Transport," Dusty reminded him.

"I don't give a damn. If we can't un-fuck what he did, Czerno will destroy humanity overnight."

And Sofia.

"I'll put out a recruitment requirement for a new Transporter," Dusty said and begin handing him weapons.

Damian pulled off his sweater to reveal a black t-shirt and tucked weapons into his cargo pants, boots and pockets. They were silent, aware this would be one of the most crucial battles they'd encountered in ages.

"Is she like the oracles in your father's court?" Dusty asked. "Does she understand how important her gift is?"

"Not yet," Damian admitted. "She's this sexy little thing with beautiful eyes. Lots of spunk and stubborn as an ox. Nice rack, killer legs. So sweet and innocent. Were we ever innocent?"

"Nope. We were damaged goods when we were dropped onto this planet."

He felt Dusty's thoughtful gaze on him and looked up from strapping a gun to his ankle.

"Watsup?" he asked, straightening.

Dusty shook his head, though Damian saw his faint smile.

"Bro, watsup?"

"Either you need a woman real bad or there's something special about this one."

"Hey now, don't insult my oracle," Damian warned. "Assuming she survives tonight."

He ignored Dusty's intent look, aware his BFF knew when he was avoiding answering his question. Dusty was right on both accounts: he needed a woman, and she was special. He didn't dare mess with an oracle, though. It was common sense: never piss off the woman who could see the future, lest she alter it and make your life hell. Thousands of years hadn't given him much insight into a woman's way of thinking, but this he knew without a doubt.

"As if the European front wasn't enough," Dusty muttered.

"Tell me about it. After this is over, I'll tell you about the Guardian recruitment stats."

"Gods."

"Yeah."

Hang in there, Sofia.

CHAPTER SIX

They drove west, away from DC. She watched the scenery turn from urban to rural and recognized the roads leading up to Skyline Drive, the scenic route running through the mountains of northern Virginia. The town car moved at a quick pace, bringing them to a mansion atop one of the private, gated drives tucked away from sight along Skyline Drive.

Czerno motioned her out of the car as it stopped in front of the Georgian-style manor house. It was full daylight, and she was already in pain despite the heavily tinted windows.

The daylight almost dropped her to her knees. She staggered against the car, cringing away from Czerno as he snatched her arms and dragged her to the house. He released her and tossed his coat to a waiting maid before motioning her to follow.

She followed, heart racing. She passed several men with guns hidden in the alcoves of doors as she walked. Upon passing the first, she realized they weren't men at all. No human's eyes glowed red, and their inhuman growls as she passed resembled those of animals. They watched her like they intended to make her their dinner. She hurried to follow Czerno, silently praying Jake ratted her out to Damian.

There were two other men in the study Czerno led her to. The door closed behind her, and he pointed to a chair. She sat, taking in the Goth décor that made the study as welcoming as a graveyard. The other two men gazed at her. One was of medium height and slender, an older man with sharp green eyes the color of forest moss who seemed out of place in the middle of the room. The second was closer to Han's age with midnight hair and eyes.

Neither looked friendly. She stayed the urge to curl up in her chair, jumping when a shadow with lopsided shoulders emerged from the corner dressed like an executioner in black hood and gloves.

"Jilian, check her," Czerno ordered. "Two, prep the room."

The man in the black hood left while the man with midnight hair and eyes approached. She blinked, shocked when he walked through the man with the green eyes, as if he weren't there. Jilian wrenched her up. Visions slammed into her, each one as vivid as the next, the sights, smells, sounds. He was Czerno's personal hitman, an executioner with no heart or soul.

"Unbound," Jilian said, releasing her.

She dropped into her chair, shaking.

"I'm impressed," Czerno said. "Bylun's gone soft."

"If he didn't act, there's a reason," Jilian observed.

"If he didn't act, I will," Czerno responded. "Prep her, quickly. Damian's not gonna sit around for this one."

Jilian grabbed her again, and she grated her teeth against the visions, staggering as she tried to keep upright. He led her down the stairs into a basement that looked more like a dungeon. One well-lit room gleamed with stainless steel. Until she saw the blood on the walls and ceiling, she thought it was a surgical room.

The torture room from her visions. Panic gripped her, and she tried to bolt. Jilian snatched her and slammed her onto the table, pinning her in place as he strapped her wrists and ankles in.

"Please don't - " she cried, yanking at her arms and legs.

"Shut up. The more noise you make, the worse I make it for you."

She shut up, breathing raggedly. He retrieved a jar from the small refrigerator and laid it next to a surgical knife, a large rubber tube, and a huge syringe.

Oh, god, oh god, oh, god!! Sofia pulled again at her bindings and closed her eyes against the blood splatters on the ceiling.

"What are you going to do?" she whispered.

"*You're* the oracle."

"I only see other people's fates, not mine."

"You see mine?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"You die."

Horribly. At Damian's hands. That Damian was capable of the same level of violence as these men reminded her that this world was nothing like hers.

Jilian laughed.

"Guess they forgot to tell you I'm immortal," he said. "Only Czerno or Damian can kill me."

I'm sorry, Jake. I'm sorry, Damian.

"I'm going to drain your blood," he said conversationally. "You should be grateful. Czerno wants this done his way, not mine."

From her visions, neither of them was capable of any measure of kindness. Tears trickled down her face, tickling her ears.

"Then we'll bind you to him."

"What does that mean?" she forced herself to ask to keep hysterics from claiming her.

"An oracle must be blood bound to her master to be of any use and keep you from dying from the Transformation. We'll bind you to Czerno, and you'll serve him for all eternity."

His words were too extraordinary for her to understand fully, but she knew serving men like these *for eternity* was equivalent to living with the devil in hell. Her breathing stilled, and she strained against the bindings.

"Hold still. If I miss, I'll paralyze you for eternity."

He held up the long syringe. By the glimmer in his eye, he wanted her to move. Sofia closed her eyes. He injected the gel into her arm, and warmth spread through her. Sweat soon covered her, and her chest began to tighten.

"We have to kill you first," he said, crossing his arms and leaning against the counter. A slow, cold smile spread across his face. "I didn't use the cocktail mix. This might hurt a little."

Fire formed in her stomach, racing through her. The man in the corner of her mind spoke to her then.

My name is Darian.

Sofia began to scream as her nerve endings sizzled from the inside out. She strained and bucked against the bindings, her body seizing. Darkness lingered at the edges of her mind but refused to take her. Instead, the agony grew, tearing her apart, cell by cell, while Jilian's laughter echoed in her mind.

The alarm sounded the second he materialized into the compound. He expected it to; he sensed Czerno as well as the Black God sensed him. He snatched Jake as a knife sliced through the air where the newbie materialized and whirled, whipping out the sword at his back. He sliced through two vamps before shooting the other two in the small courtyard. Bullets rained down on them.

He dragged Jake against the building and loosed part of his power to locate Czerno's position in the compound.

"C'mon!"

Jake shot off a burst of rounds as several vamps raced across the courtyard, their red eyes glowing and growls loud.

"You ok?" Dusty's voice came across his earpiece.

"Great," Damian grunted. "You got the schematics on this place?"

"Here," Jake said, whipping out a PDA. He ducked into a doorway while Damian shot two more vamps and reappeared, the blueprints on the screen.

"Guide me in," Damian ordered.

"Tell me when you're ready for us," Dusty said.

"Will do. D out."

Jake led him into the Gregorian mansion, whose stone walls resembled an old school fortress. Czerno's affinity for castles meant they couldn't simply blow the place up and hope she survived an avalanche of stone. He had to find her fast.

Damian located the enemy ahead of them, shooting intersections clear as they reached them. Jake led him into a dark wine cellar, and they paused to reload.

Czerno was moving.

"There's another basement," Damian said, pacing the room in search of a door.

"It's not on the schematics," Jake confirmed. "You see a door?"

They heard a sound that made them freeze and look at each other. It was the scream of a soul dying.

"Sofia!" Jake breathed, guilt and anger crossing his face.

"Stand back," Damian ordered. "Cover the door."

He tracked Czerno then placed his hands on the back wall. The stone exploded into pebbles and dust. Light from the hidden hall filled the wine cellar. Sofia's anguished scream was still muffled.

"Sofia!" Jake shouted.

"D, watch out for Jilian. Czerno brought in fifty of his goons. Jilian's - " Dusty called.

"Jake!" Damian shouted as the transporter disappeared. "Fuck!"

He saw Jilian's blow cleave the transporter apart the moment he materialized down the hall. Jake dropped silently. Damian charged Jilian, Czerno's longtime executioner. Jilian met his sword with his own, barking orders to his vamps.

The screams stopped, and Damian's heart quickened. The period between when an oracle could be bound and when she permanently died was brief. Jilian's men pounded down the hall. Damian gritted his teeth, unable to unleash the blow that could destroy them all in a blink without taking out Sofia as well.

"D!"

"Busy!"

He whipped out the vamp killing hand cannons and shot the first two of Jilian's men. Several rounds drove him back, and he ducked a blow aimed at his neck by Jilian.

"I'm here, bro!"

Dusty materialized beside him, his gun roaring in the narrow hallway as he mowed down Jilian's men.

"He's coming!" he warned.

Damian slashed through Jilian, and the vamp dropped. He hacked him apart until there was nothing but pulp.

"Laney, send in everything!" Dusty barked into his mike. "*Now!*"

Vamps jammed both directions of the hall, and Czerno was making a beeline for the room behind the wall in front of them.

"Hold em, bro," Damian shouted and placed his hands on the wall.

"Got it," Dusty said, reloading before his hand cannons began roaring again.

The wall before him burst into dust, and he crawled through the opening, firing a full clip at the form at the other end. The mansion rocked as Dusty's first set of explosions went off. The ceiling began to crumble. A second explosion threw him across the room. Czerno disappeared.

Damian rose, sickened by the sight before him. Sofia lay on the cold steel table, her tears still wet but her eyes open and staring blankly. A tube ran from her neck to the vat of blood on the floor. What had started as a stream of blood had slowed to a few remaining drops.

Fury filled him. A stone dropped from the ceiling into the vat, and warm blood splashed over him.

Dusty joined him, drawing a sharp breath at the sight.

"This place is about to come down," he warned.

Damian launched forward, snatching the tube and whipping out a knife.

"Cut me," he ordered.

"You know what you're doing?"

"Think I just got me an oracle," Damian said grimly.

He felt Dusty's gaze on him before it went to the still woman.

"This is more permanent than marriage," he said in a hushed tone.

Damian followed his gaze. He felt fear again, an emotion he hated. Every instinct in his body ached to feel Sofia alive again. He didn't know if she'd understand – or forgive him – for what he was about to do to her. He didn't know if *he* understood what he was doing. But seeing her lifeless on the table made his soul wrench in a way that reminded him ...

Darian.

He handed Dusty the knife and pulled off the high-collared vest to expose his throat.

"Do it," he ordered.

Dusty obeyed and punctured deep into his jugular. Damian shoved the other end of the tube into his neck, releasing his power. He sealed his skin around the tube, forced the flow downward, and placed his hands on her, forcing her body to accept his blood. Dizziness made him lean onto the table, and he loosed his regeneration powers.

Dusty watched in silence. The house was crashing down around them. He couldn't transport a dead body.

"D!" Dusty shouted as a chunk of stone crushed a stainless steel cabinet.

"C'mon, c'mon," Damian urged, watching for signs of life in the woman. He forced his blood out faster and faster.

"We gotta go!" Dusty yelled, slapping him on the back. "*Now!*"

Damian carefully gathered the woman into his arms and closed his eyes. Dizziness washed over him, and he felt his body strain to transport. Silence, and he opened his eyes to find himself kneeling on the NOVA Sector's kitchen floor.

"D, put her down. Laney, get the defib!"

Her eyes were closed, but color bloomed in her cheeks.

He ordered his body to cease the transfusion and pulled the tube from his neck, healing the tear. He gently removed the tube from the oracle and placed his hand over the wound to heal it. He touched her face, exhausted for the first time in years. He leaned against the cabinets behind him.

"Move, D," Dusty ordered, snatching the defibrillator from Laney.

He cut her shirt open while it charged and placed the paddles against her chest. Her body bucked, and her eyes flew open. The oracle gasped.

Dusty felt for her pulse before resting against the cabinets opposite him. Damian met his gaze, and they sat in comfortable silence in the small kitchen, breathing hard as they recovered.

"Jule's gonna be pissed we didn't invite him," Dusty said at last and pulled off his gloves, tossing them.

"He would've tried to talk us out of it anyway," Damian said. "He's not as violent as us, bro."

"I think you mean as *me*," Dusty corrected him, then chuckled. "Congrats, ikir. You figure out how to train an oracle?"

"No fucking clue," Damian admitted with a ruthless grin.

"May the gods help you. I sure can't."

"What is she?" Laney asked, returning to the kitchen.

Damian rose and pulled Dusty to his feet.

"That, Laney, is my oracle," he said. "Watch her for a bit while we go back and clean up what's left of Czerno's goons."

Laney's eyebrows shot up, and he looked at the unconscious, blood spattered woman.

"Yes, ikir," he murmured and knelt, lifting Sofia off the ground. "I'll take care of her."

* * *

She stared at the sunbeams moving across the ceiling, not remembering where she was or how she arrived. Her memories wiggled their way out of the mud of her mind, and she sat upright. She was alive! She touched her face, her arms, her body. At the memory of the pain, she began to shake.

It's over!!

Yet the sensation of fire creeping through her remained. She suddenly realized the curtains were open, and the sun streaming into her window didn't hurt her eyes. Her memories overshadowed, she threw open the curtains. She shoved the cracked balcony door all the way open. She bathed in the mid morning sun. Morning air had never tasted so wonderful! She didn't have to wear sunglasses indoors anymore, didn't have to hide from moonlight!

"You look good."

She whirled, heart leaping at the sound. Han sat in the corner of her room nearest the door.

"I can go outside!" she exclaimed. "I'm cured!"

She looked again at the sunlit courtyard beyond her window.

"I'm *here* again," she murmured, troubled, and faced Han. "I'm ... transformed?"

Han nodded grimly.

"Isn't that good?" she prodded. "Isn't it what you all wanted?"

"It is," he confirmed.

"You don't look happy."

"It all turned out well, I guess," he said at last. "As long as you're ok?"

"I am. I can go outside again."

She sat to pull on shoes and saw the scars around her wrists, evidence of her fight against the bindings Julian used to strap her onto the table.

"Han, what happened to me?"

"It's better you don't remember."

"I *do* remember. At least, part of it I remember. Jilian injected me with something to kill me," she paused, shuddering at the flash of residual pain from the memories. "Did he succeed?"

"Yes."

"So I died?"

"You did."

Her eyes closed at the bizarre news. How many people lived to hear they'd died?

"What happened then?"

"Ask Damian."

She shuddered, afraid to face him after ditching him as she had before. No doubt he'd had to do some terrible things to free her from Czerno.

"Is Jilian dead?"

"Damn straight."

"I told him so," she said softly, disturbed. "Is Damian ok?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you upset?"

"We lost Jake."

Jake's death flashed through her thoughts.

"Jilian killed him," she said.

"Yes."

Because of me. Sofia slumped. As much as Jake annoyed her, he was still her friend. And he'd brought her somewhere where she could be safe.

"Han, can I be alone?"

He complied. Sofia crawled into bed and cried again. She'd not only seen his death - she'd *caused* it! Her heart ached for her friend. She cried until she was too tired to cry more and drifted into a vision, reliving the few moments she spent with Jilian.

You must die first.

... an oracle must be bound ...

for all eternity ...

Fire.

She jerked out of the memory with a cry. Han slammed the door open, and she squeezed her eyes closed, expecting the light from the hallway to hurt her. When it didn't, she uncurled herself from the ball she was in. His gaze swept over her before he retreated outside her door.

It was dark outside. She'd wasted her first day of light. She forced herself out of bed, exhausted and hungry. She took a shower and padded through the quiet mansion to the kitchen.

"At least I don't crave peanut butter anymore," she murmured as she went through the contents of the fridge.

In fact, she didn't crave *anything* anymore. Her stomach grumbled but the thought of a ham sandwich disgusted her. She made one anyway and forced herself to eat it, blaming her recent trauma for her queasiness.

Five minutes later, she bent over a toilet paying homage to the porcelain gods.

"My God!" she gargled between bouts of heaving.

Han watched, handing her a wet wash cloth when she was done.

"Han!" she wailed. "What's wrong with me?"

"Ask Damian."

"I knew you'd say that," she muttered.

Though nauseated by the thought, she heated up a can of soup and forced herself to eat it. The soothing warmth slid down her throat. Five minutes later, it returned, scorching her throat on the way out.

She wiped her mouth again and flung the rag against the wall, chest heaving.

"Han, please," she begged. "What can I eat?"

"Damian's in his room. Go see him," Han said, concerned yet unyielding.

"Does he have food?"

"More or less."

"It better be a feast," she growled and stood. She returned to her room to clean herself up, cursing peanut butter for ruining her appetite as she went.

A sense of dread filled her as she approached Damian's room. Han hung back, and she turned to him as she knocked.

"Are you coming?"

"Hell no."

"Why not?"

If Damian hadn't opened the door, she would have run back to her room. Han was as big as the man before her, and if he feared him ...

Damian's gaze swept over her. A burst of need washed over her as her body responded to his scent.

"Are you well?" he asked with a brusqueness that caught her off guard. His face was guarded.

She swallowed hard and nodded, struggling to control the strange sense of desire bubbling uncontrolled within her.

"Han said I should see you," she said.

At his long look, she backed away from the door.

"I'll come back later."

He threw open the door and walked away. She hesitated, sensing that entering his domain would somehow seal her to a fate she didn't yet understand.

I owe it to Jake.

Damian turned down the stereo blasting trance music and faced her, crossing his arms as she closed the door.

"I'm sorry to bother you," she said again, unable to see his face in the shadows of the dimly lit room.

"It's fine."

"Damian, I'm so sorry about Jake," she said, voice cracking and fading into a whisper. "He's been my friend for almost t..ten years. I'm so sorry."

He emerged from his defensive position, pausing near her. She wiped her eyes.

"I saw what Jilian did to him and what you did to Jilian. I saw what Jilian did to everyone and Czerno ..."

She closed her eyes. Damian rested his hands on her shoulders. The images left.

"I didn't know there were such people in this world."

"They're not people," he told her. "Jake's death is not your fault."

"But it is. If I stayed here, he wouldn't have come to save me and died."

"Jake was a warrior, one of my loyal Guardians. I mourn him, but he died doing what he was trained to do. No warrior wants to die of old age."

"He deserved better."

"You've been dropped into the middle of a war no human knows about. Men like Jake wouldn't want to die any other way than honorably defending people like you."

He touched her face, and her mouth went dry. Not trusting herself, she refused to look at him and instead wrapped her arms around him. He hesitated before hugging her. Engulfed in his heat and scent, she relaxed. He felt like home. No, better. He felt like a piece of heaven!

Her stomach grumbled loudly again.

"You're hungry," he said, withdrawing.

"I'll get something later," she said, surprised when he retreated across the room again. "Is everything ok?"

"Wonderful," was the sarcastic response.

Confused by his moods, she watched him cross to a thick goblet where a knife lay beside it.

"I'll go now."

"You are about to confront your new reality," he said. His tone made her back towards the door.

"C'mere."

She shook her head, fear spiraling through her.

"Sofia, what's done can't be undone, even if you want it so."

"You're scaring me."

"I told you I'd never hurt you," he said in a softer tone.

"I'm not feeling reassured right now!" she retorted.

He left the corner and approached her, stopping when she took a step back. He held out his hand.

"C'mere," he said more gently. "I promise not to harm you."

She hung in indecision for a long moment until she recalled that being in his arms was the only place she ever found peace. She placed her hand in his. He tugged her forward until their bodies met. Her blood surged with desire, her breathing quickening. She stared at his chest, afraid again to look up.

"Jilian killed you," he said, wrapping his arms around her in a secure hug.

She leaned into him, at peace yet hyped up on adrenaline and desire.

"He said he was going to drain all my blood out."

"And he did. I brought you back."

"How?"

"With my blood. My blood runs through your veins. You need it to live."

"Of course I need blood to live," she said with a nervous laugh.

"It's the deepest bond my ... our kind can share and one that Czerno had in store for you."

You must die first.

... an oracle must be bound ...

for all eternity ...

"You will never hunger for food nor thirst for water. I think you found out what eating does to you?"

She said nothing, her heart somersaulting.

"It's also a bond that folks in my position have to be careful about taking on, because it leaves me vulnerable. That can be an issue when you don't know how to fight. You make an easy target."

"Yes, I can see that," she agreed. "Are you going to teach me to fight?"

"Maybe. We have to get through this first."

She didn't want to ask but did.

"Through what?"

His grip tightened around her, and she resisted the urge to push him away and flee. He pulled the knife from his pocket, flipped it inward, and sliced into the tender flesh of his wrist.

Horror and hunger surged through her. The scent of his blood was more intoxicating than a shitload of vodka on a Friday night. She craved him in a way that nearly crippled her.

"Oh God!" she whispered raggedly. "No! No, no, no!"

"You have no choice," he said with calmness that terrified her. "You'll die without it."

"Let me go!"

She shoved against him as hard as she could, knowing when he released her it was because he wanted to. She tore out of his room, the scent of his blood ensnared in her senses.

She ran from the mansion into the gardens and towards the forest. Too weak to continue, she dropped to her knees. Her scream was one of fury and frustration. She screamed until she was hoarse, shaking in the chilled air.

"I guess he told you," Han said and squatted beside her. "You know, to our kind, it's an honor to be blood bound to someone like him."

It should have been her instead of Jake! Damian's words swirled through her thoughts, along with the scent of his blood. The thought of drinking from him made her sick, and she pushed herself up to vomit.

"I want to die, Han," she cried. "I can't live like this! I'm a monster!"

"You have no idea what he went through to save you. Because of him, you're alive, and you still have a soul. If he didn't bind you, you'd be bound to Czerno, and then you'd *really* want to kill yourself," he said. "You're bound to our king, our god, our master. If anyone else saw you refuse him, they'd kill you."

"I'm human, Han," she argued.

"Not any more. You're one of us now."

She threw up again, sick and weak.

"I won't do it," she swore.

"You have no choice, ikira."

What's done can't be undone.

She wept, not objecting when Han lifted her deftly and carried her back to her room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

My name is Darian. Help me.

She spent the better half of the next day too depressed to leave her bed before forcing herself up and parking on the patio in the sun, determined not to waste another day in the dark. Darian- whoever he was - would drive her crazy if she didn't find a way to distract her thoughts. Han stayed with her, not moving until two Guardians - a raven-haired man with a quick smile and a brooding blond - approached. He stood and shook hands with both of them.

"The winter's better here than Europe, I imagine," he said with a smile. "This is Ikira Sofia."

"Ikira, I'm honored," the dark haired man said with a bow and a thick Spanish accent. "I'm Grande."

Han rolled his eyes.

"That would be a description of his ego and nothing else," the brooding blond said with a light French accent. "I'm Pierre, Ikira."

"Boring," Grande said. "He skipped the class on good *nom de plumes*."

Pierre gave him a sidelong look at his butchered French, and Sofia smiled despite herself.

"Grande and Pierre are joining us from our European front. We rotate every twelve months or so," Han explained.

"Front? Like war front?" she asked.

"Fighting Czerno and his monsters."

"Ikira, welcome," Grande said.

"Thanks. Call me Sofia."

"No," Han said, leveling a look on them both. "Dusty's a stickler for titles."

"Mi corazon," Grande said, faking a wounded look. Pierre punched him in the shoulder, and they walked towards the garage.

"What is Ikira?" she asked, turning to Han.

"Similar to my queen. You rank up near Damian now."

Her smile faded. The mention of him reminded her of her cramped stomach and the half dozen failed attempts to eat normal food.

"It's a good thing," Han said at her silence. "He owns your ass. No one will mess with you."

"Great," she muttered.

"If you make it another day and a half, you'll win our bet," he reminded her.

"Let me ask you something, Han," she said, facing him. "What am I supposed to be doing? If I'm not a financial planner, should I be oracling or something?"

"Ask your master."

"I knew you'd say that. And he's not *my* master. I'm an American; we don't have masters."

"I will give you a piece of advice," he said, unaffected by her tirade. "And this isn't because I want to win our bet, but because you're a proud person. Don't wait until tomorrow to go to him or you'll crawl to him on your knees. No matter what you think, you can't live without his blood. You might as well make it on your terms, ordering him to submit, rather than begging and mauling him like an animal."

"Wow," she murmured. "You really want to win our bet, don't you?"

"You're too smart to be so damn stubborn. Jake lost his life saving you, Sofia, and you're acting like a fucking two-year old."

And he walked away. Sofia watched him, stunned by his rebuke. Her thoughts went to Jake, and she saddened. He was right. He was always right, even when he told her to ask Damian something he knew very well.

On her terms. If she had it her way, she'd not do it at all. She'd never known hunger like this!

"It's your fate," she reminded herself.

How silly was an oracle who refused her own destiny?! If for no other reason, she owed it to Jake to try. She drew a deep breath and marched into the mansion. Damian was rarely indoors during the day, and she hoped he wasn't in his room when she knocked. Her courage fled to see him framed in his doorway, as seductive by day as he was by night.

He didn't ask her why she came but stepped aside and motioned her in. Sofia balled her fists and entered, sweating at the thought of the ordeal ahead.

"I feel like some sort of animal," she told him. *But I want to live.*

He raised an eyebrow.

"I'm scared, Damian," she added.

"I know," he said, holding out a hand to her.

She took it, her insides quaking in anticipation and hunger. He sat her down on the couch and sat down across from her with the knife in hand. She closed her eyes, more of his home videos playing through her mind.

"Stop," he warned.

She opened her eyes. A flash of darkness went through his gaze, and the same sense of hidden fury returned.

"You hate this."

"I do, but not because of you," he said.

"Someone hurt you? Was this during your dark period?"

He froze for a moment then resumed.

"It was," he confirmed.

She took the hint but wondered who had hurt him so badly that he still bore a grudge thousands of years later. He sliced his wrist, and her attention turned immediately to thick liquid bubbling against his olive skin.

This isn't right.

You'll die without it.

She recoiled, pushing herself against the couch. He sat beside her, stroking her hair with one hand.

"You won't hurt me," he assured her.

She refused to move. He shifted his hand to her neck and held her in place, placing his bloodied wrist against her lips.

The scent, the taste was unlike anything she ever experienced. Sofia licked her lips, the rich flavor as ensnaring as his scent. She lapped once with the tip of her tongue, tasting both the metallic, spicy blood and her tears. She opened her mouth and drank from him, timidly at first then hungrily. Damian hissed beside her, his grip on her neck tightening. She withdrew, afraid to hurt him.

"Don't stop," he urged, his voice huskier, lower. "Drink."

She closed her eyes and drank. When she pulled back at last, she sat in a daze, fulfilled and content yet unable to shake the horror of what she'd done. Damian had turned his face away and was clenching a thick knuckle between his teeth.

"Did I hurt you?" she asked, appalled.

"No," he grated. "Are you done?"

"Yes."

"You better go."

Something in his voice compelled her to hurry. Sofia fled to her room, amazed at how good she felt. She was no longer hungry, and she felt energized, fulfilled.

Guilty.

How long could she live like this, drinking someone else's blood?

How long would he allow it?

It was still sooooo wrong!

How could slitting his wrist for her daily *not* hurt him?

She tried to sift through her emotions, before she returned to his door. He opened it before she knocked, dressed for sparring in his judo pants and nothing else. It took every ounce of her willpower to keep from devouring his body with her eyes.

"I wanted to make sure you're ok," she said. "And ... I'm ok, right?"

"We're cool," he said, pushing himself away from the doorframe. "Whenever you're hungry, you can come by."

He was guarded again. She felt like the morning after a drunk, one night stand. What did she say after the most awkward experience of her life? The thought of his blood lit her afire, almost as much as the sight of his bare chest.

What would sleeping with him while drinking from him be like?

She backed away from his door, wondering how that deviant thought emerged. Han eyed her as she hurried past him towards the library. Dressed for sparring, he waited with Grande and Pierre for Damian.

"You ok?" he asked.

"You always ask me that. If I'm not, you'll know," she replied curtly.

"Very well, Ikira."

She glared at him, sensing his amusement. Damian trotted down the stairs. She didn't look at him until his back was to her on their way towards the door. As if feeling her gaze on him, he paused at the door.

"If you ever want to try it, let me know."

"Try what? Sparring?"

Screwing and drinking.

His voice was as clear in her mind as if he spoke the words. She sucked in a sharp breath, at once confused and thrilled. Without looking at her, he strode through the doors into the courtyard.

"I do *not* understand you," she whispered after him. His simple words turned her inside out, and yet, what would *he* want with a woman like her? If he was what Han claimed – king, lord, master of the entire damn universe – wouldn't he take the supermodel of his choice?

Target of opportunity. Maybe that's what she was.

Sofia shook her head. If she was an oracle, she needed to learn to be one. She retreated to the study and began to search the shelves for books on oracles. Many of

the books looked ancient with some were written in different languages. One volume caught her attention.

Oracle, See thyself home.

She collected what she could find and perched in a chair, reading until sundown, when the hunger pangs hit her again. They were always worse at night, when Damian's draw was overwhelming. The thought of him without his shirt on, or better yet, naked ...

"No way in hell," she breathed.

She gritted her teeth and forced her attention to the stack of books, jotting down notes on her notepad. There appeared to be no such thing as a do-it-yourself manual for seeing the future, but the books had a few good - if bizarre - anecdotal stories that gave her ideas. Armed with her notes, she emerged from the library.

The mansion was quiet, and she roamed until she found where everyone was. The men were at dinner, including Damian. The scents of what looked like pizza night taunted her, and she stood peering through the cracked door at the long dinner table.

Bitterness slithered through her.

She was even different from *them*. Her reading shed some insight, saying that when an Oracle died, she could be brought back to life by a blood bond. There weren't many details, and she could only guess that this was not the normal case, as some stories mentioned Oracles attending great feasts.

She watched the men eating happily around the table and left the mansion for the gardens. A cold wind comforted her as she sat alone. The moon was covered by clouds, and she crumpled the notes she'd taken. Tears began to spill again, and she began to understand how Darian felt, utterly alone and abandoned in the corner of her mind.

"You should go inside," Damian's voice was soft.

"I don't belong there. I don't belong anywhere."

"You belong here," he said resolutely. "You were forced into a transition without being prepared for it. I'm sorry for that."

"But are you sorry for what I am?"

"Not at all."

He pried the notes from her hand.

"What is this?"

"I'm trying to learn to be an oracle. I read a couple of books today."

He studied it.

"There's no dummies guide," she added. "I think I can teach myself how to keep from seeing deaths whenever I touch someone."

She sneaked a look at his face, surprised to see the warm smile there as he read through her notes.

"Have you tried any of this?"

"No."

"Try it."

She took it back. She wanted to reach out to him, but she was ashamed even to look at him. Would he soon grow tired of her showing up at his door, demanding a meal?

"I don't want to use you," she voiced out loud.

"Pardon?"

"I don't want to use you for ... for your blood. I don't like being dependent on anyone. It'll get old for you one day."

"It won't."

"How could it not? It's just the way things are," she insisted. "I'm an addict. You're the supplier. What if you get a new job someday and stop selling drugs?"

"I never thought of it that way," he admitted, chuckling. "I am what I am, and you are what you are. I don't second guess that."

"I'm not as confident as you. My existence relies on you giving me blood. Sometimes I think you'd rather eat me than talk to me."

She hugged herself and faced him, agitated.

"I don't like being hungry and not being able to go to the kitchen."

"I understand."

By the reserved note in his voice, he did. If she closed her eyes, she would see the black memories crossing through his mind, but she allowed him his privacy.

"I will never make you beg or deny you what you need," he said, gaze dark. "If you're hungry, visit the kitchen. I won't say no."

"I don't want this."

"It's not your choice. You must learn to trust me."

Trust!

She almost laughed. Kidnapping, involuntary resurrection - these were not the foundations trust was built on!

Damian held out his hand to her. She hesitated while her silver eyes swirled with hypnotic slowness. His terrified, brave little oracle was entrancing, the shimmer that caught his attention when they met much stronger with their bond.

She was *trying*. He never thought something so simple could please him so much. He couldn't flush away the dark memories from his time after the Schism when he'd been enslaved by humans intent on using his god-powers, but he could protect her from a similar fate. She moved forward, taking refuge from him in his own arms, a reality that amused him.

"Damian, I'm a monster, even in your world," her heartbreak was in her voice, and he squeezed her closer to him. He didn't think he'd ever met a human or Guardian as honest as this one.

"At least you're a cute monster," he replied.

She pulled away, her anger rippling through him. He didn't know how something so innocuous could piss her off, but then again, thousands of years hadn't given him much insight into a woman's mind.

"You're a jerk, Damian!" she said, glaring at him before running away.

"You better run, little girl," he growled, irritated by her response.

His gaze followed her until she disappeared into the house, and he shook his head. He let her get away with so much! She had *no* idea how his world operated! He didn't understand the ins and outs of their blood bond, but he knew how much she rocked his world when she drank from him earlier.

In a different time, he'd simply command her to take her place at his side and in his bed as his mate and slake his heated blood whenever he felt the need. The ancient kings - his father and brother included - had regularly taken oracles as their queens. He

began to understand why and couldn't help but feel frustrated at having to find a way to *win* her instead of command her.

His phone dinged.

Ikir, may I enter your home?

He gazed at the message, puzzled, before he realized who it was.

At your risk, Watcher.

"I knocked this time, ikir."

He turned to see the small man with bright green eyes that glowed in the moonlight. Damian crossed his arms and leaned against the wall around the trickling fountain at his back.

"I admit, this technology makes it much easier for me to communicate," the Watcher said, gazing at his phone.

Damian raised an eyebrow, not about to humor the otherworldly harbinger of bad news.

"I hope you don't spend enough time here to learn to use too much technology," he said pointedly. "Whatsup, Watcher?"

"The Grey God is coming."

"The *what*?"

"I had to wait until you found your oracle to tell you. I do apologize," the Watcher said. "If you hadn't found her, he wouldn't come. But now he will."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"To contain the uh, coaching being done, the Original Beings are ordaining a new god to act as a sort of referee here on earth who will have the ability to bridge the physical and divine worlds."

"Y'all pissed really them off this time, didn't you?"

"Yes, Ikir, I think we did."

"What is this Grey God?"

"I can't tell you, but you must be on the lookout for him. You have to protect him."

"Didn't your Original friends give him god-powers?"

"It's hard to explain."

Damian waited. The Watcher returned his gaze to his phone, reading a text.

"Fascinating," he murmured.

"You gonna try to explain?" Damian prompted.

"No, ikir."

He studied the small man infatuated with his phone. He'd hoped never to see the Watcher again.

"I've assigned you a ringtone," the Watcher said in satisfaction.

"Didn't think you Watchers liked us lesser beings contacting you."

"In an emergency."

"Is that your way of saying something bad's gonna happen, and I'll need to call you?"

"No, ikir," the Watcher said, looking up. "But in case it does ..."

"Right," Damian said, not amused by the cryptic responses.

"Will you tell your team captains I may visit them?"

Despite his suspicion, he chuckled.

"You can stop with the basketball analogies," he said. "You mean Dusty and Jule?"

"My apologies, ikir. I wanted to explain things to you in a way you'd be able to understand."

"Yeah, we're all idiots here on planet earth."

The Watcher smiled in response, and Damian knew well enough his kind truly thought themselves superior.

"I'll tell them not to kill you on sight, if that's what you're asking," he continued. "But I'll warn you as well: if you speak in riddles to Dusty, he'll cut your heart out. And Jule may smile at you, but you better disappear fast if you tell him something he doesn't like."

"I understand," the Watcher said. "I want only the opportunity to speak to Dusty, if needed. Jule's still on what you might call the otherworldly shitlist."

Damian straightened, at his limit with the cryptic nonsense.

"Anything else you wanna avoid telling me?" he snapped.

"No, ikir."

"Walk yourself out."

He strode away. He felt the Watcher's presence disappear as he entered the mansion. His phone dinged again, and he glanced down.

Thank u, ikir.

"Just when things were complicated enough ... " he muttered and retreated to his study for his evening telecon with Dusty and Jule.

They were both online already, swapping vamp stats.

"Dusty, do I need to send someone to Miami to fix your IT?" he asked as a message popped upon his screen.

"You know he's a techno-phobe," Jule said. "Still using stamps and envelopes."

I prefer the personal touch to this e-shit.

"Hey, there's something I need to tell you guys," Damian said grimly. "The Watchers are in town, and they may be dropping by to visit."

There was a pause in activity.

Uh, oh.

"You have no idea," he said. "We'll talk when you're in town. Watcha got for me tonight?"

* * *

"Ok, Ikira, what do you See?"

She tentatively touched Pierre's outstretched arm. He took his place on the sparring field, and Grande leaned close to her.

"He'll win in seven moves," she told him.

"Pierre for the kill," Grande said, handing Han one from the wad of dollars in his hand.

"This is working too well," Han said, eyeing her.

"If only you could touch horses," Grande said with a sigh of exaggerated melancholy. "We'd be kings at the races."

She was getting a better grip on her newfound talent. She was able to predict the winner of their rounds – without flashes of their deaths. Han motioned him away, and Grande shifted down a seat.

"Isn't there a better use for your gift than lining Grande's pockets?" he asked.

"I asked you the other day, and you weren't at all helpful," she reminded him. "If you have any ideas, let me know."

Her stomach growled loudly. She ignored Han's knowing look.

"I win again!" Grande exclaimed as Pierre's opponent went down. "*Dos dolares, senor.*"

"Enough," Han said. "No more bets with Ikira. It's called cheating in the real world."

"You have any other magic tricks for us?" Pierre called to her.

"Not today."

"Magic tricks," Han muttered. "In my day, oracles were the most revered, most feared and celebrated. This generation has no idea. Including you, Ikira. You're all fucking idiots."

"You're no fun today, Han. What gives?" she said, surprised.

He grimaced in response. She touched his arm.

"You're leaving me," she said, saddening. "Why?"

"Battle is what we do," he answered then looked at her. "What did you see?"

Damian's rules for oracles returned to her.

"You'll live," she said.

After your leg is broken next week.

He appeared relieved, and she felt guilty. And hungry. Always hungry. She chewed her lip and glanced at her own wrist. Did her blood taste half as good as Damian's? She made a face, drooling at the thought of Damian's blood again.

"I guess I'm done here," she said and rose.

She placed a checkmark next to the first of her ideas for learning to use her power. She wandered the mansion as she often did, restless and starving. She found herself again in front of Damian's door. She'd been there twice before today and only knocked once for fear he'd answer. And then she'd tried to eat chocolate and ended up in the bathroom even weaker and hungrier.

I don't want this!

Her stomach growled. Angry, she turned to leave when Damian's door opened. He was dressed again all in black, a color that should have minimized his size but just amplified how ripped he was beneath the clothing.

"You need something?" he asked with a casualness that pissed her off, as if he didn't know why she was there.

"No."

"Alrighty then."

He closed his door.

He was messing with her - he knew she was hungry!

He promised!

She sighed and knocked. He answered again.

"You need something?"

"Yes," she grated. "I do."

He pushed the door open. She entered and saw car keys on the table near the door.

"Are you going to town?"

"Yep."

Bet he's got a girl in town.

"Figures."

"Pardon?" he asked, looking up from the wallet he rifled through.

"Nothing."

"You finish your thoughts out loud pretty often."

"Bad habit."

"I think it's cute."

Maybe I do.

"*That* is not cool," she told him.

"The girl or the ability to read minds?"

She gritted her teeth and turned to go, trying not to think of how jealous the idea of another woman made her.

"There's no girl," he called. "You can stay."

"I wasn't -"

"Yes you were. Sit down."

He was amused and she fuming, her emotions scattered by his mere presence.

I have no right to be jealous. If he has a woman, he has a woman.

"Sofia, stop thinking and sit down."

She obeyed, embarrassed.

"There's no woman, though I'm flattered," he said, sitting beside her on the couch with knife in hand.

The sight of the knife made her squeamish.

"I keep trying to entice you, but you seem immune to me," he teased. "No other woman has been able to resist me. It's fascinating."

"I appreciate you trying to make me feel less nervous, but you shouldn't lie to me," she snapped.

"I can have any woman I want. I wouldn't bother with you if I didn't want you."

The edge of arrogance surprised her. She looked at him. His look was intent, the gold of his irises swirling.

"Let's get this over with, so you don't miss your hot date," she said coolly.

He lifted her chin with one finger. His lips brushed hers, and she felt something within her melt at the simple touch. Hunger for him - not just his blood - roared through her. He kissed her gently, tasting her, savoring her. At his prodding, she opened her mouth. His mouth was hot, his flavor as addictive as his blood. He nipped at her lips, his tongue darting in and out of her mouth. He pressed her back against the couch, and she yielded, her hands touching his face, his soft hair, his neck. Touching him sent warm energy racing through her blood. Maybe he had a harem of women at his beck and call, but she couldn't see herself with any other man. Ever.

"You believe me now?" he whispered against her lips, pulling away.

She sighed in response.

"The offer's always open," he assured her. "Now drink."

He placed his bloodied wrist to her mouth. She closed her eyes, body on fire as she drank from him while imagining what his mouth could do to the rest of her body. When she was sated, she pushed his arm away. He had turned away again and was chewing his knuckle.

"Why do you do that?" she asked, embarrassed when her voice came out husky.

"Are you in pain?"

"Not the kind you'd understand."

"What do you mean not the kind I'd understand?" she persisted, standing. "I don't want to hurt you, Damian."

His eyes were closed. He gave a hoarse, husky laugh at her words.

"I mean, when you do that, I want to fuck you, and if you don't leave like, NOW, I'm gonna drag you into my bed and - "

She ran before he finished, emotions roiling and high off the kiss and his blood. Though she couldn't see her own fate, she began to suspect which direction it'd take her in.

"Any day now!" he shouted as he passed her room to leave.

* * *

She stood in a dark, cold place, gazing at the hunched form in the corner. She couldn't tell if he was human or beast. While afraid, she knew whatever he was, he needed help. Her help.

Darian stirred, pushing himself farther into the corner. She approached and knelt a safe distance from him, trying hard to see into the darkness of the corner. She couldn't make him out.

"What do you want from me?" she whispered.

"Free me."

While his form was large enough to be a man the size of Damian's Guardians, his voice was terrified and gravelly, as if he hadn't ever spoken to anyone.

"Are you ok?" she asked, creeping forward.

He began to cry, the soul-deep weeping of a man who'd lost all and spent his tormented life in a level of hell she'd never be able to imagine. The sound made her gut twist and her chest tighten. Tears formed in her eyes at the heartbreaking sound of his pain. She moved closer and held out her hand. He reached for her, but his scarred hand passed through hers, as if all that remained of him was a ghost of the man he'd been. She made out the shape of the bottom of a tattoo on his bicep, what looked like a half-sun. The rest was shrouded in darkness.

Darian wouldn't leave her alone. The scene played over and over in her thoughts, growing stronger until he was as vivid during daylight as he had been at night. She rubbed her temples then issued a challenging glare to the contents of the pantry, furious once more she could eat none of the wonderful things it held.

"Gods. She does this a few times a day. She can't eat food, but she refuses to admit it to herself," Han explained to Pierre. "Since you'll be her new - "

"Babysitter," she interjected.

"Exactly. You'll be holding her hair for her in the bathroom several times a day."

"She cannot eat?" Pierre asked with a frown.

"No. She's blood bound."

His look turned from disappointed to approving.

"Bien."

"I want food," Sofia said with a sigh.

Damian hadn't returned the night before. She wondered again whether or not he had a harem elsewhere. That thought coupled with her nightmare made her even angrier at not being able to eat.

"Go eat," Han grumbled.

"No."

"Fine. Let him sleep. He had a rough night anyway. I know you're mad at him and thought you'd like to pester him."

"Why was his night rough?"

"He had a run-in with a whole bunch of Czerno's goons."

Concerned, Sofia turned to face him.

"Is he ok?"

"He's fine. Cranky."

"Then I definitely don't want to see him," she said, eyes going to the ceiling.

He'll be too sleepy to tempt me. If he doesn't refuse me because he's tired.

He promised.

She returned her gaze to the Pop Tarts.

"Damn you all," she muttered and closed the pantry.

"Go. Eat."

She didn't acknowledge his order but headed towards the stairs. Her daily debate about drinking blood made her pace in front of Damian's room until he wrenched the door open and stared at her, bleary-eyed and bare-chested.

"Either come in, or go think somewhere else!" he snapped.

"Good morning, sunshine!" she said with false cheerfulness.

He muttered a curse and flung his door open. She smiled, pleased to see him as pissy as she felt. It was his turn to be ticked at the world - she was sick of being alone and angry. She closed the door behind her.

"Han said you were out doing battle last night," she said, noticing the shredded t-shirt on the floor.

"This world is so fucked up I don't know why I bother."

He flung himself back into bed. Irritated, Sofia pulled open the curtains to his windows overlooking the bed.

"Sofia!" he snarled, burying his head under a pillow.

"You promised," she reminded him, enjoying his misery. "The kitchen is always open."

He flung out an arm.

"I'm not going to cut you," she objected.

"Then you're not going to eat."

"Fine."

She started towards the door.

"Stop!"

She turned to see him pull two knives from under his pillow. He rolled onto his side.

"C'mere."

"Did you win your battle last night?"

"I'm still here, aren't I?"

She waited at the edge of the bed. He sliced his forearm and tucked the knife beneath his pillow once more, closing his eyes.

"Are you going to get up?" she asked.

"No."

The sight of him in bed made her blood surge. His head remained shoved under a pillow, and his body relaxed, as if he were falling back asleep. Turned on and starving, she gingerly crawled across the bed and settled beside him on her belly, pausing guiltily before lapping up the bubbles of blood. She drank until full.

"Thank you, Damian," she whispered and placed a small kiss on his elbow.

His other hand snaked out and rolled her onto her side beside him. He looped one leg across her hips so she couldn't move.

"Damian - " she protested.

"Hush."

The curtains closed at his silent command, and she lay still, waiting for him to make some move on her. He tucked her against him and fell asleep. The sense of peace descended upon her again, and she relaxed against him, content to her soul to be surrounded by his scent and heat.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Usually when he awoke with a hard on and a woman in his bed, what happened next was pretty straight forward. He rolled onto his side, watching her sleep. Her cool beauty turned haunting in the moonlight that slid through the curtains. She lay sweet and vulnerable on her back, her lips parted and warm body tucked against his side. He touched her face and trailed a finger down her neck, between her breasts, and rested his hand on her stomach.

There were many things he *thought* of doing to her. He couldn't risk alienating the woman in his bed, partially because she was still too delicate, too new to his world to take the next step and partially because he was still leery of the powers of an oracle.

"Damian?" her voice, thick with sleep, ratcheted up his hormones another level.

"I'm here, kiri," he said.

He brushed stray hairs from her face and replaced his hand on her stomach. The simple movement took discipline Dusty would be proud of.

"Do you think I'm a monster?"

"No, kiri. I think you're a lost angel."

"I know where I am," she said with sleepy stubbornness that made him smile.

She roused herself and lay on her side, facing him. His hand shifted to her hip, and he felt the absence of her warmth to the bone. Her eyes glowed and spun. They gazed at each other for a long moment.

"You're always welcome in my bed, kiri," he said, satisfied when her pupils dilated and her face reddened. She looked away, embarrassed.

"You shouldn't say those things," she whispered.

"Why not? You're mine already. You just haven't realized it," he said.

She gave him an agitated look and rolled onto her stomach, twisting her head away from him.

"Will you answer something personal, Damian?"

"Shoot."

"What are you? And don't tell me a divine spirit of sorts. That doesn't make sense to me."

He pulled her into his body, even as she refused to look at him. She didn't resist his touch. She never did, and yet she never surrendered either. It was an odd mix that warned him she'd not yet accepted her place in his world.

"My father was the White God, the deity charged with safeguarding good and battling evil on behalf of all the creatures of the universe. My brother inherited the title when he died. I inherited it from him on his death."

"You're a god?"

"Yeah. Cool, isn't it?"

He rested against her, enjoying her scent.

"Why are you on earth? Shouldn't you be floating in the sky somewhere?" she asked skeptically.

He chuckled.

"A long time ago, there was a battle so horrible it threatened to destroy the whole universe. There are ... creatures older than me in the universe, and they were fighting a turf war over who ruled what part of the universe. The battle got so bad that the only way to prevent the annihilation of every being in the universe was to divide the physical and divine worlds. The Schism occurred, and some of us were exiled to the physical world - the human world - while the rest of my kind and the other creatures were confined to the divine world," he explained. "So, while I am a god, I have to stay here, where I'm preordained to fight Czerno, the Black God, for the fate of humanity."

As he spoke, memories streamed through his mind, memories of the universe before the Schism and afterwards, when he and a few others were cast alone onto earth. He thought again of the Watcher's latest warning, of their being a new god in town.

"Were there many oracles before the Schism?"

"Oracles are rare but there was at least one every generation. When the kings of our people found them, they mated with them to bind them to them."

"Instead of blood binding?"

"Depended on the king and the oracle. I would say it was a rough lesson in history when the kings of my time learned that killing a woman with the intent to bring her back as your servant doesn't really work as they'd planned."

"If you killed me, I'd make your life hell."

"Exactly."

"Who's Darian?" she asked and pushed herself up enough to look at him.

Damian's jaw clenched. When he didn't answer, she continued.

"I have dreams about him where he's sad and alone."

"Darian was my brother, Sofia," he said quietly. "He died a long time ago."

He met her gaze and saw her confusion. The tension between them was thick. He knew without touching her mind that she wanted him as much as he wanted her. She cleared her throat and lay down again, facing away from him.

"I'm bound to you forever," she whispered.

"Yep. You're mine."

"Will you ... can you have a mate and an oracle?"

He considered, smiling to himself. For her sake, he made an effort to behave, but he truly loved the openings she gave him.

"I can," he concurred. "Many times, a king will take an oracle as his mate. But if you don't stop messing with my weak heart, I'll go elsewhere for a mate."

"You're a jerk."

"I'll say again: you're welcome in my bed, preferably naked, though this is good enough for now, I guess."

"Damian ..."

She didn't finish. He understood. She was terrified of what she was, of his world, of him. He was a saint thru-and-thru for rubbing her back instead of seducing her. He liked that she needed the comfort only he could provide, trusted him on a level that seemed to him far more intimate than fucking.

Then again, he was a man, and he didn't pretend to understand a woman's mind. *He'd* never lay down in a woman's bed and expect to sleep when they were both horny. It was purely a woman thing.

"You must miss your brother."

His thoughts turned dark. He didn't like that she was able to pull those memories free of the prison he'd sent them to. He released a small burst of power into her. She fell into a deep sleep. Damian wrapped his arm around her and held her close for a moment, torn between thoughts of her naked and thoughts of his brother's death.

A light knock at his door distracted him from both painful thoughts. He covered Sofia with a comforter and closed the door to his bedroom behind him.

"Come in," he ordered.

The door opened, and he froze.

"Hey, love."

Claire was as beautiful as the last time he'd seen her. With red hair, glowing skin, a voluptuous body he'd experienced many times over, and beautiful eyes, she was the epitome of beauty.

"Hello, Claire."

She closed the door behind her, dressed in clothing that accentuated her large breasts and tight body. His blood boiled more at the memories that pricked his mind. She looked at him with a coy smile before approaching. He didn't move, unable to determine if this was a dream or a nightmare. His slain brother's wife had always been a painful sight for him, the reminder of his brother and a happier time before the Schism.

She leaned against him, her hand trailing down his chest and settling on his crotch.

"I see you remember the last time we met," she said, desire clouding her gaze.

She kissed him, and he responded, his mind on her and Sofia. It would take Sofia awhile before she came to his bed of her own accord. Claire was ready for him *now*.

Her arms slid around him, and he pulled her against him, kissing her hungrily. She gripped his ass the way he liked. He kneaded her breasts, wanting nothing better than to suckle her until she cried out in ecstasy.

Sofia.

He pulled back, breathing deeply.

"C'mon, love, I'm wet for you," she purred.

Shit!

He wanted to fuck someone, and that someone was sleeping in his bed. There was a time when he didn't care who he slept with, when he was hard at the sight of any woman who would take him to bed.

"I can't, Claire," he said and pushed her away from him.

Surprised, she tried to move towards him. He held her at arm's length, forcing himself out of the cloud of desire tormenting him. He wished Sofia would wake up and intrude, her presence bolstering his weak will.

"Love," Claire said. "For old time's sake, please."

"Not this time, Claire," he said with resolution. "Things have changed."

Sofia.

The voice awoke her from her deep slumber. Moonlight slid in through the crack between the curtains. The voices were not happy, and she was surprised to hear one of them. It was a woman's.

"... and I've told you no," Damian said. "It ain't happening, sister."

"Why not? We're so good together."

She peeked through the crack in the door to see the voice of the speaker.

Claire. Damian's whisper was tortured. He was silent, as if watching. Sofia rubbed her temples but didn't move, grateful he wasn't hurting her head for once.

The woman was beautiful, tall and shapely with auburn hair and deep blue eyes that made no attempt to hide her interest in the bare-chested man before her. Damian's hair was mussed, and his arms crossed.

"How long were we a pair?" the woman continued, tracing a finger lazily down his bicep. "Centuries, no?"

Her accent was exotic and complemented her sexy, sultry voice. He rose and crossed to the window.

"Claire, no," he said. "I didn't realize you were rotating *here*, or I'd have blocked it."

"My love, we've been destined for each other since I wed your brother thousands of years ago. We had eyes only for each other then."

"And I learned the hard way. What we had is gone. Long gone."

"We don't need love. I know you want me."

At his hesitation and the heated, lustful look he gave her, Sofia's mouth dropped open. He shook his head despite the desire on his face.

"Come, love. We will fight and fuck together. What else is there?"

She had a damn good point, Sofia admitted, and hated her for it. She forced herself to peer at them again. Damian's gaze was on the door to the bedroom, and she ducked back, remembering he could hear her thoughts.

If he made a choice, she wanted it to be the choice he'd make whether or not she was there.

"Not possible," he said.

She didn't know if it was meant for her or the woman sidling up to him. Or both.

"Why not?" Claire purred.

Sofia peeked out. The woman was all over him! Her boobs were pressed against Damian's bare chest, and her hands were on his biceps.

Sofia knew she had no right to claim him, especially when she just rejected him less than an hour before. Fuming anyway, she pushed the curtains away from the balcony door and stepped into the night, winter's chill taking some of the heat out of her.

"Stupid men. Always want woman with huge boobs and nothing between their ears. *Let's screw, Damian. We're good at it, so why not?*"

What in God's name was wrong with her? Her balcony was several feet from the edge of his. She looked down to the bushes several floors down then decided it was

worth the risk. Not wanting to be around to hear Claire get her way, Sofia climbed onto the edge of Damian's balcony and stretched upward towards the ledge running around the mansion.

She yelped as someone grabbed her hips and pulled her from the edge of the balcony.

"What the hell are you doing?" Damian demanded, lowering her to the ground and spinning her to face him. "Are you *jumping* to your balcony?"

She glared at him.

"There's a door. Use it."

"I didn't want to interrupt your reunion."

His eyes narrowed. His body was warm against hers, and she resisted the urge to wrap her arms around him.

"God, I'm so stupid!" she growled.

A smile flickered across his face and turned into a laugh.

"You're *jealous*?"

He hugged her against him.

"No, of course not!" she snapped, pushing at him.

"Woman, you're something else!"

"Damn you, Damian!"

"You're as welcome in my bed as she is!"

A thrill went through her. Embarrassed at the emotions bubbling within her, she pulled away and folded her arms across her chest, marching into the living room.

"It's ok, Damian, really. You can do whatever with Claire. Just put a sock on the doorknob or something so I don't bother you."

"You are very magnanimous to give me permission to do whatever the fuck I want in my own house."

"You're such an ass, Damian!"

"And you're fucking naïve."

Her face flamed red. She marched herself back to her room, angry and agitated. A breeze flickered her curtain, and she closed it, certain Claire's cries of ecstasy would soon fill the air around the mansion.

Alone, her thoughts returned to the dead man alone in the dark room. She shook out the sexual energy running through her and turned on a light, not wanting to be alone in the dark while the dead man in her thoughts began to sob once more.

A few hours later, she sagged against the toilet, ignoring Pierre as he tsked her and held her hair. She'd refused to see Damian for two days, but she'd seen Claire two million times a day. Everywhere, eating Pop Tarts, eating chocolate, eating broccoli.

Sofia groaned and held her stomach. Claire could *eat*! There was no crueler fate in this world than her own!

"Have you tried crackers?" Pierre asked. "Or maybe antidepressants?"

She glared at him.

"We've eliminated every other type of food, and the drugs might help you accept that you cannot eat."

"Bonjour, Pierre."

At her voice, Sofia wanted to throw up again.

"What's this?" Claire asked, pausing in the door frame of the bathroom. "Hello, love. I've seen you around a lot the past couple of days. Are you one of the help?"

One of the help?!

Sofia bit back a retort and forced herself to her feet. The pain in her stomach was almost crippling. She motioned for Pierre to close the door so she could clean up. When she opened it, Claire gazed at her with a look both guarded and surprised.

"How ... interesting," she said with a forced smile, looking at her in reproof. "My how things change."

She sashayed away. Sofia looked down at herself. She looked decent in jeans and a long sleeved shirt. She wasn't dressed in skin-tight workout clothes like Claire, who joined Damian as he trotted down the stairs for their daily sparring session. Of course, she wasn't nearly as smokin' hot as Claire either. Claire greeted him with a kiss on his cheek and a look so smoldering it made Sofia blush. Damian glanced at the redhead and touched her arm in affectionate greeting.

Sofia forced her attention to her list. She had checked off three of the seven exercises she'd learned from the books she read. She was so fatigued, she hurt everywhere.

"Pierre, I'm going to lay down. I've lost my will to live today."

"Very well, Ikira," he said with his usual stoicism. "If you decide to live, let me know."

"I will."

He followed the group to the courtyard to spar. Nearly doubled over in pain, Sofia returned to her room. She clutched her stomach as pain pierced her concentration. Darian was crying, and her head hurt.

"Pierre *recommended* I see you. You are so damn stubborn," Damian snapped, pushing her door open. "What's the purpose of starving yourself? Jealousy?"

He closed the door and moved the laptop Pierre had brought her to supplement her oracle research. He sat on the bed beside her and pushed her onto her back. She strained, but he planted one heavy hand on her chest.

"I'm not sleeping with her, Sofia," he said and sliced his wrist.

The scent of his blood overwhelmed any objection she could make, and she snatched his arm. She drank heavily and opened her eyes, surprised to see his eyes open and the gold swirling within them. The tick in his jaw belied how tightly his teeth were clamped.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"And?"

"And what?"

"I said I'm not sleeping with her."

"Good for you."

"Stubborn, infuriating woman."

She gazed at him, completely aroused and angry at the same time.

"I'm not jealous."

"Bullshit."

She rolled onto her stomach away from him, blood flying with desire and heat.

"Gods, woman. In a different time," he muttered then swore. "When the common sense fairy smacks you upside the head, you know where to find me."

He left, as pissed as she was. She sighed. It was getting harder and harder to deny what she felt towards him. In the long silence that followed, she heard Darian's sobs. She held her head in her hands, tormented by his pain without understanding how she was supposed to help a dead man.

"Please stop," she whispered, wondering if oracles could go crazy, too.

Unable to be alone with the man in her head, she went to her library. Pierre returned a couple of hours later as she as she checked off the fourth box on her list of oracle self-training. He smelled of soap, and his hair was wet.

"You know the French are the kings and queens of love," he said and sat in his chair by the door. "I can help you."

"That's the last thing I need."

"You would be more pleasant if you fucked him every once in awhile."

"Wow, Pierre, that's the most inappropriate thing I've ever heard."

"Forgive me, Ikira."

By his tone, he didn't give a damn what she thought.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about. We Europeans enjoy a more liberal form of commitment than you Americans."

"You sleep around."

"Yes, and it's very relaxing."

"I don't want to sleep with a bunch of men."

"*You* wouldn't be permitted that freedom, Ikira," he almost scoffed. "But you have one man you can sleep around with."

"He wants Claire and probably has a private brothel in town. Pierre, I'm some sort of monster killed by a psychopath and resurrected that can't eat real food," she said bitterly. "The last thing I need is to complicate things more."

"It's not that bad. Claire?" he tsked. "I would not sleep with her. Damaged goods."

"Pierre, you can sleep with whomever you want, really."

"I know. Why do you not ask him?"

"To sleep with me?"

"Oui."

Because he would agree. She mulled his proposition and forced her gaze to the paper again.

5. Test ability to control skill on new target.

There was one person she wanted to know more about.

"Do you know where Claire is?"

"Oui."

"Let's go."

He led her from the library, across the courtyard, and into the far wing of the mansion she'd not yet explored. It was a barracks for the Guardians, most of whom greeted her with a quiet *good day, Ikira* as she passed. The wing housed an indoor basketball court, indoor pool, a small game room, and a huge theatre room where music blared from some action movie. Claire sat beside another Guardian, watching the movie. Sofia didn't have time to plot how to approach her.

"Claire," Pierre said, stooping to kiss her cheek.

"Bonjour, mon amour," she purred in response.

"Ikira wanted to meet you."

Claire rose, the smile freezing on her face as she faced Sofia. She forced her own smile, noticing how Claire's gaze swept over her as if she were an uninvited insect in her bedroom.

Claire. Darian said again.

"Hello, Claire," she said, extending a hand. "I wasn't able to meet you the other day when you stopped by. I'm ..."

Claire shook her hand, and the visions that protruded into her thoughts floored her.

Czerno.

"... I'm Sofia," she choked out. "I wanted to welcome you."

"Enchantee, Sofia. It's my pleasure," Claire said. "Pierre will defend you well. Damian couldn't have chosen a better guard."

"Babysitter," Pierre corrected her.

"Exactly," she agreed. "I didn't have a choice."

"If you must be with a man, it's good that he's French," Claire said with a wink at Pierre. "Please excuse me."

Sofia stepped out of her way, trying hard to digest what she'd seen.

Claire and Czerno in bed together.

"Sofi!" Damian's call pulled her from the vision replaying in her head. "C'mon!"

He waved her out of the theatre and led her towards the mansion. She sensed his excitement and trailed, troubled.

"Heya, Dust-man!"

Three men stood in the main foyer, two in the same shade of brown as her bodyguard and a striking man in designer jeans and an expensive sweater. He shook hands with Damian, a small smile on his chiseled features. Dustin was lean and handsome with clear, cool blue eyes and sharp, angular features. His hair was sandy blonde, his skin golden. His noble features and cold, aloof air gave her the impression of an ancient Greek prince.

"Good to see you, bro," Damian said with warmth she hadn't seen him display towards anyone else.

"Better circumstances this time around," Dustin said with a glance at her.

"Hold the salt, Dust-man," Damian warned. "Sofia, this is Dustin, the commander of the western hemisphere. He helped me rescue you from Czerno."

Her face felt warm at the look both gave her.

"It's a pleasure, Ikira," Dustin said and held out his hand to her, palm up.

She looked at it curiously, then at Damian.

"You haven't taught her shit, have you?" Dustin asked Damian.

"Not the traditional greeting."

"Ikira, in our time, an oracle greeted all visitors to the king's palace to assess their loyalties to her king. Visitors held out their hands like this," he said, indicating his outstretched hand. "It's a sign of the ultimate respect. The visitor is giving you an open invitation to his soul. You have the option to touch me or not."

She braced herself and placed her palm against his. His memories were much like Damian's: fuzzy home videos with no sense of his future. She removed her hand. Dustin assessed her in silence for a few seconds, and she had the feeling his sharp gaze missed nothing.

"You're better off than when I saw you last," he said at last and turned to Damian.
"You got time to talk, BFF?"

Sofia hid a smile at the term of endearment issued from one rock of a man to another.

"Yep. Before we do, I need to discuss something with both of you. Come."

He motioned them both down the hall and into his private study.

"Pierre, stay."

Pierre obeyed and closed the doors behind him.

"How's Florida?" Damian asked, crossing to his desk.

"Good. Looking forward to Christmas."

"Don't expect anything from Jule. He'll never remember Christmas. I already ordered your present."

"That's why I like you better."

"Dusty likes presents," Damian explained, glancing at her.

"*Good* presents," Dustin clarified. "None of that shit you gave me last year."

"You don't get to pick. A present's a present."

Sofia sat in one of the plush chairs, legs pulled to her chest, and watched their brotherly exchange. Dustin didn't look like the kind of man who would like anything, let alone presents. She glanced towards the door, mind on what she'd learned earlier.

Claire. Darian was silent, his voice almost too hushed to make out.

Damian dropped an envelope on the table in front of her.

"There are traitors on the council," Damian started. "Our European front has been growing progressively weaker the past hundred years. They know what they shouldn't about our capabilities and our weaknesses. Jule's going crazy trying to keep up."

He pulled photos from the envelope as he spoke. Dustin began sorting through them. She didn't want to look, sensing she'd met a source of their issues already.

"Sofia, Han tells me you've gotten quite good at reading people."

She said nothing.

"The quarterly council meeting is tonight. You'll get to meet all my council members."

Dread trickled through her.

"You can tell me who the traitors are."

"Is this what oracles do?" she forced herself to ask.

"Oracles do many things, but this is one of them," Dustin responded. "It's unfortunate you don't have a mentor to show you more about your talents. The ability for you to determine a traitor from a loyalist is one of your most valuable talents. It's also what makes people hate oracles."

"People hate oracles?" she repeated, distraught.

"Let me rephrase - people *fear* oracles. It's a good thing. The more people fear you, the less they'll fuck with you."

She rested her chin on her knees, gazing at Damian.

"You'll identify the traitors," Damian continued.

"Then we take them out back and - " Dustin ran his finger across his throat.

Sofia gripped her throat with one hand.

"You kill them?" she whispered, horrified.

"Bad people," Damian said. "People who would kill you. People like Czerno. Dusty takes care of these kinds of people."

"Yep," Dusty agreed.

She shuddered as the distant sensation of burning returned. If any man deserved death, it was Czerno. But *did* any man deserve death? And if she told Damian who to kill, did that make her *worse* than them? Her eyes slid to Dustin as she tried to reconcile the executioner with the man who liked presents. She met Damian's gaze.

"Ours is not a pretty world, kiri," he said firmly. "This is what you are."

It wasn't the reassurance she hoped for.

Stop Claire, Darian all but demanded.

Their plan made sense, as ugly as it was. Who better to weed out traitors than the one who could see them for what they were?

"I wanted to see if you're to the point where you don't need human touch," he said, gesturing to the pictures.

She shook her head. She leapt up and closed the door behind her, turmoil in her breast. She didn't belong in the human world anymore, and yet, she couldn't just dump it. Her thoughts darkened and returned to Toby and Jake.

No, she could never become as cold and accepting of death as the men around her, even if they were at war with a monster like Czerno.

But it's my fate.

Damian's gaze lingered on the door after the oracle fled. Something more than Dusty killing bad guys was upsetting her.

"Wanna visit the sector?" he asked, turning his attention to Dusty. "I'll show you what Rainy's guys found."

"Yeah."

He held out his hand, and Dusty clasped his wrist, allowing him to transport them both to Tucson Sector HQ. They appeared in the quiet living room, turning at the startled gasp.

Rainy's Natural, a beautiful woman with mocha skin and blue eyes, leapt up from her seat.

"No worries, Traci," Damian said, seeing her panicked look. She'd been there for about two months, not yet enough time to acclimate to the Guardians.

"Rainy around?" Dusty asked.

Traci's eyes were on Damian. A human's reaction to him never ceased to intrigue him. It was irritating, most of the time, like now when he wanted to get a quick response out of one.

"Traci," Dusty said more sharply.

She looked to him and blinked.

"He's sleeping," she said at last.

"You wanna wake him up or you want us to?" Damian asked in amusement.

She hesitated only a moment longer before bolting and disappearing up a set of stairs.

"Can't take you anywhere, D," Dusty complained.

"Like you're normal," he replied.

"Who decorated this place?" the groused, taking in the lopsided posters of cars and beer bottle décor.

"You're such a woman, Dusty," Damian said with a chuckle.

"Speaking of women ... " his BFF said, pinning him with a look. "What's up with your oracle? She didn't seem happy today."

"Damned if I know. She walked in on me and Claire last night."

"I bet that went well."

"Nothing, and they're both pissed at me. You didn't tell me Claire was coming this way, bro.."

"Bro, I didn't know. You can blame Jule for that one. Is Sofia doing any oracling yet?"

"She's learning. Han says she's progressing pretty quickly, though since none of us know how to train her, it's hard to tell. She's trying," he said. "We'll find out what she can do when our guests arrive."

"Ikir, boss," Rainy greeted them as he trotted down the stairs, dressed in jeans and nothing else. "You scared the shit outta Traci."

Damian caught his eye and looked pointedly at Dusty. Rainy smiled faintly with a nod.

"What'd you find?" Dusty asked, oblivious to the exchange.

"Traci found several of the vamps' stash houses here in Tucson," Rainy said, motioning them to follow him into a small, dark study humming with electronics.

He sat down in front of a computer and pulled up a satellite image with the stash houses marked.

"This is what's interesting," he said, pointing to a trail leading from a stash house on the northeastern side of the city and dead ending in the desert. "She can't pick up anything past this point."

He drew a box around a large area.

"Only you and Czerno can put up one of those types of shields," Dusty muttered.

"And it's not mine," Damian responded. "Any intercepts on why he's in town?"

"The local intel team is having a problem tracking his vamps. We think they're using disposable cells. As soon as we get a number, it goes inop."

"But we know he's here," Dusty said.

"Yeah, pretty sure. This square is ten square miles, though. Unless we know where to look, we won't find where his base is."

"It can't be a coincidence he's here, a few miles from *you*," Dusty said, turning to him.

Damian nodded. He suspected Czerno's Watcher allies tipped him off.

"The vamps we've captured for interrogation have a new technique. They've been killing themselves with cyanide pills," Rainy added.

"What happened in Europe is happening here," Damian said, meeting Dusty's gaze. "Antoine probably wasn't the main threat in Europe."

Dusty studied him, an odd look crossing his face. Damian waited expectantly, but he shook his head.

"It's probably nothing," Dusty said. "I'll check the records to see which Guardians rotated here from Europe from the past year."

"After the Quarterly, we'll pack up and clean up," Damian said. "Hopefully, Sofi can tell us who's on Czerno's payroll."

"I hope so," Dusty replied. "Rainy, can your Natural trace anything at all within the square?"

"Nope, though I've only let her past the barrier once. Not sure what traps Czerno might have set."

Dusty gave Damian a cool look, and he heard the unspoken warning about women being the downfall of mankind. He smiled.

"Send the UAV's over the area," Dusty said. "We'll see what we can see."

"Got it," Rainy said, turning to face them. "I need more people, boss, or a transporter at least."

"I've got several incoming," Dusty replied. "Damian, transporters?"

"None have survived recruitment," he said grimly. "We had three in the last class, more than we've seen in a few hundred years. All three were gunned down. Jule's short, too. We can pull in a Natural from Latin America. He's the closest."

"Hector?"

"Yeah."

"I'll contact his station chief," Dusty said, pulling out his phone. "Whoever is taking out the recruits knows who to hit first."

"They do indeed," he agreed.

"Call me if you need a transporter in the meantime," Dusty directed. "I'll make myself available."

"Thanks, boss," Rainy said. "You have a new Natural, ikir?"

"I do."

"If she's flipping out, you can call Lon's wife. Traci hasn't adjusted yet, and Linda's been a big help."

"Linda's the talker, right?" Dusty asked, glancing up from his phone.

"Yeah. Good girl."

He'd been considering how to help Sofia adjust. She seemed a solitary person, but he wondered if she'd benefit from meeting the Natural women in the organization. She'd been stuck in the mansion since he'd found her, mainly because he wasn't about to let a fucking *oracle* – the first in a few hundred thousand years! – out of the safest place he could put her. His gaze returned to the screen as he deliberated over how close Czerno was and shelved the thought of letting her out of his sight.

"I'll keep it in mind," he said.

"Jasmine's pissed, but Hector will be in this weekend," Dusty said.

"Awesome, boss."

"Dust-man, we've got a Quarterly to prep for," Damian said.

"Let's go," Dusty agreed. "Rainy, thanks. I'll be back tomorrow."

"Roger, boss."

Damian's attention lingered on the image on Rainy's screen. He couldn't help the sense of unease sliding through him. He didn't like the new level Czerno was taking their battle to. The playing field was as uneven as the Watcher had warned, and it appeared as though Czerno's Watchers weren't as dedicated to non-interference as *his* Watcher was.

At least he'd know who the traitors were by the end of the night.

CHAPTER NINE

Sonoran desert, Arizona

The Black God's southwest base camp

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

Two dropped his arms to his side.

"Water," he said.

"Slaves don't drink the master's water."

He felt the stinging blow at the back of his head and wobbled, dropping to his knees. One of his master's men - the ones with the red eyes - shoved him away and took his canteen, dumping its contents.

"Get the fuck outta here!"

He threw the canteen, and it hit Two's cheek. Two took his canteen and rose. He moved mechanically out of the kitchen a few hundred feet below ground. He went back to his small room and sat on the bed staring at the white wall in front of him.

"Two, what're you doing?"

He didn't remember when this man had arrived or why he was supposed to remember him. But he knew he must remember him as he did his master. He concluded he was his master's friend, or he wouldn't be here. His master's friend, the man with eyes as green as the moss in the corner of Two's room, stood in his doorway.

"I'm thinking, master."

"Thinking?"

His master's friend was powerful. Two sensed it and cringed as he entered the room. His master's friend had never hit him, but he scared Two.

"Slaves don't think, Two," his master's friend said. "What are you thinking?"

"I see a woman in my head," Two said.

"A woman? What woman?"

"I don't know her."

"What does she look like?"

Kiri. He didn't know where the word came from or what it meant. It sounded pretty, like the poof the desert dust made when the first drops of rain fell. The last time he went to the surface, it had rained huge raindrops. Then a rainbow had come out, and he'd stared at it until his master beat him.

"Slave, what does she look like?"

There was an impatient note in his master's friend's voice that scared him.

"Who, master?" he asked.

"The woman."

"What woman?"

"The woman in your head."

Kiri.

A strange voice spoke the word again, and he saw the woman with blue and silver eyes. She was crying, because his master was going to hurt her.

Don't cry, kiri, he thought.

"Did you remember to do as I told you? Did you stop drinking the juice your master gave you?"

He looked up, surprised to see his master's friend in his doorway, the man with eyes the color of the moss in the corner of his room. He rose in respect.

"Yes, master."

"Good boy. You must do as I tell you," his master's friend said. "It's very important you don't drink that juice ever again. Don't forget."

"Yes, master."

"Come. Your master calls for you."

Two obeyed. He followed the man with eyes as green as the moss in the corner of his room down the busy hallways, unaffected by the men who spit on him or shoved him as he went. Slaves were treated this way.

He'd had a dream last night, something he never remembered in the morning, except for this time. He thought hard. There were many people in his dream, and he thought he should remember them. He heard the strange voice again.

Kiri.

The woman came from his dream! She was talking to him. He didn't know what she said, but she was holding out a hand to him, crying. Uneasiness swept over him.

He didn't want her to cry.

Don't cry, kiri.

But she kept crying.

"Two, coffee," his master said.

Two obeyed and left the room filled with lights and computers. The man with green eyes was waiting for him in the hall and touched his arm. Two cringed away. When he let him go, he saw the woman more clearly.

He went to the kitchen. The woman stayed with him. Two wondered if she'd ever come out of his head, or if she had to stay there, like he stayed in his master's corner. If she stayed in his head, his master wouldn't beat her like he did him.

Stay there, kiri. I'll take care of you.

"Are you hungry?"

Sofia jerked from her place beside her window, not sure which voice came from her head and which from the handsome man before her. She'd watched the arriving guests with a mixture of fascination and dread. They wore tuxedos and ball gowns like wealthy celebrities attending an exclusive Hollywood party. Beautiful women that rivaled Claire and men so handsome, even age couldn't diminish their muscular bodies or riveting looks.

"You're not dressed."

Damian was in a white shirt and snug tuxedo pants that outlined long, thick thighs and a tight ass. His body drew her, and his scent surrounded her when he knelt beside her.

She wanted to tell him about Claire, but she was afraid to. He cared for Claire, or at least, he was attracted to her, and she didn't know if there was more than what she knew about them.

He held out his wrist, and she grudgingly took it, drinking from him while smelling the scents of the feast being prepared for his guests.

It's not fair.

The taste of him filled her, calmed her. She let her head drop back and sighed.

"You should get dressed, Sofia."

He wiped the corner of her mouth, and she resisted the urge to nip his finger. His warm lips met hers, and she opened her eyes, surprised. He kissed her gently, a long, slow kiss. She savored the sensations of his hot, wet mouth and the buzz she got feeding from him.

"Come, meet your people."

She watched him retreat, desire burning within her. Pierre had brought in a dress and shoe box earlier. She flipped on the light and opened it. Inside was the most beautiful gown she'd ever seen in a mysterious shade of dark blue sprinkled with silver sequins. The dress was thick silk and moved like water as she pulled it free and held it against her.

It must have cost a fortune!

She picked up the box to toss it on the chair when something slid out. She opened the slender jewelry box and gasped. Inside sparkled a diamond choker with an unusually worn, plain charm of a half-sun, half-moon pierced by an arrow. Diamond earrings completed the set.

If the dress didn't break him, the jewelry did! Sofia lifted the choker carefully, touching the charm.

"What are you, little friend?" she murmured. It must have been significant to be surrounded by so many diamonds!

She marveled over the clothing and jewelry before changing. She pulled her hair into a simple French twist, the kind she wore to work, and applied her make-up carefully.

Her irises were half silver. Sofia gazed at her two-toned eyes. They sparkled like the blue dress and diamonds. She looked herself over, satisfied that she looked good. Not Claire-good, but good enough.

Pierre greeted her with an approving smile that buoyed her.

"His colors and his symbol."

"Is that what this is?" she asked, fingering the charm.

"It's old, maybe as old as him. His family's coat of arms, if they had those then. Very special. Even he does not wear it."

She trailed him down the stairs, eyes on the guests milling in the courtyard beyond the opened double doors. Damian and Dustin appeared deep in discussion as she approached. Both wore tuxedos with matching blue cummerbunds, which amused her for such starkly different men. Claire, stunning in maroon and bedecked with diamonds and rubies, looked her over dismissively before returning her gaze to the men.

"Ikira," Dustin said, breaking away. His blue gaze swept over her. "You look lovely."

She eyed him then looked to Damian, who stared at her with an intensity she'd last seen aimed at Claire.

I am so hot.

Sofia almost laughed at herself. She lowered her gaze at the heated look from the man who drove her crazy every other minute of her day. She cleared her throat and focused on Dustin.

"You guys match," she observed.

"Only because of *my* efforts," he said with an edge that warned her not to laugh.

He's sensitive about that shit, like a woman, Damian whispered into her mind. She coughed to cover her startled laugh. Dustin looked at her then tossed a look over his shoulder at Damian before directing her away.

"Dick," he said under his breath. "Come, Ikira. The guests must be greeted."

Her cheer faded. He motioned her towards the entrance to the courtyard.

"Is it really necessary?" she asked.

"It is."

She felt Damian's gaze on her as they walked away. She wanted to warn him about Claire ...

Later. After this latest ordeal.

She stood beside Dustin on one side of the entrance while Damian and Claire assumed the other. Claire was all over him, in his space, rubbing her breasts against him. Sofia watched, astonished at the blatant display, and almost didn't prep herself for her first encounter.

The first man was in his prime, and his eyes crinkled in a genuine smile when he clasped hands with Dustin. They exchanged a greeting in a foreign language that sounded like Russian before he held out his hand to her. His eyes went to the symbol at her neck, and one eyebrow shot up. His name ... *Sasha*.

She saw killing in his future, but only in defense of his family.

There were ten men and two women she greeted before she felt the first flash of cold. The man before her was middle-aged and handsome, but she saw his dealings with Czerno's men. He sold out Damian's men - his own men - for money. *Antoine*.

The second traitor came soon after, a man whose past stunned her. She held his hand longer than she should. The man looked no older than Damian and was indeed from the same era.

He and Claire sold out Damian's brother to Czerno. *Isac*.

If Damian knew the woman trying to crawl back into his bed had helped murder his brother, her husband ...

She couldn't see him over the crowd. Her throat tightened in unshed tears of sorrow and anger.

Damian's world was brutal. *Her* world was brutal.

"Be strong, *kiri*," Dustin said without looking at her.

She swallowed hard and held out her hand to another woman in red. The last man in line was the final traitor, a man who'd helped Jilien torture his wife then claimed Czerno's men had done it. *Haydaen*.

She all but snatched her hand away, overwhelmed at the images in her head. Dustin escorted the man into the mansion, and Pierre wrapped an arm around her as she sagged.

Pierre unloading his shotgun on the man in executioner's garb from Czerno's. It was dark, cold, and the shots hit the man with lopsided shoulders, dropping him dead to the ground. An explosion blazed in the distance. A woman was screaming, another man shouting.

She pushed herself away and leaned against a wall.

"So much death," she whispered.

Dustin returned for her. She wiped tears from her eyes.

"I'm sorry, *kiri*," he said with rare warmth. "Remember, we want them to fear you. Don't let them see you cry."

She steeled herself and nodded. She didn't want to disappoint him or Damian and couldn't help but dread the conversation to come. She tried to think of how she could soften the pain she'd bring him.

Dustin escorted her into the boisterous banquet room, and her spirits fell farther. She was seated at the end of the table opposite Damian while Claire claimed the spot to his left. The seat of honor was given to Sasha. Dustin sat beside her. From what little she knew about etiquette, she was occupying the seat of the lady of the house. A few of the guests cast curious looks her way, and everyone who looked at her seemed more interested in the plain charm at her chest than meeting her gaze.

Caterers served up food she'd kill to eat. Sofia watched the plates swap out before her as those around her gorged themselves on gourmet dishes she'd only seen on TV. As each course came and went, she felt another piece of her die.

What's done can't be undone.

She stared at the embroidered tablecloth, tormented by the scent of food she couldn't eat and the visions of death and betrayal that left an acrid taste in her mouth. No one spoke to her. She wasn't human. She wasn't one of *them*. A freak among freaks. Would she spend eternity like this, doomed to knowing only the dark secrets of those around her? If Dustin's words were true, she'd never be welcomed into the home of any of Damian's people, not if they feared the sight of her! Once she told Damian about the woman whose hand rested intimately on his arm, who he smiled at with genuine affection ...

If not for the dead man in her head, she'd be alone.

She fled the banquet hall for the library. Pierre trailed, balancing a plate of food. She stood before the window, feeling very much like a prisoner in her new world. She wondered if the dead man in her head, Darian, felt this way when he cried. She heard Dustin order Pierre out before he approached her.

"Sofia, I need to ask you something, and I need you to tell me the truth."

She hugged herself, waiting.

"Claire."

His unfinished question lingered in the silence between them.

"Yes," she whispered.

He tensed. She looked up at him, sensing both his anger and his regret. His blue eyes were colder than the sky on a winter morning in Virginia. She resisted the urge to move away from him, chilled by the visions of his work as Damian's executioner.

"I thought so," he said at last. His look softened. "You have to tell him, sweetheart."

"It'll kill him."

"He must know. You don't carry this burden alone."

She nodded, throat tight. With a squeeze of her arm, he left her.

"Sofi," Damian's voice jarred her from her thoughts.

She wiped her eyes before turning to face whatever music Damian brought with him. He was accompanied by Dustin and two other men, one she knew as Sasha, a man who'd struck her with his devotedness to his family, and Levi, a man who'd been present in many of his pre-Schism memories.

Damian's gaze swept over her. He was the lord and master again, his form and commanding presence filling up the room. His display of checked power disturbed her.

"Sasha, Levi, this is ikira Sofia."

"An honor, ikira," Sasha said with a bow.

"We've waited many years for you, ikira," Levi said.

"Sasha and Levi are two of my most trusted advisors. Sasha manages the operations for Dusty out of Miami and Levi for Jule in Europe," Damian explained.

"We've been through much together," Levi added. "I owe D my life."

"I'm honored to meet you both," she said.

"Shall we review what you've learned?" Damian asked.

His tone was genuinely questioning, and she felt grateful that he was giving her the choice to opt out. She met Dustin's gaze, sensing he felt the same pain she did.

"I'm ready," she said with more confidence than she felt.

They sat around the low table still scattered with pictures. Pierre remained at the door. She sifted through the pictures, aware of the intent attention the others paid her. She found Antoine and drew his picture out. She swallowed hard, uncomfortable with playing the role of judge and jury.

"Antoine," she said. "He's a spy for Czerno. Czerno pays him well for the locations of the safe houses in Europe and the names and locations of the Guardians."

"That we knew," Sasha said with a firm nod.

"Haydaen," she said, drawing out another. "His wife's death was by his own hand. He felt you suspected him and devised a plot with Czerno to torture ..."

Her voice caught at the images replaying through her mind. Damian reached across the table and touched her face, dismissing them.

"... to torture and blame her death on Jilian. He sold out his family for money and land in Italy."

No one spoke. She reached Isac's picture and stopped, looking up at Damian.

"Damian ..."

"Whatever it is, it's ok," he said.

She struggled to control her emotions.

"Isac. He killed your brother."

She didn't think anyone heard her choked words. Silence followed. When she was brave enough, she looked up at Damian. He had leaned back in his seat, his face a frozen mask. She met Dustin's penetrating gaze.

"And Claire."

"Claire *what*?" Damian growled in a voice that bordered on inhuman.

"She and Isac."

She couldn't bring herself to say what they'd done. The words were too painful, and by the predatory stillness of the man across from her, she was terrified of what he'd do if she said it again. He rose, as if on autopilot, turned, and faced the window.

"I know you're jealous, but this is disgusting," he said in a low voice so sharp she jumped.

"I'd never do that to you," she said, unable to stop the tears she'd been holding back since the start of the evening. "She's sleeping with Czerno and feeding him the names of the new Guardians. She and Isac killed your brother. They plotted together during

the hunting trip you and your brother took the day before he died. Claire lured him away from his Guardians to the warm springs by the - ”

“Enough!”

He faced her, eyes whirling madly. His accusation and fury were plain on his flushed face.

“Why do you think she came here? She wants to find a way to kill you, too!” she forced herself to continue.

“You jealous little bi - “

Before she knew what she did, she’d closed the distance between them and slapped him hard. Fury bubbled within her, breaking free.

“Tonight, I’ve given you the last shred of me that was human!” she shouted. “I just signed their death warrants, and you think I’d stoop so low as to point the gun at someone because I’m *jealous*? You think I’d sell my soul because of something so stupid? I’m doing this for *you*! This is what I am! But you know what, Damian? Fuck you. *Fuck you!*”

Hurt, she fled into the cold night air, stopping only when she reached the center of the gardens. Pierre trotted after her. She dropped to her knees and sobbed, unable to control her pain and fear.

Damian started after her, furious. Dusty caught his arm and motioned for those in the library to leave.

“You’re a dick. You know how hard it was for her to tell you that?”

Damian glared at him, his restraint on his powers rippling. Long buried rage was bubbling upward, along with the tiny instinct he’d squashed thousands of years ago.

“I can’t believe –“

“I believe her, Damian,” Dusty said in a calm voice. “Claire’s been on the European front for a hundred years. She just rotated to the southwest on orders that neither you nor Jule nor I issued, and the Tucson sites have fallen like flies. Because of her natural ability, she’s been intimately involved in screening new recruits. It’d be easy for her to flag the newbies for Czerno’s men.”

Dusty’s words floored him, and Damian couldn’t help but feel hurt that his BFF hadn’t told him of his suspicions sooner. He paced, mind racing with memories he could no longer suppress, thoughts of his brother, of Claire, of Darian’s death. Sofia’s words freed them from deep within his mind, and Dusty’s hammering the fact made it impossible for him to silence them as he wanted to.

I don’t know if I trust my wife, brother.

Maybe Darian hadn’t been talking about infidelity but about something else. The memories came faster. Darian was chopped into so many pieces that there’d been no body to bury. Not providing his brother a proper burial – the burial of a king! – had sickened him. Almost as bad, how many others had died from the treachery of a single Guardian? How many Guardians had he lost *this year alone*?! How many humans were dead because he lacked the strength to face his instincts?

He roared and slammed his hands on the desk at the far end of the library, unable to stop the images racing through his mind. Claire was all that remained of his brother, and he’d loved her out of respect for a man whose death he’d never been able to accept. Memories of how much Darian loved Claire, of his own nights in her bed, overwhelmed him. That she’d used him, killed Darian ...

"Damian."

Dusty's soft voice brought him out of his mind, and he realized he was kneeling on the floor with his head bowed.

"Brother," Dusty whispered.

He knew Dusty was right, knew Sofia was right, knew he'd known since just after Darian's death that there was something not right about Claire but was too desperate to hold onto the last piece of his brother to face the truth. He was reliving the pain of Darian's death, sickened by his own cowardice. Darian had even tried to warn him, and he'd never wanted to see what was in front of him.

Forgive me, brother.

"I know, Dusty," he admitted in a thick voice. "I think I've always known."

"No, brother, you couldn't have known how twisted she was. No one could."

"Even someone who reads minds?" he demanded with a bitter laugh.

"Did you ever read hers?"

"No. It was Darian's rule - if you trust someone, don't do it. She is ... was the last of my family."

If he had, how many thousands of lives would have been saved? How good was a Defender of Humanity who purposely looked away from something that led to so many deaths?

"Darian's death is not your fault," Dusty said in a hushed tone.

Damian closed his eyes. Dusty knelt beside him, resting a hand on his shoulder and squeezing.

"Trust me," he whispered. "We're in this together."

The words were familiar, the same words he'd spoken to Dusty thousands of years ago, when he'd discovered the youth who was not yet a man on a slave trader's block, bloodied and weeping for the family he'd just lost.

He met Dusty's pale blue eyes and saw his pain reflected in Dusty's tight face.

"These oracles are dangerous," Dusty said with a faint smile. "I forgot that part about them."

"Darian's finally dead to me," Damian said hoarsely. "Tonight, I lose him forever."

"You've still got me and Jule," Dusty reminded him. "And a terrified little oracle who's sobbing her eyes out right now."

"I fucked that up."

"She's resilient to make it this far. She'll be ok," Dusty said. "As for the traitors, I'm offering up my skill set, if you need it."

"You can have the others. I'll deal with Claire."

"Are you sure?"

"I should have done this long ago, brother. No one else will die because of me."

Dusty's phone dinged, and he retrieved it.

"Jule's asking if you're ok."

"Tell him we identified his Europe issue."

Damian picked himself up, grateful for Dusty's presence.

"Have the four rounded up," he ordered. "Let them sweat for a day, then do whatever you want with the three."

"Interrogation? Execution?"

"Both."

Dusty nodded and strode out. He'd not had to work too hard for confessions in the past thousand years, not after word of his cold, methodological skills leaked to the Guardians. Dusty was a one-man Internal Affairs department. The Guardians knew that betrayal would be confronted by Dusty, and even those loyal to Damian feared him appearing unexpectedly at their door.

Damian knew him well enough to know all the tales weren't true. His reputation alone was enough to make most men weep when confronted. But this time, he suspected Dusty would live up to his legend.

As for Claire ... pain spiraled through him. He waited in the library until he'd composed himself and left for his suite. He couldn't stem the memories flooding his mind and felt the wound of Darian's death reopen wider than it had originally been.

Pierre was in front of Sofia's door. He stopped, guilty yet too raw to confront her. Pierre glanced up from his video game at his hesitation.

"She sleeps, ikir," he supplied. "'Tis the best time to deal with her."

Damian snorted. Pierre's lip was completely insubordinate, and it was obvious he'd never worked for Dusty. Dusty was a stickler for formality from his men, while Jule's hemisphere was far more relaxed. Damian didn't care; Sofia liked Pierre, and he had a feeling Pierre's blunt dose of reality was soothing to her in a world where nothing else made sense.

He entered her room, emitting enough of his power to hide him from her senses. Her curtains were open, as they had been every night since she transformed. Her face was streaked with tears, her eyes puffy even in sleep. Her sleep was troubled. He sensed the visions in her head, not surprised to see his own black memories playing on the screens on the back of her eyelids along with a dark nightmare of a man in a corner crying. He wondered if the man was his soul, weeping for his brother.

He sat down heavily in the corner, watching her. He was ashamed of his last words to her. She'd struggled with Claire, wanting to spare him the pain he'd unleashed on her. Her eyes had been shadowed since he met her, her own struggle with her new world taking a visible toll on her. The videos running through her head were dark and disturbing, had been since she entered his world. They drove her away from him and the true purpose of his Guardians. She was alone and segregated, partially because she was new, and partially because an oracle's soul-reading job was brutal enough that most oracles - including his mother - killed themselves soon after their full powers manifested within them.

He wanted her to see what he saw, the good his Guardians did for humanity, the courageous, selfless hearts of his men, the difference they made in fighting evil. It was a war his family had been fighting for millennia, one that wouldn't end even with his death. He ached to show her how much she meant to him, to open her closed vision of him and his world and show her the beauty that made him fight as he did.

She saw nothing but death and the darkness in every soul she ran across.

Yet she tried to learn her new role with a selflessness that struck him now as incredible. Everything she did, she did for *him*, even if she feared him. Jule had always said he inspired men to follow him, though he saw nothing different in what he did than what his deputies did. He'd been as gentle with her as he'd known how, and still she suffered under the weight of the visions. For the first time in his life, he felt helpless to help the small form of the woman before him.

He rubbed his face, mind going to Dusty. Despite his reserve, he could tell Dusty liked her. He suspected it was because the same mettle lining Dusty's backbone lined hers. They had similar cool reserve, unlike Damian and Jule, and had both survived ordeals that would cripple anyone else. He understood why she'd looked at Dusty before telling him about Claire. She'd found courage in a kindred soul.

He leaned forward. He'd hurt her tonight. He didn't want to hurt her. Ever. Even with all his powers, his armies, his ability to read minds, he didn't know how to make things right with her. True, they had eternity to figure each other out, but he didn't want her turning cold like Dusty or jaded like Jule. He loved her fresh innocence, her selfless courage. He loved her hugs, though he'd never experienced hugs since he was a babe. He liked that she sought him out, not the leader of the Guardians, not the White God, not the Defender of Mankind. She wanted *him*, the man behind the titles and the power.

He'd treated her like shit tonight, and he was at a loss as to how to prevent the tortured existence that became the fate of most oracles.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. He snatched it and transported himself out of her room. Jule's message brought him back to the unpleasant task ahead of him.

I'll be in town in a day or two. Dusty told me everything.

Grimly, he returned to his duties of entertaining his guests, feeling as if he needed to do something for his little oracle.

"Sofia."

She stirred from her trance, mind replaying scenes of Darian's death. Darian had quieted as the scenes of his violent death played through her dreams. He sat in the dark corner of her mind, still and silent.

"We must go, Sofia."

Pierre spoke from her doorway, framed against the light of the hall. The clock read 2:38.

"Right now?"

"It's important."

The thought of Czerno loose somewhere in the house made her sit up quickly. She still wore the gown, though strands of hair blinded her and she knew her pillow would be filled with makeup. Pierre eyed her and crossed to her bathroom, tossing several items into her travel bag. She fixed her hair while sliding on her shoes.

"Is Czerno here?" she asked.

"Mon dieu non!"

"Then what's the rush?"

He waved her out and led her at a quick pace to the front door.

"You look terrible," he said, considering her.

"Rough night," she muttered and snatched her makeup bag from him.

A town car with darkened windows awaited them. She spent the next half hour in the dim lighting of the car fixing her makeup with Pierre's persistent pointers. They entered a large neighborhood and drove the same few blocks a few times before stopping in front of a large adobe hacienda walled off from its neighbors.

"Go inside. I'll wait til you enter the gate. You'll be safe."

She hesitated then exited the car and shivered in the late night breeze. The town car left as she stepped inside the gate. She knocked on the door. When no one

answered, she knocked again. It wrenched open, and a man in a black trench coat Damian's size looked her over once.

"Not tonight. Get the fuck outta here."

And slammed the door. Sofia took a step back and silently urged Pierre to hurry. Damian's men were not the type she wanted to piss off.

"Why are you not in side, mademoiselle?" he asked, agitated as he trotted through the gate. "It's not safe out here."

"You said it was."

"It's safer inside."

Sofia swallowed a retort. Pierre pounded on the door with the discretion of a jackhammer. The door opened, and a different, blond man looked them over before stepping back.

"Pierre," her bodyguard said, clapping him on the arm.

"Everyone and their mother is here tonight. You might as well come in," was the surly response.

"What happened?"

"Rainy was supposed to protect a Natural he found. The vamps fucked her up real good tonight."

"What's her talent?"

"Tracking."

She trailed them through the house that resembled a frat house. The only décor consisted of international beer bottle displays and pictures of scantily clad women or cars. The living room was equipped with a massive flat screen television and worn furniture. They reached a second foyer where the man in the trench stood with a caramel colored man covered in blood and a third.

"This is the Tucson Sector team," Pierre said. "They're the Guardians at the operational front of our war. Their job is to kill the vamps and any other of Czerno's creatures while minimizing collateral damage."

"You mean without killing anyone else," she said, crossing her arms again.

"It's one of our most sacred creeds: we do not kill humans. Sometimes we find Naturals, humans with the ability to track Czerno's creatures or to heal our kind or some other natural talent."

"Like me?"

"Sorta."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you're in a category all by yourself, but if it gets my point across, sure."

"You're an ass, Pierre."

He moved away from her to meet the others. The tension of the stiff forms in the foyer was overwhelming. Without Pierre, she'd never set foot in such a dangerous situation.

"Rainy, Ving, Justin, this is Pierre," the surly blond said.

The three looked at him, the bloody man - Rainy - with pure hostility. The other two were too occupied by whatever happened to do more than glance at the newcomer. Ving - the man in the trench coat - looked at her.

"What the fuck? Lon, did you let her in?"

"Yeah. She's with him."

The four looked at her. If she ran, they'd eat her, she was sure. So she stayed put and hugged herself more tightly. Pierre was at ease among his own kind.

"You a doctor?" Rainy demanded.

"Damian sent her," Pierre answered.

Rainy hesitated, then threw open the door he guarded, glaring at her. Pierre motioned her forward, and she went, afraid of what she'd find. As she passed Rainy, she looked up at him and saw the lines of worry in his face. His gaze was stormy, but there was more there, a profound sadness that made the large man more human.

She entered, and he closed the door behind her. A bloodied woman lay on the bed, unconscious and breathing shallowly. A brunette woman worked to stabilize her, and Sofia froze in place.

She didn't want to see more death.

"Can you give me a hand?" the woman called over her shoulder. "I need this hung high."

She held up an IV bag. Sofia forced herself to take it. The woman looked up at her, surprised. She was in her mid-20s with crystal clear blue eyes and porcelain skin.

"I thought you were ... nevermind," she said, scurrying around the bed. "It's better you help anyway. The boys are clumsy."

Sofia looked down at the beautiful woman on the bed then jerry-rigged the IV over a lamp to keep it elevated.

"Is she going to be ok?" she asked, then realized how stupid her question was when she could see the future.

"I'm not sure."

She sat down on the bed, careful to keep the blood from her gown, and touched the woman's face, bracing herself. What she saw amazed her, and her eyes watered, this time out of relief and happiness. *Traci.*

"She's bleeding internally," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"It's her spleen. Can you fix that?"

The brunette paled.

"Rainy!"

The door flew open. Sofia stood as his hot gaze fell to her, sensing he wanted no stranger near the woman.

"We need to take her to the hospital, *now.*"

He shot forward and gathered the woman in his arms while the second woman scrambled to grab the IVs.

"Where the fuck is Damian?" Rainy roared as he tore through the house.

Pierre motioned her aside as the mad rush went through the house to the garage.

"I want to go, Pierre," she said, following.

"Yes, please come," the brunette urged. "I don't know how you know this, but I stopped asking questions awhile ago. C'mon."

The men piled into two Tahoes, and the woman led her to a small Honda. Pierre crammed himself into the backseat.

"I'm Linda."

"Sofia."

They were quiet the remainder of the trip while Sofia dwelled over what she'd seen in Traci's future.

What was Damian doing? Why had he sent her, and where the hell was he? She knew he could heal people. Was he that busy?

She hung back as they entered the hospital and watched the emergency room personnel take Traci. Linda flashed her a strained smile that made her feel welcome for the first time in a week before the pretty brunette gave the blond man, Lon, a hug and kiss. He relaxed visibly with her in his arms.

They waited. Rainy paced, flung himself into a chair, then paced again. She didn't like seeing someone else suffer the way she did every time she thought of Toby or Jake or others dying. She approached him. His gaze raked over her.

"Rainy," she said, clearing her throat. "Traci's going to be ok."

"How the fuck would you know?"

"I just do."

He stared at her.

"Who *are* you?" he demanded, approaching her so quickly she backpedaled. His jaw ticked, and his fists were clenched. She cringed away from him as her knees hit a chair. He was ready to snap, and she didn't want to be the first one he took out when he did.

"Careful," Pierre warned from nearby.

"Down boy," Ving said, taking his arm.

"The babies are ok, too," Sofia added.

They all froze, and a look of surprise crossed Rainy's stormy features.

"The *what*?!"

She said nothing, realizing she'd told him something he didn't know.

"Sofia found the internal bleeding. If I were you, I'd listen to her. Traci will be fine. Sit your ass down," Linda said, planting herself between them and physically pushing the man who towered over her.

To her surprise, Rainy obeyed, though he sat across the room and stared at her. She curled up in a chair, afraid to move too quickly under the tense Guardian's gaze. A doctor emerged soon after, hesitating as his gaze swept over the room full of massive, bristling men until Linda came forward.

"Are you next of kin?" he asked.

"More or less," she said with a smile.

"Come with me."

"Sofia," Linda waved her over.

Rainy started to his feet as she rose, and she stopped.

"Dude, chill," Lon said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Pierre drew nearer, and Linda waved her forward again. Sofia went, trailing them down a hall with antiseptic-laced air to an open bay with beds separated by curtains. Traci was alone at the far end of the bay.

"She'll be alright. We had a scare there, but she pulled through. We've stopped the bleeding. She'll have to remain here for a couple of days."

"Thank God," Linda breathed. "And ... uh, her babies are ok?"

"She's in the early stages of pregnancy, no more than eight weeks. We'll be watching for signs of trauma. It'll be another two weeks before I'll feel comfortable imaging her uterus to see the fetus."

Sofia listened as she approached Traci's bed and gazed down at the unconscious woman. The woman was hooked to a ventilator and IVs, her battered face clean and pale. The doctor left, and Linda joined her.

"Czerno is a monster," she whispered.

"He is," Linda said. "Lon - my husband - has had his own run ins with Czerno."

"So have I."

She felt Linda's gaze.

"It's why they do what they do, to protect humanity from that fate."

At her curious look, Linda continued.

"Their war, it's been going on for thousands of years. Damian is their leader. Lon says he's not ... normal, if you'd call any of them normal. I guess D is something less normal than my Lon. Anyway, the war between Czerno and D is for the fate of us puny humans."

"Why would creatures like them bother?"

"I don't know, but I'm glad they do. I've only met Damian once, when he saved Lon's life after Czerno chewed him up and spit him out. His men worship him. He's helped all of them somehow, though he terrified me the time I did meet him."

"He has that affect on people."

"Are you one of the Naturals, like Traci?"

"Not really."

Sofia heard her unasked question and moved away.

"Is she having boys?"

"Girls, two of them."

Linda laughed.

"Rainy with two girls? No way! He'll be inconsolable."

Sofia smiled and looked at the pretty woman beside her. There was a natural sense of cheerfulness to her that she liked.

"May I ... could you shake my hand?" she asked lamely.

Linda's brow furrowed, but she held out her hand. Sofia gripped it, the touch enough to reveal a future like Traci's, filled with love and joy.

"Am I pregnant, too?" Linda teased. "That's an awesome pregnancy test, by the way."

"No, you're not," Sofia answered with a smile. "You will be soon."

Linda grinned.

"We better get Rainy in here before he tears down the hospital looking for her."

"I'm not staying. He's an inch away from wringing my neck," Sofia said, following. Her stomach growled.

"You wanna get some food?"

She bit her lip and crossed her arms.

"Sure."

Linda sent Rainy to Traci and walked with her to the cafeteria. Pierre trailed them at a distance just out of earshot, and Linda looked at her curiously.

"He's wearing the color of the bodyguards," she observed. "You must be someone important."

"Not really. I'm a lost sheep."

"Strange. You seem to know what you're doing."

"I'm ... new to Damian's organization. One week new, to be exact. I don't really know which way is up right now."

"Wow, Sofia. First, welcome, and congrats! These are the finest men you'll find anywhere."

"Thanks."

"Second, who's your sponsor?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, no one gets in without a reason. Someone brought you in."

They sat at a table near the windows.

"Why did they bring you in?" Sofia asked.

"Lon found me. I'm a Natural. I have the ability to levitate things."

"Really? Like anything?"

"Yep."

"So, if Lon said something stupid to you, you could toss him into the air and leave him there until he agreed to treat you with an ounce of respect. And if he didn't, you could leave him there and do whatever the hell you wanted for the day."

Linda looked at her, and she realized she'd said too much. She cleared her throat, anger spiraling through her again.

"I guess I'd never thought of that," Linda admitted, a smile pulling up the corners of her mouth. "But yeah, I could do that."

Sofia watched her take a bite of a muffin, at once longing and agitated. She was hungry. After her explosion at Damian, she'd have to beg for food. And she'd never demean herself to that man. She'd just have to starve to death.

"I do understand how frustrating this all seems when you first join. Well, you don't really *choose* to join."

"You're telling me," Sofia said with emotion. "One day I'm normal. The next, I can't stand daylight and Damian is beating down my door."

"Damian?" Linda's amazement increased. "Damian's your sponsor?"

She nodded.

"I *totally* have to tell Lon. Hold on a sec."

Sofia watched as she whipped out a phone to text Lon.

"You have no idea how special you are if D is your sponsor. Or how lucky."

"Lucky?"

"Yeah, sure. He's dreamy, runs his own um, business, and he's got, like, Superman powers. He's like a modern day king who's in charge of the superheroes trying to beat down the evil villains."

Sofia recalled how much her first meeting with him had scared her. His aura of power, his command and confidence, the sense that – whatever he was – he was something humankind wasn't prepared to face.

"He's just a good guy," Linda continued. "He's been after bad guys for thousands of years, and he's never gone to the Dark Side or quit or anything. That says a lot for

someone, you know? He's good to his men. Lon and the others adore him. I like him, even if he scares me."

This world is so fucked up I don't know why I bother.

His cranky words echoed in her thoughts, and she smiled to herself.

"They do so much to help people," Linda said, looking down as her phone dinged.

"Lon doesn't believe me. Oh, well. Where is Damian?"

"I'm definitely not his keeper," Sofia said with a shrug.

The sun peaked over the horizon, reminding her that she'd gotten only a few hours of bad sleep. Linda texted back and forth with her husband for a few minutes.

"Traci's awake. I'll be right back," she said, hopping up.

Sofia gazed out the window, mulling over the night. She began to suspect Damian sent her there so she could meet the other women dragged into his organization. Or maybe he wanted her out of the house so he could kill the traitors.

Oh ye of little faith.

"I hate that," she answered.

I know.

"What do you want, Damian?"

I owe you an apology.

"Well, man up and do it in person."

"A little testy today, aren't we?"

She jumped, watching as he folded himself into the small chair across from her. His scent made her heart quicken and her drowsiness dissipate. Her breath caught as she gazed at him, and she looked for any sign he was still angry at her. His golden eyes were calm, his large frame relaxed with the feline grace that made her hormones wild. His power was checked but his unusual presence enough to draw the looks of those around them. Most moved away quickly, sensing there was something about him that just wasn't normal.

His gaze was trained on her with an intensity that made her body warm from the inside out.

"Well?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, Sofia, for being a dick."

"Apology accepted," she said and looked down. "I'm so sorry about Claire. I knew it would hurt you."

"No worries."

His aloof response made her look up. His gaze was wary and moving, and he was guarded once more. Even after thousands of years he was reliving the pain of his brother's death. If she closed her eyes, she'd see the home video of Darian's funeral pile. Her heart went out to him.

"I think I'd known for a long time and didn't want to face it," he said. "I probably could have gone much longer ignoring her."

"She would have killed you."

"She would have *tried*."

"You can risk your life, but I won't," Sofia retorted.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you cared."

"I do care about you, Damian, even though you're a total jackass."

"For the record, you're the only person in history who could get away with half the shit you say," he told her.

"I know."

The warmth of his smile was not lost on her, and she thought about what Linda had said about him. Maybe the cheerful woman was right – maybe there was more to Damian than she gave him credit for.

"D."

It was Lon, whose gaze went to her as he approached.

"Guess I lost that bet," he muttered. "She's ok and says thanks. The doc can't figure out what happened. He should release her today."

"Glad I could help."

"Rainy would have come, but he won't leave her side. Poor sap."

"No worries. How's Linda?"

"Good. Still won't let me live down almost dying."

His gaze went to her then Damian expectantly. Damian ignored his hint, and Lon didn't press.

"See you at the next bar-b-q?" he asked, holding out his hand.

"Wouldn't miss it," Damian said, standing to shake his hand.

"Linda says you can call her whenever you want," Lon said, handing her a tissue with a phone number and smiley face written on it.

"Thanks."

He retreated.

"Pierre, you want my croissant?" she called.

"I do," Damian said and snatched the pastry.

"It's because I'm French, isn't it? You assume we French all eat croissants," Pierre complained.

"This is sooooo good," Damian said, pinning her with a look as he wolfed down the second half.

She glared at him.

"Just when I start to like you ... you know it's amazing even a man who's *thousands* of years old can act like a twelve year old. Pierre. Car. Now."

Furious, she breezed past him, not surprised when he opted not to ride home with her.

She didn't see Damian until afternoon, when he strolled in from sparring, ear to a cell phone. He was naked from the waist up and sweaty, a combination that made her sit up and pay attention.

"I don't know what she's talking about," he said with a grimace and handed the phone to her before striding out.

"Hello?"

"Hi Sofia, this is Linda! How are you?"

"Good, thanks. Everything alright?"

"Oh yeah. I was telling D that Rainy went off the deep end when we told him about the girls!" she giggled. "Traci told him not to think about asking her to marry him just because she's pregnant, and he said she had *no* choice and he'd drag the priest to her. He almost beat down her door. They're in this horrible tiff right now."

"Wow, I didn't mean to start this."

"The doc would have noticed she was pregnant, just not the twin part and the girls part."

"Right. Totally *not* my fault then."

Linda laughed.

"Listen, I wanted to see if you wanted to go Christmas shopping with us this weekend. It's one of the last weekends before Christmas. I'm way behind, and Traci -" Since when did the concept of Christmas shopping seem so bizarre?

Since I became some sort of recently resurrected fortune telling vampire.

It was something normal people did during this time of year, something she'd done every year for 27 years.

"- count you in?"

Sofia covered the speaker.

"Pierre, am I allowed to go Christmas shopping?"

"I hate this fucking library."

"Is that a yes?"

"Oui."

"Linda, I'll go."

"Great! We'll pick you up. Are you at D's?"

"Yeah."

"Traci's been there. She'll drive. We'll see you Saturday at nine."

"Great, thanks."

Sofia hung up the phone, feeling as if she were emerging from a stupor for the first time in months. While she couldn't shake the sense of doom that followed her from the visions, she felt more normal, less afraid, at the thought that she'd be rejoining the rest of humanity for a shopping trip with the girls, even if only for a morning.

She left the library to return Damian's phone. It rang loudly in the hall, a rap song spitting f-bombs that made her eyebrows rise. She hesitated then answered.

"Hello?"

"Hello? Do I have D's number?"

"Yes."

"And who are you?"

"Sofia. Who are *you*?"

There was a pause before the man on the other end answered.

"Jule, a friend of his. I'm in town right now on an errand."

"Are you a good friend?"

"I'd like to think so," he said with a chuckle. "We met when he was a teen and went through some rough stuff together."

"Yeah, I know. His is a sordid history. What kind of a person was he when you met?"

"He's always been the best man I know," was the unhesitant response.

His voice held an upbeat note and natural warmth that she liked. He wasn't like Dustin, who seemed more likely to kill a stranger than talk to one.

"If you all are on the side of good, why is there so much death?"

He gave a surprised laugh.

"Trust me, there'd be more if the bad guys won. It's not easy being the good guy, and it's a job not many people can do. You have to stay true to your values while destroying something as well. It's rough."

Damian trotted from the stairs towards the courtyard and paused, looking at her curiously.

"I'm having an issue reconciling the two," she admitted.

"Who?" he mouthed. She waved him away.

"We've all gone through that stage. You have to look at it like this: would you want someone to help you if something bad happened?" Jule continued.

"Yes."

"Exactly. But not everyone can do what we do, because we're, well, different than normal people. We're in a unique position to help people who can't help themselves against bad guys who want to hurt them."

"I see. You have no regrets?"

"No way in hell, and neither does D. Because of us, many innocent people have been able to live their lives and humanity thrives."

Damian watched her, eyes narrowing.

"I see why he likes you," she said quietly. "Thanks for talking to me. He'll call you back."

"Sofi - "

She hung up and tossed Damian the phone.

"I'm going shopping Saturday," she told him. "And Jule called. He's in town."

"That's who you were talking to?"

She didn't miss the way he bristled but turned her back to him to return to the library.

"Yep. He's a good guy."

Don't answer my phone.

"Then stop doing that!"

No deal.

He drove her crazy, and she was hungry again. Always, always hungry. Was she destined to spend the rest of her life starving?!

"Your drug dealer's still in business. For now."

"That's not funny," she said, turning to glare at him.

"No?" he asked, approaching her with a languid walk that stirred her blood.

He stopped in her personal zone, too close, but she wasn't about to back down this time. She crossed her arms and looked up at him, meeting his steady look with a challenging one of her own.

"You're getting braver, kiri," he said in a husky tone.

She tried not to let it affect her but suspected by his look of satisfaction that he saw how quickly her face changed colors.

"If you're half the man everyone tells me you are, you'll send Han some flowers. He's going to break his leg tomorrow."

Amusement flickered across his face.

"At your service, oracle."

She ached to touch him but refused, hugging herself more tightly instead. Her nerve began to frazzle. She walked away.

"Sofia."

There was a serious note in his voice that made her stop. His gaze was on her chest. She fingered the necklace there.

"The diamonds were a bit overwhelming for daily wear," she admitted. "I restrung it onto one of my chains."

He said nothing, and she saw the look that crossed his face. He wasn't sure what to make of it.

"Is that ok?" she asked.

"Very."

He spun on his heel and left. She watched him go, admiring and puzzled.

"My dear Han, you were right about these damn moods."

He was worse than a woman PMSing.

You're full of shit.

She gritted her teeth, hating the fact he had open access to her thoughts and worse – he could *respond* to them!

"No," Pierre said, blocking the library as she approached. "I'm not wasting any more of my time in there."

"I have one more thing to do," she said, holding up her list. "Why don't you go spar? I promise not to leave."

He gave her a look of supreme distaste before he, too, walked away.

What was it with these men and their moods? She shook her head and returned to the library. In truth, it was the one place in the house where she felt safe and comfortable when she wasn't with Damian.

CHAPTER TEN

Claire didn't look any worse for wear after a day in the offsite location Dusty had scouted as a temporary dungeon for their prisoners. If not for the worried flicker of her gaze past him to see who followed, he would have thought this a social call.

"Dusty's not here," he said, irritated by the inference that *he* was somehow someone to be less feared.

She sat on one of two fold-out chairs in the concrete room, legs crossed and hands in her lap.

"I guess I should feel honored to have your personal attention," she said acidly.

He pulled up the other chair and sat across from her.

"Two hundred and sixty three," he started. "That's the number of Guardians you've killed directly with your actions over the past few thousand years. In an organization of less than five thousand, that's a lot."

"I offered to become your queen after Darian died," she replied. "You threw me out with nowhere to go after my husband was killed. Who do you think paid the bills if you didn't?"

"I'm not sure how betraying everything your husband stood for would excuse anything you did. You're a pretty twisted bitch."

Her eyes narrowed. Damian regarded her coolly, unwilling to let someone so undeserving get the best of him. When he wanted, he could be as cold as Dusty.

"You'd never understand," she replied.

"You're right. I'd never kill my mate or sell myself to Czerno."

She paled at his words.

"It's that bitch, isn't it?" she exclaimed, rising and pacing. "I was meant to be at your side, not her!"

Damian felt something cool further within him at the reference to Sofia.

"You were meant to be at *Darian's* side. Your skills as an oracle were terrible, but he mated with you anyway."

She shook her head as if *he* were the fool.

"Will you tell me why you betrayed him before I kill you?" he asked with calmness at odds with the storm in his breast.

Claire glanced at him then back, taking in the resolve on his face. Suddenly she was mewling, kneeling beside him, her hands on his thigh and her face soft and beguiling.

Like the night she'd come to visit him upon arriving in Tucson. Damian gritted his teeth, remembering how tempted he'd been by the same ruse a few nights before.

"Forgive me, Damian. What I did was wrong," she whispered.

There tears in her eyes, and she looked sincere.

She killed Darian.

Damian stood and moved away, emotions roiling. How could someone so treacherous live under his nose for thousands of years? How had he ever turned a blind eye to her? He touched her mind for the first time ever, and his resolve solidified at the images he saw there.

She'd never loved Darian and had used him to gain his title and power. Her betrayal struck him even harder.

"It doesn't matter, Claire. You killed my brother and 263 other Guardians."

She rose and dusted off her legs from where she'd knelt. Her eyes flashed with defiance, and she glowered at him.

"You've had tens of thousands of years to get rid of me. You can't tell me you never looked into my thoughts with your god-powers!"

"I didn't," he said. "I promised Darian."

"Even when we were fucking?"

"Even when we were fucking."

"Tell me, Damian, does she fuck the way you like it? Can she do for you what I did?"

"Leave her out of this, Claire," his growl was inhuman, a warning she didn't heed.

"I was meant to be at your side not some stupid *human!*"

"There's no chance of that now, is there? I don't even expect to let you live tonight."

As if finally realizing her game was called, she hesitated.

"I'll tell you everything you want to know about Czerno," she said.

"I want to know why you killed my brother."

She appeared pensive, then shrugged.

"I don't remember anymore," she said.

Fury lit his insides as he regarded her easy dismissal for one of the most painful events of his life. Worse - he saw in her mind that what she said was true. She didn't remember, and she didn't care.

"Damian," she purred, approaching him and resting her hands on his chest. "I'll tell you everything you don't know about Czerno in exchange for my life. I swear, I'll tell you all and disappear."

Her touch was like poison! He glared down at her, looking for some sign of the woman he'd thought she was.

"I don't give a fuck about Czerno, Claire. I loved Darian. I love Sofia. At one point, I think I loved you, too."

"We can - "

He pushed her away from him and drew a deep breath, withdrawing a pistol from the small of his back.

"You're a *traitor*," he spit the word. "You've killed so many, and I've been too afraid to see you for what you are. Tonight, you're nothing to me."

She stared at him, her surprise the first genuine emotion he'd seen. He gathered his power and sent it towards her, wrapping around her tightly.

"Claire, your immortality is revoked."

"Damian, don't!" she shouted as the invisible hands stripped her of her immortal gift. They dropped her to the floor. She scrambled up and stared at him, terrified.

Damian took aim with the pistol and fired into her heart before she could make another sound. She dropped. He stood over her, watching the life fade from her eyes. Images of his brother played through his thoughts, images of Claire's father presenting her to him, of their visible love, of his death, of his own involvement with Claire ...

They hit fast and hard, even as he exited the compound and destroyed it with a flash of power. He stood and watched it burn, feeling as if a part of him burned with it.

A part of him did. What was left of Darian went up in the second funeral pile in his honor. Damian closed his eyes to the heat and light, tormented by his brother's death and his own cowardice.

Forgive me, brother.

Miles away, she couldn't shake the feeling that something was very wrong with Damian. His mind was closed, his home videos playing too faintly for her to hear. Whatever he was going through, he was doing his best to block her.

"C'mon, kiri," Dustin said, poking his head into the library.

She unraveled herself from her favorite chair near the window. Dark had fallen an hour before. She pocketed her list and trailed him to the area just beyond the patio, where the scent of hot dogs and s'mores greeted her long before she reached the small group circled around a bonfire. Linda and Traci were there. She hid a smile at the look on Linda's face. The brunette stood between Traci and Rainy, as if she were trying to broker a peace deal between two warring countries.

Traci was stunning, from her supermodel body to her delicate, elfin features. Her arms were crossed, and though she smiled at Lon, Sofia could see her level of comfort was equal to hers among the giants that towered even above a supermodel.

Relief flooded Linda's features as she saw Sofia. She hurried from between the two warring factions and hugged her. Sofia forced herself not to recoil, afraid to touch anyone.

"I'm glad you're here," Linda whispered. "This is *awful*."

Sofia felt Rainy's hard gaze but avoided his heated look.

"Traci, come here!" Linda called, flashing a smile.

The supermodel all but bolted from the midst of the male forest around her.

"This is Sofi. She saved your life."

Traci's hand fluttered to her stomach, and Sofia's face flamed.

"I'll get you some food," Linda said, bouncing away.

"She's so sweet," Traci murmured as she left. "I'd go crazy here if not for her."

"I completely understand," Sofia said.

"Linda says you're newer than me. This world will screw with your mind."

"Yeah."

An awkward quiet fell, and she sensed Traci was as reserved as she was. Linda returned with two hotdogs and handed one to each of them.

"You have to eat for three now, Traci," she said cheerfully.

Sofi pitied the beautiful woman as a stricken look crossed her features.

"There goes that modeling career," she whispered.

Pierre walked by and snatched Sofia's hotdog. She was grateful; the scent was both nauseating and infuriating. Linda eyed him.

"She doesn't eat," he called over his shoulder.

"You're not starving yourself, are you?" Linda asked, turning to her in concern.

"She's blood bound," Pierre supplied, unasked.

Sofia glared at him, her embarrassment deepening at the look the men around the fire gave her. Any hope she'd had of them not understanding how different she was died. Their looks ranged from amazement to surprise to Dustin's look of disapproval aimed at Pierre.

"What does that mean?" Traci asked.

"It means, she doesn't eat," Dustin said, coming to her rescue. "Why don't you all sit down? Grande, Lon, move."

They complied, and the three women sat in lawn chairs.

"Do you eat s'mores?" Linda prodded, handing her the plate going around.

"Lin, we'll talk about it later," Lon told her softly. "Just skip the food."

Did they think she was a freak? She couldn't tell. Linda was too easy going to be affected by much of anything, and the men seemed more surprised than anything else.

It's the greatest honor to be bound to a man like Damian.

Han's words returned, and she forced herself to relax. No matter what anyone else thought, it was her reality. It must not have been totally unheard of if they all understood what it was.

"How long have you been a part of this insanity?" she asked Linda.

"Two years, or just under. It's kinda neat to know we're helping save the world from bad guys."

"You seem pretty happy," Traci observed. "Maybe in two years ..."

Sofia saw her pain and couldn't help but empathize.

"He loves you," she said quietly. "I saw it in his face when he almost killed me for being anywhere near you."

Traci's gaze flew to her. There was turmoil in her pale blue eyes.

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" she asked, one eyebrow arching. "I'll make his life a living hell if so."

Sofia shook her head.

"Jackass," she muttered.

Sofia exchanged a look with Linda, and the chipper woman took the hint.

"You guys excited about shopping Saturday? I have a few places picked out already. This has to be my favorite time of year, and the one time Lon promises not to dissect our credit card bills."

"Yeah, I can think of some places I'd like to go," Traci said. "I've been living in the bachelor pad with the guys for three months now. I definitely need some girl stuff."

"We'll totally load up. Rainy will have to get used to pink stuff being everywhere."

"That he will," Traci said with a small smile.

"Are there more of us?" Sofia asked Linda.

"Naturals mated with Guardians?" Linda grinned. "Yep. We have our own support group. I'll send you the link to our online forum. There aren't many of us, and we're all over the world, but we're really close knit. We have to be. Who else can you tell about your husband beheading five vamps?"

Sofia gave a surprised laugh.

"I can't believe all this," she said. "It doesn't seem real."

"Hon, it's as real as it gets," Linda assured her. "You'll have to make some sacrifices, but it's worth it."

Her adoring gaze went to Lon. Sofia exchanged an understanding look with Traci.

"Maybe in two years ..." Traci said again.

"Can you have cocoa?" Linda asked.

"Nothing."

"I don't understand what blood bound is," Traci said.

Sofia took a deep breath.

"Well, Czerno's henchmen killed me. Damian brought me back, but I can't live without ... his blood. I need it instead of food."

"How romantic!" Linda exclaimed.

"I don't really think of it that way," Sofia said, eyeing her. "It kinda hurt getting killed, and it really sucks not being able to eat food."

"It is romantic," Traci agreed. "What a wonderful story."

"You think so? You don't think it's crazy?"

"No!" they said simultaneously.

"Sofi, none of us are normal. Maybe in the human world, it'd be totally insane. I don't mean that in a mean way," Linda said quickly. "But you have a new family now, and it doesn't sound crazy to me at all. It sounds like a fairytale."

Traci was gazing at her intently. Sofia saw the tears form in her gaze.

"Excuse me," Traci said, standing. "Sofia, is there a restroom?"

"We'll be back," she promised Linda

They walked towards the house, reaching the patio before Traci started crying. Sofia stood helplessly for a long minute.

"Traci ..."

"I'm sorry. Maybe it's my hormones. Or maybe I'm just not ... this is so unreal!"

"Pierre, go please," she said, knowing he'd be there when she turned. "I'm not going past the bathroom."

He moved away without returning to the group.

"Come on," she said, placing a hand on Traci's arm.

She guided the crying woman inside to her library and dug through the small satchel near her favorite chair.

"I've been crying for a week straight," she said. "I've figured out which tissues are the softest."

Traci choked on a half-laugh, half-sob and accepted the packet of tissues. She sat down, sobbing her heart out, and Sofia sat near her. God how she understood the uncertainty and confusion Traci felt!

"You again."

She turned at Rainy's voice. His green eyes shifted from her to Traci. Sofia hesitated then stood. She left them alone and returned to the group, deep in thought. The growing night chill drove Linda into Lon's arms, and she relaxed near the fire. The men spoke among themselves, swapping war stories and discussing the Tucson Sector's influx of vamps. They ignored her, and she rested her head on the back of the chair, their low talk and the warmth of the fire lulling her into another trance.

Images flowed behind her eyelids, most too fleeting to catch. Damian's home videos played, intertwined with those of others, until a wave of power washed over her. She jerked upright. The men had frozen in mid-speech and were looking towards the mansion.

"Don't worry about it," Dustin said, eyes locked on the house. "He's had a rough day."

Their gazes lingered before they returned to their conversations. Sofia glanced at Dustin and stood, concerned. Damian was not one to lose control. If he had, something horrible had happened. She closed her eyes, searching for the home videos. Visions of his brother.

Claire's death.

Stop.

His command was so sharp she jumped. She felt more compelled to him now than ever before.

"Sofia," Dustin called as she stepped towards the house. "Kiri, you've never seen him like this."

"He needs me," she said.

He searched her gaze and pursed his lips but lifted his chin towards the house.

"Pierre, stay," he ordered.

"I'm not going in there," Pierre assured him, earning him another look of disapproval.

The sense of power increased tenfold as she entered the mansion. The lights were on, but shadows crawled from the corners and choked the lights until they were shriveled, glowing orbs. The shadows clung to her as she stepped into the hallway. They moved like smoke, shifting and swirling as they crawled the walls. They formed a fog at her feet and trailed her towards the stairwell.

She swallowed hard. Damian needed her. Shadows chased her up the stairs and flew down the halls, coating the floors and walls in shallow, black fog. The power swirling in the air around her grew as she neared Damian's door, and she was reminded of the tension in the air before a thunderstorm. Only this was equal to a hundred thunderstorms.

She didn't know what Damian was, but he was beyond Superman powerful.

Leave.

His command reached her as she opened his suite door. He stood on the balcony, visible beyond the transparent curtains rustling in the moving fog. She hesitated before moving forward again.

"Sofia."

The warning in his voice was plain. His whisper reached her across the room.

"No," she told him.

Fear unfurled in her breast, and she clenched her fists. Shadows crawled over the world around her, and the tension in the air made it hard to breathe. The hair on her arms and neck stood up. She'd never seen him not in control. His powers were quiet and exploring, crawling over the physical world.

The air around him was even harder to breathe. Her breaths quickened, and her heart pounded.

"You need me," she managed.

"I need *nothing* from this world!" he said with an undertone that was purely inhuman.

His fury, pain, and sorrow choked her. Her eyes watered at the soul wrenching emotions. She'd never felt pain like his!

"Damian."

He whirled and stalked towards her, his face a mask of fury. She retreated until the balcony railing trapped her. He planted his hands on either side of her and lowered his face to her level. His presence was overwhelming, and her body reacted with both terror and lust so strong it made her head spin.

His eyes were black, fathomless, the eyes of a god among men.

"Tell me, Seer, what do you See?" he rasped in the inhuman voice.

Her breaths came in short gasps, but she refused to back down. She belonged to his world as much as he did. She belonged to *him*.

"I see a man who just lost the last connection to someone he loved to his soul," she whispered.

The burst of furious power shot through her, the shockwave rattling the windows of the house. She closed her eyes. An eerie quiet followed, and she expected him to be deciding her fate: would he shove her over the rail or kill her as he had Claire?

She opened her eyes when nothing happened, shaking from both cold and fear. Damian's head was bowed, his tense body still. Compelled to him like nothing else in the world, she touched his face with a quivering hand. He was still for a long moment before he nuzzled it. She raised the other hand to his other cheek, sensing his resistance. A moment later, it melted, and he embraced her. She wrapped her arms around him, at home again.

"I was getting ready to destroy the world."

Cold fear trickled through her. He wasn't joking.

"Good thing I felt hungry tonight," she said.

He whispered something in his tongue.

"You were right. I was a coward," he said after a moment. "My brother loved her with all his soul. She was all I had left of him."

She listened, struck by the sorrow in his voice.

"Such is the weakness of a man," he added bitterly.

"You're not weak, Damian," she said, propping her chin on his chest to look up at him. "I've seen your soul, you know."

"It serves me right. I've been spying on the thoughts of humanity for thousands of years. Guess it's my turn."

"I'm glad you didn't destroy the world," she whispered.

"For the record, you're fucking crazy. I could have killed you."

"It's the least I could do. You're there for me when I need you," she said. "Even if your attitude sucks."

He chuckled hoarsely and spread butterfly kisses across her forehead, hugging her against him even tighter. She loved being his arms!

"My sweet, pain in the ass oracle. Looks like it was a good idea bringing you back from the dead after all."

"That's the worst thing you've ever said to me!" she cried, offended.

She felt the tension within him melt, and the restless shadows wrap around her, cocooning them before retreating. She'd never felt a surrender like his. His guard was down for the first time since she'd known him. The idea of him being vulnerable to anyone floored her. From his home videos, he'd never lowered his guard to anyone, even Claire. Awed by the power she had over him, she began to understand the extent of his solitary existence for the millennia of his life. He'd known love and trust only in the earliest stage of his life, when he had a family before he entered the dark age of his people. He'd been alone since, except for his two adopted brothers. He'd never been able to share his pain with anyone else.

Her stomach growled.

"So you *are* hungry."

"I'm always hungry," she grumbled.

"Can't get enough of me."

Jackass.

He drew away from her, and she met his black gaze. Hot desire flowed through her and was mirrored on his face. His gaze was direct, just short of demanding. She took a step back.

He offered his wrist, and she knew he was offering much more. She shook her head, mouth too dry to speak. She wanted him, God did she want him!

"When I'm ready to destroy the world, you waltz in like it's nothing. When it's just *us*, you run. How does that work, Sofia?" he challenged in a husky tone.

It was one thing to offer her body, but her heart, her soul ... he would take all of her, consume her completely, irrevocably. She stood on a ledge, considering a swan dive into the depths of the universe. As much as she wanted him, *needed* him, she was terrified to take the final step that would make her his for eternity.

"It's ok, kiri," he said, softening. He touched her hair. "Come to me tomorrow morning. I'm not yet in control of myself."

She was more grateful to him in that moment than she'd ever been. She took his hand and kissed his palm, then ran to her library, mind racing with what she'd learned about him.

Damian listened to the door closed behind her, stunned by what he'd seen in her thoughts. Love. Pure, sweet, unconditional. For *him* of all things! He'd heard it in her thoughts even if she didn't speak the words, and her ability to see through him as he did everyone else amazed him.

He'd never thought much of that talent, the ability to see into someone. He'd always found something wrong, something evil or bad, no matter how small the inclination. Except in her.

"Brother, come out of the shadows," he said, weariness in his voice.

"I wouldn't intrude."

"Bullshit. You were making sure I didn't hurt her."

Dusty said nothing but drew abreast of him.

"Thank you," he said and leaned again on the railing. "I hope you'd have kicked my ass if I did."

"Puh-lease, brother. What makes you think I didn't follow to make sure she didn't chicken out?" Dusty challenged.

"Glad she passed your test. She probably doesn't realize what happens to people who don't."

"We'll keep it that way."

Damian chuckled despite himself, unable to shake the negative emotions running through him. He felt both spent and wired, his head too full of memories to control.

"Are you ok?" Dusty asked.

He drew a ragged breath.

"I am now," he replied.

"I don't want a woman, but if I did, I'd want one like kiri," Dusty admitted. "I saw the way she looked at you. Bro, *I'm* in love with her."

"She's a lot like you."

"I don't cry that much."

"She's got your lip."

Dusty rolled his eyes. Damian regarded him, reminded again how fortunate he was to have friends like his. Dusty met his gaze with his clear blues, concerned and relieved.

"It's been a good week. We found an oracle, executed some traitors, chased down bad guys, hosted the Quarterly, and are evac-ing soon."

"Just when I start to get bored with life," Damian agreed. "Jule's missed most of it."

"Serves him right. He forgot my birthday *again*."

"What is it with you and your birthdays? Every year you bitch about it," he said, enjoying the distraction from his dark thoughts.

"I like my birthdays," Dusty said defensively. "There's nothing wrong with it."

"If you say so. I don't even know when mine is."

"July 27 on the current calendar. Jule's is November 3."

"You've got issues, bro."

"Fuck you, man," Dusty said in irritation. "It's the little things that count."

Damian shook his head, comforted by the little oracle and his BFF.

"You did the right thing," Dusty said. "Give yourself a break and get some rest."

He slapped him on the arm and disappeared. Damian gazed at the dark landscape. Sleep was as far from his mind as possible. He thought instead of Claire and Sofia. At one point after his brother's death, he'd considered making Claire his queen. Respect for his brother's memory stopped him. In hindsight, he wondered how he'd ever been fooled or why he'd settle for Claire when there was someone like Sofia out there, who'd love him for him and not for his title.

He spent the night deep in thought, forcing himself to face the dark memories he'd tried so hard to bury.

* * *

Two awoke from a dream. He sat up, sweating. He didn't remember the dream, but he saw that *kiri* was crying again.

"It's ok, *kiri*," he said.

She'd been quiet for a day or two, going everywhere with him, a companion in his head who was beyond the touch of his angry master. She was *his*, and she brought him a sense of peace.

I'm scared.

It was the first time he'd understand the words she spoke to him. Two swung his legs off the bed, holding his breath in case she spoke again. Her voice was tiny and quiet.

I'm scared.

He didn't know what to do.

"It's ok, *kiri*," he said again.

So much death in this world.

"We're not dead, *kiri*."

You are.

"I'm not dead. Are you?"

Not anymore.

He rubbed his face, his fingers slowing as he felt his scars. They were thick and gruesome, creating ridges and channels in his face. He traced his fingers over the scars on his hands and followed them up his arms then his chest then his legs. They were everywhere, like the mountain ranges surrounding their hideout. He didn't remember what made the scars, and he didn't realize how many there were.

"Maybe I am dead," he said, tracing the scars down to his feet.

You are.

He was breathing. He felt the pain of the last blow his master had given him before bed. His feet were cold, and he was hungry. Always hungry. Did he ever eat? He wasn't allowed to drink the juice he liked anymore.

"No, *kiri*, I am alive," he said.

He couldn't sleep when she cried. Two mechanically dressed himself and left his room. The halls were quiet. He walked without knowing exactly where he went. The halls narrowed and sloped, and he knew he'd been this way before even though he didn't remember when. He paused before a keypad and looked at his hand. There were three sets of numbers written in green ink on his palm. He typed the first in. The door opened and led to another keypad. He entered the second number and came to the final keypad. He typed in the last number.

The desert night was cold and dark. He looked around and found a familiar dirt trail that led to a large rock overlooking the desert he'd sat on earlier to watch the sunset.

He loved sunsets.

"Is this better, *kiri*?" he asked and sat on his cold rock.

I don't like it underground.

He had no choice. He did what his master said to do. *Kiri* was in his head. She had to do what his master said, too.

No.

"He will hurt you, *kiri*," he told her.

You'll protect me.

He frowned, troubled. At least his master couldn't touch her if she stayed in his head. He'd never have to worry about protecting her.

His eyes traveled from the desert to the sky. He clasped his arms behind his head and lay down, impervious to the cold. The sky was dark, the stars plentiful and bright.

"Do you like the stars?" he asked her.

Yes.

"I think I like them, too."

But he wasn't sure yet.

"Slave."

Two bolted to his feet. The man with eyes the color of the moss in his room materialized from the shadows.

"Yes, master," he said.

"What are you doing here?"

Two looked around him. He'd found his way out, but he wasn't sure how. He looked up and recalled the stars. He stared, aware *kiri* liked them, too. When he came to see the stars or watch the sunset, she didn't cry. Maybe she didn't like it underground.

"Slave."

He jerked, surprised to find his master's friend, the one with eyes the color of the moss in his room, standing before him.

"Yes, master."

"What are you thinking?"

"Slaves don't think, master."

His master's friend moved closer, and he silently told *kiri* to be quiet, lest she be heard. She was on the verge of crying again.

"Do you like the stars?" his master's friend asked.

"Yes, we do."

His master's friend looked at him for a long minute.

"Return to your room, slave, and I won't tell your master I found you here."

"Yes, master."

Two went back to the door and looked at his hand. He didn't remember coming this way, but he was sure it was the way back. He entered three codes and crossed through three doors, walked down a hall too narrow for him to walk straight, and retreated to his room. *Kiri* began to cry again.

"Slave."

He turned when he reached his door. The master's friend, the one with eyes the color of the moss in the corner of his room, stood before him.

"Yes, master."

"You must take care of *kiri* no matter what."

The master's friend had heard her crying. Two bowed his head, awaiting a beating that never came. When he looked up, he was alone. He wondered why he was in the hallway at all and returned to his room.

"It's ok, *kiri*."

I miss the stars.

He didn't know how to leave the underground prison, or he'd take her outside to see them. Two sat down on his bed and stared into the darkness, unable to sleep when she cried.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I thought you didn't eat croissants," she said, staring at her bodyguard as she awaited Linda and Traci.

Pierre received a wide berth from the Starbucks customers, his massive frame standing out even more among normal sized humans. People stared, women in envy and hunger. Pierre was beyond handsome with his brooding looks, wind-swept blond hair, black clothing and trench coat. He was lined with weapons she'd watched him emplace earlier. His trench coat was too heavy for her to lift by the time he finished stowing the weapons.

"Of course I do. I'm French," he said and swallowed one whole. "You Americans can't get it right, though."

"At least you can eat them."

He winked and swallowed another.

"I think Pierre was right about that sweater," Linda said as she rejoined them. "I'm glad I didn't get it."

"It made you look ten pounds heavier," he reminded her.

"Black isn't supposed to do that."

"It's the material, not the color."

Traci joined them, coffee in hand, and they merged into the crowded mall. Pierre stayed on her heels, guaranteeing her a wide berth. She was grateful to him. His cell rang, and he answered, eyes always moving.

"Has it been an hour?" she asked. "I forgot my watch."

"Yeah, just about. We can make our way back there," Traci said. She looked healthier and happier than their last two encounters, and Linda had let it slip that she and Rainy were talking again.

"That pocket is for knives, not your shit," Pierre snapped as Linda dropped another trinket she'd bought into one of his pockets.

"The key is knowing that - if you're not a bad guy - they can't do more than bark at you," Linda confided.

Texting, Traci led them into the jewelry store. Sofia fingered the cell phone and credit card Damian thrust into her hands on her way out the door. He'd not said anything to her since the other night, when he'd almost destroyed the world. She fed from him silently and made every effort to avoid him in the meantime. Just thinking of him made her body heat and her heart flip. She didn't know what she felt towards him. If her Christmas gift was any indication, she thought she might be falling for the brute.

The sales person recognized her and reappeared with a small box.

"Here is the original," he said, pulling her necklace from a small baggy. "And here is what we've done."

He opened the box to reveal a man's platinum signet ring with the half-moon, half-sun and arrow symbol neatly carved on its head. *Damian* was engraved on the interior. She'd seen the image in his home videos. Every White God but him had worn the symbol. It was a sign of his history, of his past, and he regarded it with both yearning and regret. She didn't know if he'd welcome the gift or if his recent ordeal left him more jaded towards his past.

"Very nice," Linda said, picking it up. "This thing is big enough to fit on my toe."

"Pierre, what do you think?" Sofia asked. He'd approved all their purchases and talked them out of a few bad ones during the morning.

"Bien," he said with a nod of approval. "Subtle bling. He will like it."

She replaced the necklace and handed the credit card to the salesperson. In a few minutes, they were strolling through the mall once more.

"Pierre, where are you from anyway?" Traci asked, looking up at the bodyguard.

"France."

"We know that," Linda said. "*When* are you from?"

"1660-ish. I'm a baby in the organization."

Linda rolled her eyes.

"I don't think I'll get used to that," Traci said with a shake of her head.

Pierre's phone rang again.

"It is different, but you'll never hear such neat accounts of history as you will from these guys," Linda stated.

Sofia's phone vibrated, and she pulled it out, wondering who had her number.

Hey S, it's Jule. Come 2 fd crt.

She glanced at the signs at the nearest intersection indicating the direction of the major department stores and the food court.

"Can we go this way?" she asked, pointing.

The three moved with her, Pierre speaking tersely in French on the phone. She recognized Jule on sight and couldn't help but feel surprised. Like the assassin who obsessed about birthdays and clothing, there were two sides to the man before her: the warm, friendly stranger who she'd felt so comfortable with she confided to him over the phone without knowing anything about him, and the tattooed thug before them in snug biker leathers. He wore an assortment of knives on his belt and a silver symbol of a star with two arrows through it that looked older than Damian's on a black choker around his neck.

He towered head and shoulders over the mostly female crowd and leaned with deceptive casualness that radiated danger against one of the pillars in the food court. His leather vest revealed arms and chest completely covered in colorful, vivid tattoos, his whole visage daring anyone to challenge him. He was the kind of man she wouldn't think twice about running from, though the intelligence gleaming in his soulful brown eyes gave him away as something more. His skin was the shade of melted chocolate, his features too exotic to discern his ethnicity, and his long, straight hair braided down his back.

She stopped a safe distance from him, unable to reconcile the man on the phone with the man before her. He flashed a wide smile at Pierre, who lifted his chin and nudged her forward.

"Ladies. I'm Jule," he said in a gravelly growl as they neared.

"I've heard of you," Linda said, surprised. "Don't you rule the eastern hemisphere?"

"Something like that. Linda, Traci, Sofia, I presume."

He looked at the charm dangling from her necklace and held out his hand to her, palm up. She placed her hand atop his, assessing him. She saw glimpses of his shared history with Damian and Dustin and of a time before meeting them that was too dark for her to see clearly. His intense gaze remained on her.

"Pierre doing good by you?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah. He's got a great sense of style," Linda said with a laugh.

"He'll do," Sofia answered.

Jule's smiles were less reserved than those of the other men despite his unfriendly appearance. The skin around his eyes softened. She saw the thaw from the cactus daring anyone to touch him to the man she'd spoken to on the phone. He took in her features with passive curiosity.

"Hey, boss," Pierre said, holding out his hand.

"Good to see you, Froggie. Enjoying your new assignment?"

"Mon dieu, non! I can't believe you sent me here to babysit."

She gave him a harried look, and Jule chuckled.

"If he's complaining, he's happy," he told her. "He's the best in my sphere of command, though Han's shoes are hard to fill."

"Han had manners," she replied.

"And you're alive because of who?" Pierre responded.

"Glad to see you're getting along," Jule said with a grin. "Dusty warned me you were a handful, Sofi."

"Me?" she asked, surprised.

"Oui," Pierre agreed.

The men around her were smoking crack. She rarely left the house and lived in the library. She wasn't sure what she could do to be more boring.

"Since we're here ... " Traci said, eyes going to a Chinese buffet.

"Go ahead. We'll wait," Jule said. His gaze returned to Sofia, and she crossed her arms under his scrutiny.

"I think I'll go with her," Linda said, looking between the two.

Jule glanced at Pierre, who obeyed the silent command and moved away.

"How you holding up?" he asked.

"Better."

"Reconciled things yet?"

"Working on it. Linda is putting me in contact with the support group she belongs to. I'm reading their blogs. Haven't worked up the nerve to post. I'm different, Jule, even among you all."

"That you are," he agreed. "Dusty says you stopped D from annihilating the planet. That's a good thing."

"I saw that you shared his history ... " she stopped, not sure how comfortable he was with a stranger reading his mind.

"You're definitely not gonna stress me out, ok? Just say what you need to."

"He was upset about his brother."

Jule nodded, a dark look crossing his features.

"That was a bad time for all of us," he recalled. "A very bad time. That was right after I met them, before the Schism and being paroled to earth. When it rains, it hails."

"I know."

"I'm impressed. You're doing well. I bet D didn't tell you that only ten percent of oracles ever get as far as you have."

"No, he didn't."

"Most of them kill themselves. Some go crazy. Some go crazy then kill themselves. The rest we kill when they start going crazy."

"Are you ... " she paused then plowed forward, gaze on his choker. "Are you the same kind of entity he is?"

"Sort of. We're cousins, several times removed. We both inherited our powers while Dusty was like you, a human meant for something much greater."

"We found the traitors in your hemisphere," she said, looking away.

"I know. You saved thousands of lives."

She was silent.

"Sofia."

She looked up at his soft tone. His gaze was warm.

"You did the right thing."

"I hope so," she replied. "I'd do anything for Damian."

"Dusty said I'd like you," he said with a smile. "He's right. You're what D needs. It's taken thousands of years, but I'm glad you finally show up."

"Let me guess, if you didn't like me, Dustin would take me out back and kill me."

"Something like that," Jule said with a laugh. "He's really protective of the people he cares about."

"You didn't come all the way to Tucson for an errand," she said, recalling their phone conversation.

"I did not," he confirmed.

He said no more, and she lost the nerve to pursue.

"I'm going for Frenchie fries," Pierre called. "You want anything, Sofi? Perhaps an American hamburger? Where are you from Jule, so I can get you ethnically stereotypical food?"

Jule laughed, looking at her to see how she'd take it.

"That man has issues," she muttered.

"Let me guess, you asked him if he wanted a croissant?"

Jule bristled suddenly, the smile disappearing as his face turned predatory once again. Sofia watched him, surprised at the quick change.

"Pierre," he called.

Her Guardian was rimrod straight as well, sensing whatever Jule sensed. They exchanged a silent communication, and Pierre moved through the crowd towards Linda and Traci.

"C'mon, sweetheart," Jule said. "It's time for us to go."

Fear swept through her, and he offered a tight smile.

"No worries. Nothing here can get through me. I'm not D, but I'm as close as they come."

He strode beside her, whipping out his cell as they headed towards the nearest exit.

"D, it's me. We're headed back."

The sense of normalcy faded as they moved through the mall. She looked back to see if Pierre followed. He and the girls were gone, though three men in sunglasses moved purposefully towards her and Jule. She knew them for Czerno's men; if they revealed their eyes, they'd be red. She looked up at Jule. He appeared relaxed despite the danger.

"Just another day at the office," he said with one of his warm smiles.

"Will I ever get used to this?"

"Maybe someday."

A car awaited them when they exited. Jule ignored the three men trailing them and ushered her into the armored Tahoe. The driver sped away before the door closed, and she twisted around to see the three men watching them.

"They can't risk killing you," Jule said. "Or they'd have razed the whole mall. Czerno has no restraint when it comes to collateral damage."

"What does he want with me?" she asked, hands shaking.

"In our time, whoever controlled the oracle, controlled the battle. You're a weak point for Damian, and Czerno has been waiting for him to develop an opening."

"I don't like the sound of that," she said, sitting back in her seat.

"What's done can't be undone," he said. "It's a good thing."

"Doesn't seem like it."

"But it is," he said firmly. "Oracles were rare in our time. Blood bound oracles your age and ability? Almost unheard of. Oracles blood bound to a man in Damian's position? Incredible. That he's chosen you as his mate with will basically ensure the continued existence of life as we know it. Trust me - it's a good thing."

"His *what*?"

Jule looked at her.

"Shouldn't have said that. Pretend I didn't."

"Jule, you opened this can of worms."

"And I'm closing it."

She recognized his tone; it was one Damian used when making her boundaries with him clear. She didn't like those boundaries one bit.

"You're on my shit list with Damian and Pierre," she said.

"At least I keep good company," he said with a chuckle. "Is Dusty there, too?"

"Not yet."

"I think I like you, Sofia."

She shook her head. She liked him, too, even though he was different from Damian and Dusty. He patted her leg with another of his friendly smiles and turned his attention to the world racing by them.

It was dark before they returned to the mansion. The driver had driven in circles and down every back alley he could find until Jule was confident there was no one tailing them.

Damian and Dustin awaited them. Their faces lit up at the sight of Jule, and Sofia trailed him in, watching as the three clapped each other on the shoulders and hugged. The energy around them was lively; they were brothers whose bond was formed during their years in the bowels of hell.

She closed her eyes, the home videos playing in her thoughts. These were happy images of shared exploits, battlefield victories, and tender moments crying on each other's shoulders as their world grew uglier. They touched her, and she smiled.

"Sofia," Damian said in a warning tone.

She opened her eyes to find all three gazing at her with similar guarded looks. She crossed her arms, agitated.

"Damian, Dustin, Jule, I'm an oracle. Get used to it."

And she went to the library, their pride be damned.

"Damn oracles," he said under his breath, watching her.

He wasn't sure if he should be angry at her defiant insubordination or amused by it. She was harmless to him, like a trash talking flower. Then again, most men had *some* level of respect for him and his position. He shook his head, returning his attention to Dusty and Jule. Dusty's gaze was on the ground, his smile partially hidden while Jule's amusement was less discreet. He grinned.

"Look on the bright side," Jule said. "She's accepting her role."

"Exactly," Dusty agreed.

Damian glared at both of them, suddenly aware they were laughing at *him*.

"You'll get your turn," he assured them both. "And I'll be there to laugh at you when you do. C'mon."

He strode down the hallway to his office, trailed by his two friends. Han had laid out a few maps on the table near his desk. He flipped the lights on, and the three of them gathered at the table.

"Our evac plan was to take everyone here," Dusty said, indicating a point in the Utah desert. "But we don't know how much information Claire had access to and what she passed to Czerno."

"I didn't stop to ask her," Damian said in a cold voice. Dusty and Jule knew better than to pry what happened when he confronted Claire. He'd done as he promised Jule and eliminated the threat.

"We'll evac elsewhere."

"Wouldn't recommend Europe," Jule said with a snort. "You still coming to help me clean up?"

"Wouldn't miss it. Dusty, can you run the evac and clean-up ops for Arizona?"

"Gladly."

"How 'bout Australia for the next HQ site?" Jule asked.

"Come to Florida," Dusty suggested. "We can be neighbors. I'll help you keep your woman in line."

"I'll be left out again," Jule complained.

"I'm going back to Europe with you, aren't I?" Damian asked, amused. "And I'll stay until the issue is fixed."

"Even if your oracle remains in Florida?" Dusty challenged.

"I trust you to take care of her," Damian assured him.

"See how that works, Dusty?" Jule said with a laugh. "I think you just picked up oracle babysitting duty."

Dusty pursed his lips, and Damian smiled. He trusted Sofia to either of the two men before him and knew Dusty was the more likely of the two to shoot first and ask questions later if she was threatened.

"So we evac tomorrow and set up HQ in Florida," he summarized. "Dusty, can you pick a site and relay it to us? I've got parish calls to make this evening. I'm going to deliver the order to rendezvous here at 0800 in the morning for evacuations. Jule, we'll leave for the European front tomorrow."

"Awesome," Jule agreed.

"I need your computer," Dusty said.

"Like you can use one," Jule said.

"Fuck you, Jule."

Damian smiled and tossed his head towards his computer, straightening. His thoughts drifted to Sofia. He'd likely be away with Jule for quite awhile. If it weren't so unsafe, he'd take her with him.

"I'm heading out to the Sector," he said. "Make yourselves at home."

Jule flipped open his phone, and Dusty sat in front of his computer. He transported himself to his room to change. As he pulled on the last of his clothes and crossed to his armory, a small, black velvet box nestled between two daggers drew his attention. He opened it, surprised to see a ring bearing the White God's seal. He'd tucked away the necklace thousands of years after finding it among the pieces of his brother's body. He'd never been able to bring himself to wear it.

He gazed at the ring, touched. He didn't know how the little oracle knew just how to affect him. Dark memories crossed his mind, along with his resolve to finally let his brother's memory rest in the peace it deserved. With Claire's death, he'd avenged his brother, righted the wrong made thousands of years ago. He no longer needed to feel as if he still dwelt in the shadow of Darian's death. He was the king now in his own right.

He removed the ring from the box, smiling as he saw his name engraved in the interior. He transported himself to the library, where he knew she'd be hiding out.

"Did you do this?" he demanded, holding up the ring like a piece of dirty underwear.

She jerked at his voice and twisted to face him, observing him coolly before turning away.

"Are you going out?"

"I am."

Aggravated by her second display of defiance in one night, he crossed to her and planted his hands on either side of her chair, demanding her attention. She looked up at him.

"Do you like it?" she asked, unease and desire crossing her features at his nearness.

"Yes."

"In your home videos, you're always thinking about the symbol."

"Home videos?" he echoed.

"Your memories."

Her two-toned eyes were still, her head resting on the back of the chair as she looked up at him. The sexual awareness killed him more and more lately, and he started to think going to the European front was a good thing. She'd have time and space to adjust without the added confusion of *him*.

"You shouldn't be afraid to wear it anymore."

"You see too much, Sofia," he replied gruffly.

"You keep telling me who I am. This is who *you* are, Damian."

There was tenderness in the way she looked at him that amazed him. He felt her deep confusion of the world around her and marveled again at how selfless she still managed to be.

"Thank you, Sofia," he whispered.

She smiled at the genuine note in his voice, and he leaned forward, kissing her. If only he didn't have to tour the Sector tonight!

"We'll come back to this, kiri," he promised, grudgingly withdrawing.

Her eyes swirled with arousal, and her parted, plump lips threatened his resolve. She touched his face. He kissed her hand and pushed away. He left the library and transported himself to one of the remaining, undiscovered safe houses at the base of one of the mountains. He placed the ring on his finger, body buzzing with lust and anticipation.

There'd been no hesitancy in her kiss, none of her previous reserve. Maybe, just maybe -

"Hello, Damian."

He whirled, aware he'd been too lost in thought to heed his instincts. Czerno stood before him. Before he could react, a charge of electricity flew threw him, carrying with it an invasive liquid that paralyzed him. He dropped to the floor with a roar, his eyes blurring as more fire and liquid tore through him. He struggled to free his arms from the invisible bonds, his eyesight darkening until he dropped into unconsciousness.

The sense of danger jarred her, and she sat up straight, heart pounding hard. She looked around.

Something was wrong.

Damian.

She shot out of her seat and to the door, wrenching it open. She pulled out the cell he'd given her and called the only number in it.

"Jule."

"What happened?"

"Sweetheart, I'll call you later. Stay put for now, ok?"

He hung up, but there was urgency in his voice. Jule wasn't the type of man who worried about anything, and fear slid through her.

"Pierre!" she called. For the first time, he wasn't lingering in the shadows. "Dustin!"

She snatched her satchel and dug out Linda and Traci's numbers. She dialed each of them, distressed when both calls went to voicemail. She stopped and closed her eyes, seeking the home videos that normally streamed.

Nothing. Coldness filled her.

She went to the key locker and chose one of Damian's sports cars, her instincts urging her to go somewhere, though she didn't know where. Within minutes, she was on the road. It'd been only a week and a half since she ventured into this new world, but she felt strangely exposed without Pierre with her.

Her phone rang, and she snatched it.

"Did you call?" Traci asked.

"Where's Rainy?"

"I'm not supposed to say anything."

"Please, Traci, it's important."

"Come to the Sector."

Sofia arrived half an hour later and found Traci alone with the man she recognized as Ving. He looked past her as he opened the door.

"Where's your bodyguard?" he demanded.

"I don't know."

He stared at her. She edged past him.

"Traci?"

The model appeared, looking tired but awake.

"Ving, we're going to the site," she told him.

"Hell no."

"You can take us, or I can go alone," Sofia said.

"Neither of you will go anywhere."

She exchanged a look with Traci.

"Very well. I'll wait for Pierre to catch up," she said, going to the living room.

Ving eyed her, waiting until Traci followed before accompanying them. Sofia put her purse down and tucked her phone into her jeans.

"You hungry?" Traci asked. "I was just making a midnight snack. I can't stop eating."

"You're eating for three," Ving reminded her.

"I know, I know," Traci grated. "As long as I don't look it!"

"No, thanks," Sofia said, pretending to be interested in the football game on TV.

Traci disappeared around the corner to the kitchen. Sofia waited a minute, then called.

"You need help?"

"Sure, if you want."

She felt Ving's gaze on her as she walked. There was no backdoor in the kitchen, but Traci had wedged the window over the sink open. She rolled her eyes before ducking through it. Sofia followed.

"And now we run like hell," Traci said, closing the window softly.

They circled the hacienda to Sofia's car and dove into it just as the front door wrenched open. She tore away from the curb, heart pounding as she watched Ving's furious form grow smaller in the rearview mirror.

"I'm in so much trouble right now," Traci said. "Rainy's gonna be *pissed*."

"Me, too, I'm sure. Where are we going?"

"One of their safehouses was hit earlier. Rainy called to say he'd be there for awhile cleaning up the mess. I've been there twice to check for signs of vamp surveillance."

"That doesn't sound good."

Her phone rang. Jule's number flashed. She suspected Ving had made a couple of hurried phone calls and let the call go to voicemail.

"This feels weird," Traci said. "I'm used to one of them following me around like a puppy."

"Yeah, I noticed that, too. It feels good to get out, though."

They were quiet. She drove fast with Traci's directions guiding her. As dawn broke, they reached the safehouse, a low, adobe structure hidden between the foothills of the Tucson Mountains. The destruction was visible long before they reached the building. Dead vamps lined the driveway. Several cars were on fire, and black smoke spiraled towards the sky. Deep holes in the ground, rimmed with black, pockmarked the shallow

valley. A dozen vehicles were parked near the structure, itself the size of a small warehouse. At least one of Damian's Guardians lay slain among the scores of vamps.

The adobe structure was guarded by several more Guardians, and she stopped the car before reaching them. The death around her disturbed her, and danger hung in the air. She closed her eyes, waiting. A faint memory began to play. She hesitated and moved away from the car.

"Sofia," Traci called, fear in her voice.

Sofia stopped at the edge of the driveway, horrified by the bloodied and broken bodies spread across the expansive area in front of her. It looked like a warzone and smelled like a cesspool. Her chest was tight and her breath short, but she knew there was one way to find out what happened to Damian.

"Come with me," she whispered. She grabbed Traci's hand, and she picked her way through the death until she found the vamp she sought.

"Sofia!" Dustin's voice was filled with fury.

She knelt beside the vamp. While he looked dead, he was alive enough for his memories to reach her. She braced herself and touched him. The night's battle lit up her thoughts, and what she saw made her gasp.

Czerno himself had been there for the well-timed ambush that overwhelmed the two Guardians assigned to the safehouse. Damian appeared and destroyed nearly a hundred vamps before facing Czerno and Czerno's secret weapon, the one that made the vamp believe they'd win before he'd been shot down. The vamp before her went down before she saw the outcome, but she knew what happened.

Damian had been kidnapped.

Dustin wrenched her to her feet.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Dusty," Jule cautioned, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Dustin released her, glowering. There was only one thing that could make such a cold man so upset. Jule leveled a glare on her.

"Traci?" Rainy's voice was surprised and furious.

"You have thirty seconds, sweetheart," Jule said with a calmness that chilled her to the bone. "Or I'll give you to Dusty."

She didn't want to know what happened after that. She'd seen the dark side of Dusty in the library before she told Damian about Claire.

"Damian was ambushed. Czerno knew he was coming here and had a small army of vamps. He had a secret weapon, but I don't know what it was."

"Where'd they take him?"

"He doesn't know."

Jule freed a gun from the small of his back and pointed it at the vamp beside her. She turned her head away, jumping as the shot rang out. Jule met her gaze calmly, and she resisted the urge to run. She didn't like the reminders that the men around her were capable of such violence.

"I'll deal with you later," he promised.

Ving pulled up and barely made it out of the car before Rainy grabbed him and slammed him over the hood.

"Dusty, calm them down," Jule ordered.

Dustin obeyed

"Fan out and find out if any others are alive!" Jule shouted to the men. "You don't leave my sight, oracle."

She acquiesced, afraid to disagree.

"I got one!" a shout rang out.

"I shouldn't have to tell you to tell me everything," Jule said, blocking her path with his arm. "There are two people on *my* list. No one else in this fucked up universe matters."

She looked up, hearing the unspoken threat.

"I love him, Jule," she said, admitting the words for the first time.

He dropped his arm, and she picked her way through the bodies, covering her mouth to keep from vomiting. Lon knelt by a vamp whose chest still moved. She leaned down, bracing herself as she rested a trembling hand on his forehead.

For Damian.

"He's one of the last to arrive," she said and closed her eyes. "He came from an underground facility on the other side of Tucson."

"Where?" Dustin demanded.

"He's not exactly providing an address."

"Someone from Tucson Sector!"

Still fuming, Rainy joined them.

"What landmarks did he pass?" Jule prodded. "Street names, anything."

His memories were fading fast and growing blurry. Sofia sifted through them.

"The mall. He passed it on his way out of town. Abandoned gas station, new housing development in the foothills. Dirt road, reservation perimeter on the left ..."

"Do you recognize it?" Jule turned.

"I do," Rainy confirmed. "Keep going."

The memories stopped. Sofia withdrew, staring at the dead body in front of her.

"I take it he's dead," Dustin said. "Rainy, get your men. Call in those from the neighboring sectors. We'll need to hit fast then evac."

"You did good, sweetheart," Jule said.

He lifted her to her feet. Her stomach growled.

"When was the last time you ate?" he asked.

"Friday."

Rainy bound off, snatching his cell as he waved the others over.

"Dusty, we're going to have another problem soon," Jule said for Dustin's ears only.

"I'll be ok," she said. "I've gone two days without serious consequence."

Dustin looked at her then at Jule. They exchanged one of their silent communications.

"Fuck," Jule said quietly, realization dawning. "Sofia, you said Czerno drained your blood?"

She nodded.

"We should have seen this coming," he said, running his fingers through his hair.

"You think ..."

"Yes," Dustin said.

"What?" she asked. "What happened?"

"You remember what I told you about oracles offering a weak chink in a commander's armor?" Jule asked. "What I didn't say was how you can be used against

him. When you're blood bound, you can't kill your master, and your master can't kill you. Czerno has your blood. Chances are he used your blood to incapacitate Damian." She paled.

"There's no other way. D couldn't be overpowered unless his powers were crippled," Dustin said. "We gotta think this one through, Jule. We'll have one chance to rip his hideout open and ..."

Sofia watched them walk away, alone and cold. If Damian died, it was because of her. She started towards the road, away from the field of death. Her phone rang. The number wasn't familiar, but she answered.

"Hello, love," Czerno greeted her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"If you're as smart as I suspect, you've probably used your gift to figure out where I am."

"Yes," she whispered.

"Have you told your friends?"

"No," she lied.

"Good. I've got a deal for you. It's simple, really. Even if I kill Damian, I'll have to deal with all his people. However, if I have you, I'll beat them at every turn. If you come to me right now, I'll let him go."

Her heart beat hard.

"Swear on your soul?"

"Love, I don't have a soul. By the time Dusty figures out what to do, Damian will be dead. In fact, if you refuse me now, I'll kill him before I hang up the phone."

She closed her eyes, shaking.

"If you agree, I'll free him when you show up at my doorstep."

"Yes," she whispered. "I'd give you anything for him."

"You have an hour."

He hung up, and she stared at the cell then looked to her car. The door was open as she left it, the keys in the steering column. Jule and Dustin reached the building, and she looked at them.

Czerno would never let her go. If she went to him now, she'd spend eternity with him, a slave to the Black God himself. The truth settled into the pit of her stomach, along with the realization that she meant what she'd said, she would do whatever it took to free the man she loved.

Dustin met her gaze, and he froze.

"Sofia, no!"

She bolted to her car, far enough ahead of any of the men that they couldn't stop her. Peeling out, she floored it and tore down the road. The dead vamp's memories were fresh in her mind, and she sought the sights he'd passed.

Her phone rang, and she snatched it.

"Sofia, turn around. Now."

"No, Jule. He'll kill him if I don't go."

"He'll kill him if you do."

Her tears rose, blurring her vision. She struggled for control, focusing on the road.

"Sofia," he said more gently. "Please."

"Stop," she begged. "It's my fault he was caught. I can fix it. I can fix it!"

"You can't fix a war that's been on for hundreds of thousand years."

The number took her breath away.

"I have to, Jule. I'm sorry. The world needs him."

She hung up the phone. She gripped the steering wheel hard and drove.

The staging area was where the vamp remembered it being, tucked at the base of a mountain in a draw. Sofia swallowed hard at the sight of so many vamps milling around. She drove up to the elevator entrance on the side of the draw. One vamp in particular seemed to be awaiting her and strode to the car. The other vamps didn't so much as acknowledge her as she stepped from the car. Her greeter motioned her to follow, and she obeyed, mind on Damian and nothing else. He led her into a small elevator that plunged quickly to the depths beneath the mountain.

The underground world was well built and bright with white washed walls lining corridors wide enough for two people to walk side-by-side. The vamp led her down a maze of hallways through scores of vamps and past multiple doorways until he reached a set of double doors. He opened one, and she entered. The study beyond was a replica of the one in Virginia, down to the Gothic hood on the fireplace.

Damian was nowhere to be seen. Czerno rose from a desk as she entered. The large man in black with lopsided shoulders and an executioner's hood pressed himself into a corner. The man with verdant eyes stood beside him, watching her.

"I did what you asked. You said you'd free him," she said.

At Czerno's chilled smile, she knew he had no intention of freeing either of them. Panic swelled within her.

"Welcome home, love," he said.

She whirled, but the vamp that led her down blocked the doorway. She sucked in a breath, struggling to calm herself.

"Czerno, free him! You have me!"

"I'd rather kill two birds with one stone," he said. "Two, take her."

"No!" she breathed. "Please no! I'll do whatever you want! Please, just let him go."

"We'll talk later, love," Czerno assured her. "You'll have all the time in the world to beg me, on your knees and on your back."

His gaze swept over her in cold admiration as he spoke. The executioner from the corner emerged from the shadows and took her arms.

"Let him go! Please!" she shouted as he pulled her from the room.

Hysteria gripped her, and she fought him until he slung her over his shoulder. Tears blinded her.

"Damian!"

Sofia.

His voice was weak, as if he were far away. She strained against the man again.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she sobbed.

The man in the executioner uniform dumped her onto a familiar surgical table in a room that stank of blood.

She screamed and launched off of it. He slammed the door closed, subduing her hysterical strikes with unexpected gentleness until she lay strapped to the cold table,

weeping. When spent, she lay still, willing sleep or death to take her. Neither did. She closed her eyes to the ceiling.

Her stomach growled again. She'd starve in a day.

The shadow emerged from the corner again. She'd forgotten his presence, but he peeled off one glove to display a scarred forearm and hand. As she watched, he took a knife and sliced his wrist. She twisted her head away as he dripped the blood over her lips. He snatched her head with his other hand, then held her nose closed as she clamped her mouth shut. When she gasped for air, his blood trickled into her mouth.

She started to spit it out but stopped.

She knew this man.

Though his blood didn't ensnare her as Damian's did, it tasted *familiar*. She drank, and he lowered his wrist to her lips. His memories flashed as they made contact. He knew nothing beyond the past twenty four hours. His first memory was of waking up, then everything he'd done for the day.

He moved away when she ceased drinking, back to the corner. She twisted to stare at him. He was Damian's size, though by his lopsided shoulders and scars, he'd survived some sort of serious injury. He was lean and wiry compared to Damian's bulky build.

Memories flooded her mind, and she sensed there was something she was missing from them.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

He didn't answer and returned to his corner.

She lay still, the man in the corner so silent she had to look several times to make sure he was still there. Sobs wracked her body as she thought of Damian and how badly she'd destroyed any plan Dustin or Jule could make.

"Damian," she whispered. "Forgive me. I should have let you make love to me."

Panic and tears soon drained her of energy, and she stared listlessly at the bloodied ceiling until the man in the corner stirred. The door behind her opened, and Czerno stepped in, trailed by the older, silent gentleman.

"Still alive," he observed, walking around her. "Two, let her walk around for an hour every twelve. I don't want her muscles turning to jelly."

She glared at him, hate in her gaze. She would *never* give this man the visions he wanted!

Czerno trailed a finger down the side of her face, his chilling smile and the onslaught of visions making her gasp.

"I'm blood bound," she forced the words out. "If you kill him, I'll die."

"I've got something almost as good as him," Czerno said, motioning to the man in the corner. "According to my source of information, a blood relative can sustain an oracle marooned without her master. We're going to test this. Either you'll die or you won't."

"I'll never help you!"

"I have eternity to break you, Sofia. I'm in no rush, though I do have a plan to motivate you. It involves removing your body parts, one at a time. Or maybe peeling your skin off? Maybe fucking you til you scream will soften you up a bit. We'll see what works, won't we?" he lowered his head to her ear. "I have options. You don't. Trust me. Everyone breaks."

Terror washed over her at his calm, controlled words. She'd seen what he was capable of in his visions. The best she could hope for was eternity on this table, alone, knowing what she'd done to humanity's defender. She started to cry again.

Czerno circled her again and ran his hands down her body, stepping away in approval. He left with a satisfied chuckle.

"Forgive me, Damian," she whispered again.

Two freed her a few hours later and let her walk around the room. He stood in front of the door, unmoving as she explored her surroundings. The room was empty aside from the table. There was one vent in the ceiling, not large enough for her hand let alone her body. Despair washed over her, but she forced herself to concentrate.

Damian wasn't dead. She felt it. If she could only reach him ...

She faced Two, the only thing between her and escape. He was a puzzle, a man with no memory beyond waking up in the morning. The rest was blocked, as if a dam was placed there. She paced and stared at him.

... a blood relative can sustain an oracle.

She'd heard no such thing, but then again, she didn't know anything about oracles aside from what little she'd gleaned from books and testing herself. His theory was so far correct. Her stomach was content, and she'd not thrown up. She hesitated, then approached Two. He didn't move as she stopped in front of him. She took his hand. He obliged and removed his glove, rolling his sleeve to his elbow and withdrawing a knife. Though she wasn't hungry, she drank, exploring the black curtain shielding his memories as she did.

He pushed his sleeve up farther, revealing the bottom of a thick bicep with a partially visible tattoo. She slid her hand up his arm and nudged the sleeve. The image on his bicep was the same she wore around her neck.

Images flooded her mind, Damian's, Claire's, Isac's. She saw Damian watch the new king get his tattoo as a rite of passage, saw it again as Claire made love to her husband, saw it in Isac's vision as he hacked the tattooed man apart. The man hiding in the corner of her mind, he whose death plagued Damian for thousands of years.

Darian.

She staggered back, the visions cementing in her mind, overwhelming her. She tripped, and her head snapped back. Two caught her before she hit the ground. His stunted memories collided with the others running through her mind. His honey-colored eyes were visible in the harsh lighting of the room.

"Darian!"

His pupils dilated. He placed her on the table and retreated, shaking his head and swiping at the air around him, as if plagued by bees.

"Darian," she repeated.

Kiri.

Seizing control of himself, he stepped forward and pushed her back, binding her to the table again. Her hope soared, and she watched him return to his corner.

"Your name is Darian. Your brother is Damian. You were born two years apart. You married Claire ... " she went on, closing her eyes as she repeated everything from the memories of others.

He didn't move, didn't respond. She spoke until she was hoarse. Her hope flagged, and she cried, then started again. She spoke until she drifted into an uncomfortable doze only to awake when he released her.

Cramped, she stretched before approaching him again. She pulled the necklace from her neck.

"Look," she said and touched his bicep.

Mechanically, he rolled his sleeve and pricked his wrist. The curtain blocking him from his memories was less defined, like ice beginning to thaw.

"This is who you are," she said, holding up the symbol. "Your name is Darian. Your brother is ..."

She started over, talking until he freed her once more. But he showed no sign of life as he took up his position in his corner, and desperation crept through her. She cried and kept talking, her sentences punctuated by sobs. At last, she stopped speaking and lay, exhausted. If there was a way to make him see what was in her head ... to *make* him remember ... she focused on Damian's memories, the ones before the dark age, when he and his brother were happy.

"Hungry," she whispered.

Two obeyed and moved forward, slicing his wrist for her again. As she drank, she replayed Damian's memories over and over.

Damian needs you.

"Kiri."

His word threw her off guard.

"Think, Darian, think," she said. "Do you remember your brother Damian?"

An image flashed, that of Damian chained to a wall. Tears formed in her eyes.

"Yes," she choked out. "Damian. Your brother."

"Don't cry, *kiri*."

He was struggling. She replayed the home videos, closing her eyes and focusing. If he were like his brother, he would hear her thoughts.

Two returned to his corner.

She kept the movies playing, focusing on nothing other than the brothers' time together. She drifted into a doze.

"Damian," Two said, waking her.

"He needs you," she whispered. "He's in trouble."

"Damian in trouble."

"Yes, Darian."

"Don't cry, *kiri*."

He fell into silence again for several hours. When he freed her again, she approached him and touched his hood.

"Remove it, Darian."

He didn't respond. She touched his arm, replaying the videos. He pulled off the hood with one hand.

His face was as deeply scarred as his hands. His hair was brown rather than white-blond, his beautiful eyes deep set and large. She took his face in her hands the way she had Damian the night he wanted to destroy the world and forced him to meet her gaze. His honey gaze was still.

"Damian needs you," she whispered. "He's in danger. I love him, Darian. Please help us."

"Damian."

She raised to her tiptoes and kissed him, her own memories of Damian forefront in her mind. She replayed their first kiss, his ring, the way his men spoke of him. She showed him Czerno, his master, and the darkness in Czerno's mind. She dropped to her feet and moved away.

"Kiri."

His eyes were closed.

"Your name is Darian. Your brother is Damian."

Emotions rippled across his face. She touched her hands to his cheeks again.

"Please, Darian, please. You can do this."

His eyes opened, and he met her gaze. For the first time, she sensed he was aware. His golden eyes swirled.

"Remember," she said, holding up the necklace.

"Two!" Czerno pounded on the door.

She waited. The life died from his eyes, and he replaced his hood.

"No. No, no, no!" she shouted, pounding on his chest.

Sobbing, she dropped to her knees. Two stepped aside. Czerno entered.

"Congrats. You've survived two days. Looks like I was right," he said, satisfied.

"Two, put her on the table. Kill Damian and come back when you're done."

Sofia tried to push him away as he lifted her onto the table. There was a tug at her neck, and she touched it, surprised to find the necklace gone. Two left.

"As soon as he's done, we'll start working on you," Czerno promised. "Start thinking of which way you want me to fuck you first."

He closed the door behind him with a cold laugh, not bothering to bind her.

She curled on her side and wept.

I love you, Damian. Please forgive me!

He'd never heard *kiri* cry so hard. Her heart was breaking. Two walked through the halls quickly. He couldn't remember what the master had told him to do. All he could see in his head was *kiri* crying and the dreams she'd made him remember. They weren't good dreams, and the ones she showed him weren't the only ones in his head.

"Don't cry, *kiri*."

He didn't know what to do. His master was hurting her. Why didn't she go back to his head, where she was safe? Why did she come to see him? He took care of her and fed her and let her walk around. Every time he freed her, he hoped she returned to his head. But she didn't.

Damian. Darian.

The images in his head made him stagger and fall against the rough wall. The chain around his hand bit into his finger, and he looked at it. It was *kiri*'s. He rolled up his sleeve, staring in wonder at the tattoo on his bicep. He didn't remember how he got it.

Damian needs you. Please help him, Darian.

He was Darian, eldest son of the White God. The dreams were coming faster now.

He looked around him and at the necklace in his hand. He was going to Damian. If he freed Damian, *kiri* would go back to his head, where his master couldn't hurt her.

Two went to Damian's cell and opened the door. Damian was still and silent, but he wasn't dead. No, the master had been waiting to kill him, had been feeding Damian the same juice Two stopped drinking. Damian was chained to the wall so he could be force fed. Two had helped force feed him, before he knew *kiri* loved him.

Two stopped and looked at Damian, another flash of dreams driving him to his knees. He pulled up his sleeve. Damian had a mark like his on his ring. He lifted the chain, *kiri's* chain, and looked at the identical symbols, struck by the idea that he somehow belonged to the same world they did.

Two released him and lifted him over his shoulders. He made his way through the crowded halls, grunting under the weight of the man. He followed a familiar path through a narrowing hall and looked at his palm for the three codes written there. He took Damian outside to the rock where he and *kiri* watched the stars and set him down.

"Don't cry, *kiri*," Two said, still hearing her sobs.

He knelt over Damian and pulled the ring from his finger. He placed the necklace in his hand and closed it gently.

"From *kiri*," he told the unconscious man. "She loves you, and she's sorry."

He turned and made his way through the doors he remembered traversing many times the past few days. And now, he would convince *kiri* to return to his head, before his master killed her.

Two's chest clenched, and he was afraid. He didn't want *kiri* to die. She was *his*. She was all he had.

* * *

Alarms sounded a second before the doors exploded off their hinges.

"*What did you do?*" Czerno roared in an inhuman voice.

Sofia darted off the table, staring at him as he entered, trailed by Two and the man with green eyes. The man with green eyes leaned over to Two, whispering to him. Two bowed his head, and the green-eyed man was gone.

"How did you free him? How did you alert them?" Czerno demanded, snatching her arm so hard she cried out.

"I've been here!" she said, shoving at him and his black memories.

A backhand sent her world reeling. Fire lit up half her face, and she tasted blood in her mouth. She landed hard. He kicked her in the stomach, and she gasped.

"Two, bring her."

Two obeyed, lifting her off the floor and carrying her. She gazed up at him as he followed Czerno, looking again for some sign of life in his still gold eyes.

"Darian," she whispered. "Please, Darian, come back to me."

He didn't even look at her, and her hope plummeted again. They stopped in a small command center, where one wall displayed monitors.

"Now!" Czerno barked.

Jule's face materialized on the screen. Czerno snatched her and dragged her close, the visions making her stagger.

"Where's Damian?" Jule demanded.

"Get your men out of here!" Czerno ordered. "Quickly, before I kill her!"

Fire tore through her, and she cried out. It increased, the sensation of frying from the inside out.

"Stop," Jule ordered. "Dusty, order a withdrawal."

The fire burned hot enough to devour Czerno's dark memories.

I'll protect you, kiri.

The voice in her head came from Two. Czerno released her, and she fell, body seizing in agony.

"Czerno! We're pulling out!"

"Cut it!" Czerno snarled. He kicked her as he passed. Jule's face disappeared from the screen, and the pain eased. Unable to move, she panted, body convulsing with aftershocks from the attack.

"They don't have him! He's here, somewhere! Find him!" Czerno ordered.

His vamps scampered out of the command center to obey. He stalked to her again and dragged her up. The man with the green eyes was suddenly behind him, watching her.

"I don't give a damn if he escapes. I have you."

He hit her one more time, and she careened against Two, caught between consciousness and darkness. Two lifted her and carried her into a hallway teeming with vamps.

Damian was free! The thought pierced her thoughts, and she sagged against Two, not caring if she survived or not. Two took her down a quieter hall and set her down. She doubled over, pain from Czerno's attacks crippling her.

Two knelt over her. He held Damian's ring in front of her face then tucked it into her jeans.

"Yes, master," he said to no one she saw.

She closed her eyes, in too much pain to concentrate. He touched her, and familiar warmth flashed through her, easing the pain. Two pulled her to her feet. Sofia stared up at him, not daring to hope he'd help her. He stalked down the hall. She watched him, tempted to run, before realizing the amount of activity in the halls behind her guaranteed her capture.

She jogged after him as he strode through the maze. He emerged into a busier hall and waited for her, taking her arm and leading her through the vamps. They passed through the activity before he started down another hall. The alarms faded, and the halls grew cruder, unfinished. Sofia followed him as the halls angled up and narrowed until Two had to walk through them sideways. He reached a door finally and typed in the access code. It opened. They passed through two more before exiting into a cold desert night on the side of a mountain, overlooking the activity at the elevator's entrance.

Sofia almost cried in relief. Two continued, finding a narrow path in the dark and starting down it. She followed, shivering. The path wound its way downward, dumping them into a draw far enough away to be safe. Two walked on once he reached the desert, and she trotted after him, looking back at the floodlit entrance to the elevator. Gunshots streaked around the entrance. A massive explosion went off, shaking the ground beneath them.

She stopped and stared, throat tightening.

"Damian," she whispered.

Two took her arm, driving her onward. When assured she'd follow, he released her and marched on into the desert, away from the mountain. A sense of familiarity hit her as they neared a clump of rocks. She'd seen it in Pierre's future. The images replayed, and she launched forward.

"Pierre, no!" she shouted, running ahead of Two.

He snatched her as she passed, but not before she heard a shot and felt fire burn through her. She was driven back against Two, who caught her. Warm blood splattered her neck and face.

She cried out in pain.

"Let her go!" she recognized Pierre's voice.

Two lowered her, pulling up his sleeves. She snatched his shirt.

"No!"

"Fuck, Pierre!" Dustin snarled. "Sofia? You ok?"

"I'm ... ok," she said, suddenly dizzy. "Dustin, don't shoot him, please! *Please!*"

A dark shape moved from the rocks while three more fanned out from the sides.

Two strained against her grip and tensed. Sofia shook her head to clear the dizziness.

"Darian, lower your head," she ordered.

The man beside her hesitated then obeyed. She yanked his hood off.

"Dusty, Jule's got him!" Rainy shouted triumphantly. "I'm calling the choppers."

"Fast," Dustin ordered.

In the distance, a small army of vamps was running towards them. A flashlight blinded her. She held up her hand.

"Mon dieu!" Pierre said, then cursed.

"Holy shit," Dustin breathed as the flashlight rose to Darian's face. "Holster em! *Now!*"

He moved forward, stopping to stare at Darian.

Pierre dropped beside her, muttering in French. Sofia sagged, exhausted. Before she started to drift into an in-between place, she saw Darian stand and look around, awake for the first time in thousands of years.

Dustin's face was a mottled mess of emotions. Darian eyed him warily, not recognizing him, before he knelt beside her again. Heat scorched through her and she gasped, awake once again.

"You can see the stars, *kiri*," he said in his monotonous, mechanical voice.

"Rainy, where's my chopper?" Dustin shouted, drawing his weapon again.

"Looks like we should start running, non?" Pierre asked.

Sofia pushed his hands away. Fatigued, her wounds were nonetheless healed. Pierre hauled her up.

"Pierre, carry her. We'll run," Dustin said.

Before he could comply, Darian shoved him aside and swept her off her feet.

I'll protect you, kiri.

They ran to the next nearest group of rocks, where a handful of four-by-fours waited. Darian placed her behind Dustin and climbed behind Rainy. Sofia wrapped her arms around Dustin and squeezed her eyes closed as the engine roared to life. Sand flew as they soared and leapt through the desert. The distant beat of a helicopter's wings drew closer as they raced away from the mountains into the desert. A chopper landed ahead of them.

Dustin braked hard and swung his leg over the handlebars.

"Sofi, go! Rainy, Lon, with me!"

Sofia shielded her eyes against the wind and sand. She reached out to Darian and grabbed his hand, pulling him with her. His world was one of confusion, his memories overwhelming as the dam that had been in place for thousands of years crumbled. Darian held his head, and she wrapped her arms around him, wishing she could protect him from the dark memories breaking free.

I'm scared, kiri.

"Hold on, Darian," she whispered, tears blurring her vision. "I'm here."

He showed her a picture of where he'd taken Damian.

"Thank you, Darian!" she cried.

I'm scared, kiri.

She felt his fear and squeezed her eyes closed, the man in her arms colliding with the man hiding in the corner of her mind. They became one, and this time, when she reached out to him, he took her hand. She sobbed, absorbing the black visions spilling through his mind. Thousands of years of Czerno's depravity threatened to consume him. She was his only relief, and the visions threatened to consume *her*.

Peace, oracle.

She didn't recognize the voice in her mind and felt the presence of someone – or something – beside her. A hand swept the dark memories from her mind, and she sagged against Darian, feeling the same sense of peace overtake his mind.

"Master, I did as you said," Darian said in a choked voice. "I saved kiri."

Good boy. Be at peace tonight, both of you.

The being left, but the peace remained. Darian began to cry, and she held him tighter.

The chopper landed. Pierre hopped out and helped her then Darian. They were at another discreet location, this one nestled between the peaks of two mountains. She darted off the landing pad with him, and the chopper went up again. The men on the small base drew their weapons at the sight of Darian. She took his arm, terrified they'd shoot the lost soul. Pierre led them to the empty, well-lit helicopter hangar, where several men crowded around a still body on the hangar floor. Her heart flipped, and she sprinted forward.

"Damian!"

He was unconscious and pale. She dropped to his side and fluttered kisses across his face.

"Jule, what's wrong with him?" she asked, twisting.

"Poison," Darian croaked.

Jule's arm shot out to block the interloper's progress towards them then froze. His mouth dropped open. She hopped to her feet and shoved Jule's arm away, pulling Darian to the ground beside her.

"Darian, what is it?" she demanded. "Please tell me!"

He held his head and leaned into her, struggling. She took his face in her hands again, forcing his attention on her.

"Please, Darian!"

"Claire's ... blood," he said at last.

Jule knelt beside them, staring at the horribly scarred man.

"Claire ... was meant to be his oracle," he said hoarsely. "It's *your* blood, Sofia."

Horror descended upon her as she realized the depth of Claire's betrayal. Darian crouched beside his brother, studying him while emotions flew across his face. He placed his hands on his face. Damian's body bucked. Darian moved away. Damian rolled onto his side and puked blood into the sand.

Sofia touched him, heart rejoicing. Dazed, Damian sat up.

"Kiri is safe," Darian said in a monotone voice.

Damian's head whipped around. The two brothers stared at each other, and she choked back a sob, joy and horror flying through her.

"Everyone out."

Damian's voice was soft, but his command made everyone in the hangar jump. Jule pulled her to her feet and half-carried her out. He gripped her arms and turned her to face him. His gaze was unusually intense as he struggled to control his emotions. He embraced her, hugging her hard. She clung to him, overwhelmed.

"Here I thought I'd lost two people I cared about only to recover three," he said, hoarse. "If you weren't D's, I'd kiss you."

"Jule! We need to go!" Pierre's voice urged.

"All hell is about to start raining down," Jule said, pulling away from her. "Go with Pierre. Rainy wants to chew your ass out for dragging Traci into this, and then I'll chew your ass out for being so fucking stupid."

He wiped the tears from her face and kissed her forehead.

"Go," he said, pushing her towards her awaiting bodyguard.

"Bring them both back to me, Jule," she whispered. He gave a brisk nod.

"Sofia!"

She turned, surprised to Traci racing towards her from across the helo-pad.

"Two women," Pierre muttered.

Traci flung her arms around her, her fear fresh on her face. Sofia hugged her back.

"Pierre," Jule said with a toss of his head.

"Gladly. Come with me ladies."

He gripped each of their arms and led them towards two black Tahoes. She twisted to see the helo-hangar one last time, not yet able to believe the night's events.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

His brother was somewhere inside the scarred shell of a man before him. He stared into Darian's gold eyes, seeking some sign of the man he'd known. Darian struggled visibly, his gaze stormy and his frame shaking. His own head was fuzzy from the effects of the drink he'd been force fed. He had a throbbing headache, and his body didn't respond the way it should.

"Do you know me, brother?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"Damian," came the mechanical voice. "Kiri loves you."

Damian couldn't help his smile at the words. Darian knew him because of Sofia, and he reached out to his brother, absorbing what memories were in his mind. Darian's mind was like a disaster scene after a hurricane. The bits and pieces of who he was were there, disjointed and scattered. Two people were all he knew with certainty: Sofia

and the Watcher with his forest green eyes. His brother wasn't sure of anything or anyone else, even if he did match the faces in his thoughts with those around him.

"Be gentle. He'll break if you push him," the Watcher said.

Damian twisted, surprised to find his body stiff with the simple movement. He was too out of sorts to feel the Watcher's arrival.

"Master," Darian said, bowing his head.

The sight of someone once so powerful and proud in submission to *anyone* infuriated him. For the first time in his life, Damian was speechless when confronted with the horror before him.

"He's been abused for thousands of years," the Watcher said, pausing beside the still, scarred man and resting a hand on his head. "He'll need your help."

"Like I wouldn't help him," he snapped.

He looked to his brother again, fury of the deepest kind running within him. He loved Darian, always would, but understanding what he'd been through for thousands of years made him wish his brother had died instead of being forced to bear such pain.

"I can only coach," the Watcher reminded him. "Your oracle and Darian had to do the real work. If she'd been any less of an oracle than what she is ..."

Darian would spend the remainder of his life in the hell that'd claimed him. Damian's throat tightened.

"Claire did this to him."

"Yes, she did. After the attack, Czerno brought him back to life. He wasn't part of the plan to kill him, but he found out from Claire when they met shortly before Darian's death. He understood that the Black God can never truly kill the White God for fear of unleashing the Original Beings, who would crush him. He was there to save your brother when Isac finished and kept him under control using Claire's blood. I think he's since been sickened with evil and forgotten if you don't exist, neither does he."

"My own enemy saved him," Damian said with a harsh laugh. "Our world is so fucked up."

"Yes, ikir, it is," the Watcher agreed.

The depth of Claire's betrayal made him wish he could kill her again a thousand times over! He'd been too kind in his execution of the sick bitch!

"Kiri," Darian said almost sadly.

Damian's spinning emotions warmed at the idea that Sofia saved him. He didn't want to think on the probability behind such a powerful oracle appearing when she did. No, he wouldn't look that gift horse in the mouth, not when the embodiment of her ability sat hunched before him.

"Will he ever be close to the man I knew?" he whispered the thought, unable to help the tears that rose with it.

"There is a legend among the humans of the phoenix, who rises from his own ashes," the Watcher replied. "Your brother will never be what he was, but he will rise again as the Grey God."

He looked to the Watcher, surprised.

"Darian is the Grey God?"

"Yes, ikir. He will be forever stuck between the two worlds, the good and the evil, without entering either or leaving either behind. His will not be an easy role to fill."

He reached out to his brother and touched his head to his forehead. Darian didn't resist, and Damian delighted in the idea that the sound of him breathing meant his brother was truly alive.

"Watcher, I love him, and I can't fathom his pain," he said. "Will he be lost like this forever?"

"No. Even in human time, his suffering will be short but it will be very bad for him until it ends."

"Sofia can help him."

"There will be others who will help him, too. He will need them all, and he will need you if he is to take his place as the Grey God. One of your team captains will have friends as well."

"Jule is as old as you," he said. "Or older?"

"Close," the Watcher admitted. "He's still not in favor among my kind. His penance is not yet served."

"Good. Leave him here with me."

"You'll not face anyone willing to challenge you for him, ikir, I assure you, though there may be some who *might* help him."

The amount of distaste in the Watcher's voice amused him. Jule had never said what he'd done to piss someone off and get exiled to earth, but it must have been bad if the Watcher's kind clipped his powers and sent him packing.

"By your leave, ikir," the Watcher said with a bow of his head.

He waved him away, attention returning to Darian. He touched his brother's face, his emotions soaring once again.

Darian was alive. Sofia was safe. In that moment, nothing else mattered to him. He released a deep breath and rose, aware the birth of a new god and discovery of a powerful oracle indicated nothing but more trouble to come.

"Come, brother, let's take you back to kiri," he said.

Darian stood obediently, and Damian's throat tightened again to know his brother was at his side.

Sofia watched the last of the blood swirl down the drain. She leaned her head against the shower wall, exhausted. Damian's heavy ring hung off a chain around her neck, and she clenched it.

"You ok?" Traci called, voice muffled by the door.

"Yeah."

She turned off the shower and dried herself. Traci sat on an unmade bed belonging to one of the Tucson Sector members.

"Pierre, can I get some privacy?" she asked.

"Nope," he said from his position on a chair inside the door. "You're both grounded." She returned to the bathroom to dress in clothing Linda had brought over.

"When will you know if the house is safe?"

"Soon," was his vague response. "They have to finish their clean up."

"Did they find Czerno?"

"They won't. He goes poof and returns to one of his other bases, leaving everyone else to fry."

She shivered.

"Did you really shoot her?" Traci asked.

"Not on purpose," Pierre grated.

"That's kind of an extreme form of revenge for asking you about croissants."

Pierre mumbled a few curses. She wiped the fog away from the mirror. Her bruises were gone, and her two-toned eyes were calmer than they'd been. For the first time since entering this world, she felt at peace.

"Pierre, I want to go home!" she complained.

"Ok."

She poked her head out of the bathroom. He lowered his phone.

"Really?"

"All clear. You are coming with us, mademoiselle," he said to Traci.

She sprung up and snatched her purse. He grimaced and rose more slowly. Sofia slipped on oversized flip flops Traci dug out of one of the closets. Pierre's phone dinged, and he opened it again.

"There's a few missions, but they said the house is clear," he said. "Linda is there. Looks like we'll have to evac and rebuild the Tucson Sector. Czerno knows where all our safehouses are."

Grande and Lon awaited them in the living room, and they rose as they approached. Two armored Tahoes sat out front. Pierre drove the women while the other two followed.

"If I weren't so scared, this would be neat," Traci whispered to her. "Armored cars, bodyguards ... like we're famous or something."

"It is kinda neat," Sofia agreed. "Until your bodyguard shoots you."

"If you keep mentioning it, it won't be an accident next time," he retorted, shooting her a look in the rearview mirror.

She smiled, and Traci covered her mouth to keep him from hearing her laugh.

"Pierre."

He glanced at her.

"Thank you for taking care of me. You're a good man."

"You're welcome."

Though still arch, his tone had softened enough to show her he wasn't unaffected by her genuine words.

The mansion hummed with activity, from the gardens that served as a helopad to the teeming barracks and guardians pacing the halls. She was reminded of a scene from a movie, where an army mobilized for war.

"Linda's asleep already. Go on up and rest. We've got to start moving everything within 24 hours," Lon told them, slinging a machine gun over his shoulder.

"Traci," Rainy called, holding out his hand.

She went to him, eyes wide at the activity. In the midst of the activity in the mansion, Sofia saw Dustin. He settled one of his cool looks on her and tossed his head towards the stairs. He didn't look to be in a mood for questions, so she hurried past him to her room, Pierre trailing. She closed the door, surprised at how quiet her room was.

She was about to lie down when she sensed him walk by. Her heart soared, and she touched the ring at her neck. She hesitated, sensing he would be angrier with her than Jule or Dustin had been. Or both combined. Steeling herself, she passed Pierre at her door and knocked on Damian's door.

Not in the mood, Sofia.

She opened the door, heart pounding. He was framed against the balcony once again, and she leaned against the door before venturing forward. Despite the cool fear spiraling through her, she couldn't help but feel thrilled at the sight of him after she thought she'd lost him.

"If you ever, ever, do anything like that again ... "

He didn't have to finish the threat. His tone was enough to tell her he'd show no mercy. He was too angry to face her, and she was glad of it. She hugged herself, wanting to throw her arms around him but knowing he was in as an approachable of a mood as Dustin.

"I brought this back," she said and pulled off the chain, placing the ring on the table nearest the door.

"I wanted to apologize to you, Damian," she continued. "When I was in that room ..."

His grip on the railing tightened, and she stopped, afraid of pushing him through the brittle façade containing his emotions. After a thick moment of silence, she forced herself to continue.

"I swore to myself I'd do this," she said. "Damian, I love you. If you don't hate me for what I did, if you still ... want me ... I'm yours."

He said nothing, didn't move. A knock sounded at his door. She took the opportunity to escape, darting by Dustin to her room.

She'd said her piece. She didn't know if she'd hurt him enough to drive him away forever or if there was a sliver of him that still wanted her. Tortured by the thought she might have waited too long, she paced her room until too tired to stand.

Just when he'd thought Sofia couldn't surprise him more, she did. The insanity of what she did was beyond his comprehension. While he loved the *thought* of her commitment to him, her action made him want to explode. And then to waltz in and deliver such an important message at a time when he wanted nothing more than to remain infuriated with her for her actions.

"Fucking women," he muttered.

"That fucking woman saved your brother's life," Dusty reminded him.

He'd not yet reconciled how he felt about seeing his brother alive and in so much pain. He was more and more appalled by the memories afflicting his brother, what he'd gone through since his supposed death. Darian was showing more signs of life. He'd spent the morning vomiting blood and was able to remember Jule and Dusty by afternoon.

And kiri. He knew Sofia better than he knew Damian. Damian closed his eyes in pain, unable to shake his brother's black history.

"Though if I were you, I'd still be super pissed at her."

"I am," he assured him.

Dusty's gaze grew intent.

"Damian, I'm sorry. We should have prevented her from leaving. I never thought she'd do something like that," he said quietly.

"I don't hold you responsible," Damian said with a smile. "If there's one thing I've learned about humans, it's that you can't control them."

"It *is* my responsibility. She's your mate and my sister. I swear it'll never happen again. The oath I took to you and Jule I now take to her."

Damian was touched. He saw Dusty's conviction on his face.

"Thank you, Dusty," he replied in a hushed tone. "I doubt she'll appreciate it though. The first time she forgets your birthday, all hell will break loose."

Dusty shook his head.

"I am grateful to you, Dusty," Damian replied more seriously. "It's been a rough few days."

"How are you feeling?"

"Good. Easier for me than Darian to readjust."

"How is he?"

He's lost in his mind right now. He'll have to work through it."

"I don't suppose there are any shrinks among the Naturals."

"Don't think so. Sofia can work with him some. I don't know how she reached him inside that dark maze," he said with a shake of his head.

"Neither do I."

"What a sick bastard. If I could kill Czerno ... " Damian swore darkly. How sick was the man who kept his former enemy as a slave?

"Fuck, D, I'd take killing Claire over Czerno any day," Jule said, appearing near the door. "Czerno's job is to be a bad guy. Claire was the worst kind of traitor imaginable."

"Good point," Damian said. "I was able to take care of that issue, though. I can't touch Czerno."

"I love Sofia, but I hope you take a switch to her ass," Jule advised as he tossed himself into one of the chairs.

"I told him it was your fault," Dusty said.

"It was," Jule agreed. "And I'm deeply sorry for it, Damian. On what soul I have, I swear never to allow harm to come to kiri."

Damian chuckled.

"It wasn't either of your faults. I think this was a small thing they call fate," he assured them. "And thank you both."

"We still good for tomorrow?" Jule asked, referencing their journey to Europe.

"Yep. Dusty and Darian will be babysitting my oracle."

"I'll keep her in line," Dusty assured him.

"I'm too angry at her to pity her," Jule said. "You gonna try to rein in Pierre, too?"

"If only. The day kiri grows tired of him, he's going to my behavior modification training," Dusty assured him.

"Only if kiri agrees," Damian warned.

"Is this how you train 'em in the eastern hemisphere?" Dusty demanded, turning to Jule.

"Better a benevolent team player than a dictator," Jule retorted.

"Disciplinarian. I don't let them run amok and follow their *feelings*. I give them structure."

"Like robots."

Their long standing feud over leadership styles was interrupted as Darian appeared in the midst of them. Damian's throat tightened, and his eyes misted at the sight of his brother. Darian appeared confused as he took in Jule and Dusty, recognition blooming slowly. He turned to Damian, his scarred features the most beautiful sight Damian had ever seen.

"Ikir," he said, nodding his head in deferment. "May I see kiri?"

"You don't need permission to do anything," Damian said gently, aware his brother was not yet himself. "Please don't call me ikir. I'm your brother, not your master. And yes, go see kiri. She'll be happy to see you."

"I will be happy to see her, ikir," Darian said. He adored Sofia, that much was obvious, even if he wasn't really sure where – or who – he was most of the time. Damian's feelings for her swelled even more.

"How are you, Darian?" Jule asked with a warm smile.

"I am well, ikir," came the mechanical reply. "Please excuse me, ikir."

And he was gone. Damian's gaze lingered. He had a long way to go, but he was alive.

"Take care of both of them, Dusty," he murmured.

"I swear it."

"He's as strong as you. He'll pull through," Jule said. "And Dust-man won't let anything near them."

* * *

Visions of Czerno and home videos from Darian morphed into a grotesque nightmare that made her body shake, even as she tried to shake the dream from her thoughts. Insomnia was a blessing from such darkness.

Come.

She hesitated before pulling her robe on and obeying. The mansion was quiet again, the signs of activity from earlier gone. Pierre glanced up from his video game as she passed him. He watched her until verifying where she went before returning to the game.

Damian's suite was lit only by a blazing fire in the hearth, and the scent of Jule's cigars hung in the air. She waited, gaze falling to Damian. He appeared calm and in control again, if not relaxed with the only three men he'd ever trusted. Her heart almost burst at the sight of Darian in one of the seats. Though he was still unable to understand exactly what was going on, he'd improved dramatically even since she last saw him.

Damian waved her in without looking at him, his eyes reflecting the fire. He patted the seat beside him on the couch facing Dustin and Jule. She didn't hesitate to settle beside him, knees drawn to her chest, and leaned into his body, struck by the difference between the men before her. At once, the home videos and nightmares faded. She sighed in relief and rested her head on Damian's shoulder. He moved his arm to wrap around her and pulled her against him.

"You're not forgiven," he reminded her.

"Damn straight," Jule said, though there was warmth in his face. "If I had a woman who pulled the bullshit you did, you'd -"

"Be in deep shit, kiri," Darian finished for him.

Jule chuckled. Darian's gaze mirrored Damian's, and Sofia hid her face against Damian's chest as the three men facing her gave her similar looks.

"I'll never have a woman, if they're this much trouble," Dustin declared.

"Agreed. And if I do, she'll learn to call Damian, Dusty, or Darian before leaving the house," Jule chimed in. "Which is exactly what you will do, kiri."

Sofia couldn't help but saying,

"You'll both have women, and Dustin, when you're in trouble, she'll call *me*."

Jule and Dustin both looked to Damian.

"Not sure I like this oracle shit," Dustin voiced for both of them.

"No way, kiri," Jule said firmly.

"If she didn't come after you when you needed her, why would you want her at all?" she challenged.

"Definitely steering clear of Americans," Dustin added.

"Because, kiri, you can't do what these men can," Jule scolded. "And D doesn't have any other brothers for you to rescue. You know that's the only reason you're not locked in your room for the rest of your life."

"No worries," Damian said with an edge that made her still. "I'll take care of it."

"Glad I'm not you," Dustin said, leveling a look at her.

She huddled closer to Damian, unwilling to look at his face.

"What does kiri mean?" she asked.

"Beloved. It's used for sisters, mothers, and mates in our world," Jule answered.

"By the way, you're on my list. I hope I'm off yours."

Her throat tightened, understanding the honor despite his nonchalant delivery. She nodded.

"What list?" Dustin asked.

"You're not on hers," Jule assured him. "I imagine only Pierre is on it now."

She laughed.

"I sense a reassignment," Dustin said, gaze going to the fire.

Her gaze fell to Damian. He was struggling again. She shifted away from Damian and touched his forehead, absorbing the horror of his memories. She drew a sharp breath but forced herself to stay, to take his pain.

"No, kiri, you've done enough," he said, taking her hands. "I have much to atone for."

His heavy words broke her heart, but she respected his request and returned to Damian's side. The horrors from his mind fell away as she curled against him again.

The men fell into a comfortable silence, and she sensed the silent communications she couldn't hear. Comfortable against Damian, she drifted into a restful doze until he shifted. She roused herself, surprised to see the other three had disappeared at some point. She sat up, forcing herself to meet his golden gaze. His face was unreadable, his gaze steady.

"Please don't be angry," she said, touching his face.

He took her hand in his and leaned forward, allowing his forehead to rest against hers. She sighed, delighting in the tender moment.

"Are you going to run from me again?" he asked without moving.

"No, Damian. Never again. I promise," she swore just as quietly.

"Good."

He stood and swept her into his arms.

"I've got plans for you tonight," he said, desire flaring on his face as he carried her into his bedroom. "And every night from here on out."

Her heart sang as she realized she'd not lost him, her body echoing the desire on his face.

* * *

The next morning, the sigh of snow falling outside her window drew her gaze as she packed for the evacuation. Damian'd replaced her necklace at her neck, a small comfort until his work in the European front was finished. She approached the window, amazed at the snow, until her gaze fell to a figure kneeling like a dark gargoyle in the snow. He'd been there long enough that the snow had covered his footprints.

Alarmed, she swung on her robe and snatched one of Damian's trench coats. She flew down the stairs and through the teeming hallways. Pierre trotted after her into the cold morning. The air was cold, brisk, the snowflakes falling faster. Snow crunched under her feet and quickly soaked her flimsy slippers.

"Darian!" she exclaimed, dropping to her knees beside him.

His eyes were closed, his body hunched and hands clenched together. He wore nothing more than a t-shirt and jeans. Snow covered his hair, and his skin was cold.

"Darian!" she touched his face.

He opened his eyes and stared at her, a tortured look on his face.

"I remember them," he said. "All of them."

His memories flashed, and she winced at the sight of the executions he'd committed for Czerno.

"That wasn't you, Darian," she whispered. "You had no control over yourself."

"I'm weak."

"You're not. Damian was crippled by the same thing."

She regretted alluding to it the moment the raw look of anguish crossed his face.

"Claire," he said hoarsely.

He closed his eyes, his jaw clenched hard enough for the muscles to tick. A tear escaped one eye and trailed down his face. She felt her own tears spill over. His was not the kind of pain she could fix.

"You're safe, Darian," she said and draped the trench coat over his shoulders. She placed her hands on his face and pulled her into him, hugging him. "We won't let anything happen to you."

Dustin approached, his gaze as haunted as Darian's. He knelt, ruffling the snow from Darian's hair.

"It's ok, brother," he said quietly. "Let's get you inside."

He withdrew and helped Darian to his feet.

"Sofi, get ready. We're evac-ing you and Darian next," he ordered. "Pierre, pack your things. You're going, too."

She didn't miss the look of relief that crossed Pierre's face and suspected he'd been threatened with a reassignment for shooting her. Obviously, Damian had reconsidered. She was happy for it.

Pierre tossed her a familiar cell as they entered the mansion with an unread text message.

4got 2 tell you. Luv u 2.

She grinned and typed a response.

Man up and tell me in person.

Next time I see you, I'll do better - I'll show you, he promised, his whisper sliding into her mind. A thrill went through her.

"I still hate that," she muttered.

In the words of an oracle I once knew, get used to it.

"I love you, Damian. Come home soon."

I will, kiri, I will.

Truly thrilled about the start to her new life, she folded the phone and dropped it into her pocket. She followed Dustin and Darian down the hall.

Sofia.

She recognized the voice from the chopper ride with Darian.

He was waiting for her. She pushed open the cracked door to the library. Inside was a man she recognized from Czerno's, the small man with dark green eyes and white hair. Her heart slowed, and she froze inside the doorway.

He gave a fatherly smile and approached her, holding his hand out, palm up. She hesitated, torn between screaming for Dustin and staying where she was. She touched her palm to his, driven back by the impact of images that rippled through her. The whole of Damian's history, his forefather's, all the way to the Beginning, when spirits milled without purpose before the Original Beings shaped the universe into something much greater.

She snapped her hand back and stared at him, overwhelmed. The man before her was from before time, before life, before *everything*. He clasped his hands behind his back. The memories rippled through her then coalesced, locking themselves away in the back of her mind.

"Watcher."

Dustin's warning growl was cold. He took her arm, pulling her behind him. Her gaze was riveted to the man before her. His green gaze switched from her to Dustin, never blinking.

"I mean no harm, Guardian," the Watcher said.

"What are you?" she breathed, the images swimming through her thoughts.

"Ikira, I am a Watcher, one of those who guards the Guardians," he said with another of his warm smiles. "My job is to make sure the pendulum never swings too far into the court of the Black God."

"Bullshit," Dusty snapped. "You have no loyalties to either God."

"True, but it's always been in the Watcher's best interest to ensure humanity perpetuates. The Black God doesn't share our view."

"Master," Darian's voice was monotonous. "I obeyed you. Kiri is safe."

She turned to see his gaze on the ground, his body braced as if for a blow. Heartbroken by his return to the slave he was, Sofia was stopped from comforting him by Dustin's grip on her arm.

"I know, Darian," the Watcher said. "You did well. If I may, ikir?"

He looked to Dustin. Dustin gave a tense nod and pushed her behind him, out of the Watcher's path. He was coiled and ready to snap if the Watcher so much as looked at her too long. She wasn't about to contradict the cold executioner when he was in this mood.

The Watcher approached Darian, who knelt in response to a silent command. The Watcher placed both hands on his head. Darian jerked.

"Tomorrow, when you awake, you will no longer be a slave. You will become the Grey God, who you were born to be," the Watcher told him.

"I thought Watchers had a policy of non-interference," Dustin said in a measured tone.

"We do, ikir, unless the balance is so disturbed that we must interfere."

His words sent a chill through her.

"You will see me again, ikir," he promised. "And you, ikira. You will remember the secrets I gave you one day, when you must use them."

She didn't like the ominous words and looked up at Dustin again, seeking to gauge just how serious the situation was. He was pale beneath the golden skin. She crept closer to him. If he was worried, she had a reason to be terrified.

"My dear Darian," the Watcher said in a softer tone. "I cannot take the pain of the memories you will experience in the morning when you remember the whole of your existence. Do not be consumed by them. You have a great fate to fulfill in this life yet."

"Yes, master," was the monotonous response.

"Tell the White God I send him greetings," the Watcher said and moved away from them.

In a gentle flash of light, he was gone. Sofia released the breath she was holding and moved in front of Dustin, gazing up at him. Her hands shook.

"Dustin?" she prompted when he remained staring at the place where the Watcher had been.

He looked down at her. Sensing her fear, he touched her arm, the edge of tension dissipating. His look softened, and rare warmth crossed his features.

"There's alotta shit about our world you'll figure out," he promised her. "Watchers rarely cause us harm, but they rarely involve themselves in our business either."

His considering gaze returned to Darian.

"Don't worry, kiri. First things first. We need to evac now."

She nodded, sensing there was much he wasn't saying. He shepherded them to the library door, returning to his original purpose. She took Darian's hand and led him down the hall like the lost child he was. She braced herself against the memories running through his head and the confusion as he tried to figure out where he was.

"You're safe, kiri," he said.

"So are you, Darian," she replied.

As they strode into the gardens towards an awaiting helicopter, she couldn't help but think she'd just stepped into something far greater than she could ever imagine.



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