

MAGIC'S DESIGN

Chapter 1

Darkness and fear clawed at the back of Mila's mind, so desperate and needy that she could barely think. It pressed in on her from some distant place, as it had so often in the past. Intense feelings made it worse—whether anger, fear or pain. Today it was worry. Her best friend Candy was sitting across the table from her, unknowingly deciding whether Mila was going to cut coupons and pay the mortgage this month, or whether she was going to be eating, but under a bridge.

With a satisfied sigh, Candy removed the triplet jeweler's loup from her eye. "Exquisite. Really, Mila. Every line is perfectly straight, the colors the exact jewel tones the client wants. This is museum quality. If the others are as good . . . and I know they will be, I'll take them all."

All Mila could do was nod as Candy turned the second pysanka, with a simple "call of spring" design, over in her hands. She wanted to feel happy that her friend was impressed with the intricately dyed "Easter eggs." After all, she'd spent most of her life studying the craft that had passed down in her family all the way back to pre-Christianity pagan times. But even through her pride, the darkness closed in tightly, worse today than in years. Every blink of her eyes made another world appear. Blink—the warm, varnished table became icy stone with sharp edges that she could swear were cutting into her palm. Blink—the bright sunlight outside the restaurant was transformed into darkness, eased only by tiny blue dots of light in the distance. Blink—the scent of fresh baked garlic bread and rich marinara sauce turned damp and musty. The back and forth between the sensations was making her queasy.

"Okay, so how about two hundred? Will that work for you?" Slowly, Mila's mind pulled out of the dark cavern—yes, it definitely felt like the caves she and Baba Nadia used to explore. With effort, she focused back in on where she was . . . turned away from the evil hiding somewhere in the darkness.

But her heart fell as Candy's words sunk home and the darkness came calling again, forcing her to dig her fingernails into her palms to keep it at bay. Only two hundred? Damn. She needed at least three to pay the bank. She'd hoped . . . after all, there were five eggs, and duck eggs to boot. No. She had to stand firm. Surely her best friend would understand. It would mean more scrambling tomorrow, but the eggs were worth twice that. She felt her mouth grimace and worked not to show her disappointment too strongly. "Oh. Um . . . y'know, Candy, I'm not really sure I can let them all go for that. I mean, the marriage fertility egg alone took me six hours to design and dye."

Candy's face got an odd expression. Then realization struck her and she threw back her head and laughed. Her perfect blonde mane of hair flowed and gleamed under the lamp.

Mila felt a pang of envy. Candy was her best friend in the world, truly. But sometimes she couldn't help but be a little bit jealous of the other woman's stunning looks and size six figure. Mila had always wanted to look like that. Instead, she was petite and curvy, with a tendency to gain weight. Her dark hair fell in unruly curls. The one feature she really did like was her eyes. They were wide and green, with naturally long black lashes.

Candy shook her head. “Ohmygod, you silly goose! Of course they’re worth more than that. I mean two hundred each. And naturally, I have the cash with me, ‘cause I figured they’d be perfect. You always make perfect eggs.”

It was all Mila could do to breathe. Two hundred each? A thousand dollars? She could not only pay the mortgage, but she wouldn’t have to worry about badgering Sela for rent until after she came back from spending the holidays with her family. She could even pick up enough groceries and cat food to last until payday. Woo!

Another snort from across the table brought heat to her cheeks. “Geez, give me some credit. You thought I meant two hundred for all of them? I know how hard you work on them, Mila. I tried to get you three hundred each, but the client topped out at two. And they’re well worth it. He’ll be pleased.” With a flourish, Candy pulled a wallet embroidered with stylized dollar signs from her tooled leather purse and counted out the money from a stack of hundred dollar bills. “I suppose you’re going to do something horribly practical like pay bills with it. Or are you going to do what I think you should do and blow it all on yourself at the after-Christmas sales? You never seem to get around to buying anything nice for yourself.”

Mila folded the cash and tucked it in the zippered compartment of her purse with a grin. “Trust me, Candy. Paying the mortgage to have a roof over my head, a warm furnace and a fridge full of food will be nice enough.”

She blew out a little breath onto her nails, as though they were wet. “You don’t have a mortgage. It’s not like you’ll lose the house or anything if you miss a payment. Live a little . . . you get paid on the first.”

She sighed. Candy never could understand the concept. “It is a mortgage—or it will be as soon as I have the deed. But since the loan paid for fixing the roof, upgrading the electrical and putting in a bathtub, I’ll keep calling it a mortgage.” But she couldn’t deny Candy had a point. She did tend to skimp on herself and her family when the house or car were concerned. “But if there’s enough left over, I might be able to spring for a few late gifts for Mom and Sarah. And I only sent Baba a card this year. It would be nice to give her something pretty. She likes warm fluffy scarve—”

A flash of pain lanced through her forehead, tearing a gasp from her throat. Then, like an icy breeze through a doorway, she felt a chill settle over her, strong enough to make her shudder. But it was when the pins-and-needles sensation overtook her toes that she began to panic. Oh God, please not now! Not in the middle of a restaurant.

She fought to stay calm. Panic would only make it happen faster. Moving her head slowly toward her friend she let the barest whisper ease gently from her throat. “Candy, my toes are going numb. We need to get out of here.”

Candy’s hand flew to her open mouth to prevent an alarmed screech. She had practically been a family member, growing up next door to Mila. She’d seen a number of Mila’s episodes.

“Crap! Okay, yeah. We need to get out of . . . but they haven’t even brought the food yet.” She blew out a frustrated breath and looked around the restaurant frantically, searching for their waiter as Mila slowly began to gather her purse and put on her coat. “Well, hell. Okay, I’ll just leave a fifty on the table. That should cover it. Maybe I can come back and get it and . . . no, that won’t work either. Oh, crap.”

“Shhh,” Mila warned as another spasm pounded her temples. “Not so loud.” Like the

barest beginnings of a migraine, she could feel the symptoms unfurling in her mind. The slightest trigger would send her thrashing to the floor, screaming and uttering names and words that had no meaning. Anything could do it: a loud noise, a bright light, even touching something that was hot or cold. Going from a warm restaurant to the winter air outside was going to be tough.

A few years ago Mila's sister Sarah had filmed an episode on her cell phone after their mother dropped a soda and it exploded. She'd wanted Mila to see why everyone had treated her with kid gloves her whole life. Her mother likened the episodes to epileptic seizures, but the doctors and neurologists had never been able to find a physical cause.

Mila fought back tears. She hadn't had an episode in so very long. Maybe if she could ease through this, not make a scene, she might actually be able to keep her— Shit. The car. She looked toward the window as she pushed back her chair and stood. "I drove." She could see her pride and joy out on the snowy street through the glass. The little silver Corolla was used, with high miles and a flaky heater, but it was hers. And, with another storm threatening, she couldn't afford to be late to work every day again by taking the bus.

Candy reached out to touch her hand as tears threatened. She'd worked so very hard, waited so long. "Oh, sweetie . . . your license. And you just finally qualified. No, we won't risk that. They don't have to know. C'mon. We'll hurry. I'll drive you home and you can pick the car up tomorrow when you're feeling bet—"

But as the door to the restaurant opened, the bell she'd considered charming rang, seeming too loud to her ears. The sound ripped along sensitive nerves, and the icy air hit her like a club to the head. She felt herself falling . . . felt Candy drop everything to reach for her.

The world went black, darkness crushing her mind like an empty eggshell. Another mind, with thoughts not her own, became her reality.

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Magic breathed through the air, so subtle that Talos had to close his eyes to see the flickering rune from behind darkened lids. Fire magic tickled along the birthmark on his wrist—the mark that branded him a mage. He held every muscle motionless behind the massive stalagmite, watching the escape unfold. He could tell his best friend Alexy struggled not to leap forward by the way he twitched under his cloak. But it would only be a few more minutes until Sela was in position, and then they could close in and make the capture.

The obsidian wall of Rohm Prison rose to the highest reaches of the cavern, dwarfing the group of four criminals, huddled under the shimmering black silk capes that made them nearly invisible to the casual eye. The cool moist air began to smell of molten glass as they laid enchantments to cut through the thick volcanic stone. First fire enough to make the surface glow red, then icy water to crack it. The tree alone knew how long they'd been visiting this same spot, but it must have been some time, judging by how large a passage they'd carved.

"Should we step in, Tal?" Alexy's whisper was so faint that even next to his ear, Tal could barely hear. He frowned slightly. Sela should have contacted him by flaring his mark, but she hadn't. Thus far, the Guilders hadn't actually done anything wrong. If they stopped them now, the men could simply claim they were gathering glow moss or mushrooms to sell at market. The moss hung in thick strands from the craggy overhangs, where the obsidian stopped and the regular rhyolite began. Everybody knew the shelves near the waterfall in the distance held the

best jack-o-lantern mushrooms for miles.

Tal stared at the twinkling blue lights that faintly illuminated the darkness while he thought. Imported Australian cave worms seemed to thrive here. They'd infested a lone piñon tree jutting from the stone and decorated it with sticky phosphorescent saliva. How ironic that the King's latest method to conserve magical energy was the source of light for a prison break.

He shook his head and heard a frustrated half-snort from his friend, so he twisted his lips and spoke softly. "We have to catch them entering. They need to actually breach the wall or the Commander will have our skins for a coverlet."

Alexy shuddered. He knew as well as Tal did that Commander Sommersby was fully capable of doing just that. Muttering a curse he whispered, "Well, for what it's worth, I'm glad you followed your instinct, guv. We never would have spotted them if we'd been guarding Gate Six like we were ordered."

"Bloody hell! It's about time." The almost imperceptible whisper from the darkness caught their attention. Tal didn't recognize the voice, but it didn't matter. These three Guilders had done what all the supposed experts claimed was impossible—they'd broken into the highest security prison under the Earth.

Why doesn't anyone listen when we tell them there are problems? He tightened the leather strap on his battle glove, causing Alexy to follow suit. Whether or not Sela was ready, they had to act. The horrors the human world had been subjected to by the residents of Rohm in the past would not be repeated. Not while there was breath left in Tal's body.

"Halt—Overworld Police Agency. You're surrounded. Remove your focuses and keep your hands where we can see them." In a rush of movement, he stood and held his palm toward the trio, emerald focus stone at the ready. Alexy was moving into the darkness to flank the lawbreakers. The men turned to face him. They likewise raised battle gloves and Talos felt his eyes widen and heart pound as the faint light refracted into a thousand pieces on one man's palm. A diamond nearly covered the man's glove. Nobody he knew had ever managed to tame such a complex stone. But he couldn't get a better look at the man or the glove before he raced into the breach in the prison wall.

Tal only managed to fire one blast of magic before he was forced to dive face first to the cave's floor. White light, bright enough to blind him, hit the spot where he'd stood. The heat from his opponent's stone melted the stalagmite he and Alexy had been hiding behind. Boiling black sludge rolled toward him. The edge of his cape caught on fire before he could see enough to put it out. The scent of molten rock, normally a comfort, was now his enemy.

He heard a battle cry to his left and three heads turned as one to the sound. As usual, Alexy was diving into battle with all the caution of a rabid skunk. Thankfully, his skill matched his recklessness. One criminal was already unconscious on the ground.

Tal kept his body glued to the floor as his Lieutenant's hand raised. The entire prison rumbled as formidable earth magic erupted from Alexy's ruby focus to throw the other Guilders off balance.

"Damn, damn, damn," he muttered as bouncing bits of black glass and stalactites rained down on his head from Alexy's attack. Not even his best shielding could keep all of the rocks from bouncing off his skull and scratching his arms. Well, if that didn't bring the guards inside out to help them, nothing would.

As the cursing fugitives erected hasty air charms and raced for cover, Tal whispered, “Trivoa svet.” He clenched his fist and concentrated. In bare seconds, he felt precious energy from the lights inside the prison dim just before it burned through his veins on the way to the maze of silica crystals overhead.

Red-gold light filled the cavern, and he finally saw Sela, floating high above him with arms extended in a threatening gesture toward her opponent. “No trickery, illusionist . . . or I swear by the Sacred Tree I’ll throw you from the sky.”

Tal likewise aimed his focus at the man, seeing that Alexy had the water witch under control near the broken prison wall. “As she demands, lawbreaker . . . drop down your glove and descend slowly, or I’ll let her do just that.” He kept his eyes moving between the two criminals, since they could finally be called that. “Mind that third man, Alexy. Keep him and anyone he’s attempted to release pinned inside and do what you can to repair the breach. We should have seen guards by now. That worries me. Sela, draw whatever power you need to from the lights to contact the Commander.”

Tension filled the air as the illusionist, his pockmarked face filled with hate and rage, dropped his focus glove into Tal’s waiting hand and slowly rode the air currents down to the ground. Tal raised the glove for a closer look while keeping one eye firmly fixed on the descending illusionist. The stone was a good sized dark blue lapis stone in a worn but exquisitely crafted pig leather glove. Lapis stones this fine weren’t easily found around Rohm and the tooling of the leather reminded him of another he’d seen. “Not from around here, are you, lawbreaker? This glove looks like the work of Grand Master Thetus of Vril. Vrillian, are you? Who are you trying to break out?” While he waited for an answer, he started sorting through the charms he knew that would immobilize an air Guilder. There weren’t many. Usually air magic trumped that of other Guilders. But there were a few very old spells these youngsters had probably never heard of that should be effective.

The Vrillian kept his lips pressed tight together, almost as if charmed. Tal knew better, of course. The man had been speaking just minutes before and no magic had filled the air. Still, sometimes, it was better to let the criminal think they had the upper hand. Often they made a mistake that made all the difference in prosecution.

The lights flickered and dimmed overhead as Sela’s body tensed to make a psychic link. A quick eye flick revealed that Alexy had already made the ground rise up to encase the witch’s lower body and wrists and a silencing spell glowed around his head. He was ready to transport. Glittering pebbles and dirt began to swirl around in a cyclone of magic before depositing themselves in the rift in the wall to waist high. It was only a temporary measure. Alexy had the skill to repair the wall fully, but not the energy. Not with one of the area’s rolling brown-outs about to occur. Likely the brown-out was what the criminals had been waiting for. Then they could simply stroll out with their comrades, the guards none the wiser until the power was restored.

“Good plan, overall, Vrillian. But nobody has ever broken out of Rohm. As you can see, it’s too well guarded.”

His lips parted and a snarl cut the air. The waterfall in the distance was almost loud enough to cover up the man’s mutter as his slipped feet touched the ground. But not quite. “It shouldn’t have been guarded.”

That raised Tal's brows. "It shouldn't? And why is that?" But the illusionist wasn't talking now. His lips had sealed again. Only his clenched fists and flashing dark eyes revealed his anger that was being slowly replaced by a growing fear. Tal decided to prod him along a little to see if he'd break. He smiled broadly just before casting out the immobilization charm he'd been building up the energy for in his focus with a quick flash of his hand. "No answer? Well, that's all right. I'm sure your fellows will be glad to discuss the matter at length, once I tell them you've told me all about your plan. The witch has seen us talking. I wonder if he could hear what's been said." He enjoyed seeing the frantic look in the man's eyes at the words, just before the charm froze him completely.

"Tal! Look out!" Sela's panicked voice from above made instinct take over. He dropped to the cavern floor and rolled, scanning the area frantically, just as the brown-out dimmed the lights. A blast of blue-white light from behind the hastily constructed pile of rubble in the wall gap seared his pupils and blinded him. The next thing he heard was Alexy's pained grunt and the clatter of rocks being blasted out of the opening.

Darkness descended abruptly on the cavern, so deep that not even the cave worms could be seen. Powerful magic rode the air, choking the breath from his lungs. The magic was accompanied by a bone-chilling cold that whistled through like an Arctic blast. This was no brown-out. It was much, much worse. Tal gasped for enough air to shout. "Sela, get down! Find a safe position. Stay silent." He said the words even as he scrambled through the unending black, seeking cover with blind fingertips that quickly grew bloodied on the sharp volcanic glass.

If he was right, the three of them were no match for what had just been released from prison. The infamous fire mage Vegre was the only Guilder who was known to be able to control the Creeping Darkness; a spell that removed heat and light so completely as to achieve total darkness over an area. Their only hope was to survive long enough to either seal the gates to the outer world or report back to the King.

"Blackguard! Befou—" Sela's voice, filled with rage and contempt, was cut off as a flash of light engulfed her. Surely she hadn't—? Why in the name of the Blessed Tree would she ever consider casting a death curse? He watched Sela fly backward through the air toward the waterfall. The thick, wet collision of flesh and bone against stone was followed by a whimper and then silence. A man's scream cut the air and then a blast of power shot out. Clenching his fists, he bit his tongue until he could taste coppery blood. He would not be baited. As much as it pained him, he wouldn't give away his position by speaking or racing to her side to help her. Instead, he searched for enough magic to fuel a spell. His stone was completely empty and the Creeping Darkness was doing its job. The shadows were beginning to pull on his life force reserves and, through him, others in the O.P.A.. The spell would bleed their power to the caster . . . to Vegre. Tal would die, strangled with his own power.

Tal reached outward with his senses, seeking other fire mages, his sister, the citizens of Rohm, the Sacred Tree of Life. Anyone he could connect to outside of the Agency. He could sense death in a growing circle around him—the prison guards, some of the prisoners and even a few travelers on the road to town. But strangely, not Alexy or Sela. They lived, if just barely. He stretched himself further, hoping against hope that Vegre hadn't managed to cover the entire Kingdom with his spell.

"I can hear you breathing, Mage." The amused, gravely voice seemed to come from every

direction. It was all Tal could do to remain motionless and try to find the mage among the magic, to strike. He might not have spells or blasting energy, but he was skilled in hand-to-hand combat. Vegre had been in prison for a very long time. “Yes, definitely a mage. Your fire tastes sweet on my tongue. What shall we do with you after you’re drained and helpless? Suffocate you in earth? Boil you in steam? We must reward you, after all, for attempting to foil my escape.”

There. A tell-tale footfall in the scattered rubble as the dark mage chuckled. He turned his head slowly, trying desperately not to make a sound. The distance was difficult to gauge, but he had to try.

As carefully as he could, Tal slipped his charmed handcuffs from the case on his belt. The spell Vegre had used wouldn’t affect them, since there was no power to steal until they snapped closed. All he had to do was attach the cuff to an ankle or arm and the charm would activate—drawing magical power from him to create a bright light. They were perfect for criminal Guilders, even if the magicwielder escaped from custody. They were easy to track, and quickly lost lifeforce. Even better, the cuffs had no effect on humans, other than as traditional, sturdy handcuffs. That made them perfect for carrying topside, without any danger of them falling into the wrong hands.

Tal couldn’t depend on the charm draining Vegre’s energy, because of the Creeping Darkness spell. Still, at least there would be light.

Gathering his feet under him silently, he tried to time his movements to the sounds around him. While he knew he had no power to cast, the others might not know that. So, he hoped for the best and leapt forward with a bold battle cry that should paralyze his opponents. “Pryval!”

Pain erupted when his neck snapped back. He’d collided with a body and both of them went to the ground. Tal held tight to the cuffs and reached out to grapple with the person under him, searching through the cloak for a limb—any limb small enough for the charmed metal band to lock around. His opponent didn’t speak, but he was well muscled and vicious—leading Tal to believe he was dealing with one of the original trio. The prison didn’t feed or exercise their criminals well enough for them to be muscled.

“Bloody hell!” Tal winced as fingernails raked across his face. The opponent then found purchase in his hair and his skull was slammed against the stone floor hard enough for him to see stars. Blood from the scratches stung his eyes. Unfortunately, he couldn’t use the same techniques, since his job was to bring the prisoners back to their cells generally unharmed. Still, he could certainly defend himself, and he doubted his superiors would object to a somewhat vigorous defense, considering the heinous crimes the prisoners were convicted of.

He punched and kicked blindly, giving as good as he got. The battle was more difficult than it normally would be, since not only was it pitch black, but he had to keep one hand free to attach the cuff when he found an opening. Unfortunately, the man’s arms were well covered with thick leather all the way down to his fingers, and the cuff had to touch bare skin. He swung his free arm backwards and connected with what felt like the man’s stomach with his elbow. He put enough force behind the blow to make the man exhale air in a whoosh. But then a sharp blow to Tal’s mouth from what felt like a knee made him taste blood. The scent of rank sweat and his opponent’s foul breath made him want to heave, but at last, he found an ankle that was barren of cloth. He slapped the cuff against the ankle and knew it had locked when a quiet humming

reached his ears.

“Bastard!” The man howled in pain and annoyance just before shoving Tal completely off and shaking his leg, trying to stop the charm’s stinging.

Tal watched carefully, waiting for the slow, pale blue light that would begin to chew away at the darkness. Seconds later, charm met spell and although the mage tried to cover the cuff with clothing and hide in corners, the whole purpose of the charm was to prevent that. Thankfully, the cavern was somewhat secluded and there was only one exit.

Tal’s eyes grabbed onto what light the cuff provided to look around. The first thing he saw was the lifeless body of the illusionist on the ground. His skin had blackened and was oozing yellowish pus. But that made no sense. She hadn’t finished the curse. If she had, she’d be just as dead as this criminal. The Befouler curse was a last-ditch death curse that pulled the life energy from the caster to kill another. But it killed both. Tal couldn’t imagine why his comrade would have lost her control enough to consider it. This was certainly critical, but not worth her life.

Movement to his left pulled his eyes away. A tall man with arms crossed over his chest stared down at him with an amused expression. Recognition blazed and Tal felt an immediate hatred of the man. He’d been only a child when last he saw this face—twisted with anger and hate as he was hauled by thick chains through the smoking wasteland that had been the village of Blackshear. Tal’s parents were buried there, along with half of the populace of the village. Unfortunately, Vegre’s arrogance hadn’t changed a bit, despite centuries in prison. As Tal suspected, there was no cuff glowing on his ankle.

With frightening speed that the old mage shouldn’t have been capable of, he spit the word, “Pryval.” Tal felt his body freeze in place, every muscle becoming rigid except his throat and mouth. That was odd and spoke of a very carefully laid spell.

Vegre regarded him for a long moment, before grabbing his wrist. He pulled up the sleeve and twisted it sharply, making Tal hiss in pain. The mage’s eyes lit up at the sound and then he smiled, revealing darkened stumps of teeth in several places. “As I suspected . . . a mage, but not a craftmaster. Still, it’s gratifying to know the Academy is teaching young constables to think on their feet. But surely you didn’t believe I would sully myself with fisticuffs?”

Tal couldn’t keep the sarcasm from his voice when he responded. “Of course not. Why would I expect that you’d do something yourself when you can risk a mindless lackey’s life instead?”

Vegre’s face lost its humor just before he delivered a stinging backhand to the side of Tal’s face. From the immediate sensation of swelling, he was pretty sure he’d have a black eye from it tomorrow, if there was a tomorrow. He then watched at Vegre ripped off one of his sleeves and stuffed it in his mouth to prevent him from speaking. That was confusing, since a silencing charm took very little power.

The man’s voice still carried a hint of accent from his native Britannia, but apparently he’d adapted in prison enough to use more modern speech patterns. “You should mind your tongue considering your circumstances, Constable. But we’ll see how loose your tongue is when your heart, and the hearts in those around you, grind to a halt to feed my escape.” He smiled slowly and hissed a word, eyes gleaming with malevolence in the pale light as his servant finally dared to come close. Venticulari.”

Tal had never heard that particular curse and had no idea what it might do. But from the

evil light in Vegre's eyes, he was sure it wasn't good. Even his last hope—that Vegre would remain trapped in Rohm without access to the overworld, was short lived.

“Come, Hubert. I believe you mentioned Gate Six is just a few yards from here, and is fire keyed.” He turned right at the edge of where Tal could see and gave a jaunty wave. “Fare thee well on your journey into death, constable. I would stay to watch, but I can't rely on the abilities of my . . . how did you describe them?” He tapped his finger on his jaw for a moment. “Ah, yes. mindless lackeys.” Vegre looked at the man by his side with disapproval. “I sadly can't argue with your assessment.”

Tal suddenly felt an odd sensation in his chest. A brief stuttering ended with a sharp stab that pulled a muffled cry from his throat. Vegre heard the sound, even as Tal tried not to panic and fought to work the gag out with his tongue. He smiled again. “Still, I'm free and healthy, while you're about to be distinctly . . . dead, so I suppose I have no complaints with the ultimate result.” He held out his arm almost casually and Tal realized the diamond focus was his. “Melt.” It was a simple spell, designed for glass making, but with the power of the spell and focus behind the word, the thick stone column binding the water witch dissolved into molten glass that steamed and hissed as water magic instantly cooled it.

“Thank you, grandmaster Vegre!” He looked down at Alexy's still form. “And as for you—“ The witch kicked Alexy so hard in the dim blue light that he lifted from the ground. “Something to occupy your dreams before you die, alchemist.”

Tal was so preoccupied watching the event that when the cavern lit up, he turned surprised eyes back to Vegre, who shrugged, “I see no reason why you can't watch the others die alongside you . . . the O.P.A. apparently still adhering to their ridiculous notion of comradery.” The thought of Tal watching the others die seemed to amuse Vegre greatly, for he gave a genuine smile and chuckled as he walked into the distance, followed closely by his two servants, callously abandoning his unconscious lackey to capture or death.

Another flutter in his chest, followed by a stab was deeper than the first. He would have doubled over from the force of it if he could have. The pain seemed to flow through him until it wasn't just his heart that was failing. Every vein, every organ felt as though daggers were being shoved in repeatedly. It was no wonder sane Guilders didn't use this curse. Even people who chose to kill seldom stomach torture.

It took long minutes before he could work his tongue and jaws enough to spit out the gag. Unfortunately, that didn't remove the paralyzation spell. He still couldn't move except to scream . . . and he refused to give Vegre the satisfaction. No, he had to break the immobilization first, before he could do anything else. But, at least with the Creeping Darkness spell gone, he could pull on magic in the cavern and beyond.

That made him pause and wonder. It was almost as though Vegre intended for him to do this. Otherwise, why remove a beneficial spell that was providing him energy? Or, maybe he was over thinking Vegre's motive. It might be that he simply couldn't maintain all three spells simultaneously, but didn't want Tal to discover that weakness. Either way, he needed to take advantage of it.

He closed his eyes and turned his attention inward. He searched for the runes that were corrupting his life force. They were invisible to the naked eye, but in his mind he could see the traces of colored energy that affected him. He could unwind them, but it would take a steady flow

of energy. He reached out with his senses, eyes still closed, searching. He could feel Alexy, Sela and the captive. Oddly, they were barely affected by the Venticulari spell. At least they weren't going to die as quickly as he was. To time a spell like that . . . to layer the effect from person to person—that took a level of skill that Tal had only known a very few Grand Masters to achieve. But at least his companions were alive.

After a few minutes of searching, Tal realized that they were nearly the only things that were alive in the area. Either the guards and prisoners had been relocated or they were dead. Moss, worms, mushrooms . . . all dead. As far as he could reach out, there was nothing but cold, lifeless stone.

And then he realized the trap. Alexy and Sela were unconscious, unable to free or save themselves. Tal would have to save them, but the only way to do that would be to free himself before the spell took him down. Unfortunately, the only energy to pull on was the life force of the others. If he did that, the spell would work that much faster. They would indeed die together, and it would be Tal's fault.

He couldn't do that, but to do nothing would also ensure their deaths, since he was confident that whatever Vegre did to knock them out would last until long after he was dead and they would be too weak to fight the spell—if they could even figure out what spell was on them.

“Vegre, you bloody bastard! I'm on to you. And I'll find a way to beat you!” He screamed the words into the cavern and thought he heard echoes of faint laughter return.

Again he closed his eyes, shutting out the distraction of his injured teammates. He had to search inside himself, reach for the doorway to the spirit of the Sacred Tree that had never failed him in time of crisis. His foster mother had always called him blessed for his connection to the Tree's life magic. While he couldn't imagine why he had been singled out to be able to touch the Tree's essence, he wasn't above using it to save himself and his friends and prevent the scourge on humanity that Vegre represented. He imagined a doorway, and carefully created the runes in his mind that would invoke the protection of the Tree.

At first, he could only catch flashes of light and warmth. But slowly, he heard laughter and female voices . . . smelled the spices of home and cooking, felt happiness flow in and through him—and he knew he had tapped into the essence of the Tree.

Pain lanced through his mind as another spasm gripped his heart. A chill settled over him as the power of the Tree raced through veins and tried to correct the damage from the spell. The wintery blast was both frightening and cheering. “Not me,” he whispered to the light. “If I guide you, will you help the others?”

He'd never addressed the Tree's spirit directly, but then he'd never been faced with this situation before. His eyes shot open in surprise and alarm when a decidedly feminine voice responded to his plea. “Where am I? Who are you? Who are the others, and how am I supposed to help?”

The honest confusion in the voice stopped him cold. How could the spirit of the Sacred Tree not know how to help? It was life, hope, the heart of the whole of Agathia. It was the source of all magic in the world. Couldn't the spirit do anything?

Still, it was people who manipulated the energy. It was the Guilds that originally learned to harness the magic and bend it to their will. So, perhaps the raw energy source didn't have the knowledge to do what he asked. “You need merely open yourself to me and I'll do the rest.”

There was no answer, so he presumed the spirit agreed. He concentrated on the pure thread of magic that was bright enough to imprint on the back of his retinas. Time and again, he pressed the magic to his will, dissolving the runes that held him motionless. The sudden release dropped him to his knees and made him acutely aware of the cavern around him. The cool damp air filled his chest and it felt brand new—as though he'd never been to the waterfall before. The glowing strands of saliva seemed to twinkle like stars. Even the stark black obsidian of the prison walls was intoxicating. He wanted to reach out to touch the stone, feel the cold slickness under his fingers.

But there was no time. Even as he marveled at things he'd known all his life, he felt the power fading. It would be enough to save them, but just. He raced first to Alexy's side, ignoring the flash of pain in his chest that the abrupt movement cost him. The runes surrounding him were weaker, but still formidable. Even without speaking directly, the spirit seemed intrigued by the symbols . . . as though it recognized the runes, but in an esoteric way, not for what they actually did. "Here . . . and here." He guided the magic to dismantle the runes around Alexy and felt an instinctive sort of understanding follow, as though the spirit was relearning a skill that had been forgotten. The energy stream was decidedly weaker when he finished, but he couldn't help but smile when Alexy's eyelids fluttered open.

"What in the King's bloody balls happened to me?" Alexy's voice was hoarse, as though he'd been screaming, even in his sleep. "I feel like I've been run through a clothing wringer backwards."

Tal shook his head. "I'll have to explain later. I don't know how much time I have left to save Sela."

Sela. That name seemed to ring in his head like a bell, but the confusing images that followed in his mind made no sense to him. Richly waxed furniture, a fluffy gray cat, and the thick, cloying scent of flowers—none of them were things he could attribute to the stark, nonsense police agent he'd worked with for the past two years.

He ran toward the waterfall to the last place he saw her crumpled form. But she was gone. Only a small dark stain of blood remained on the damp stone. "Sela?" He looked up and around, turning in a full circle, in case she'd woken up and crawled or flown to a safe place. He called again, louder. "Sela! Where are you?" Only the rumbling hiss of the waterfall replied.

"Are you certain she was here?" Alexy was still woozy and was slurring his words more than a little. But as soon as he released Sela from the spell, she could use the small amount of healing magic she knew to fix that.

"She was here when I went to help you. She can't have gone far. Sela!" Alexy began calling for Sela as well, picking up on Tal's increasing concern. She had been unconscious, just like Alexy, while he was working with the Sacred Tree. How could she just disappear?

He realized he was worried about her—far more than he should be. She'd been missing before . . . had been captured before. Yet, concern filled him to the point that he raced into the darkness searching.

"Tal! What are you doing?" Alexy's voice grew fainter as he ran through the cave, looking in every cranny, high and low, for some sign of her. A bit of cloth, a few strands of golden hair. But there was no evidence she had been this way.

Another spasm ripped through him, and this time he couldn't fight back the scream of

pain. He found himself on the ground, with Alexy standing over him, but he couldn't remember falling. There was only pressure—strangling his heart, pressing against his eyes, making his limbs feel leaden and sluggish. As the pressure increased, so did the stabbing, stinging, burning that made him want to tear off his own skin.

“C'mon, guv. Stay with me.” He could hear the words, but he couldn't seem to make his mouth move. The realization that he couldn't tell Alexy what the spell afflicting him was, nor that Vegre had been the caster, terrified him. He began to thrash on the ground, clutching at his throat, trying to make his lips form the words. But every movement intensified the pressure until he couldn't even think.

Make it stop! The plea, scream, demand came from inside his head, but it wasn't his voice. It was the powerful female cry of the Tree spirit, who was trapped inside the spell with him.

I can't make it stop. It's a spell. I'm going to die soon. The simple statement was met with abject panic from the spirit.

No! You can't. I'll die with you.

Tal went still. He couldn't imagine that the Sacred Tree could die. That wasn't possible. It was all-powerful, never-ending. It had existed from before he was alive, hundreds of years. It was the tree that had drawn the ragged survivors of the Blackshear massacre from the overworld to their underground sanctuary.

But if the spirit could die, then it was too late. He couldn't think through the pain to form a counter spell . . . even if he had the magic. He couldn't move his lips enough to speak. His heartbeat was slowing and he knew somewhere in the darkness, Vegre was laughing at him.

Tal looked up and saw Alexy mouthing words. The veins in his neck were standing out so far that he must be screaming, but Tal couldn't hear whatever he was saying. A cotton-fluff haze seemed to muffle everything, from sound to sensation and even the room was growing dim.

I'm not willing to die with you. This isn't my fight. The voice in his head was panicked, but there was a thread of cold iron in the declaration. Sadness filled him with the knowledge that the Tree spirit was going to allow him to die in solitude. Yet, didn't he vow to sacrifice himself, separate himself from the Agency, when it came time to die? Wasn't that part of . . . part of . . . what, exactly? He remembered a vow, and how important it had been at the time, but he couldn't seem to remember the words.

His eyes flicked open again. When had he shut them? Alexy's eyes seemed to be leaking, dripping moisture onto his face. That seemed odd, but he couldn't remember why.

Enough of this! The shout in his head was sure and strong, and was accompanied by a sound. No, more than a sound, it was a hundred sounds, a thousand. Tumbling, flowing, grating against one another . . . one moment an angel's chorus, the next an out of tune orchestra. The cacophony of noises made his chest vibrate and his lungs struggle for air.

And then everything went black.

Chapter 2

“Sela!” Mila’s eyes shot open and she sat up in a rush. The darkness that had claimed her mind made her disoriented and sick to her stomach. Bile rose in her throat from a panic that she couldn’t seem to shake, forcing her to swallow repeatedly to keep it down. If only the room would stop spinning as easily.

The door opened and Candy rushed in. She sat down on the bed and put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Hey, girl. Sela’s not here, remember? She’s at her folks for the holidays.” Mila blinked repeatedly as she tried to focus in on the here and now. The dark cavern and the blond man who had been crying and mouthing words she couldn’t hear were fading into the recesses of her mind. At least the pain was gone, as was the tingling in her toes. But she could still remember the face of the man who had tortured her in the dream. “Vegre. His name was Vegre.” It seemed terribly important that she remember that and say it out loud.

“Who’s name is Vegre? You still with me, Mila? You’re home now. It’s Candy. Remember?”

Mila finally looked at her friend. The darkness dimmed enough that she could recognize her own bedroom. The century old burled oak bed posters flickered like a tiger eye stone under the thin shaft of sunlight that managed to get through closed curtains. She sighed and snuggled deeper into the thick down mattress and sighed in relief. “I’m home. How in the world did you get me home?” That thought was followed by another moment of panic. “Oh crap, I have to call work.”

Candy rolled her eyes and let out a snort of air. “Please, do you think I’m an idiot? I called your work, told them you got waylaid by that cold going around and wouldn’t be back this afternoon.” She lifted one foot to display it to her friend. “And I should take back half of the money I paid you. Just look at these boots.”

The suede boots, normally the color of a pureblood palomino horse, were soaking wet and stained with both mud and salt. Mila knew they were her pride and joy . . . hand crafted for her on a rare trip to Italy. The fact that she allowed them to get in that condition was incredibly touching. “Ohmygod, Candy! I can’t believe you aren’t in tears. Did you carry me all the way home?” She couldn’t help but glance down at her size fourteen body, and then at Candy’s delicate size six.

Her friend laughed and patted her comforter-covered leg. “God, no! I’m lucky if I can lift my purse most days. You were actually able to walk with some help. I told them in the restaurant that you had a bad cold too, and the medicine had made you a little loopy, so one of the waiters helped us to my Jeep.” She let out a small chuckle as she stood and walked to the window, where she opened the drapes to let in more light through the sheers. “It was pretty easy to keep up that white lie, since you kept sneezing and calling him Alexy.” She turned and wiggled her eyebrows. “Found out his name is Robert . . . while he was asking me for a date.” One hand went to her hip flirtatiously. “That’s the only reason you’re off the hook for the boots, by the way.”

One word stuck in Mila’s mind from the story. Alexy. Why did that name sound so familiar? It tickled in her mind, struggling to find a link, but whatever the name meant was gone. She shrugged and then ran fingers through her crunchy, tangled hair. “Just another one of those

rambling moments, I guess. You know how the episodes are. Congrats on the date, I suppose. That wouldn't have seemed to be a dating opportunity to me. So, how'd you get me up the front steps into the house?"

Her friend snorted expressively. "Hell, girl. Your problem is that nothing ever seems like a dating opportunity. Probably why I get more dates. But I got lucky when we got here, too. Your neighbors, Bryan and Jeff, were home taking down their Christmas decorations. They helped me get you upstairs." She paused and looked at Mila sternly before tapping one manicured nail on her hip. "I'm really ticked off that they knew nothing about your condition, by the way. You promised me that you were going to tell them, so they could look in on you if something like . . . today happened." She raised eyebrows in only slightly mock frustration. "Hmm?"

Mila had no excuse and she knew it. All she could do was let out a frustrated breath. "I know I promised you . . . and Mom. It's just that . . . they think I'm normal around here. You remember how they talked about me behind my back when I lived in Aurora. I felt like some sort of circus freak. Everybody watched me with greedy eyes, like they were waiting for the next show." She threw back the comforter and sheet and shivered from the sudden rush of chilled air in the drafty bedroom. "You don't know what it's like, Candy. People have actually told me that they were afraid to invite me to parties, because they don't know when I'll go off."

Her friend looked suddenly uncomfortable, shifting weight from foot to foot and staring at the floor. "I never really thought about it from your side. It's just that we worry—"

On impulse, Mila dashed across the room and threw her arms around Candy's shoulders, not caring when a splinter from the old unvarnished floor embedded in her heel. Slender arms gave her a hug tight enough that her words were muffled. "I know. And I love you guys for it. I really do know how hard my condition is for you and the family. But please . . . give me a little space, and try to have faith in me." She pushed backwards and held Candy at arm's length. "Please?"

There was a knock on the front door just as Candy opened her mouth to reply and they both turned to the sound. Mila stepped back and looked at her mess of clothing, grimacing at the deep wrinkles in the woolen skirt. "Any chance you can get that for me while I change? I can't even imagine who it would be in the middle of the day."

Candy twisted her arm and lifted the edge of the fluffy red sweater covering her watch. She shook her head and uttered a small nervous laugh. "Um, I'm betting it's your grandmother."

Mila's jaw dropped and heat rose to burn her cheeks. "You called Baba Nadia? What were you thinking?"

Her friend was unapologetic as a crescendo ringing echoed up the stairs from the ancient pull bell. "Would you rather I'd called your mother? You were unconscious for the better part of an hour, Mila. I didn't dare call for an ambulance. You'd lose your driver's license. And your Baba used to do that . . . thing to bring you out of an episode when we were kids. Remember?"

"Thing?" Mila asked as the knocking started again. She vaguely remembered how Baba would roll eggs on her stomach when she was sick—ancient Ukrainian folk medicine that was amazingly effective when done by the right person. And Baba was one of those people.

"You remember how she used to wander the neighborhood when we were kids, knocking on doors to treat sick people?" Candy shivered as another ring persistently sounded downstairs. "I always hated sitting in strange people's living rooms, when half the time I didn't understand

what they were saying. And God! Those foul-smelling plasters on our chests and hot wax readings.”

Mila furrowed her brow. Really, she didn't recall spending all that much time with Baba as a girl, but she must have if Candy remembered it. She sighed. “Well, we might as well get it over with. Stall her if you can, while I change into something suitable, huh?”

Her friend looked slightly panicked. “Don't take too long. That woman terrifies me, and there aren't many people who can still do that.”

They were in agreement about that. The Penkin matriarch was a force of nature who could casually walk by a junkyard and have the guard dogs whimper and crawl away with tails between their legs. The Dog Whisperer had nothing on her grandmother. As Candy left and closed the bedroom door, Mila went to the closet and flipped through hangers before finding a pressed pair of black slacks and a white shirt. The embroidery on the collar was in similar jewel tones and design as the eggs she'd sold to Candy. Baba loved bright colors and the fact that Mila had done the stitching would win points on a crucial day like this.

She'd just pulled the splinter from her foot and was buttoning her shirt when Candy's unusually tentative voice came through the closed door. “Um, Mila? It wasn't your grandmother at the door. It's two guys for Sela. I told them she wasn't here, but they insisted on talking to you.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “They're all stern and distant. I think they're cops, but they wouldn't show me a badge. Doesn't Sela work for the Feds?”

Someone for Sela? Nobody ever came to see her roommate, and she couldn't imagine her being in any trouble. Fresh to Denver from an Amish farm in Pennsylvania where her family eschewed all technology, Sela had gone whole hog into materialism. Working for the U.S. Geological Survey in Boulder gave her plenty of money for all the high-tech toys that she'd never had as a child. Mila could barely walk through her room without tripping on video cables from game systems, computers and music players. “Sela's not the type for federal trouble. They're probably family. I've heard they're really disapproving of technology and the living room is loaded with it.”

Candy sounded unconvinced. “Yeah, maybe. But you haven't met them. You'll see what I mean in a minute.”

Mila looked again at the clothing in the full-length oval mirror in the corner, suddenly relieved the shirt had a homemade feel. If the visitors were Sela's relatives here to check her out, she just might pass the test. “I'll be right down. Could you ask if they want something to drink? I've got some juice and bottled water in the fridge.”

“Will do.” As soon as she heard the familiar thumping of Candy's heels down the stairs, she dashed to the bathroom at the end of the hall. One look in the mirror over the sink made her grimace and drag fingers through stubborn tangles gluey with hair spray. Maybe if she flipped her hair over her head and brushed vigorously for a minute, it would help. As she counted out stroke twenty under her breath while simultaneously scrubbing her teeth with cinnamon paste, she heard something crash to the floor down the hall.

Mila paused to listen. The rustling was definitely louder than Candy's muted alto and two males—one tenor and one baritone—down in the living room. She stood carefully and smoothed her thick waves into place, then spit toothpaste into the sink as quietly as she could.

Could Baba already be here? But no, Candy would have mentioned it, and Baba never did

anything quietly. She grabbed the big metal flashlight from the floor near the door. It was both a necessity in a neighborhood that was usually the first in the city to lose power, and a powerful club for protection. After taking a deep breath, she carefully slipped out into the hallway.

She was right. The noise was definitely coming from Sela's room. The door had been closed since she left nearly a week ago, but now it was slightly ajar.

Through the crack, she could see Sela, racing between her dresser and an open suitcase, stuffing clothing inside haphazardly and muttering to herself. Her face was covered with bruises and there was a dark spot on the back of her head that looked very much like dried blood.

"Sela?" She whispered the word, not wanting the people downstairs to hear—especially since Candy already told them that Sela wasn't here.

Her roommate turned so quickly she nearly fell, her face a mask of terror. She raised a hand straight-armed from her shoulder, causing Mila to take a step backwards. It took a few moments for recognition to come to Sela's eyes, but when it did, the arm dropped.

Mila rushed forward, keeping her voice down, despite her excitement. "Sela, when did you get home? There are some people downstairs looking for you. Have you talked to them yet?"

Her roommate looked at the open door to the room in abject horror before tiptoeing over to close it. "I haven't been downstairs yet, because nobody knows I'm here. There are men following me, Mila. You have to tell them that I don't live here anymore."

The disapproval must have been clear in her expression, because Sela's face fell. She continued whispering, more because she wanted to find out what was going on before there were interruptions. "You know I won't do that, Sela. How many times have I refused to lie for my boss, even when annoying clients come in the office? What's going on? How did you get up here without coming through the door downstairs? Are you in some sort of trouble? Should I call the police? I can certainly stall whoever's downstairs until they get here if you're in danger."

Sela ran fingers through her short blonde hair in frustration and only then noticed the blood that came away on her fingers. She looked down in shock, apparently just realizing how she must appear. "Look, Mila. I know this must seem strange, but you have to believe me—it's imperative that the men downstairs don't see me here."

Mila folded her arms over her chest and raised brows, stern with disapproval, in what her brother always referred to as her Baba face. "Go on. How did you get up here, and why don't you want those men to see you?"

Few people could stand up under the Baba face, and Sela was no exception. She looked again at the suitcase and then at her watch before replying. "All I can tell you is that there are things going on that you don't understand and will have a hard time believing. I like you, so I tried my best to keep you out of this, but it's too late now. But trust your gut, Mila. You're more unique than you can ever imagine. There are people who would . . . who have killed—" she looked toward the door at the sounds of movement outside. "Oh hell, there's no time. Just, keep an open mind and be careful."

With that, she turned away and started throwing things frantically into her bag.

Mila felt like an idiot standing there, just staring at the woman who she'd lived with for nearly two years now—but apparently didn't know at all. Rational thought said that Sela was delusional from the blow to her head, but instinct . . . her gut, told her differently.

Before Mila could frame her first question to get more details, she felt a strange, prickling

sensation flow through her feet. It was pins and needles, but of a different sort than before an episode. This was deeper and heavier . . . more like claws that grabbed and held, filling her skin with heat and pain. She felt her head snap around at the precise moment that Sela's did—toward a spot near the window that was shimmering. With an abruptness that made Mila gasp, a greenish haze replaced the sparkles and a tall man stepped into the room as though the window was a door.

Mila froze as she recognized the man who'd tortured her in the dream. Clothed in black silk, he reeked of death and decay. Mila expected to run from the room from the man who'd stolen the life from her body, planned to scream and cower. But instead, she stepped toward him aggressively, surprising herself. She forgot to lower her voice, but it didn't really matter anymore. "You're not welcome here, Vegre. Get out and leave us alone."

While his eyes had been only for Sela, the mention of his name drew both his and Sela's eyes toward her. He stared at her for a long moment but then shook his head. "I don't know you, human, but that you own my name means your death." He raised his hand and uttered a single word. "Moratay."

"Avatay." The word slipped out of Mila's mouth, completely unbidden. It was such a surprise to hear him to utter that old word—part of a game she and her sister Sarah had played as kids. It was similar to Marco Polo that her friends played, but the second word had to be uttered before the first word finished, otherwise you lost a point. She felt heat hover in the air around her face and then it blew around she and Sela. The energy hit the wall hard enough to blow apart the old plaster over the brick. The resulting blast of noise didn't seem possible from the light breeze that had passed around her.

A flurry of footsteps bounded up the stairs just before a hard shove sent her sprawling to the floor. The words came seconds later. "Get down, Mila!" She felt another rush of heated energy singe her hair, like walking past a bonfire when the wind changes. Out of her peripheral vision, she saw Vegre grab Sela's arm and start to drag her toward the roiling, bubbling gash in reality.

Even as her mind screamed, Leave this alone! Run! Hide! she reached out and grabbed Sela's ankle with both hands and pulled, struggled to keep Sela from being abducted. It was as though her sudden help spurred Sela on, because she began to fight in earnest—kicked and scratched and screamed nonsensical words at her attacker.

The door burst open, slamming against the wall so hard that the old patterned knob embedded in the plaster. Mila caught her breath as two men raced in with Candy and Baba Nadia at their heels. The blond man . . . he was the same one who had been in her dream.

"Alexy! Help her!" Mila's eyes locked on those of the dark-haired man who'd shouted. She didn't recognize him . . . not at all, but she felt like she should. His movements, his energy, felt so familiar that it was almost like he was a lover she'd forgotten she had. But then, when the blond moved forward to help, the name the man called him finally struck home in her mind. Yes. He is Alexy. Time seemed to still as Mila took in the implications. Even a woman's scream nearby seemed distant within the buzzing in her head as she stared at the blond and felt a surge of deep friendship . . . comradeship that had no romantic ties, but was equally as strong.

"Oh, my God! Is that Sela? What's happening to her?" Candy's words from the doorway drew Mila's gaze away from the men. Vegre had disappeared through the passage, and only

Sela's lower torso remained in the room, stretched painfully—her pant leg taut over a twitching leg. She was halfway between here and . . . wherever, held only by Mila's fierce grip on her booted ankle. The next scream made her realize that holding her like this was hurting her. Even Alexy hesitated and looked to the other man for guidance.

"Think it'll come off if I help pull?" It took a second for Mila to realize that it was Sela's leg.

The dark-haired man looked stricken at the thought and seemed to struggle within himself for an answer. He opened his mouth finally, but it was her Baba's calm, gentle voice that broke the silence.

"Yes. Too much of her is on the other side. Mila. You must let go."

She felt her eyes welling as she stared at the crackling green hole of energy. "But I can't. He'll kill her. She said so, and I've seen what he's capable of."

"He? Who took her?" The dark-haired man moved across the room and knelt down beside her. His dark eyes were intense, flickering with an internal fire that seemed to warm her toes. "Did you hear a name?"

"Vegre. His name is Vegre." The name made three of the four others in the room flinch and her grandmother reached instantly for the cross under her shirt. She kissed it and closed her eyes. "Then she is doomed. But please, Mila . . . don't help him by prolonging her torture. Let go." Another scream punctuated the air, lending credence to her Baba's words.

"Wait!" cried the dark haired man suddenly. "Not yet." He ripped off a leather driving glove with a large chunk of green glass over his palm. He held it for a second and then with a look of determination, made a throwing motion into the flickering void. He turned his head and nodded. "You can let go now. We'll find her."

Something made her comply. But she'd been holding on so tight that it was hard to open her fingers. The man had to help her pry them open against the constant tug from the other side of the sparkling goo. At last she felt Sela's leg slip away. The moment the last bit of spiked heel disappeared, so did the sparkling.

It was suddenly still in the room until Alexy let out a frustrated sound. "Tal, what in bloody hell were you thinking? He'll spot your glove in a second and we'll wind up dead from a soul-sucking spell before we can make it back to base."

The dark haired man, Tal, looked at him calmly and then smiled. "Cloaked it first and put on an attachment spell."

The frustration slipped away from Alexy's face, to be replaced by a brilliant smile that was obviously his normal expression by the many laugh lines around his eyes. "That's bloody brilliant. I'd never have thought of turning a focus into a tracker."

Mila felt apart from herself, numb and fuzzy after the frantic activity that resulted in failure. It was Candy's voice that turned their laughter serious again. "Would someone please explain what's going on? Spells? Trackers? Weird green—" she fumbled for her next words, "goopy things that people disappear into?"

Baba patted her on the shoulder. "All in time, Candace. First, though, we must refresh and do a reading. Before I reveal more, to you or—" she motioned to the men with a stern look, "—Them, we must have calm energy."

Tal rose from his squat and flipped one side of a long cape back over his shoulder in a

practiced gesture. He offered her a hand up and she realized she was still sprawled face down on the floor. Rising to her knees she took the hand, marveling in the gentle strength that seemed almost . . . chivalrous. “Um, thanks.”

The sensation of his touch wasn't what she expected. His hand was overly warm, heating her skin until her toes tingled. Her body ached from that one touch, but there was also a familiarity there, a sensation that she'd been touched by him before . . . intimately. It was a struggle not to gasp or throw herself at him and she noticed that as soon as she was on her feet, he let go, as though burned.

Tal turned toward Baba, his voice gruff, yet breathy. “Apologies, grandmother, but we've got a criminal to track. Sela's strong, but his followers are many. If we don't find him soon—“ He paused, and anger filled his face. “Well, we won't consider that. We will find him.”

Baba's wide body filled the doorway and she gave another of her patented looks over crossed arms. “You are weak and will only endanger the witch further if you proceed without ritual. Come. You will eat herbs and drink tea and be healed. Otherwise—“ She paused and stared at the men with the most dangerous expression Mila had ever seen. “I will put you down where you stand.”