



Darkness Splintered: A Dark Angels Novel

By Keri Arthur

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***New York Times* bestselling author Keri Arthur continues her Dark Angels series as half-werewolf, half-Aedh Risa Jones races to save the world from descending into ultimate chaos....**

Risa has angered several powerful people, and she's starting to feel the pressure from all sides. She also finds herself under the scrutiny of the vampire council, some of whom consider her a monster who should be destroyed. But they offer her a bloody bargain: Take on the lethal head of the council and others will support her.

As the search for the keys to hell heats up, Risa realizes that she has no choice. For the sake of the people she loves, she must find the keys—and get rid of Hunter—before the next gate is opened and brings the world closer to all hell breaking loose....

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Novels of Keri Arthur

“Keri Arthur’s imagination and energy infuse everything she writes with zest.” —Charlaine Harris

“Fans of Anita Blake and Charlaine Harris’s Sookie Stackhouse vampire series will be rewarded.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Risa makes readers fall in love with her....I highly recommend Arthur’s books.” —*USA Today*

About the Author

Keri Arthur, author of the *New York Times* bestselling Riley Jenson Guardian series, has written more than twenty-five books. Her most recent in the Dark Angels series are *Darkness Hunts*, *Darkness Devours*, and *Darkness Unmasked*. She’s been nominated in the Best Contemporary Paranormal category of the *Romantic Times* Reviewers’ Choice Awards and has won a *Romantic Times* Career Achievement Award for urban fantasy. She lives with her daughter in Melbourne, Australia.

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Chapter One

I woke up naked and in a strange bed.

For several minutes I did nothing more than breathe in the gently feminine—but totally unfamiliar—scents in the room, trying to figure out how, exactly, I’d gotten here.

And where the hell “here” was.

My brain was decidedly fuzzy on any sort of detail, however, and that could only mean my mission to consume enough alcohol to erase all thought and blot out emotion had actually succeeded. And that surprised the hell out of me.

Thanks to our fast metabolic rate, werewolves generally find it difficult to go on a bender. I might be only half were, but I usually hold my alcohol fairly well and really hadn’t expected to get anywhere near drunk. I certainly hadn’t expected to be able to forget—if for only a few hours—the anger and the pain.

Pain that came from both the worst kind of betrayal, and my own subsequent actions.

My eyes stung, but this time no tears fell. Maybe because I had very little in the way of tears left. Or maybe it was simply the fact that, somewhere in the alcohol-induced haze of the past few days, I’d finally come to accept what had happened to me.

Although it wasn’t like I had any other choice.

If I had, then I would have died. Should have died. But Azriel, the reaper who’d been my follower, my guard, and my lover, had forced me to live and, in doing so, had taken away the very essence of what I was.

Because in forcing me to live, he'd not only ensured that my soul could never be reborn, but he'd made me what he was.

A dark angel.

The next time I died, I would not move on and be reborn into another life here on Earth. I would join him on the gray fields—the unseen lands that divided this world from the next—and become a guard on the gates to heaven and hell.

And that meant I would never see my late mother again. Not in any future lifetime that might have been mine, because he'd stolen all that away from me.

What made it worse was the knowledge that he'd saved me not because he loved me, but because he needed me to find the lost keys to the gates.

And because I was carrying his child.

The stinging in my eyes was nothing compared to the pain in my heart. I curled up in the bed and hugged my knees tightly to my chest, but it did little to stop the tidal wave of grief washing over me.

If he'd said, just once, that I mattered more than any quest or key—or even the child we'd created—then perhaps the bitterness and anger would not have been so deep, and I wouldn't have banished him from my side. But he hadn't, and I had.

And now all I could do was try to figure out what had actually happened in the days that had followed his departure, and move on.

Because despite his actions, my task in this world had not changed. I still had keys to find, and I very much doubted whether the patience of either my father or the Raziq—the rebel Aedh priests who'd jointly created the damn keys with my father before he'd stolen said keys from their grasp only to lose them himself—would hold for much longer.

Hell, it was surprising that one or both of them hadn't already appeared to slap me around in an effort to uncover what the hell had gone wrong this time.

But maybe they had no idea that I'd actually found the second key. After all, this time it had been stolen not only from under my nose, but before I'd managed to pinpoint its exact location. Which meant the thief—the same dark sorcerer who'd stolen the first key, and who'd permanently opened the first gateway to hell—wouldn't know which of the many military weapons he'd stolen was the second gate key in disguise. Thanks to the fact that my father's blood had been used in the creation of the three keys, only one of his blood could find them.

And I would find them. Without my reaper. Without my protector.

A sob rose up my throat, but I forced it back down. Enough with the self pity, I told myself fiercely. Enough with the wallowing. Get over it and move on.

But that was easier said than done when my entire world had been turned upside down.

I scrubbed a hand across gritty eyes, then flipped the sheets off my face, and finally looked around the room. It definitely wasn't a place I knew, and I very much doubted it was a hotel room. There were too many florals—the wallpaper, the bedding, and the cushions that had been thrown haphazardly on the floor all bore

variations of a rose theme—and the furniture, though obviously expensive, had a well-used look about it. There was a window to my left, and the sunshine that peeked around the edges of the heavy pink curtains suggested it was close to midday.

Curious to see where I was, I got out of bed and walked over to the window. My movements were a little unsteady, but I suspected the cause was more a lack of food than any residual effect of my drinking binge. Alcohol cleared out of a werewolf's system extremely fast, which is why it was so damn hard for us to get drunk. And that was definitely a good thing, because it meant my desperate attempt to forget wouldn't have done any harm to my child.

I drew one curtain aside and looked out. In the yard below, a dozen or so chickens scratched around a pretty cottage garden. To the left of the garden were several outbuildings—one obviously an old stable, another a large machinery shed—but to the right, there was nothing but rolling hills that led up to a thick forest of gum trees.

It definitely wasn't somewhere familiar.

Frowning, I let the curtain fall back into place and turned, my gaze sweeping the small room again. My clothes were stacked in a neat pile on the Georgian-style armchair, and flung over the back of it was a fluffy white dressing gown. Sitting on the nearby mahogany dressing table was a white towel, as well as bathroom necessities. Whoever owned this place at least didn't intend to keep me naked or unwashed. Whether they intended me other sorts of harm was another matter entirely.

Not.

The familiar, somewhat harsh tone ran through my mind and relief slithered through me. I might be without my reaper, but I still had my sword, so I wasn't entirely without protection. Amaya—the name of the demon trapped within the sword—was as alert and as ready for action as ever. The sword itself was shadow wreathed and invisible, so the only time anyone was truly aware of her presence was when I slid her dark blade into their flesh. Although she did have a tendency to be vocal about her need to kill, so she certainly could be heard on occasion—generally when she was about to kill someone.

What do you mean, 'not'? I walked over to the Georgian chair and started dressing. Like the room itself, my clothes had a very slight floral scent, although this time it was lavender rather than rose, which was definitely easier on my nose.

Harm not, she replied. Foe not.

Which didn't mean whoever owned this place was a friend, but my sword had saved my butt more than once recently and I was beginning to trust her judgment.

Should, she muttered. Stupid not.

I grinned, not entirely sure whether she meant she wasn't stupid, or that I'd be stupid not to trust her. I sat down on the chair to pull on my socks and boots, then headed for the door. It wasn't locked—another indicator that whoever had me didn't mean any harm—but I nevertheless peered out cautiously.

The hall beyond thankfully was free of the rose scent that had pervaded my room, and it was long, with at least a dozen doors leading off it. To the left, at the far end, was a wide window that poured sunshine into the space, lending the pale green walls a warmth and richness. To the right lay a staircase. There were voices coming from the floor below, feminine voices, though I didn't immediately recognize them.

I hesitated, then mentally slapped myself for doing so and headed toward the stairs. My footsteps echoed on the wooden boards, and the rhythmic rise and fall of voices briefly stopped.

I'd barely reached the landing when quick steps approached the staircase from below. I paused on the top step and watched through the balusters. After a moment, a familiar figure strode into view and relief shot through me.

"Ilianna," I said. "Where the hell am I?"

She paused and looked up, a smile touching the corners of her green eyes. Ilianna was a shifter, and her human form echoed the palomino coloring of her horse form, meaning she had a thick mane of pale hair and dark golden skin. She was also a powerful witch, and one of the few people outside my adopted family I trusted implicitly. Tao, our flatmate; Mirri, Ilianna's partner; and Stane, Tao's cousin, were the others.

"We're at Sable's winter retreat," she said. "And it's about time you woke up. I was beginning to think you intended to sleep the rest of your life away."

Sable was Mirri's mom. I'd met her only once, but I'd seen her often enough on TV. The woman was a cooking phenomenon, with two TV shows behind her—the repeats of which still pulled good ratings—and a slew of books on not just cooking, but herbs and natural healing. Mirri's dad, Kade, had worked with my aunt Riley at the Directorate years ago, but had unfortunately been killed when Mirri was little more than a baby. It had been Sable who had looked after his herd and kept them all together when he'd died.

"After the events of the last week or so, sleeping the rest of my life away certainly has its appeal." I couldn't help the grim edge in my voice. "Why the hell are we at Mirri's mom's rather than home?"

"Because we figured a change of scenery might get you out of your funk. You coming down for lunch?"

"Funk" was definitely the polite description of what I'd been through the past few days. "Lunch would be good," I said, even as my stomach rumbled rather loudly.

Ilianna's eyebrows rose at the noise. I grinned and walked down the rest of the stairs, only to be enveloped in a hug so fierce I swear she was trying to squeeze the last drop of air from my lungs.

"God," she whispered. "It's good to have you back."

I blinked back the sting of tears and returned her hug. "I'm sorry, Ilianna. I didn't mean to worry you. I just—"

"Needed to cut loose a little," she finished for me. "I understand. More than anyone else ever could."

It was gently said, but nevertheless a reminder that I wasn't the only one who'd been played and abused. Guilt swirled through me and I pulled back, my gaze searching hers.

"Are you—"

"Yes," she said, interrupting before I could finish. "As I said in the hospital, my pregnancy was meant to be, even if the method of conception was both unforeseen and unwelcome. But we are not discussing me and my pregnancy right now."

I half smiled. No, we were discussing me and mine. "I've a feeling I'm about to be told off."

“Not told off. Just . . . warned.”

Tension rolled through me. “About what?”

She hesitated. “While I understand your need to cut loose after everything that has happened recently, others do not, and they are looking for you. Specifically, one person. And she’s not someone any of us should piss off.”

“Hunter.” I practically spat the word.

Madeline Hunter was the head of the Directorate, a top-ranking member of the high vampire council, and a monster clothed in vampire skin. She was also, unfortunately, my boss, thanks to an agreement I’d made the day I’d scattered my mother’s ashes.

Of course, that agreement technically no longer stood, because I’d been the one to find and kill the man who had murdered my mother, not Hunter. That man had been my Aedh lover, Lucian, who had managed to fool me in more ways than I was willing to think about. Not only had he been responsible for my mother’s murder, but he’d also been involved in the theft of the keys.

And, as a parting gift, he’d kidnapped and impregnated Ilianna, and had tried to do the same to me. Thankfully, I’d already been carrying Azriel’s child by that time.

Ilianna grimaced. “Yeah. Tao’s fobbed her off a couple of times now, but she’s getting pretty scary.”

Scary was a normal state for Hunter, but I certainly didn’t want to piss her off any more than necessary. Not after what I’d seen her do to the dark spirit who’d murdered her lover.

Still, it was decidedly odd that she didn’t know where I was. “Why would she be hassling Tao, or anyone else, for that matter? She knows exactly what I’m doing every single minute of the day, thanks to the fucking Cazadors.”

Cazadors were the high vampire council’s kill squad, and they’d been following me astrally for weeks, reporting my every move back to Hunter.

“In this case, she doesn’t, because they can’t follow you here.” Ilianna tucked her arm through mine and escorted me down the hall.

I raised an eyebrow. “You’ve spelled the place?”

She nodded. “Mom found a spell that automatically redirects astral travelers every time they approach the spell’s defined area.”

Just astral travelers, not Aedh, I guessed. Which was logical given the only spell we had to keep the Aedh out was the one we were using around our home, and that had originated from my father. Which meant my father and the Raziq could get to me here. I shivered and tried to ignore the premonition that I’d be confronting both far sooner than I’d want.

Still, some protection was better than nothing, and at least we could plan our next move without the Cazadors passing every little detail on to Hunter. “There wouldn’t happen to be a mobile version of that spell, would there?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

Of course not. Why on earth would fate throw me a lifeline like that? “Then I guess I’d better give the bitch a call ASAP.”

And pray like hell she didn’t have another job for me. I really didn’t need to be chasing after escapees from hell right now—especially, I thought bleakly, when chasing hell-kind was all I had to look forward to in the long centuries after my death.

Besides, I needed to find the sorcerer and snatch the second key back. While he might not know which one of the items he’d stolen it was, there was nothing stopping him from taking them all to hell’s gate and testing them out one by one.

And while my father and the Raziq had been relatively patient so far when it came to my lack of progress on the key front, I doubted that would last. They’d already threatened to destroy those I loved if I didn’t find the keys. I wouldn’t put it past any of them to actually kill someone close to me, just to prove how serious they were.

As if tearing me apart to place the tracker in my heart hadn’t already proved that.

“Calling her should definitely be a high priority,” Ilianna agreed. “But come and eat first. You look like death warmed up.”

No surprise there, given I nearly had been. “So what’s stopping Hunter or the Cazadors from physically finding us?”

“She probably could, given enough time. While the spell is designed to confuse astral senses, they’d still have a general idea of location.”

“But all she has to do is hack into my phone—”

“Which was left at home,” Ilianna interrupted. “Along with anything else that could be used to track you. We’re not that dumb.”

No, they weren’t. And Hunter was undoubtedly hassling Tao simply because she couldn’t get to anyone else. Even she had more sense than to contact Aunt Riley. I might not be related by blood to Riley, but she and her pack were the only family I had left. They would not have reacted nicely to the news that Hunter was after me. “Knowing Hunter as well as I now do, I’m surprised she hasn’t done more than merely threaten him.”

Hell, she probably considered a spot of bloody torture a good way to start the day. Although, given Tao was rapidly losing the battle with the fire elemental he’d consumed, maybe I should be hoping the bitch did attempt to torture him. Crispy fried Hunter was a sight I wouldn’t mind seeing.

“She’s given him until tonight to find you, so there’s time. You need to regain some strength before you run off to confront that psycho bitch.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” I muttered. “Especially now that I have to do it alone.”

Ilianna hesitated, then said quietly, “Look, I don’t know what actually went on between you and Azriel, but—”

Something twisted deep inside me. Pain rose, a knife-sharp wave that threatened to engulf me. No, I reminded myself fiercely, you can’t go there. Not just yet. Not so soon after waking. I needed at least some time to mull over the implications of my actions by myself.

“Ilianna,” I said, when I could, “leave it alone.”

“But he wouldn’t have left you—”

“He did, because he had no choice. I banished him.” How I’d actually managed that I had no idea. I mean, he was a reaper, a Mijai, and me telling him to leave me alone had never worked before now. So why the change?

“Why the hell would you do that? Damn it, Ris, you need—”

“Ilianna,” I warned, the edge deeper in my voice this time.

She drew in a breath, then released it slowly. “When you want to talk about it, I’ll be here. But just remember one thing—he’s not human. He’s energy, not flesh, and he doesn’t operate on the same emotional or intellectual levels as we do. But whatever he did, he did for a reason. A good reason. And no matter how absolute or final his actions may seem to you, it may not be a truth in his world.”

“The truth,” I replied, bitterness in my voice, “is that the keys were always first and foremost to him.”

And I wanted more than that. Wanted him to feel about me the way I felt about him. But was love an emotion reapers were even capable of?

I blinked at the thought. I loved him. Not just cared for him, but loved him.

When the hell had that happened?

I’d spent far more time with Lucian than I ever had with Azriel . . . I paused at the thought. No, that wasn’t true. Not really. I may have spent more time sexually with Lucian, but for every other part of the day—and night—Azriel had been by my side. Somewhere, somehow, he’d snuck past my guard and stolen my heart. How that was even possible when we were still little more than strangers, I have no idea. It wasn’t like love and I were on familiar terms. Quite the opposite really, given the only other man I’d loved had been Jak—the werewolf reporter who was one of the people we’d pulled in to help with our key search—and that had turned out to be a complete and utter disaster.

Obviously, my heart had no damn common sense when it came to picking men. Or it just liked to be broken.

Ilianna said, “I would not be so sure of that—”

“Ilianna,” I warned yet again.

She sighed, then pushed open the door and ushered me through. The twin scents of curry and baking bread hit, making my mouth water and my stomach rumble even louder than before.

The room itself was a kitchen bigger than our entire apartment. The country-style cabinets wrapped around three of the four walls, providing massive amounts of storage and preparation space, and there were six ovens and four stovetops. A huge wooden table that would have seated at least thirty people dominated the middle of the room, and it was at this that Sable, Mirri, and two other women sat.

They glanced around as we entered. Sable smiled and rose. In either human or horse form she was stunningly beautiful, with black skin and brown eyes that missed very little. Mirri, a mahogany bay when in horse form, had taken after her dad.

“Risa, so glad you’re recovered.” Sable kissed both my cheeks, then stood back and examined me somewhat critically. “Although you do need some condition on you. You, my girl, are entirely too thin.”

I smiled. “Werewolves do tend to be on the lean side.”

“Not this lean, I’ll wager. The ladies and I are just about to go out, but there’s a curry in the oven and the bread should be done in about five minutes.”

“Thank you—”

She cut me off with a wave of her hand. “Ilianna is family now, and her family is my family. So please, don’t be thanking me for something we’d do for anyone in the herd.”

I smiled. At least Mirri’s mom had accepted her relationship with Ilianna. The same couldn’t be said of Ilianna’s parents—although I personally thought they would come round if they actually knew about it. But Ilianna refused to even tell them she was gay.

Sable collected her coat and bag from the back of one of chairs, then she and the two women retreated out the glass sliding door.

I raised an eyebrow and glanced at Mirri. “That felt like a deliberate retreat.”

Mirri grabbed a couple of tea towels and rose. “I told them you and Ilianna need some alone time for a war council when you woke up.”

“War council? Sorry, but whatever I do next—”

“You’re not doing alone.” Ilianna began setting the table for the three of us. “Azriel may be gone, but Tao and I are still here. And we’re a part of this now, Risa, whether you like it or not.”

I didn’t like. Not at all. She and Tao had been through enough because of me and this damn quest. I wasn’t about to put them through anything else. But I also knew that tone of voice. It was no use arguing—not that that ever stopped me from trying.

“The first thing I have to do is find the damn sorcerer who stole the key, and that’s not something I want you involved with. It’s too dangerous, Ilianna.”

“Maybe.” Ilianna gave me a somewhat severe look. “But the Brindle is more than capable of taking care of a dark sorcerer. There aren’t that many in Melbourne, you know, and they’d be aware of all of them.”

The Brindle was the home of all witch knowledge, both ancient and new. Ilianna’s mom was one of the custodians there, and Ilianna was powerful enough to have become one—and in fact had started the training when she was younger. She’d walked away for reasons she refused to discuss, but if the predictions of the head witch, Kiandra, were to be believed, Ilianna would one day not only finish that training, but her daughter would save the Brindle itself.

“Yeah,” I said, “but given Lucian was probably working with him, he’ll know about my connection to both you and the Brindle.” I grimaced, then added, “I’d bet my ass he’s taken steps to ensure you—and they—can’t find him.”

“But it would take major magic to achieve something like that, and it would create a ‘hot spot’ that could be traced.”

Maybe that sort of ruling would apply to Earth-based magic, but would it apply to magic that was Aedh sourced? And even if it did, that still meant dragging more people into the search, and I really didn't want to do that unless absolutely necessary. It was just too damn dangerous.

"It's an option." I sat down. "But it wouldn't be my first."

Ilianna placed the hot bread on the table. "Why not? There's no easier way to find a sorcerer than to trace his magic."

"A normal sorcerer, perhaps. But this one has been working with an Aedh, remember, and has probably acquired much of his knowledge." Which was another reason to be glad Lucian was dead. At least the bastard couldn't pass anything else on to our ever-elusive sorcerer. "Besides, our best option right now is to go through Lucian's things and see if he left any clues behind."

Mirri snorted as she began dishing out the huge chunks of curried vegetables—which wasn't normally a favorite of mine, but it smelled incredible. "Forgive me for stating the obvious, but you've been on a bender for three days. That would have given our sorcerer plenty of time to go through Lucian's things and ditch whatever evidence there might have been."

"Lucian was clever enough not to leave such information in easy reach. If there is incriminating evidence to be found, then it would be somewhere ultimately safe from everyone but him."

And that, I realized suddenly, could mean the gray fields. They might be the unseen division between worlds, but they were as filled with life as anyplace in this world. And given Lucian had once been an Aedh priest under my father's tutelage, then maybe the first place I should look was in temples near the gates of heaven and hell. I had no idea whether they still stood now that the priests had all but disappeared—or if someone like me would even be able to see them—but what better place would there be to secure information? It was doubtful whether the reapers or the Raziq would bother to look through ruins in an effort to find information on a dark sorcerer.

Of course, that was presuming Lucian could get onto the fields. The ability to attain full Aedh form had apparently been ripped from him by the Raziq, but that hadn't stopped him from shoving his fist into my mother's chest and blowing her apart.

Which is exactly how I'd killed him.

I'd had my revenge, but its taste wasn't as sweet as I'd expected.

I swallowed heavily and added, "The bastard was more cunning than a basketful of foxes."

Ilianna's smile was grim. "But not cunning enough in the end."

"No." I tore off a chunk of bread as Mirri slid a plate of curry my way. "I'll search his place first, then I'll do the same to his lover's place."

"And if you find nothing either there or on the fields?"

Then we were in trouble, because I honestly didn't think the Brindle would be able to help us. Not in this. Not when Aedh magic was involved. And there had to be: The ancient cuneiform that gave the magic to the transport pillars we'd found—pillars both the dark sorcerers and Lucian had been using to move around undetected—could have come only from Lucian.

“If I find nothing,” I muttered, as I dipped a chunk of bread into the curry, “we’re up shit creek without a paddle.”

“Then,” she said, “talking to Kiandra can’t hurt. At least she’ll be able to tell us if there is some sort of hot spot near the intersection. Until we know that, we can’t make any other plans.”

“We?” My gaze shot to hers. “There’s no damn we—”

“Oh yes there is,” she cut in, voice fierce. “You can’t do this on your own anymore, Ris.”

I snorted. “I was never doing it on my own, and look where it’s gotten—”

I cut the words off as awareness ran through me. Something approached the house.

Something that wasn’t human, or in human form. An invader that was as silent as a ghost, and yet accompanied by such a wash of heat and power that the hairs on my arms stood on end.

It was a sensation with which I was more than a little familiar.

An Aedh approached the house, and he was in energy form rather than physical.

Only it wasn’t any old Aedh.

It was my father. And he was not happy.

Having to face a parent as prone to violence as mine certainly wasn’t what I needed right now—especially when I didn’t have Azriel at my back.

I closed my eyes, trying to remain calm, trying to contain the fear that galloped away at the thought of another confrontation. The desire to reach out to Azriel, to tell him that I needed him, that I wanted him back in my life, was fierce. But that was just a reaction born of fear. After all, the last time my father and I had met face-to-face, he’d just about killed me—and that was with Azriel present.

But if it was my father approaching, why hadn’t the Raziq device woven into my heart reacted? It had been designed to summon them the minute my father appeared in my presence, and when it activated, it felt as if someone had shoved their hand into my chest and was intent on squeezing every ounce of life out of my heart. Painful didn’t even come close to describing the experience.

This time, however, there was nothing. And while it was curious, I wasn’t about to complain. I might not want to confront my father, but I sure as hell had no desire to be caught in the middle of a battle between him and the Raziq.

He hurt not, Amaya commented. We stronger. Fight.

I snorted. Fighting was my sword’s answer to every problem.

Not every, she said. But kill better.

I ignored her and said, “Ilianna, Mirri, get upstairs. Now.”

Ilianna opened her mouth to protest, then took one look at my face, grabbed Mirri, and got the hell out of the kitchen.

And not a moment too soon.

An instant later I was hit by a blow of energy so fierce it smashed the chair and flung me backward. I was thrust along the floor with such force that I crashed into one of the cupboards, sending jagged pieces of wood and china flying. Then a band of iron settled around my neck and hauled me upright.

“Where is the second key?” The voice was a deeper, angrier version of mine, and so thunderous it rattled the remaining crockery in the cupboard.

I opened my mouth to answer, but no words came out. No air was getting in, either, but it was anger rather than panic that bloomed through my body.

Damn it, I was getting rather tired of being thrown about by all and sundry. My father, the Raziq, Hunter—they all needed my help, and it was about time they started remembering it.

Even as the thought crossed my mind, energy surged through my body and Amaya was suddenly in my hand. I gripped her hilt tight and swung at the invisible band of steel wrapped around my neck. She screamed in pleasure and anticipation, eager to kill.

No, I warned. Not yet.

Fun not, she bit back.

Then shadowed steel met Aedh force. Lilac fire flared down her length, leaping from the tip of her steel to race along the cord that was my father’s energy. He roared, the sound one of fury and pain combined, and released me so suddenly I hit the ground knees first. Pain shot up my legs, but I ignored it and held Amaya in front of me. Her fire flared out from the sides of her blade, forming a curved circle that completely encased my body. And just in time.

Energy hit the barrier, and once again pushed me back into the cupboard. Amaya screamed her fury, her shield burning bright where my father’s energy flayed her. But she held firm.

“Try to remember you need my fucking help,” I said, my voice surprisingly devoid of the fury and fear that tumbled through me.

“I am your father,” he roared. “I may have given you life, but I can also give you death.”

Amaya’s hissing got stronger in my head. Whether that meant she was finding it harder to maintain the shield or she was simply getting more pissed off, I couldn’t say. But the sooner this attack ended, the better for us both.

“My death will hardly help regain control of the two remaining keys,” I countered, still managing to keep my voice even. “Besides, I’ve already been dead. It holds no fear for me.”

The words were barely out of my mouth when the attack stopped with a suddenness that had me blinking. There was a moment of silence before he said, “You died?”

A hint of amusement had replaced the anger, and I frowned. What in the hell was funny about me dying?

“You didn’t feel it?” Amaya was beginning to quiver in my hands, which generally meant she was running low in resources and would soon start leeching mine. And while that was something I couldn’t afford given I wasn’t exactly at the top of my game after the last few days, there was no way in hell I was about to ask her

to drop the shield. Not until I knew the reason behind my father's sudden mood switch. "I thought the blood bond meant you could feel my presence no matter where I was?"

"When you wear flesh, yes," he replied. "But place yourself in death's hands, and it is a different matter entirely."

"Why? I mean, wouldn't me dying break any sort of connection? That in itself should tell you something happened."

"It is not that simple."

"It never is."

His amusement got stronger, but it didn't make me feel any safer. Quite the opposite, in fact.

"If you had remained on death's plane, then, yes, I would have sensed it. But you chose to come back."

"Which clarifies nothing, given the gray fields themselves are the realm of death." And the Raziq certainly had no trouble finding me whenever I stepped onto the fields.

"Stepping onto them as an Aedh is very different from stepping on them as a soul ready to move on."

Which I would never be able to do again, thanks to Azriel's actions. Bitterness stabbed through me—bitterness and anger and a splintered sense of loss. I swallowed heavily and somehow said, "So is the fact I basically died the reason why the device in my heart hasn't summoned the Raziq?"

"Yes. As I told you previously, only death could stop it."

Which only meant I was free from the pain of the device, not from the Raziq themselves.

Unfortunately.

"And is that the reason you seem to find my death so amusing?"

"It was not so much your death, but the mere fact that you succeeded in short-circuiting Malin's plans."

Malin was the head of the Raziq, and my father's former lover. She was also a woman scorned, as my father had apparently refused to give her the child she'd wanted, deciding instead to seek out and impregnate my mother. It was a combination that made her less than benevolent when it came to me and, in part, the reason behind my latest kidnapping. What she'd actually done to me during that time I couldn't say, because she'd erased all memory of it.

Although given she'd told me my father would more than likely kill me if he ever found out about it, I'm guessing it was something pretty bad. Something that perhaps tied me to her just as much as my father.

"I hadn't exactly planned to die, you know."

"Humanity rarely does. It is one of their greatest failings."

Strength fade, Amaya said, annoyance heavy in her mental tones. She didn't like having to admit to any sort of failing. Must draw—

No, I cut in. Drop the shield.

And I mentally crossed my fingers that my father hadn't been waiting for that very event.

The faint lilac haze around me flickered, then died, and Amaya's blade became shadowed once more. I tensed but, despite my fears, my father didn't immediately attack.

Not that I relaxed any. "It's a failing also shared by the Aedh. I hardly think Lucian had planned to die so soon."

"Perhaps not, but he was aware of its approach, as you well know."

He paused, and that vague sense of amusement vanished. My grip on Amaya tightened so abruptly it was a wonder my knuckles weren't glowing.

"Lucian's plans are no excuse for you having lost the second key, however."

"No, because you own some of that blame." My voice was curt, which was perhaps unwise given the state of both my strength and Amaya's. "You not only knew he was fucking the sorceress Lauren, but also that he was working with the sorcerer who stole the first key. You didn't tell me the first fact until after I'd questioned you about her, and you didn't even bother mentioning the second."

"Because it should not have been relevant. No human should have been able to access the fields, let alone the gates."

"But he had Lucian's help, and he's a very powerful dark sorcerer."

"Lucian could not attain full energy form, and therefore should not have been able to step onto the fields."

"So how the hell did the sorcerer get to the gates with the first key if he didn't have Lucian's help?"

His anger swirled around me, fierce and frightening, but this time, its force was not aimed at me. And it had a rather frustrated edge to it.

"That I do not know."

And it killed him to admit it—a situation that cheered me up no end. "We think the sorcerer accessed the fields via stone portals formed by both black and Aedh magic—"

"While that is more than possible," my father interrupted, "he should not have been able to see the light and dark paths, let alone access them."

"Unless he had Lucian's help."

"Even Lucian would not have been so foolish as to direct a human to their location. Not when he had his own plans for them."

"Lucian's plans had nothing to do with the gates. He not only wanted revenge on the Raziq who'd made him less than he was, but to turn back time and once again become full Aedh."

An aim that seemed right up there with pigs flying, and yet Lucian had totally believed it was possible.

“Only the strongest magic raised on the strongest ley-line intersection could feasibly allow a human to achieve something like that.”

I frowned at his slight emphasis on the word “human.” “Meaning Aedh are capable of transcending time?”

“Of course.” Amusement filtered through his words again. “How do you think Lucian came to spend so much time here on Earth? He was not only stripped of his ability to become full Aedh, but he was relegated to suffering eons of human development.”

“And all it did was not only give him plenty of time to plan his revenge, but plenty of time to find a ley line strong enough for him—and his sorcerer buddy—to place their portal.”

And it was so well protected we’d yet to find the damn thing. According to Ilianna, the sorcerer had to be using a containment spell to keep us from sensing it, but surely the amount of power he’d need to suck from the intersection just to change form—let alone access the fields—would not be so easily restrained . . .

I added, “I’m gathering Lucian would have been able to access the fields that way?”

“Certainly. But both he and this sorcerer would have to alter the composition of their bodies to that of energy, if only temporarily. Souls are the only other entity outside Aedh and reapers who can walk the fields, and only then with the help of a guide.”

“What about the temples?”

“What about them?”

I bit back my impatience. I wasn’t about to rock the boat too much when my father was being helpful. Or as helpful as he was ever likely to get.

Although it did seem somewhat surreal to be having such a calm and collected conversation with him after his initial entrance. “Would either Lucian or the sorcerer have been able to access the temples in their altered forms?”

“Lucian could have, as he was my chrání. The sorcerer has no need to enter the temples. The gates are within the grounds that surround the temples, not in the temples themselves.”

A chrání, in Aedh speak, basically meant student or protégé. “That doesn’t actually answer my question.”

Yet again his amusement touched the air. While it was nice that he was in such a jovial mood, I suspected it wouldn’t take much to bring back his wrath.

He said, “Only those of Aedh blood can enter sacred temples.”

Meaning the gates weren’t considered sacred? Why not? “So I could enter them, if I needed to?”

His energy swirled around me, contemplative in its feel. I wasn’t entirely sure why, given he could access my thoughts and would have to know where this was heading.

And yet, his next question suggested the exact opposite. “Why might you wish to access the temples?”

“Lucian was a devious bastard who trusted no one.” And rightly so, given it was my father who’d betrayed him to the Raziq in the first place. “Not only would he have kept information about the sorcerer’s identity,

but he would have kept it somewhere not even the sorcerer could access.”

“Being Aedh does not automatically give you access to the temples—indeed, only those initiated into the order can move freely within the inner realm of the temples.”

“Which is a roundabout way of saying I’ll need your help?” And it would come at a price, of that I had no doubt. Still, it was worth reminding him exactly what was at risk. Hell, he might even surprise me and offer help without threats or strings.

And tomorrow, those damn pigs will fly.

“You will need help to access the temples, yes, but I will not be able to provide it. The Raziq have traps waiting around them.” Contempt darkened his tone as he added, “They hope to ensnare me should I be foolish enough to go near.”

“So how in the hell am I supposed to get into the place if you can’t help me? I’m thinking you don’t want me asking the Raziq for help.”

Anger surged, strong enough to snatch my breath and send lilac sparks skittering down Amaya’s sides. “That would be unwise.”

“Then how about offering a fucking solution, instead of just threats?” I snapped. “Because if you want the sorcerer shut down before he can use the key, I need some help.”

“There’s your reaper. While they are not initiated into the order, they have always had access to the temples.”

My reaper . . . pain and regret stormed barely shored-up defenses, and once again tears were stinging my eyes. Damn it, no. I was stronger than this. I’d survived Jak’s betrayal, and I’d get over this, too. I had to, because this time, there was more than just my heart and my mother’s reputation at stake. This time, there were lives on the line. Many lives.

A world of them, in fact.

I fiercely thrust the pain aside. “Didn’t you just say the gates are within grounds? Why, then, would the reapers be able to access the temples?” After all reapers, as soul guides, needed access to the former not the latter.

“At one time, they did not. But the priests have long gone, and the reapers have been forced to do what the priests once did.”

And that was keeping the gates in working order, as well as stopping anything—and everything—that tried to escape hell. With the first hell gate now open, more and more demons were escaping into the fields and subsequently onto Earth, and the Mijai—who were the reaper soldiers—found themselves spread very thin indeed.

God, I hope Azriel is keeping himself safe . . .

I shoved the unbidden thought back into its box. “My reaper is no longer part of this mission, so it’s not like I can get his help.”

“It is not like one of the Mijai to abandon a mission before it is finished.”

“He didn’t abandon it. I banished him.”

“But you could not do that unless he—” He stopped, and once again I felt his amusement. “That is an interesting development.”

“And what, exactly, is so interesting about me banishing him?”

“The mere fact that you could.”

Which in no way explained his amusement. Goddammit, could no one ever give me a straight answer? “Care to go into a bit more detail?”

“No.” Again that glimmer of amusement trailed around me. “You are not unprotected, however. The Mijai still need you, just as the Raziq and I still need you.”

“Meaning someone else is now guarding me?” Someone who was keeping their distance, and refusing to interact with me in any way? Because I certainly hadn’t sensed their presence.

“Yes. What their plans are beyond that, I have no idea. Nor do I have any interest, other than reminding you your allegiance must lie with me. Otherwise—”

“My friends will die,” I cut in, annoyance back in my voice. “I’ve heard that song before. So tell me, how the hell am I going to access the temples if I can’t get reaper support?”

“You are not the only half Aedh in this city, and the other is also trained as a priest. He could get you in.” He paused. “However, you will not gain access into the quarters the chrání and I shared without my help.”

He was talking about Uncle Quinn. And while I really didn’t want to involve either him or Aunt Riley in this fucking quest any more than I already had, it was looking more and more like there was no other choice.

“And the price of your help is no doubt the key.”

“No,” he said, voice so ominous it sent chills racing down my spine. “The price of the key is the life of your friend.”

And just like that, the facade of civility snapped.

Power surged, an energy so fierce it momentarily felt like he was trying to pull me apart. Amaya screamed in response, and flames leapt from the point of her blade. But they swirled around aimlessly, as if she couldn’t find anything to attack.

And she couldn’t, because my father had disappeared. Completely disappeared.

A heartbeat later, Ilianna screamed.

Chapter Two

Oh fuck, no!

I spun and raced out of the kitchen. Ilianna’s screams stopped as abruptly as they’d started, and the only noise in the house now was the thunder of my footsteps as I raced up the stairs. If he’d hurt Ilianna in any

way—

I swallowed heavily—as much against fear as fury—and followed the tendrils of power that was my father's presence.

“Enter,” he said, as I approached a door near the end of the hall. “And witness what awaits should you fail.”

I flexed my fingers, my palm suddenly sweaty against Amaya's hilt, then opened the door and stepped inside. The room was a mirror image of the one I'd woken in, although lilac rather than roses seemed to be the dominant theme here. Ilianna and Mirri stood in the middle of the room and, despite my fears, both were not only alive, but apparently unhurt.

But this was my father we were talking about. He was perfectly capable of tearing one or both of them apart in an instant.

I hoped to god that wasn't what he was planning now.

My gaze met Ilianna's, and in the green depths I saw fear and fury combined. She didn't say anything—maybe she couldn't—but her gaze flicked toward her mate. I stepped closer, and saw the luminous blue threads that had been wrapped around Mirri's neck.

Only it wasn't any type of thread found here on Earth. It was energy.

I stopped and stared. “What the hell have you done?”

“It is what you would call an insurance policy.” His voice was heavy with menace. “I have threatened the life of both the witch and the wolf, but it hasn't appeared to make much difference to your actions—”

“My actions?” I all but exploded. “What about your fucking actions? If you'd been up front about what Lucian was and who he was working with, the damn sorcerer would not have grabbed the first key, nor would he have gained access to the second. That blame lays on your shoulders, not mine.”

“Indeed,” he continued darkly, as if I hadn't spoken, “one could almost think you do not take my threat seriously.”

“That is not true—”

“And yet, you appear to fear the Raziq more than you do me. That cannot be allowed.”

I clenched my fingers against Amaya's hilt, but resisted the urge to throw her into the haze of energy that was my father. I had no idea what that thread around Mirri's neck was and, until I did, I had to practice restraint.

Thread bad, Amaya muttered.

I knew that without asking. Can you destroy it without hurting Mirri?

Know not, she replied. Taste first.

And if you taste it?

Kill might.

Mirri, or the thread?

Amaya hesitated. Both.

Then there'd be no tasting. "What the fuck have you done, Father?"

"If you wish this shifter to live, then you must not only retrieve the second key, but find the last one."

"As I've repeatedly said, I can't find the second key without your fucking help," I spat back. "And I can hardly find the third key when you haven't even told me where the fucking thing is."

"I will send directions for the third key, and a means of getting into our temple rooms," he said. "But the latter will require several hours to construct. You are not an initiate, so I will also have to create a means of circumventing that particular restriction. I suggest you use that time to search this plane for the sorcerer and the second key."

"And if I don't succeed in finding it, Mirri will die." It was a statement, not a question. I don't think I've hated anyone as much as I hated my father at that moment.

Except, perhaps, for Hunter.

"Yes. And there is one other restriction."

My stomach was churning so badly it felt like I was going to throw up. It was enough that she could die—what the hell else could he do? But even as the thought crossed my mind, the answer came. He was Aedh, and Aedh, like reapers, could command souls. He could rip hers free and make her one of the lost ones—a ghost confined to the astral field, never to move on, never to be reborn. I licked dry lips and croaked, "Meaning?"

"The lariat will begin tightening at forty hours. At that time, she will have eight hours left."

And with that, he was gone.

"Bastard!" Ilianna exploded, and swung around to face her mate. She touched a hand to Mirri's cheek. "Are you okay?"

Mirri nodded, her face pale and fear in her eyes. "Yes. For now."

I stopped beside Ilianna. "I'm sorry, Mirri, really sorry—" My voice faded. I seemed to be saying that an awful lot of late and, as ever, it was useless.

Mirri gave me a taut smile. "You can't be held accountable for your father's actions, Risa."

No, but I could be held accountable for my own and if Mirri died . . . god, it would kill Ilianna. My gaze dropped to the thin cords of power around her neck and I raised a hand. Mirri hissed before I could actually touch it.

"Don't," she said quickly. "It tightens."

I swore vehemently and glanced at Ilianna. "I don't suppose hoping for some sort of magical intervention is worthwhile?"

Her gaze came to mine, green eyes filled with fury. Though it wasn't aimed at me, I felt the force of it nevertheless. It would be unleashed my way if anything happened to Mirri.

"No. It's a type of energy I've never felt before."

No surprise there given its source was one of the most powerful Aedhs around. "Would the Brindle be able to do anything?"

It was, after all, the home of all witch knowledge, so surely they had to have something, somewhere, about the Aedh and their abilities. And some way of counteracting something like this.

"I'll take her there immediately." The doubt in her expression suggested she held little hope of them being able to do anything. She gently squeezed my arm. "Find the keys, Risa. Fast."

Easier said than done, and she knew it. But I pressed my hand over hers in reassurance, then spun and walked back into the room I'd woken in. I gathered my keys and wallet, shoving them into pockets as I looked around to see if there was anything else I'd left behind.

There wasn't. I'd obviously travelled light when I'd gone on my drinking binge. I took a deep breath and released it slowly, vaguely hoping it might help calm the turmoil inside. I may as well have tried to stop the moon from rising.

I swore softly, wrapped my fingers around my keys, and called to the Aedh within. She came with a rush that literally blew me away. Energy tore through every muscle, every cell, numbing pain and dulling sensation as it broke them all down, until my flesh no longer existed and I became one with the air. Until I held no substance, no form, and could not be seen or heard or felt by anyone or anything who wasn't reaper or Aedh.

In that form, I swept out of the house and into the sunshine, speeding away from peace and quiet of the rolling hills, heading toward Melbourne and the Collins Street building that housed Lucian's apartment.

I didn't re-form as I neared the building—there were too many people walking along this end of Collins Street to risk that. I didn't immediately go into the building, either, but scanned it carefully, looking for anything that seemed odd or out of place.

It was one of those grand old Victorians the top end of Collins Street was famous for and, like many of them up here, only five stories high. Lucian's apartment was on the top floor, at treetop level, and would have been beautiful once it had been finished. Not that being unfinished had ever stopped us from using the place—and we'd certainly shared many good times within the half constructed interior walls. But it had all been a lie.

Well, not so much the joy he'd gotten out of sex—in that area, at least, he'd been real and honest. And yet the sex had been nothing more than a means to an end for Lucian. What he'd wanted—what he'd always wanted—was the keys.

The keys were everything. To Lucian, to my father, to the Raziq, and Hunter. Hell, even Azriel . . .

I cut the thought off abruptly. Don't think about him, I reminded myself fiercely. Just don't.

But it was hard not to when I was carrying his child.

I cursed and moved warily into the building. There didn't seem to be any traps, but that didn't mean they weren't here. After all, Lucian's other lover—and his partner in key-stealing crime—was a dark sorceress.

And while we had no actual proof Lauren had been working with both Lucian and the key thief, my father certainly hadn't denied the possibility, and that was good enough for me. And given that, she'd want to protect his identity just as much as Lucian had. After all, the game was far from over—for them, as much as for us.

I slipped under the locked gate and into the building's foyer. New marble had replaced much of the old, but the floor was covered in dust and the breeze rustled the plastic sheeting still covering some of the walls. There were no workmen here, despite the fact it was only early afternoon. With Lucian dead, I guess they'd have no choice but to shut the site down—at least until his estate was sorted out, anyway.

That's presuming he'd made a will. Lucian had never suffered from a lack of confidence, and he certainly wouldn't have expected to die as he had—especially by my hand. But it might be worth doing a search through the probate office records. If he did have heirs, maybe he'd left information with them.

There would be something, somewhere, of that I was sure. Lucian had been betrayed once, and it had cost him his Aedh powers. He wasn't likely to let anything like that happen again. He would have had some form of insurance.

I moved forward again, but tiredness washed through my particles and I stopped. I might shift to Aedh with far greater accuracy and power these days, but it still took a lot of energy to hold this form, and I wasn't at my best. Not to mention the fact I was now pregnant. I had no idea how far along I was, but even if it was little more than a week or so, it would no doubt drain my strength faster. After all, there were now two beings for the energy to alter. I just had to hope that being in this form wouldn't affect my child. But Azriel was energy rather than flesh, and I was half werewolf and half Aedh, so our child belonged to all three. Surely something that was part of my child's heritage would not harm him or her.

Still, given the building site was closed, there was little reason to remain in Aedh form. I called to the transforming magic once again, and it stormed through me, rearranging cells until I was once again wearing flesh.

Dizziness immediately swept me, and I had to grab at the nearby wall to remain upright. But the pain that raced through my being was next to nothing when compared to my usual state after a shift.

My clothes, however, came through the change as disastrously as ever. They always disintegrated just fine, but re-forming them was trickier, as the magic didn't always delineate bits of me from the other particles. Which meant I often ended up with a dustlike sheen covering my skin rather than fully formed pieces of clothing. My jeans generally came through relatively intact, although the breeze teasing my left butt cheek suggested a rather largish hole around that area. My underwear, as usual, hadn't fared all that well, given both my knickers and bra were little more than fluff that clung to my skin and itched like hell. My sweater had also survived, a good thing considering the state of my bra. Being nearly naked on a building site probably wasn't a great idea, even if the building site was currently empty.

But I'd barely pushed away from the wall when a familiar scent teased my nostrils. I swore softly and turned around, my gaze scanning the plastic sheeting. As I did, Jak Talbott stepped out from behind it and said, "Well, that was certainly one hell of an entrance. Care to explain how you did that, exactly?"

"No," I bit back. "Care to explain why the hell you're here?"

Because he was certainly the last person I wanted—or had expected—to see here. Not only was he my first love—though one, thankfully, I'd finally gotten over—but also a reporter with a nose for a story. I did not want said nose sticking in this particular story, even if I'd been using him—and his resources—to help find

the ley line gate.

His answering smile was slow and sexy. At five ten, he was pretty much the average height for a male werewolf, and while he wasn't what I'd term drop-dead gorgeous, his rough-hewn features could certainly be classified as handsome. His hair, like his skin, was black, but there was a whole lot of gray in it these days. More, perhaps, since he'd become part of my quest. As for the smile—well, it had certainly enabled him to slay more than his fair share of maidens. Me included.

"Where else was I supposed to be?" he said, his dark eyes showing little of the amusement evident in his expression and his voice. "You wouldn't answer the phone, Tao threatened to cut my nuts off if I went near you, and Ilianna—well, heaven only knows what she would have threatened had I contacted her."

Amusement bubbled briefly. Given Ilianna's opinion of Jak's reappearance in my life, her threat would probably have been a whole lot nastier than Tao's. "None of which explains your presence here."

"Where else might I be given the Directorate's reticence to answering questions about Lucian?" He eyed me for a second, the amusement fading. "I figured that, given your involvement with the man, sooner or later you'd come here."

A statement that made me wonder just how much he knew about Lucian's death. "You could have been waiting a long time—"

"I doubt it. Now, it's your turn."

I grimaced. "Look, the way I reappeared . . . it's not something—"

"Don't try that," he cut in. "We passed the whole 'it's not something I need to know' thing around the time we were attacked by hellhounds. I deserve some honesty, Ris, if nothing else."

I sighed. He was right. He did. After all, I could hardly bitch about people lying to me when I was doing the exact same thing to him.

"You know how Azriel comes and goes—"

"You're not a reaper." His gaze swept me, though I wasn't entirely sure why. When Azriel wore flesh, it wasn't obvious he was anything else.

"No, I'm not." Not yet, anyway. "But I am partially an energy form. My father is an Aedh, just as Lucian was."

Something sparked in his eyes. The reporter within had the scent of a story. "So you do know he died?"

I hesitated, though there was little point in denying it. "Yeah."

"And do you happen to know how?"

"Why? What have you heard?"

"Interesting way of not answering the question, Ris." He studied me for a moment, then added, "I talked to several people who were near the warehouse at the time of his murder. By their accounts, it appeared that Lucian had been blown up—something later refuted by the Directorate. They said the cause was accidental."

If the Directorate were saying that, it could only mean Uncle Rhoan was cleaning up my mess and protecting my ass. They knew, as much as I did, it had been no accident.

But if Jak had been talking to people who'd been near the warehouse at the time of Lucian's death, it was more than possible he knew my part in it. Still, I returned his gaze steadily. "And you don't believe the Directorate's statement?"

He snorted. "I saw the photographer, remember? From what the witnesses said, the manner in which Lucian died was almost identical."

The photographer had been one of the many leads Lucian had erased before we'd had the chance to talk to him. I'd forgotten Jak had been there when I'd discovered the body. "Whoever killed Lucian didn't kill the photographer."

"Never suggested they did." He quirked an eyebrow. "And that wasn't actually a question I asked."

Perhaps not out loud, but it was nevertheless implied. And I didn't have to be psychic—although, technically, given my somewhat unreliable clairvoyant abilities, I was—to predict his next question.

"It does, however, force me to ask—did you kill him?"

I didn't pull my gaze away, didn't react, even if my insides were churning so badly it felt like I was about to throw up. "What do you think?"

"I think it's possible, and I'd like to know why."

I considered my options, weighing honesty—and what that might mean—against the knowledge that I still needed his help. Probably more so now than ever before thanks to the fact that I'd pushed Azriel away.

And yet, it was no more right to draw Jak deeper into this whole mess than it was Ilianna or Tao.

"It's possible," I said eventually, "that Lucian died the way he did simply because that's the exact same way he killed my mother."

Jak blinked. "Lucian killed your mother? Why the hell were you fucking him, then?"

"Why do you think, asshole?" I spun around and stalked toward the elevator.

He took several quick steps and grabbed my arm, stopping me. "Look, I'm sorry, but you've got to admit, it's an obvious question."

I drew in a deep breath, though it did little to calm the rush of anger—anger that was aimed just as much at myself as him.

"Do you think I haven't agonized over the fact I was having sex with my mom's murderer? It makes me want to puke every time I think about it." I pulled my arm from his and continued on to the elevator. "And the worst of it is, that wasn't the end of his crimes. It was just the beginning."

Jak fell in step beside me. "What else did he do?"

"Just about everything." I punched the Call button. "He was working with the sorcerer who stole the keys, and he was reading my thoughts during sex to keep up to date with everything we were doing to find them."

“Wow,” Jak murmured. “Even I wasn’t that much of a prick. At least when we were making love, I concentrated on the business at hand.”

A reluctant smile touched my lips. “Oh, I don’t know about that. There were definitely occasions when it seemed your thoughts were elsewhere.”

“If my thoughts were elsewhere, you can bet it was because I was trying not to come. You, my dear, can sometimes make a man a little too quick on the trigger.”

My smile grew. “I did notice you had a tendency to fire off a little too soon—”

“It didn’t happen that often,” he said, nudging me with his shoulder.

“If you say so,” I murmured, amused. The lift door opened and I stepped inside.

He followed close behind. “What floor are we heading to, and why?”

“Top floor, to what would have been Lucian’s apartment. I’m looking for clues.”

He punched the appropriate button. “Clues for what?”

I grimaced. “I wasn’t Lucian’s sole bed partner. Not only was he bedding a dark sorceress, but we’re pretty sure the two of them were partners in crime with the sorcerer who stole the keys.”

“Well, speaking from experience, the man had to have superman’s stamina if he could cope with more than you in his bed.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You and I are over, so you really can stop with all the compliments.”

“Hey, throwing a compliment doesn’t mean I want back in your bed. I mean, yeah, I’d love it, but I’ve come to accept it’s not going to happen.” He paused, then added more seriously, “So we’re looking for something to pin down the sorceress?”

“No, because we know who she is. However, we’re not looking for anything. I’m looking. I don’t believe you were invited to this particular party.”

“Unfortunately, you’re stuck with me. I mean, considering the options and all, what choice do you have?”

“That sounded like a threat, and really? That’s not a place you want to go.”

“It wasn’t so much a threat,” he murmured. “Not considering you could probably get your uncle to throw my ass into jail or erase my memory.”

“Then what the hell was it?”

“More a . . . reminder. I know what I know, simply because I have the contacts. Contacts you still need.”

I should have been annoyed, but the reality was, he was right. I’d gone to Jak in the first place because of those contacts, and I still very much needed them.

But given the fact that everything that could go wrong had gone wrong, I at least owed him the chance to back away. Not that I thought he would—not when the scent of a story was in his nostrils.

“Jak, the people who want the keys are threatening the life of everyone I care about.” I met his gaze again, hoping he’d see that I was totally serious. “The more you attach yourself to this quest, the more likely the chance of you becoming one of its victims.”

“And tomorrow I could die crossing the road,” he said, with a shrug.

“Jak, I’m not kidding—”

“I know.” He squeezed my arm lightly, his fingers warm against my skin. “I don’t mean to downplay the danger, but it’s a danger I’ve faced before. I’m a paranormal and occult news investigator, remember?”

“You’ve never faced this sort of danger before,” I muttered, glancing up at the floor indicator as the elevator came to a bouncing halt.

The doors swished open. “Perhaps not,” he agreed. “But it doesn’t alter the fact that I always do whatever is necessary to get my story.”

And one of those necessary things was hooking up with me to get a story on my mother. While I knew not everything about our relationship had been faked, it had certainly been more real to me than it ever had been to him.

The elevator opened directly into what Lucian had planned to be the living room of his penthouse apartment. It was still filled with building debris, although many of the plastic sheets that had defined the different areas the last time I was there had gone. But the new walls hadn’t yet received a coat of paint and cables hung everywhere, looking like a network of intertwined snakes.

Snakes were better than spiders, I thought with a shiver. And then wondered whether that was clairvoyance or merely paranoia speaking.

“Wow,” Jak said, looking around. “This place is huge.”

“And this is just the living area.”

“Obviously, Lucian wasn’t lacking in cash.”

“No.” I picked my way through the building rubbish, heading for the newly constructed doorway into the kitchen area. “But considering he’d had centuries to accumulate it, that’s no real surprise.”

“Centuries?” Jak said, surprise in his voice.

“At least.”

I paused just inside the doorway, quickly scanning the vast kitchen-dining area. It still held the remnants of the old kitchen—an oven, a fridge, and the bare bones of two small counters—but the framework for the new kitchen was in place.

The folding chairs we’d briefly used the time I’d met Lauren here were propped up against an outer wall. I’d asked her—against Azriel’s warnings and my own misgivings—to create a spell that would nullify the device the Raziq had placed in my heart. She’d subsequently presented me with a cube designed to prevent magic escaping its boundaries. The idea, supposedly, was that once the cube had been “tuned” to my aura, it would prevent the device in my heart activating. But the cube hadn’t been created from the magic of this world. It hadn’t even been created from blood magic. That, perhaps, I might have risked, even if only as a

last resort.

But the source of the cube's power had come from hell itself. While I might have made some very stupid mistakes lately, and had often placed too much trust in entirely the wrong people, even I knew better than to use a device created by a woman who not only considered it natural to play in hell's fields, but perfectly normal to draw on its energy to create her magic.

It was certainly one of the few decisions I didn't regret. Unlike all the time I'd wasted with Lucian . . .

I shoved the thought aside and continued looking around the room. But aside from the fact there were now doors dividing this room from the bedroom area, little else had changed.

And yet, something felt different.

An odd sense of wrongness crawled across my skin, and that was usually a precursor to me walking into a shitload of trouble.

"I don't suppose you have any weapons, do you?" I studied the doorway leading into the bedroom. If any clues were going to be here, they would be found in the place where he'd made so many conquests. Like most Aedh, he'd been able to charm the pants off any woman he desired with just a kiss, simply because an Aedh's kiss was designed to sweep aside objections and fuel lust.

And Lucian had certainly been more than willing to employ the power of it. Maybe it had been his way of passing time—when he wasn't plotting his revenge, that was.

Jak glanced at me, expression sharp with concern. "Why would I? And why would you be asking something like that?"

"Because I have a very bad feeling we could be walking into trouble."

And along with it came a very bad desire to reach for Azriel. Not so much for his protection, but simply because I felt stronger—more capable of coping with the weird shit that kept getting thrown at me—with him by my side.

I don't want to do this alone. And that, right there, was a truth I might not have any wish to face, but one I inevitably would. Because no matter how angry I was, no matter how determined to prove that I could do this alone, the truth of the matter was, I really didn't want to.

I'd banished him in anger and confusion and grief, and it wasn't just that he'd made me Mijai and ended any possibility of me being reborn and seeing my mother again. It was that he'd destroyed our one sure way to end this key madness and keep everyone I cared about safe.

The simple fact was, no one but me could find the keys. No me, no key, no threat.

I had every right to be angry. And I was. Very much so. But Ilianna was right. I owed him the chance to explain his reasons. He had tried—in his own stoic, say-as-little-as-possible way—but I'd been too locked in misery to listen. I'd wallowed in that particular pool long enough, though, and I was ready to listen now. Besides, I'd faced up to Jak's betrayal, and given him a second chance, even if it extended only as far as friendship. Did Azriel deserve anything less?

"What sort of trouble?" Jak asked.

“The kind that comes from a seriously annoyed dark sorceress.”

“Oh, delightful.”

He gave the bedroom doors a somewhat dubious look. He wouldn’t have seen anything more than I did—an innocuous, unpainted double entrance into another room. But the more I looked at those doors, the more the sensation of danger crawled through me.

“You know,” he added, “common wisdom would suggest walking away from trouble rather than into it.”

I half snorted and glanced up at him. “Seriously? You’re actually suggesting we turn around and walk away?”

“You know me better than that.” His grin flashed. “I was merely pointing out what the wise would do.”

“I don’t suppose suggesting you at least wait here would do any good?”

“No. Besides, you’re armed and I daresay your reaper is near.”

“I daresay a reaper is near,” I commented, voice a little harsher than necessary. “Whether they’ll come to our assistance should we land in trouble is anyone’s guess.”

I forced my feet forward. Jak fell in step beside me. “I take it from that there’s been a lover’s quarrel?”

“It means exactly what it says. A reaper is near, just not Azriel. More than that you need not know.”

“Which, of course, just fuels the fire,” he murmured. “This case gets more interesting by the day.”

“And more dangerous.” I slowed as I neared the double doors, scanning them quickly and still seeing nothing. Yet that niggling sense of wrongness was growing.

Amaya? Can you feel anything? I twitched my fingers but resisted the urge to reach for her. Not every problem could be solved by her presence, however much she might believe otherwise.

Not, she replied, and sounded a little miffed. I wasn’t entirely sure whether it was over my thought that she couldn’t solve every problem, or the fact that there didn’t seem to be a problem.

“So what lies beyond the doors you’re giving the evil eye to?” Jak asked.

“A bedroom.”

He frowned—something I sensed rather than saw. “I thought you were looking for clues?”

“I am, but I’m not likely to find them where the builders could inadvertently stumble upon them.”

“And the builders couldn’t stumble into the bedroom?” Jak asked, a slight edge in his voice. Whether it was sarcasm or concern, I wasn’t really sure.

“Well, yes. But it would suit Lucian’s twisted sense of humor to hide stuff in a half-finished bedroom.”

“So are we going to enter, or are we just going to stand here and stare at the door?”

“I prefer the latter option myself,” I muttered. “But I guess we should do the first.”

I gripped the handles and slid the doors back into their respective recesses. The large room beyond was more finished than it had been the last time I'd been here. The king-sized bed still dominated the middle of the room, but the three bathroom walls had been plastered and the fourth side was now a half height glass brick wall that would have provided some modesty to those sitting on the toilet but little else.

My gaze swept the rest of the room, but I couldn't see anything out of place. Couldn't see anything that suggested there was, in any way, something dangerous lurking in wait for us.

And yet that's exactly what I sensed.

It would be sensible to retreat. Totally. But retreating wouldn't get the damn keys found. Wouldn't save Mirri's life.

I swallowed heavily and forced myself forward. Felt a featherlight press against one shin, then a snap. Quickly looked down and saw the glimmer of pale thread.

I froze, waiting for the hammer to fall.

"What?" Jak's voice was little more than a whisper.

"Someone placed a cotton line across the door. I just broke it." I scanned the room again. Still nothing, and yet the sense of danger was growing.

Energy whisked across my skin. It was the barest caress, little more than a hint of darkness, but it nevertheless made my skin crawl. Amaya's hiss began to flow through the back of my thoughts.

"Why would someone do that?" Jak asked. "I mean, anyone could spring it."

I didn't get the chance to reply, because at that precise moment all hell broke loose.

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