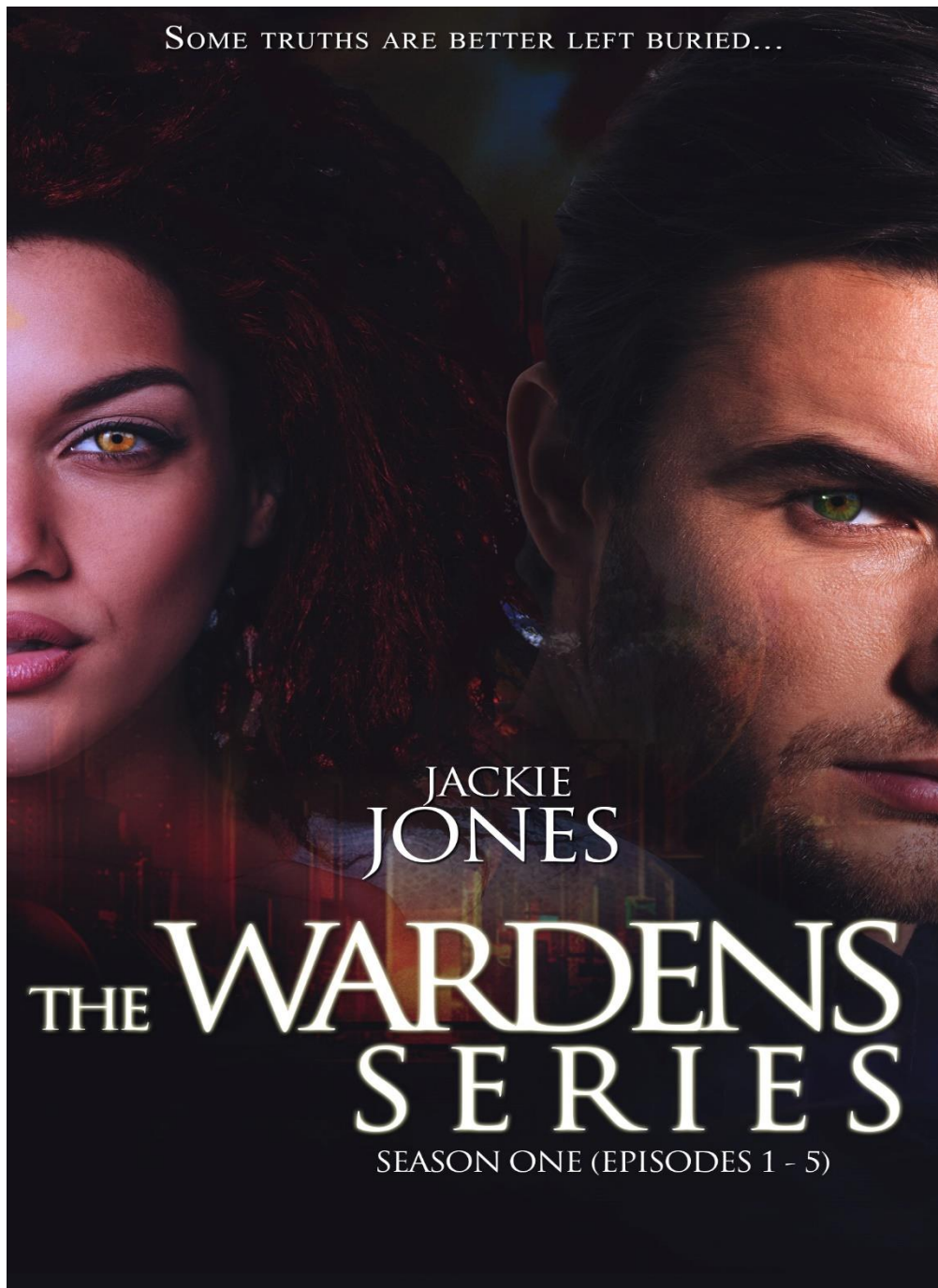


A The Wardens Universe series



Written 2012 - 2013

The Wardens Series – S01 (Episodes 1 – 5)

By Jackie Jones

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Other Info

This is a first edition and includes Chapters 1 – 52, and the epilogue. It is a *The Wardens Universe (TWU)* series.

To join the ranks and dive into the world, visit [The Wardens Universe \(TWU\)](#).

To check out other TWU stories or excerpts, read [Erin's Origins](#), and [Praesidium's Orphans Chapter 1: Wendigo](#).

For more information about Jackie Jones, her stories, and other content, please visit: [Pages Unforgotten](#).

Formatting

This is the earliest version of this series and you may come across formatting errors. *E.g.: Underlined words = italics.*

Author's Note

Special Editions of The Wardens Universe books/episodes including behind-the-scenes content, convenient tools like Table of Contents, and Previously On (so you can skip ahead if you want), and more, will be available in April 2021.

Bookmark my [Stories page](#) for regular updates. To purchase a personalised, signed digital copy of this episode, and/or a special copy with all five (5) episodes in Season 2, [contact me](#) with your request.

Social

Find me on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) @jackiejoneslive.

I don't post as often as before, find out why in my post: [Scrolling for Likes and Other Social Media Disasters](#).

Before you begin, here's how reading the series works:

Each episode consists of 10 – 12 chapters. Read on to new episodes to continue the story (much like watching a show).



*Chapters 1 – 10 *

Episode 1: Skins

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Chapter 1

Erin groaned and sat up straighter. Zach's forefinger pissed her off, as it poked her awake each time she tried to get a little shuteye. Turned out he was some sort of green-eyed, dark haired, human-sized hawk, who didn't miss anything, though his eyes were supposed to be on the house across the street.

"I've probably got bruising in my ribs from all that," she said grumpily and grabbed the cup of soda they'd been sharing. Disgusted, she threw it back on the rental car's dashboard, "And you've drank it all too."

Zach ignored her grumbling and gestured to the two-storey house they'd been observing. "There's been some movement in the last few minutes, but we're going to have to get closer."

"You mean *I'm* going to have to get closer, don't you?" Erin said, still annoyed at the lack of soda.

Letting her sarcasm fly over his head, Zach handed her an earpiece which she immediately inserted. Their job required them to be in constant contact and this, along with a few other hidden gadgets found in her black jeans, tank top and leather jacket, all worked together to ensure that neither of them got into too much of a bind and could be easily extracted if they did.

"One time around and that's that," Zach said in warning and Erin nodded. She'd been known to go off course more often than their employers liked and Zach was usually the one cleaning up the mess.

"I know, I know, leave the hard work to the big boys." She pulled her dyed curly red hair back with a band and got out of the car, her soft-soled black ankle boots allowing her to stealthily make her way to one side of the house. The deep quiet was unsurprising at well past two in the morning. Erin peered into one of the windows, the specially made contacts she wore allowing her to see through the darkness. Being a warden meant quiet, quick and most

of all, unseen. She and Zach had been partnered up for just over two years and she often liked to say that she did all the hard work, while he got to stay in the van.

“Do you think this was a legit call Zach? Seems pretty good here to me,” Erin whispered when she’d made a full circle of the house. Her Barbadian accent came through too loud over the wire.

Zach adjusted the levels before answering, “It came straight from head office, so *something* has to be happening here, they’re just not sure what.” Erin stood from her crouched position and looked around the large backyard. The night was still and for a moment she wished she was tucked safely in one of the beds in this neighbourhood. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d slept in an actual one. She turned to retrace her steps,

“Heading back to you Zach, maybe we can take a break, get something to eat or . . .”

“Erin, third window on the left, go now!” The urgency in Zach’s voice got her moving and Erin ducked down again, making a dash for the other side of the house that Zach had indicated she should check out. Her heart beat faster and she could feel beads of sweat gathering at her temples. This always happened when there was about to be a sighting.

“Erin, *hurry*,” Zach urged, as if she wasn’t already. She raised herself up slightly when she reached the window and did so until she could see into the room. At first she saw nothing but furniture and scattered toys.

“Have I missed it?” she asked Zach anxiously, not wanting his answer to be ‘yes’ and face another meeting where their handler Damian, would emphasize how disappointed he was in them.

Zach’s answer came in a hushed tone, “Look up.”

Erin did as she was told and turning her gaze to the ceiling, saw exactly why they’d been sent to the backwoods of Kentucky. An old woman, naked and emaciated, clutched the wooden ceiling. She was sniffing the air, moving slowly towards the stairs that would lead her to the sleeping occupants. Chills ran through Erin at the sight – *a soucouyant*. They were wicked little creatures that sometimes shed their skin when they were ready to hunt and took the blood of others for their own gain. They did this every few years, a process that allowed them to recapture their youthful beauty, before their true haggard appearance took over once more.

“She’s a mean looking one,” Erin said softly, watching the woman’s progression, “Don’t they have kids in there as well Zach?”

Zach issued another warning, “In and out Erin, that’s our job. Containment will come deal with her.”

Erin tried again, “But Zach, we can at least scare her off a little and then ...”

“No,” he said sharply, “In and out, now, before she can drink Erin.”

She sighed but agreed. She willed more strength into her being, the dark magic flowing through her aiding the cause. Erin opened the window, hopping in carefully and landing as quietly as she could on the wooden floor. The soucouyant had already made its way along the ceiling to the upstairs rooms and Erin took the time to whisper binding spells that would keep the creature in the house until containment could come and get rid of her. She paused at the stairs.

“Erin,” came a worried call from Zach, “What are you thinking?” She balled her hands into fists, not answering. “Dammit Erin you’re—”

She touched the device in her ear, switching his voice off. He could keep up with her with his GPS system instead.

Chapter 2

Zach frantically switched to his GPS device so he could monitor Erin's movements. She was always trying to save the world killing one monster at a time, which was noble, but not their job. Wardens were supposed to hunt down, observe and curb the violent behaviour of the many supernatural beings they hunted. They worked for Praesidium, referred to by employees as the organisation. Its headquarters were in Middlesbrough, England, but they were sent all over the world on cases, with wielders of powerful dark magic one of their most coveted weapons.

He'd had another partner before Erin, a woman who'd followed the rules and didn't get him into trouble. When she'd transferred and became a member of the containment unit, Zach had been stuck with the new girl that no one had wanted as she was already known for using rather unorthodox methods. However, their employers seemed to like Erin for some reason and she continued to get away with way more than he would have ever dreamt of in his six years with the company.

Zach saw Erin making her way upstairs and hoped against all hope that she'd just take a tourist shot and get the hell out. The device in his ear buzzed to life.

"A little help here partner?"

"Jesus Erin," he said annoyed, but was already jumping from the vehicle. He pulled his gun from its holster and ran towards the house. He wasn't as gifted magically as Erin was and instead poured his knowledge of the craft into making weapons that were specially designed to combat supernaturals. His weapon looked like an ordinary Glock, but was chock full of spelled bullets that were able to penetrate the skin of many of the creatures they faced.

Lights were starting to go on inside the house and from Erin's earpiece Zach could hear voices. This was not good. He ran faster, ignoring the pleasantries as he gave the door a hard kick. This didn't work the first time and cursing under his breath at the pain in his leg, Zach blasted the knob with his gun, causing it to shatter and allowing the door to swing open.

Screams echoed down to him and Zach dashed upstairs, "Erin, which room?" he called to the wind, though it hadn't been necessary as the screaming was no doubt coming from the last bedroom on the left. Zach had studied the plans of this house as he did every area they were told to survey and went towards it as though he lived there.

“*Get out now,*” he heard Erin shout and saw a small child, followed closely by two adults, come rushing terrified from the room. In a panicked daze, they paid little attention to Zach as he ran past. When he finally turned the corner, Erin was standing, a ball of black light poised to strike in her hand. Her smooth dark-caramel coloured skin seemed to glow under the glare of it and her honey-brown eyes stared intently at the soucouyant.

Zach could imagine what this room would look like on an ordinary day. It was the child's room and was much like the one he'd shared with three others while growing up in England, minus the fact that it was outfitted with every comfort a little human could want. Tonight however, the scene was rather different. An old woman grabbed onto the wall half in and half out of her skin, hissing angrily at them. Zach aimed his gun at her, hating the way her greyish skin seemed to swing and hang as she skittered back and forth like a cornered roach.

“Nowhere to run grandma,” Erin said, her eyes never once leaving the soucouyant. Zach stepped back, blocking the doorway with his body. He wasn't the biggest guy around but was no pushover either. Built more like a swimmer than a linebacker, years of martial arts training had made him fitter than most, a fact he'd been thankful for since he'd been paired with Erin.

The soucouyant's gaze flittered from him to her and Zach whispered, “We can still make it out, leave the rest for containment.”

Erin shook her head, “We're already here and she's cornered, what's she gonna do?” As if angered further by their conversation, the soucouyant made a leap. She cleared Erin's head and missed being struck by her magic by a hair.

“You just *had* to ask.” Zach pulled the trigger hearing flesh rip as he managed to hit the soucouyant, but she was fast and slithered past him, using the small space between his body and the doorframe for her escape.

“*Shit,*” Erin shouted pushing past him. She conjured another ball of light in her hand as she raced after the soucouyant.

“Erin, leave it, your spells will do the rest.” Zach tried, but he knew it was useless and followed his partner as she disappeared into what seemed to be the master bedroom. Seeing the soucouyant once again on the ceiling, her hands and feet easily keeping her suspended

above them, Zach was glad that the lights in the house had been turned on. Her eyes glowed yellow now and if he had to see them with night vision, Zach was pretty sure he'd shiver a little with revulsion.

The soucouyant hissed at them, her greying hair hanging from her nearly bald head in thin strands. Erin inched closer and Zach, ready to back her up, steadied his aim.

Erin threw the ball of dark magical energy at the fiend with a loud grunt and Zach touched the trigger twice, letting the bullets do their work. The soucouyant screeched and fell from the ceiling, making another disturbing leap to one of the room's windows. Zach followed her movements with gunfire, lighting up the room even more than it was, as Erin's own brand of violence did its work.

The soucouyant was being hit from all angles and like the tough leathery being she was, took it all in stride as she made a dash to another window. She smacked her body against it, the intention to break the glass and escape, but Erin had already covered that.

"Told you grandma, there's nowhere to go." As realisation hit the creature, her face took on an expression of pure rage. Erin and Zach steadied themselves, bracing for what was coming next, when suddenly from a distance they heard sirens.

Chapter 3

The two snapped to attention and exchanged a brief look. Bell County's authorities couldn't catch them. They'd have to lie about who they were and what they were doing there, stories that no one would believe. They'd tried to be as noiseless as possible, but the screaming from the residents and the soucouyant's own vile behaviour, had no doubt caused quite a stir on the otherwise sleepy little street.

"We've got to get out of here, *now*," Zach said, worried.

Erin agreed, but looked at the angry soucouyant, not sure what should be done next. They couldn't leave her there for the police to see, especially with the strict rules about human encounters with the supernatural world. Erin could kick herself for her foul-up. She'd just wanted to help the family who lived there and had turned it all into a royal mess.

As if reading her mind Zach said, "You're going to have to do it." She'd have to remove the spells she'd placed on the household to keep the soucouyant at bay and let her go instead.

Had she done as she'd been told, containment would have rolled in, captured the beast and rolled back out all before breakfast. As it was, they'd have to do a pre-wipe, which meant that the memories of the family who lived in the house would be altered, so that they would believe that they'd been burglarised, as opposed to almost fed on by a deranged granny.

The soucouyant, still hissing at them, watched the exchange. They could understand all human languages, but seldom did they verbally communicate with any others but their own kind. Erin saw the anger fade, be replaced by confusion and then satisfaction as the soucouyant watched her lips move, removing the binding spells. Erin did it with a heavy heart, her annoyance with herself knowing no bounds as the sirens came closer and the soucouyant was finally able to break the window's glass and flee into the night.

"Cloak me," Zach said and she did, allowing the two of them to slip by unnoticed by the small crowd of neighbours who stood gathered around the victims. Erin heard snatches of their conversation as they passed by and realised with a pang of regret that one or more of them present had to be containment disguised as neighbours, as the father was already telling the story of a vicious burglar who'd scared them from sleep.

When they were safely back in the car, Zach turned the key letting it purr to life.

“I’m so sorry Zach, I really thought we had enough time.”

“Well we didn’t.”

Erin sighed. He always got like this when he was angry with her and he had every right to be. It wasn’t just that they would be in a world of trouble with their handler, but soucouyants *never* left their prey behind.

The call that had brought them to Kentucky had been about voodoo that was going on in the county. People were turning up dead and those that weren’t, were found dazed and in critical condition from extreme blood loss. Erin had been especially grateful to be on this case, as it was their first since her and Zach’s last big job in Brazil a few weeks back that had led to a major takedown, and she’d been looking forward to continuing their winning streak. Tonight, this had been far from the case. *Maybe I’m rusty*, she thought. Her employers didn’t like her methods, but she got the job done and figured that mattered most.

“You’re going to have to talk to me some time,” she ventured now, turning to Zach.

“Maybe, but not right now,” he fired back at her. Erin sighed heavily again and settled back into her seat. “Excuse me for wanting to save them,” she said under her breath.

Zach turned to look at her in disbelief for a moment before turning his attention back to the road. “You’re kidding right? That’s not our job Erin, how many times do I have to—”

“Maybe it *should* be our job then. We’re better at tracking than most of those containment guys and we’ve already got a few takedowns under our belt,” she responded cutting him off.

Zach’s grip on the steering wheel tightened. He pulled over to the side of the road, stopping the car abruptly. He turned to her with a deep frown, “Only because *you* forced us into it. I always just want to do my job and leave, why do you always have to be so damn difficult?”

It was Erin's turn to get mad as she faced him. “Me? Difficult? If you’d just help me when I want you to, stop trying to block me all the time, we wouldn’t waste so much time and what happened tonight, wouldn’t have.”

Zach went red in his frustration and though Erin knew she’d been stretching it with her last assertion, she was too mad to take it back just yet. He was always getting on her case,

even when her way won them the day. Now that they'd most likely be reprimanded because things didn't quite work out, he would be even more self-righteous. Zach opened his mouth to say something; closed it. He turned away from her and got out of the car, pacing and angrily chattering to himself.

"Sure, run away from the issue just like always," Erin said opening her car door, then stopped, looking up. Her next words almost caught in her throat, but she forced them out, a kind of irrational fear threatening to engulf her. "Zach, get in the car," she said, then louder, "Zach get in the car!"

Zach had been so caught up in his own anger that he hadn't heard her properly at first. He turned, wondering what she was so wound up about; followed her gaze.

Coming swiftly towards the place where they were parked, were seven translucent beings. Veins, cartilage and bone were clearly visible and their yellow eyes glowed with hate and anger. Not needing to see anymore, Zach ran quickly back to the car and jumped into his seat. He didn't wait and was starting the vehicle again, barely checking his mirrors as he reversed back onto the deserted street.

"This is worse than we thought," Erin murmured, mentally preparing herself for the new battle ahead.

"What an understatement," Zach said with a slight scoff, concern etched on his face. It wasn't just one soucouyant they were dealing with in this county, it was a nest zeroing in on Zach and Erin as their next meal.

Chapter 4

“*Faster Zach,*” Erin hollered as he spun the car around on squealing tyres.

“I’m *trying* to, just shut up and let me drive.” Erin tried her best to remain silent, but from the rear-view she could see the soucouyants coming towards them at lightning speed and the thought of them getting their hooks into her and Zach was gut-wrenching.

The creatures usually took blood from the softer areas of the body and if they drank too much, the unfortunate victim met a swift death, unable to recover even if they were given transfusions. Erin glanced worriedly round again. One, or even two soucouyants was okay, but seven was a serious challenge. She wasn’t sure if they could fend off an attack if they caught up to them.

“We’ve got to hide, it’s the only way,” she said now, craning her neck as one of the withered beings separated from the rest.

“Where do you propose we do that?” Zach asked sarcastically.

“I don’t know but we’ve got to try *something*,” Erin said exasperated. She was still looking into the blackness of the night sky, interrupted only by the bobbing and weaving of the soucouyants. They were getting closer and Erin was frantically trying to think up a plan that could save them both. Before she could form another complete thought, the soucouyant that had veered off the others’ path came flying out in front of them. Zach swerved, pulling the steering wheel hard to the left and Erin was thankful that no other drivers were on the road.

“Hang on,” he said now and pressed his foot down hard on the accelerator. The lone soucouyant was only thrown off for a moment though and came charging again, this time smashing herself head-on into the vehicle’s windscreen. Erin jumped back as the phantom face, wrinkled and worn, stayed plastered on the glass. She snarled, baring her teeth which were yellowing and broken, but vicious-looking things. Erin felt her hand pulse and wanted to create a mini explosion that would get the revolting creature away from them but didn’t. This was just one and the last thing they needed was broken glass inviting a car full of nasty out to get them.

She looked back again. “Uh, Zach ... ?”

Zach glanced into the rear-view mirror he'd been avoiding since the chase began. The other soucouyants had gathered together and closed in. Their features seemed to fade in and out, gaunt bodies becoming one as they merged, weaving together like snakes. They were intent on their mission, no doubt seeking revenge for their hunted sister.

Seeing this, Zach sat back dejectedly in his seat, "Fuck," he said with a heavy breath and ran a hand through his dark hair, "Remember how I said to hang on before Erin?" She nodded, squeezing her eyes shut for a moment, "Try not to die." For the next few seconds they lived a kind of waking nightmare. Erin grabbed Zach's hand, holding onto it tightly as she whispered a protection spell. He squeezed back, liking her strong grip and smaller hand in his, but was not able to focus on the feeling long enough for it to mean anything but what it was. She squeezed her eyes shut again, waiting for the impact.

When it came the car rocked as though shaken by an earthquake. It spun out of control and ended up some feet away on a grassy embankment. Glass shattered, sprinkling painful remnants on them and the soucouyants continued to push as if they wanted to turn the car into a mashed tin can. With nothing to stop her anymore, the soucouyant who'd been on the windscreen came confidently through and looking up to face her, now inches away from her own face, Erin saw it was the same one from before. Erin knew soucouyants were vengeful, but this was downright ridiculous.

Realising that their sister was now able to get close enough to her prey, the soucouyants stopped their constant pushing and began to chatter excitedly among each other in a language that neither Erin nor Zach could understand. They wove in and out of the car, teasing wickedly as they played with their food. In the end they gave way to the one now sniffing Erin's fiery red hair and Erin supposed she was the leader.

The soucouyant bared her teeth at the warden again, licking a black tongue across lips that weren't quite there. More like phantom lines, thin and vein ridden, making Erin pull further back, not ever wanting to feel them on her skin. She felt Zach squeeze her hand again, wanting to reach for his gun. So far the protection spell she'd laid on the two of them was slowing down the soucouyant's appetite, but the tricky thing about using spells like this, was that they rapidly wore off and Erin wouldn't be able to use it again until some time had passed.

She didn't release Zach's hand and he looked over at her sharply, not understanding. This exchange caused the soucouyant to let out a loud hiss in his direction, spraying Zach with phlegm-like spittle that left thick red spots all over his face. Her action made the others crowd in, hissing and snarling at them furiously. They bit at thin air, frustration rising when they couldn't get close enough to break the skin of the humans. Erin's spell worked like a barrier, which allowed them to get only so close and no further. She knew this wouldn't last much longer though and had thought of another plan of escape.

Zach tried to drag his hand away from her again, not liking how close the soucouyants were and hating the disgustingly gritty feel of the spittle on his face. He imagined that it was old blood from victims, combined with anything else the crones chose to eat. Erin was pissing him off too, not letting him get his gun at *least*. In fact, he didn't even understand why she wasn't using their time under the protection spell to repel as many as they could. He soon saw why.

"Through my door *now*," Erin ordered suddenly and Zach, accustomed to acting quickly in tough situations, didn't ask any questions. She'd slammed her hand infused with magic against her crushed car door, ripping it from its hinges and leaving it crumpled in the street, before jumping from the car, still gripping and pulling Zach along with her. He followed suit, using his special brand of agility to quickly manoeuvre his long legs over the handbrake, seat and out into the night. The soucouyants screeched heatedly amongst each other, their prey lost. Erin had cloaked them both and they ran as fast as they could away from their deaths.

Chapter 5

Satisfied that they'd gotten far enough away from the soucouyants the wardens came to a stop. They'd run into a wooded area just off the road and paused at a large hemlock to catch their breath. Erin released Zach's hand, causing the cloaking spell to wear off. She rested back on the tree.

"Thank goodness they fell for it," she said, wishing there was water somewhere on her person.

Zach nodded in agreement, resting his hands on his knees. "We should keep off the road for the time being, it'll be daybreak soon enough and those crazy bitches will be running back home to protect their skins." All soucouyants left pieces of their original skins in their nests as they roamed for blood. They feared being apart from them for long as if this skin - sacred to the creature - was destroyed, she ceased to exist.

Erin nodded, agreeing with Zach's suggestion and looked around. She was trying to figure out where they could be as the darkness turned into a dim early morning light.

Zach was ahead of her as he usually was with these kinds of things. "If we keep heading north, we'll make it back into the town before it properly wakes up. We covered quite a bit of ground when we were being chased," he said.

"Let's go then. We might have kept them busy for a while, but we have no way of knowing if any of them were able to feed on other humans tonight," she said, taking a few steps forward, then, pausing for a moment, "And we know she's going to try to get at that family we saved tonight." Zach understood that Erin felt badly for how everything had gone down. She was always defensive whenever she knew she was wrong, just as she had been when they'd argued earlier. This time though, he wasn't quite ready to let it all go,

"Saved? That's not what I'd call it."

Erin glanced back at him with a scowl before she turned again in a huff, taking long strides on even longer legs as she went.

"Did I say something wrong?" Zach asked sarcastically as he followed her through the trees and brush.

The day continued to brighten and cool breezes flowed as they made the trek. They didn't talk to each other, only intent on the task ahead — getting out of the woods and back to the town. A few woodland animals called out to each other as they went and their footsteps as they travelled over leaves and moss were clearly audible, but otherwise it was silent, which had a calming effect on Zach's mood. He was about to say something to Erin, just to let her know he wasn't angry anymore, when something else broke the silence.

The new noise introduced to the party was the buzzing of Erin's cell phone in her jacket pocket and she sighed, looking at Zach with concern. They both knew who was calling without having to check and Zach looked on anxiously as Erin pressed the answer button.

"Damian, we were just going to call—" Erin stopped talking, cut off by their handler on the other line. Damian was the one who gave them cases and answered to their employers when there were foul ups and this one had been huge. She pressed the speaker button so Zach could hear and watched as his face fell further at Damian's rant.

"... the laughing stock of the organisation," he was saying, his gruff tone sounding even more irritated as he went on, "A couple of wardens who can't get their job right? You realise you've put that family and probably the whole county in jeopardy right?"

Erin answered meekly, "Yes, but it wasn't supposed to —"

"Shut it!" Damian cut her off again, causing her to flinch and Zach, put a reassuring arm on her shoulder. "You listen here girl, it's one thing when you do your own thing and you succeed, but this is a loss, a big, fat shite storm of a loss that someone else has to clean up."

Erin spoke up, "No they won't Damian, we'll take care of it."

Damian didn't say anything for a moment and when he did, she winced. "What? Take care of it you say? *We* you say? I doubt that Zach ... are you there boy, or has the cat ripped your bloody tongue out?"

Zach answered, "I'm here sir." Erin made a face. Zach still respectfully referred to all their superiors as 'sir' or 'mam'.

"Did you have anything to do with this?" Damian asked now and Zach looked briefly at Erin.

“I backed my partner up as we’re taught to do sir,” he replied diplomatically and Erin smiled appreciatively at him.

This however, made Damian angrier. “You I thought I could count on, now I see you’re *both* being bloody idiots.” He shouted his last words, disturbing a bird from a nearby tree.

Erin decided it was as good a time as any to share the rest. “I know you’re angry Damian, but there’s more.”

Damian sighed deeply, “What else could have gone wrong last night? Well, spit it out,” he said.

“It’s not just one soucouyant that’s causing the trouble, there’s a nest.” Silence on the line for a minute or two and Zach and Erin waited, phone poised in the palm of Erin’s hand. They were accustomed to Damian’s ways by now and one of them was that when he was thinking, he ignored everything else.

Finally he spoke, sounding calmer than he had since their conversation had begun. “Okay, we can spin this in our favour. You two need to find that nest and when you do, bind it until containment gets there. I’ll stall the boys upstairs until you sort it all out.”

Erin breathed a sigh of relief and raised her other hand for a high-five, which Zach reluctantly gave into. “Great, we should have it all sorted in a week or so Damian, thanks so much.”

Damian laughed drily, “Oh, don’t thank me girl, if you didn’t have this out you’d be sitting in lockup. Zach?”

“Yes sir?”

“By the book, no excuses.”

“Yes sir,” he said, eyeing Erin with a pointed look. “We’ll get on it right now,” he added.

“You better. You’ve got two days.”

The call ended and Erin slipped the phone back into her pocket. “*Two* days?” she asked Zach incredulously. “It’s not like soucouyants walk up to you and invite you to dinner.” She shook her head.

“It’s better than lockup,” and Erin had to agree. She’d been in lockup once before and hated the small four by six cell, where all contact with others, light and food were forbidden. It was the organisation’s version of solitary and a way to punish its employees if they went too far off the beaten track.

“Okay then, let’s find us some old bitches,” Erin said with a fake southern drawl. Zach hid his smile.

Chapter 6

When they made it back into town, they found that the organisation had left them a few gifts at their motel. Outside was a new rental vehicle and when they entered the room, there was a locked suitcase containing changes of clothing, along with new surveillance equipment. Erin was secretly glad that was all they'd left. She was getting tired of the smug looks from containment officers whenever they messed up. She stripped down and put on the fresh clothes, which were the same as each item she'd been wearing before, a combination she liked to think of as her 'workdrobe'. She removed the band from her hair and shook her curls, ridding them of trapped glass.

"Not going to shower?" Zach asked pulling his own t-shirt off and Erin scowled. There wasn't time for anything but what they'd been sent to do and even though the thought of a hot bath was appealing, it just wasn't on the to-do list right now. She sat at the lone desk and chair combo in the room, ignoring the discomfort of working from the rickety wicker furniture, as she turned on her laptop. She pulled up a map of the Bell County area and peered at it thoughtfully.

"They attacked us from the south and our first point of impact was here," she whispered to herself, tracing the distance on the touchscreen with her finger from the roadway where they'd been accosted by the soucouyants, to the neighbourhood they'd staked out. As she did, the responsive software highlighted it for her and she sat back, her mind working quickly to add this new information to all they already knew.

Zach had disappeared into the bathroom so Erin shouted her findings over the noise of the faucet, "Their nest has got to be west of here." Zach emerged freshly shaven, with damp hair and in clean clothes. She frowned at him for a moment, annoyed that he was always so well put together, but discarded a snide comment in favour of a sensible one, "Look at this." She gave up her seat to Zach, allowing him to inspect her findings.

He took it a step further, pulling up a satellite photo of the area. "Holy shit," he said under his breath, then louder, "That's how they managed to stay under the radar for so long."

Erin leaned further over his shoulder, the light scent of his aftershave a pleasant distraction, but that wasn't her focus. At first she wasn't sure what Zach meant, but as she looked closer at the area, she realised that some miles away from the place the civilians had been attacked some hours before, was an old warehouse yard. On closer inspection, she saw

that the deserted yard had one main building – a cement brick warehouse, with only one point of entry. In times past soucouyants constructed their nests with clay, adding fresh layers of the material on the walls of their homes whenever they shed, so their old skins could be encased in it. Nowadays they often used deserted places like this, secluded enough to dissuade interest in the property.

“They’ve been hiding in there all along and we would’ve missed it,” she said, and Zach agreed. If they hadn’t messed up the original plan, containment would have come in and discarded of just one of these creatures and judging from the size of the nest he was staring at now and the ones that had come after them before, they were obviously many more.

“So what do we do now?” Erin was leaning on the table with both hands and Zach tried not to give into the pleasing view of her cleavage peeking out from her vest. It had been easier with his old partner, she hadn’t been at all attractive to him and even if she was, her husband and kids would have put him off. Erin on the other hand was a beautiful woman and Zach often had to remind himself of the qualities he *didn’t* like about her, at times like these when she looked so good and was staring at him with those big, inquisitive eyes. “So?” she asked him expectantly and Zach, embarrassed that he’d gone off-track in his head, ignored his lusting for what was important.

“We can cut a hole in the outer fence here,” he circled the location, “And scale the wall at this point here,” Zach made another marker. “We don’t know how many are in there, so it’s better if we both take them on.”

Erin nodded adding, “We know they’re partial to the early morning hours when their victims are asleep, so if we head in around twelve or so, we should be able to get around most of the dinner party.”

Zach furrowed his brow, “Yea true, but you can’t put the binding spells down unless they’re inside. We still have to wait for them to come back, which could be very dangerous for us. I say we attack right before they go out to feed and that way, we might get a few scrapes but nothing we can’t handle.” Erin considered this for a moment but disagreed,

“There’s more of a chance that they’ll get away from us before I can even perform the binding spells.” Zach waited while she thought it out. Though he was the more technical of the two and usually did lots of the groundwork and research for the cases they worked, Erin

was the one that possessed the magic that allowed them to trap these creatures in the first place. It was a solid plan, but if she had a better one, he was willing to hear it.

She smiled as it came to her, “Hex bags! I’ll place them in various corners of the warehouse and when they come back from the feed, I’ll just have to do one binding spell that will trap them all. Problem solved.”

Zach saw the merit in this and stood ready to implement. He checked his gun’s chamber, then cocked it for good measure before slipping it into the holster at his waist. “We’ll leave in a few hours and stake the place out, I’d rather we didn’t have any surprises.”

“I’m already surprised that you didn’t put up a fight as you always do when I suggest things,” she was needling him.

Zach took the bait with a sigh. “I wouldn’t have to if you didn’t always—” A loud knock at the door caused them both to pause.

“Housekeeping,” came a high-pitched voice from the other side and they looked at each other surprised. Neither had expected a dive motel like this one to offer that kind of service. Erin walked cautiously to the door and Zach put his hand on his gun. They could never be too careful in this line of work.

Erin opened the door a crack, “We’re fine thank you,” she said to the fresh-faced girl in her early twenties, with blue eyes, auburn hair and velvety cream-coloured skin. The girl smiled prettily at Erin her housekeeping cart gripped firmly with one hand.

“The boss likes to keep the customers happy,” she said pleasantly and Erin opened the door a bit more, not wanting to get the woman in trouble should she not at least appear to be trying to clean the room.

“Yup,” she said knowingly and glanced back at Zach, whose expression urged her to hurry. “I know what that’s like.” When Erin looked back at the girl, she was no longer holding the cart and was gazing wickedly at Erin.

“Sure you do. Give them this message for us.” Erin only had time to see the glinting blade, before the woman sunk it deep into her abdomen. She clutched it, sagging onto the wall and Zach shouted out, shooting his gun off at nothing, as the woman who had just stood

before them as flesh and blood, had already escaped her skin and left it on the dirty motel room floor.

Chapter 7

“Erin, Erin can you hear me?” Zach knew the soucouyant was long gone and now his only concern was Erin. He slapped her face lightly, urging her to focus on him. Her eyes had taken on a glassy look and the stunned expression on her face was muted only by grimaces of pain as she clutched her side weakly.

“Come on Erin, we’re going to have to get out of here.” Though Zach knew the silencer on his gun would have masked the sound of the gunshots, he didn’t want to take any chances. They needed to act fast and leave the motel, but neither of them were going anywhere if he couldn’t patch Erin up and for that, he needed her help. Her eyes started to close again and though he tried to make her stay with him, Erin drifted, her hand falling beside her, covered with her blood.

“*Fuck.*” Zach jumped up, running towards the suitcase they’d found in the room. He rummaged through until he found a small Taser which would generate an electrical surge.

He ran back to his partner who continued to bleed out on the floor and placed the device against her chest, “Sorry,” he said cringing and flicked the on-switch. Erin’s body convulsed violently for a few moments after, before her eyes flickered open. She gasped for breath, looking up at Zach confused. “You’ve got to heal, *now* Erin.” At first it seemed she didn’t understand him but looking down at her side and the quickly spreading blood, she nodded. Zach sighed, relieved. He’d thought the jolt of electricity would have done the trick, but as she’d lost so much blood already, hadn’t been sure. He stepped back and let her do the rest.

Erin closed her eyes, placing her hand back on the wound. Zach could see a pale blue light emanating from her hand, so faint that someone who did not know what she was doing, would feel they were seeing things. The magic wouldn’t heal the wound completely, as Erin’s magical training was geared towards damage not healing, but it would at least patch her up for the time being.

“Did you just tase me?” she asked as she opened her eyes fully.

Zach handed her a bandage from his pack, “No time for that Erin, we’ve got to wipe this place and get out of here.”

“I’m going to get you back for that,” she said standing on shaky legs, but did not delay, packing their gear, while Zach used a modifier to remove any traces of their DNA from the room. It was medium-sized gadget with a nozzle attached, designed to look like an air filter. Both wardens and containment used these, as they were integral to ensuring that no traces of their existence were ever left behind. Zach went over all areas of the room with the device, ignoring his distaste for the task, as it reminded him so much of vacuuming.

“All packed and ready to go,” Erin announced, pulling the suitcase to the floor. Zach emerged from modifying the bathroom and looked around. The room was spotless. There were no signs that Erin had been stabbed and he was pretty sure it was cleaner than it had been to begin with.

“We’ll park off the road a little way from the warehouse yard so you can get some rest. Damian gave us two days, so we can always get them tomorrow,” Zach suggested.

“No,” she snapped, “we had a plan and we’re going to stick to it. One of those bitches stabbed me.”

“I get it Erin, but you’re not at full strength, you lost a lot of blood.”

“I’m running on angry, that’s as strong as I’ll get,” she replied and as if to prove her point, lifted the suitcase and pushed past Zach and out the door. Zach shook his head and followed. There was no talking to her when she was like this. He remembered when he’d first seen her. She was this skinny girl, thirteen at the most, mercilessly beating up a chubby kid around her age. Though her opponent was much bigger than she was, Erin had made him cower. At the time Zach was sixteen and had been training with the organisation for four years, while Erin was one of the new recruits. Recruits were kept separate from others in the training facility and the only reason he’d laid eyes on her in the first place, was because he’d been running an errand for one of his teachers.

When she became his partner, he’d learnt that she’d been an orphan like all of them who’d trained as wardens, but was one of the few with an instinctive gift for dark magic. Others had to be taught to wield that kind of magic, but Erin had been born with the talent. Zach knew that she was clueless about what that really implied about her heritage and had been told in no uncertain terms by Praesidium's Director Anders Kjaer, that she should never be told. Looking at her now, honking the horn in frustration, he knew this was for the best.

“What’s taking you?” she called, leaning slightly out her car window.

“Erin, I’m literally seconds behind you, give it up,” he said, sliding into his seat. Neither spoke again until they were on the highway making their way towards the warehouse yard.

“Thanks for tasing me.” Zach glanced at her, surprised.

“I wouldn’t have done it if I thought there was another way,” he said, crossing lanes as they approached their exit.

“Pretty sure I’d be dead if you hadn’t.” Silence fell on them again.

Zach broke it, “How are you feeling now?” He flicked on the right indicator and made a dash for the exit.

“The bleeding’s stopped but it’s hurting. Being stabbed is unpleasant.” She snickered and Zach glanced over at her questioningly, “Just a bit funny our lives. It’s like some freaky kind of news report. Stabbed by a soucouyant, victim says it was unpleasant.” She laughed a bit more and Zach joined her for a moment, until she clutched her side again in pain.

“Okay cool it, save your laughter for when containment takes out these wankers.” They turned off the road and onto what seemed to be a gravel pathway, before once again ending up on a paved street. They passed fewer cars along the way and soon Zach made one final turn off that led them directly to the warehouse yard. There were still a few hours before they could make their move, but with dusk falling, they’d decided to scope the place out.

Zach parked some distance away from the building’s fence, in a bushy area that he hoped would give them enough cover, especially when night fell. He opened his car door but when Erin made motions to follow, was firm in his desire that she should stay put. He was still concerned about her injury and preferred if the only energy she exerted was to complete her binding spell.

It took Zach about five minutes moving hurriedly along the outer fence, to reach a point where he could easily see any movement from the soucouyants’ nest. He’d inserted his customised contacts before they’d left the motel, so had no trouble seeing in the dim light, but slipped a miniature telescope from his jeans pocket for a closer look. The telescope was

another customised piece and registered heat signatures, although in the case of soucouyants, this was of little use.

At first Zach saw nothing, but before long three soucouyants came from the far side of the building. He watched their progress as they went around to the other side and disappeared again. After Zach had watched them make this circle two more times, he ran back to join Erin in the car.

“Well? What’d you see?”

He hesitated before replying, “We’ve got to call containment, tell them our location and that we might need back up.”

“I don’t get it, what’d you see?” she asked more pointedly.

Zach pulled his mobile phone from his jacket pocket, dialling the numbers of some friends in containment; it was ringing. “It’s not going to be as easy as we thought. A few of them are guarding the place and from the looks of it, they might stay put while the others go on the hunt.” Zach focused on the call, “Hey Matthew, you guys on a case?”

“We’ll just have to take them out first,” Erin said, revamping their plan in her head.

“No problem buddy, thanks anyway.”

“Matthew and Greek are a no I take it?” Erin asked sighing. She and Zach had a good relationship with them and they were the only containment members they called if they wanted a few extra hands.

Zach nodded. “We’ll have to call up Damian and have him send guys in then,” Zach said, ready to dial their handler's number, but Erin knocked the phone away.

“No. If you do that I’ll be in even more trouble. What with getting stabbed and everything, he probably won’t even let me work the damn case anymore.”

“Maybe it’s for the best Erin, you’re hurt pretty bad still.” He pointed to the blood seeping through her bandages.

Erin waved his concerns away, “Flesh wound. Now, we’re going to take those guards out, perform the binding spell and get the hell out of Dodge. *Then* you can call whoever the hell you want to.”

Zach tried not to think about the cons of that plan before he spoke, “Okay, let’s do this.”

Chapter 8

Three hours later, with darkness fully upon them, the wardens made their way along the fence. They were both outfitted with as few tools as possible, not wanting to weigh themselves down with non-essentials for this job.

“Here,” Zach whispered when they had reached the place in the fence that he had determined would be their point of entry. Erin squatted next to him, peering into the darkness for any signs of movement. Zach dug into his jeans pocket, pulling a wire-cutter from its depths.

“Seriously?” Erin asked in disbelief and placed her hand over the metalwork. In seconds the wire started to melt under her touch, falling and breaking away until there was a hole big enough for them to slip through. “See?” she said, shaking her head as she disappeared through the hole.

Zach pocketed the wire cutters, “I was just being prepared,” he mumbled to himself as he followed her in.

They crossed over a narrow gravel path, staying close to the concrete wall when they reached it. It was about eight feet and was the only thing standing between them and the building the soucouyants had made their nest.

“When you get over, make for the shed a few yards away, it’ll give us cover until we’re ready to move in,” Zach whispered. Erin nodded, accepting his leg up. With Zach’s help, she grabbed hold of the wall’s edge, using her own strength to hoist herself up and over the edge. For a split second she hung on, body melded against the wall, her attention on the soucouyants’ nest. Still seeing no movement, she made the rest of the journey, landing lightly on the other side and making a dash for the shed Zach had mentioned.

“Made it, come on.” With Erin safely over, Zach made his own attempt to join her. He bent his knees, gearing himself up for a leap and sprang into the air, arms outstretched in order to grab hold of the wall. He caught it with one hand and hung for seconds before allowing the other to follow through. Raising himself up and controlling his body weight so he wouldn’t end up too far over, Zach surveyed the scene. He ducked his head hastily, seeing the soucouyant guards making their usual rounds. Zach inched his hands back, his fingers

aching as most of his weight was placed on them. After he'd counted out thirty seconds, he pushed himself up again, seeing the back of the soucouyants.

"Clear," came Erin's voice again, stating the obvious and Zach promptly climbed over to join her.

"Okay, we'll wait for them to come again then I'll go in." He ignored the pain in his fingers as he pulled his gun from its holster. He checked it as he always did and satisfied that everything was in order, waited for the soucouyants to come back around.

"Wish we could just use cloaking," Erin whispered behind him and Zach agreed. This method was far from foolproof, as if they didn't kill the guards outside and with no way of knowing if any had stayed behind within the nest, they could easily become overwhelmed if they weren't careful. The soucouyants reappeared.

"Cover me." Their new plan was a go as Zach moved from their hiding place. He seldom took lead when they went into the field and this time was no different.

"Okay worm, reel them in." Erin was using Zach as bait. She watched as he sauntered over to the soucouyants, gun at his side as though he hadn't a care in the world. Within moments they were rushing towards him, releasing the deafening shrieks that had crawled Erin's skin in the early hours. These three were still in their shrivelled skins, aged and browning with decay. *That's probably why they're guarding the place*, Erin thought. The degeneration of their skin hadn't yet reached the point of no return, when they'd have to move around like mere shadows of their former selves. These three would probably have at least two nights more before their desperation for new skin reached fever pitch and they had no choice but to go out and feed.

Zach raised his gun, standing still as he pointed it at the wizened sisters. Erin stood as well, being careful to stay hidden and feeling the magic within her pulsating excitedly, so that when released, it would be more than enough to ward off their attack. She waited.

In the seconds that followed, everything happened very quickly. One of the soucouyants came right at Zach, leaving him no choice but to shoot her. The silencer he'd attached to his weapon muted the noise, but her agonising screams as she fell to the ground, made her sisters angrier and they came at Zach even more venomously. Working together, one slapped the gun from his hand, while the other pushed him back, sending him flying

against the wall. Zach's grunt filled her ears as his back connected with the wall and he fell face first to the floor. Though he got up hastily, they were zeroing in on him fast. Erin took this as her cue and stepped out into the open.

She raised her palms up, facing the soucouyants. Her hands were engulfed by blue flame and when she released it, it raced towards the soucouyants at frightening speed. Both their heads whipped around as though they could hear it before it even touched them, but it was too late. As Erin's fire struck them, they were no longer able to fly and fell near to where their other sister sat dissolving into a substance with the colour and consistency of molasses, courtesy of Zach's bullets.

Erin's magic worked a different way, seemingly freezing them in motion and as she approached, cautiously looking down at her handiwork, the soucouyants appeared even more grotesque in death.

"Good job, they went down easier than I thought," Zach said, retrieving his gun,

"Yet you doubt me every time," Erin replied smiling. Zach was about to say something else, when the door to the soucouyants' nest opened. Erin's eyes narrowed. From it stepped the soucouyant that had attacked her earlier. Her naked skin wrinkled and the auburn hair was now completely grey, but her eyes were the same bright blue and Erin *knew*.

The soucouyant, a puzzled expression on her face, spoke, a grating sound on both their ears, "You did not die?"

"Takes a lot more than a third-rate monster to kill me," Erin replied and the soucouyant laughed. Both she and Zach had thought the soucouyant from the first night was their leader, but they'd been wrong. Zach raised his gun slowly, pointing it at her. If the soucouyant noticed, she ignored the action, focusing on Erin instead.

"You did not die. I must change that." Erin heard the click as Zach pulled the trigger, flung her own hand up with the intent of releasing more magical energy at their new target, but with supernatural speed, the soucouyant leader had already disappeared into the darkness of her nest, daring them to follow.

Chapter 9

Zach and Erin slipped in quietly after the soucouyant. The stench of rotting flesh hit them hard, long before they'd crossed the threshold and Erin raised a hand to her face, grimacing in disgust. The contacts they wore adjusted their vision to this new darkness and they looked around, attune to any foreign sound or movement.

Erin removed the first hex bag from her jacket pocket and placed it in a corner of the room, whispering a spell that would disallow anyone else but her to touch the bag again. A few yards in she did the same, crouching to place another, as Zach made sure that they were not ambushed from behind or above.

Slowly they moved deeper into the building, keeping close to the walls and masking their footsteps as much as possible. As Erin placed her hex bags, it was quickly becoming obvious to her that the soucouyant leader was the only one still in the building. While this might have given them some advantage were they out in the open, they were in *her* house now and even though Zach had pored over the existing building plans, this was of little help when it came to these creatures. After years of constantly plastering their skins into the walls, they'd changed the layout of the building, and doorways or passages that were once there, were no more. The outside remained unchanged, but inside had been reduced to a building less than five times its size.

Erin looked back at Zach, inclining her head towards a small hole in the smooth, concrete wall. It was not big enough for either of them to squeeze through, but for the pliable body of a soucouyant, this would not be difficult.

"It must lead to the centre of their lair," Erin said barely above a whisper. This would be the best place for her to perform the binding spell, which would put all the hex bags to work and trap any soucouyant that entered the building until containment arrived. Zach nodded and pulled red, rectangular charges from his inside jacket pocket. They were his creations and were designed to act as explosives with limited aftershock.

Erin stepped back and let him work. He attached three in a triangular shape around the hole and pressed the little white button found on each of them. He nodded to Erin and the two retreated a few yards back waiting for the charges to go off. When they did, it was with a small explosion that rocked the building for a few moments, before everything was quiet once again.

“Let’s go.” Erin moved forward, quicker this time, stepping over rubble and ignoring the settling dust as it swirled around them. Zach was close behind, his gun ready and moving just as deftly as Erin as they searched for the soucouyant leader. The stink as they went further in was even more revolting and Erin was glad for years of exposure to this kind of unpleasant fare, otherwise she was pretty sure she’d be already bringing up her lunch from two days before. If there were ever windows in the building, the soucouyants had long since covered them up and this inner lair seemed even darker than when they’d first entered.

Suddenly their steps slowed and Erin looked down to see a murky grey, congealing goo under their boots. It was like walking through thick sludge and Erin looked back at Zach with an expression that asked, ‘what the hell is this?’ Zach shrugged. They hadn’t gone on for more than half a minute when Erin paused. She raised her hand to stop Zach, then pointed ahead. Standing in a far corner of the room was the soucouyant leader.

Zach raised his gun and fired. This had no effect, as the soucouyant had already scurried up the wall nearest to her. She was now even further from the beauty they had seen back at the motel and had become a bald old woman, liver spots scattered over her almost grey skin. They ducked as she made a pass above them and Zach fired two more shots, missing her each time. At first Erin thought the soucouyant would try to escape through the hole, but soon saw that she had other plans.

Letting out one of those ear-wrenching screeches, she leapt at Zach, shocking him into stumbling back, and into Erin. They both fell, landing in the same sticky goo that had latched onto their boots. On closer inspection, Erin noted a mixture of skin, blood and other organic *and* inorganic materials, she was sure she didn’t want to know about.

The soucouyant had attached herself to the ceiling again and was watching them from above. Erin braved the muck seeping under her and dug her hands in to push herself up. However, they sunk in and refused to move.

“Zach don’t!” she warned, seeing her partner about to do the same. The soucouyant’s thin, cracking lips stretched across a mouth full of missing teeth, into something that resembled a grin. Zach swore and trained his gun on her. He tried to propel himself up, digging his feet into the floor, but the goo acted in much the same way as it had when they’d been walking through it, grabbing hold at any opportunity. He was beginning to understand how the substance worked. It stuck to skin absorbing it over time, but had more difficulty

breaking down other materials, which was why they could still move in it, even if not very easily.

The soucouyant leader came closer, ready to take advantage of their handicap, but she was wary of Zach's gun. He refused to lower his aim and watched her every move intently. She let out a new sound, one that was like a low bellow, that seemed to bounce off the close walls and above this, Zach heard something else. He looked over at Erin and saw that she too was aware. Some of the soucouyants were returning from their hunt and judging from the shrieking that was going on in the other room, it was only a matter of time before they swooped in to save their leader.

Zach didn't wait any longer, he pulled the trigger.

Chapter 10

As Zach continued to light up the room with gunfire, Erin used her own brand of firepower to free her hands from the waste they were stuck in. Her hands glowed under it, changing the grey colour to a more 'pleasant' brownish hue and soon it began to singe and burn as she ignited it.

“Hurry it up *Erin*.” The room began to fill up with soucouyants in various stages of regeneration. Zach focused on those that were the most life-like, as they were the weakest of the bunch. It was one of the major reasons they hibernated for most of their lives. The more supple the skin they wore, the more susceptible soucouyants were to other dangers. Their strength lay at their cores and they were strongest when most desperate to feed.

Erin didn't need to be told again and freed her hands. The blue flame was still alight, and she whispered a spell, raising her arm and tracing a circle in the air above them. The flames rose from Erin's hands, creating a ring of fire that fell just as quickly to the floor. It burnt away the gooey substance without harming either her or Zach and they jumped up, backing into the wall.

Zach holstered his gun, wishing that the magic infused in the weapon was somehow able to conjure more bullets. As it was, the rampage which had taken out most of the soucouyants' nest, had left him on empty. Erin wasn't doing much better. After using her magical energy to free them and to heal herself earlier, she needed to replenish her resources before she could do any more damaging magic. Had she been in peak physical condition this would be different, but with the pain in her side a constant reminder of her stab wound, Erin knew she had to be careful. There was still one more spell to be performed and she couldn't afford to use her magic on anything else. She pulled an ivory-handled dagger, inscribed with ancient runes from her waist. She hardly ever used it and it always felt strange in her hand when she did.

Zach's concern for Erin pushed past his alarm at their predicament. He'd seen her pull out her dagger and knew what that meant. He carried another gun in a holster at the small of his back, but was aware that any sudden movements would cause the soucouyants to close in even faster.

He spoke loudly, wanting the soucouyants to hear him, “Guess this is it Erin, pity it had to end this way. Say a prayer will you?” Erin didn’t look at Zach but understood what he meant.

In a low voice she said, “Sacrem notios bellundon.” She’d used the binding spell, much to the frustration of the soucouyant leader. She cried out, grabbing hold of her sister, flinging her subordinate’s frail body at the wardens, as she tried to escape through the hole in the wall. Erin simultaneously threw her dagger and Zach used the distraction to get his back-up firearm from its holster. He fired three times, so that the combination of magic from both weapons, caused the soucouyant’s body to explode in a cloud of bone dust and fraying skin. Erin retrieved her dagger, not pausing for anything else as she gave chase to the soucouyant leader.

“Erin, *wait.*” Zach called from behind her, but Erin didn’t stop. The other soucouyants would return soon and they needed to cut this nest off at the head. She retraced their steps until she came to the door that had first led them in. The soucouyant leader was banging her body against it angrily. She looked back at Erin, hatred filling her yellowing eyes and attacked.

Erin ran to meet her and as she came closer, fell to the floor on her knees and leaned back so that her head almost met the floor.

“Zach, now!” she yelled.

A few feet away, Zach readied his aim and fired. The soucouyant had been so intent on finishing Erin off, that she had forgotten all about Zach. His bullets ripped through her body, causing her to convulse and shake before them. Now she was out of the line of fire, Erin got up on her knees and Zach ran to her side.

“Are you alright?” he asked. She nodded, watching the soucouyant leader’s body as it fell to the floor. It lay crumpled like discarded paper and soon the bones and other tissue dissolved, only leaving behind the wrinkled skin.

Erin finally spoke, “I’m good *now,*” she said and smiled, allowing him to help her up.

“Hate to rush you, but we’ve got to get out of here.” Erin nodded, as the later it got, the more chances remained for them to get caught in another wave of these soucouyants and

when they realised that their leader had been killed, there was no telling what they'd try to do to those responsible.

Erin made it all the way to the hole in the outside fence, before she leaned against Zach, giving into the pain and exhaustion that threatened to take over, as they made their way back to the car. As they neared it, she saw a man in the distance leaning against their rental vehicle.

She tensed, "What the hell?" she exclaimed, perplexed. Zach tensed. The man stepped away from the car and Erin saw that he was someone she'd seen before. With white hair that fell to his back, pale complexion and striking spring green eyes, it was a face that was hard to forget. "He's the one from before. Last year in Albania."

"Get in the car Erin. This doesn't concern you."

"But—" she began in protest, but stony look Zach gave her made her pause. She obeyed, telling herself that it was because she was too tired to argue. The truth was that she didn't like that look. She'd seen it a few times before and each time, something about it had terrified her.

She sat in the car, watching from the rear-view as the man handed Zach a brown envelope. When she saw Zach coming back, she pretended to be checking her wound and looked up as he sat down.

"We're going to Canada," he said and handed Erin the envelope. She opened it, peering at the contents which showed her the details of a new case.

"So that guy," she said nonchalantly, "He works for the organisation?" Erin could feel Zach's gaze on her, but she didn't look up.

"Containment's gonna be here soon, we'd better get going." Once again Zach had skipped Erin's questions about the strange man. She looked into the rear-view mirror as they moved off but he was gone. This puzzled her as the only way back to civilisation was the road they were on and he hadn't passed them.

She turned to Zach about to say something else, but thought against it. "So, Canada huh? What's there?"

Zach answered quietly, "Wolves."



Chapters 11 – 20

Episode 2: Howl

~

Chapter 11

Erin took a deep breath as she made her way into Containment Unit 4. Buildings like these were scattered across the world in all the major cities, posing as financial institutions and software companies. Passers-by didn't bother to question what happened beyond the blacked-out glass windows and doors and Praesidium contributed generously to various city officials, to ensure this remained the case.

She and Zach had arrived in Toronto just hours before and had split up in order to accomplish more in a shorter period. The new case they were on was already hitting the headlines in ways that the organisation frowned upon. Civilians were turning up dead across the city, their bodies ripped to shreds in ways that had made authorities believe that it could only be the work of some kind of deranged animal. Erin knew they were about half right.

She walked the long hallway towards the inner offices, relieved that she had worn her black leather boots, as otherwise every step she took would have been heard. She could already feel the eyes on her from the many cameras hidden away in the low ceiling of the hallway and was glad that she'd kept her usually wayward red curls locked into a tight bun. The surveillance was just one of the things that made her loathe visiting any of the containment units, but sometimes her job left her no choice.

As she came to a heavy titanium door that was more like a vault than a traditional door, she pulled her key card from her pocket - a plain white square with her information digitally embedded - then pressed her hand, palm up, against the door. Recognising her unique signature, a bright white outline lit up around her hand and with a hissing sound much like an airlock door opening, it swung open.

Erin walked through, straightening her stance as she came face to face with a room full of containment employees. For the most part they ignored her, too busy with calls coming in from across the region regarding new sightings and the mountains of paperwork that came along with each closed case. Erin walked purposefully on until she'd reached a

desk near the back of the cubicle infested office space. The occupant, Matthew, who was darker-skinned than she was, brown-eyed and about thirty-five, looked up and smiled.

“You made it,” he said, standing to give her a quick hug. Though it was necessary to work with containment officers, both Zach and Erin always preferred working with Matthew and Greek. Many members of containment acted as though they were above the wardens and often treated them with utter disrespect. These two however, did not.

Erin grinned at him as he released her and perched on top of his desk. “Yea, we had to head back to Middlesbrough to report in first. Got here as fast as we could.” She stood for a moment, peering over and into the cubicle behind her friend’s, “Where’s Greek?” she asked, adding, “I see he’s just as ‘tidy’ as ever,” and laughed lightly at the organised chaos on Greek’s desk that she’d grown accustomed to over the years. When she looked back at Matthew, his expression sobered her up.

“He’s already down there. We’ve been waiting on you guys for a while and Greek hasn’t left the dungeon since the first one came in.”

Erin frowned. “The first? How many are they?”

Matthew sighed, “Three more in the last two days and we’re expecting more soon.” Erin’s brow furrowed deeper as she turned the information over in her head. There had to be more to this. The organisation seldom kept so many of the same creatures together in the dungeon. They were content with one or two of a species to study or gather much needed information about a nest or pack. But this time, they’d gone against that. Her curiosity soared. Matthew stood,

“Ready?” Erin nodded, following him through another titanium door and into a large elevator. They didn’t say much as the lift descended seven floors to the dungeon, which referred to the basement level of containment units. It was a prison for supernatural beings, impenetrable and near impossible to escape. The organisation’s director liked to boast that it was an *impossible* feat, as after years of tweaking and adjusting for the many kinds of supernaturals that were kept in the cells, it truly would be a difficult task for any inmate to escape. Still, those active in the field knew better than to leave anything to chance and so were content to leave the ‘near’ before ‘impossible’.

The elevator came to a smooth stop and as the doors opened, Erin scanned the hallway cautiously. Twelve guards stood along it, six on either side, not moving as Erin and Matthew passed by them. The end of the hallway led them to a flight of steep stairs, which ended at the door of another elevator. The two stepped in, this time going only three floors down, before coming to a stop. The doors opened onto what appeared to be a redbrick wall, but after Matthew pressed his palm against it, it allowed him through, opening just long enough for him to pass. Erin had to do the same and stepped through quickly, knowing that if she didn't, she'd be crushed.

The room they'd entered was painted all white and even the tiles they walked across matched its pristine appearance. A woman, taller than them both and wearing an ill-fitted skirt suit, came towards them. She didn't speak, looking them over with her one true grey eye. Larger than the other false one — a transparent marble, it darted this way and that as her magical abilities allowed her to determine they were indeed who they said they were.

She was a Cyclops and all dungeons used them as a final test, before they allowed anyone through to what Erin liked to call the land of the monsters. The Cyclops paused briefly, taking a longer look at Erin, but the warden did not let this bother her. She was accustomed to being a curiosity to this species and early on had assumed that it was some kind of weird magical penis envy. After they'd been approved, the woman nodded and Erin followed Matthew as he led her to the place where Greek had been holed up for more than four days.

It was a dimly lit, dank smelling room and Erin strained to see. She was not wearing her customised contacts and found it bothersome that her vision was not better than usual. A figure came from around a corner,

“Finally.” Greek sounded tired.

“Show me what Zach and I are gonna have to deal with,” Erin said, not bothering with small talk. Greek led them both to a row of cages. As if smelling fresh meat, the prisoners started to growl and slam their bodies against the titanium and silver bars. Werewolves' features were much like wolves, however, they were hairier than their canine friends, much larger and their bodies were not entirely wolf-like. It was as if the best features of humans and wolves had been merged to create beings that were incredibly strong and deadly.

The silver sent them whimpering and Greek hollered angrily, pulling a tranquilizer gun from his jacket pocket.

“Wolfsbane?” Erin asked, seeing from the way they backed away from the bars, that the werewolves had already become acquainted with Greek’s methods of keeping them quiet.

He nodded, “They’re stronger than any I’ve ever seen Erin and there’s more.” Seeing her baffled look, Greek pointed to one of the cells further away. Erin went, shock overtaking her as she looked inside. It was a man, naked and curled up in tight ball, sleeping peacefully.

“This isn’t possible. Only lycans can—”

Matthew cut her off, “That’s why so many wardens are on this one. There’s a new strain out there and it’s not just affecting females, we’ve got males living through the change now too.”

Chapter 12

Zach sighed heavily as he left yet another house with a resident who 'didn't want to get involved'. He'd been canvassing the suburban neighbourhoods for close to two hours and so far, didn't have a solid lead yet. As he made the rounds in Forest Hill, an affluent neighbourhood with lots of trees, well-kept lawns and houses that screamed wealth, he wondered how Erin was faring at Containment Unit 4 and for a moment was envious that she'd get to catch up with Greek and Matthew.

The director had been clear, he wanted Erin side-lined as much as possible in this latest job, especially after the scare with her stabbing. Zach wasn't sure how he was supposed to do that but figured he could start by keeping her indoors while he took to the streets, a job he hated.

He was posing as a detective for the Toronto Police Service and though his already immaculate appearance sold the charade, he hated the itchy suit and tie he'd had to put on. Despite all this, no one was talking. Five nights before there had been numerous reports of strange, wolf-like howling, disturbing the peace and almost simultaneously, dismembered bodies had begun to turn up. Now though, residents were keen on saying they'd had their televisions up too loud, or they were having bad dreams. Something else had caused them to change their tunes, but Zach wasn't sure what it could be.

Usually when werewolves attacked and the wardens were called in, you couldn't *get* people to shut up about their experiences. Onlookers too terrified to believe what they were seeing or the few who managed to escape, were always adamant on the way events played out. *Almost as if containment had already come in and wiped everyone's memories*, Zach thought for the hundredth time since starting his rounds.

He knocked on another door, smile in place, "Morning mam," he said with forced cheerfulness and a bright smile as after a few moments an elderly woman peered out. He flashed his fake badge, "Detective Williams, TPS. We got some reports of a disturbance some nights ago?" Zach knew his try at the Canadian accent wasn't the best - Erin was the master with accents - but thought it passed for the moment at least.

"Oh, that was my grandson's video music. It gets loud and all the neighbours complain," she said haltingly and laughed.

“Are you sure mam? The reports were about strange noises, like an animal maybe?” Zach saw something flicker in her eyes, but it happened too quickly for him to figure out what it was.

“Oh no, no animals here, except for my cat Grummels. Here, I’ll get him for you.”

“No, it’s alright mam, you have a nice day.” He turned to walk away.

“It’s probably best,” she called, “Grummels isn’t well. He’s scared of the wolves and won’t go outside.”

Zach paused and turned on his heel. “Wolves?” The old lady smiled happily at his renewed interest,

“Yes, yes, they come by all dressed up for Halloween with my grandson, he went as a sailor once you know.”

Zach shelved his irritation at the old woman’s confusion. “I’m sure he did,” he turned away again, but not before he saw a glimpse of a figure standing behind the old woman. “Must be the grandson,” he said to himself.

A new thought began to form as he made his way to the next house. *What if there’s really a cover up going on here?* Would explain how residents who’d called emergency services the day before, were acting as though nothing happened. It would also explain why Jacob had given him and Erin the case in Kentucky, even though at least four other wardens were involved already.

Jacob was a highly respected member of the supernatural realm, who sometimes tipped the organisation off on matters regarding rogue creatures. He had a special interest in Erin, though Zach was yet to uncover the reason why. It was yet another secret he’d had to keep from his partner and though he knew why he had to, it didn’t make it any less of a burden. They spent more time together than with any others and it made Zach uneasy to hide such important information from her. He turned into another driveway, wondering why he’d decided to park the rental and walk, when his cell phone rang.

“This is Zach,”

“Yea it’s me,” Erin sounded almost breathless on the other end.

“Hope you’re having more luck than I am, feels like one dead end after another.”

“When can you get back here?” Erin asked, ignoring his complaint.

“I’ve a few more houses on this block then I can head back.”

“Forget about them, we’ve got bigger fish to fry.” Worry fuelled her tone, but after hours of canvassing, Zach wasn’t yet ready to give up with nothing to show for it.

“Bigger than possibly finding someone who could give us a lead in this case? Something’s wrong here Erin I can feel it, but I won’t get anywhere if I just *drop* everything.”

Erin’s tone harshened, “Okay stay there and if you never get the chance to see a male werewolf again, remember this moment.”

“A male *what?*” Zach shouted into the receiver, but Erin had already hung up.

Chapter 13

“This isn’t possible, you guys *know* that right? It’s just not possible.” Zach was saying to the other three as he watched the still sleeping naked man on the floor of his cell.

“Not possible, yet, here we are,” Erin said dryly.

Greek had used his mixture of wolfsbane and tranquilliser on the female werewolves and they too lay in deep sleep, their large, hairy bodies now shifted back to various versions of the female form.

“If I didn’t see him return to human form with my own eyes, I wouldn’t believe it either,” Greek added, scratching at his face. After days of being underground he was not only unshaven, but unkempt and along with the deep tan and brooding dark eyes that had earned him his nickname, Greek looked much like a guy that you didn’t want to meet in an alley late at night.

Zach’s gaze narrowed as he still refused to believe, “Come on guys. Greek, you said yourself you’ve been here for a long while. It’s dark down here, no contacts, no enhancements, it could have been a lycan that got mixed up with the others. Maybe *he’s* the lycan that turned them all.”

Matthew shook his head, “Negative. Two wardens from back east brought him in on the first night and it was a werewolf alright, right down to those weird ass teeth.” Werewolves had multiple rows of teeth, some hooked, others curved, all deadly, while lycans had teeth that were more uniform, straight, sharp and just as terrifying. It wasn’t just teeth that highlighted their differences either.

Though the original lycans were said to be long dead, their bloodlines had passed down through generations of in-breeding, which had kept their gene pool pure. When lycans bit a human, the individual suffered from an unexplained illness that left them delirious and feverish until the next full moon, when they shifted into a werewolf for the first time.

Throughout the centuries, only women had survived the bite and could then turn at will like lycans, though they couldn’t stand on two feet as their more evolved family members did. They were also feral when they turned, unable to quell the darkness and violence that threatened all who encountered them. It was now forbidden for any lycan to bite

humans, but as with any law, every now and then someone broke the rules and the organisation was called in to clean up the mess.

“How the hell did he live through it?” Zach asked now, more willing to consider the bizarre tale.

“No idea. It’s weird too, the females only returned to human form when I hit them with the stuff the second time, but *he* did almost immediately after he got in here, it was like he *knew* he should.”

Zach scoffed, “Come on now Greek, that doesn’t make any damn sense. When they’re in werewolf form they can’t even think straight, now you’re saying he’s clairvoyant or something?” The others laughed despite the situation.

“I know, I know it sounds crazy given everything we know about werewolves, but this *isn’t* something we know about them. Males don’t turn, that’s the rule and the *females*, they all went quiet whenever he even whimpered, like they were bowing to him as they do in the lycan packs.” Greek’s words made them all fall silent as they considered what he’d said.

After a few minutes Erin broke it, posing a question to the containment experts. “If what you’re saying is true, could we be witnessing the evolution of the species guys?”

“You can’t be seriously thinking—”

“If not evolution then *what* Zach?” Erin snapped. He got her so mad sometimes. Zach kept his cool, explaining his findings or lack thereof during his canvass and his suspicions about a mind wipe.

This got the group thinking again and this time, it was Matthew who spoke first, “Watch who you say those kinds of things to brother, this isn’t the place for wardens to call out containment for underhanded dealings.”

Zach felt his gun heavy at his side at this but said nothing. He wouldn’t have told Greek and Matthew if he didn’t trust them to keep it to themselves, but should he find out his theory was right, containment or not, he would not let it slide.

Erin said what he was thinking, “Sorry in advance if we’ve got to take out any of yours on this one then,” she laughed and the others joined, but none of them were really

sharing in mirth. It was a serious allegation and if it was true, would cast a stain on the entire Toronto containment unit.

“Have you called this in?” Zach asked changing the subject.

Greek answered, “Of course, the big boys are coming over from the UK in a few days. They’ve asked us to keep him sedated until they arrive.” Erin nodded. They all knew what that meant. Their superiors didn’t want anyone else talking to the werewolf male until they’d had a crack at him first. She hated when that happened, as it interfered with their investigations. She was certain the man lying on the cell floor could tell them quite a story if they’d let him.

“We’d better be getting back then, can’t sit staring at his bare ass all day,” Erin said feigning cheer. From what Zach had said, there hadn’t been many leads on the outside and something told her that the man was the key to this entire thing.

“Okay, I’ll walk you guys out,” Matthew said and patted Greek on the back, “Hang in there buddy.”

Greek flashed them a grin and indicated to his tranquilliser gun, “Betsy and I will do just fine,” he joked.

“Hold on one sec.” Matthew pulled his vibrating cell phone from his shirt pocket and answered. He listened for a while then gave them a strange look. “In the shopping mall?” He asked, pulling a digital notepad from his pants pocket. He typed quickly, inputting information as the person on the other end spoke. The other three waited impatiently as the call went on, worry increasing with each passing moment.

“What’s happened?” Erin asked when he finally hung up.

Matthew’s account was almost robotic, “Werewolves attacked civilians at a shopping mall near Yonge-Dundas Square. Thirty people are dead, countless more injured. Containment was on the scene almost immediately but by the time they got there, no civilians knew what had really happened. They all thought it was some prank and that the dead people were faking for a candid reality show. It’s a nightmare out there.”

Greek whistled when his partner finished, “The guys upstairs must be going *nuts*,” he said, scratching his face again.

“Half the team’s been sent out on the case, I asked if they needed us, but they’ve advised that we both stay with the werewolves we have in custody.”

Erin looked at Zach with a raised eyebrow, “Both of you?” she asked Matthew.

“Yes. We’re about to have two more live ones on our hands and it looks like at least one of them might be male.”

Chapter 14

When Erin and Zach pulled up near Eaton Centre, it was to the kind of chaos one usually associated with a major disaster. People were scattered everywhere, spilling in droves onto the already busy street, as TPS tried to maintain order and redirect traffic.

A few from the crowd were talking to law enforcement officials, others were being treated for multiple wounds, while others still lay under sheets on the ground, all but forgotten as those involved focused on their own problems. She and Zach ducked under the caution tape that seemed to stretch far around the vast building, escaping from the reporters and curious onlookers that were starting to gather. As they did, there wasn't even the need to use their fake badges, as no one was paying attention to them.

Erin tuned out the noise of the sirens and the crowd, looking around and taking in the scene. It was already apparent to her that the victims' minds had been wiped. She watched their expressions as they relayed their accounts, noting that none of them showed any real fear. Even the wounded appeared unmoved and simply waited, some writhing about in pain, until they could be transported to the nearest hospital.

"Looks like you were right," she said, inclining her head to the scene.

"Hoped I wasn't." They went further in, making their way towards the entrance of the mall. It was one of those large outfits where one could buy anything from the latest Michael Kors creation, to household products and with it being mid-morning on a Saturday, had been swarmed with patrons blowing paycheques on things they probably didn't need.

The building itself had been cleared of civilians and was pretty quiet compared to outdoors. This silence was interrupted intermittently by the sound of paramedics hoisting bodies into body bags and wheeling them out to be put with the rest.

"Over there," Zach said, pointing to a sheet-covered lump that lay with blood seeping through the fabric. The two went over and Erin pulled the sheet back. It was a woman underneath, evident only from the breast that still remained intact. She'd been mauled, her face chewed at so deliberately, that all that was left was a mashed concoction of meat and bone.

"Shit," Zach said, taking in a deep breath and Erin nodded, agreeing with his sentiment. They pulled the sheet off further, seeing the deep impressions of claw marks

across her stomach and legs that had turned this woman into a grotesque portrait, suitable only for the art gallery of some famous alternative abstract artist. “Well, enough sight-seeing,” Zach muttered and took out his DNA analyser. It was a new device to the organisation created by another warden, much to Zach’s annoyance. He’d kicked himself for not thinking of it first.

The device was no bigger than the palm of his hand and by placing it over an individual’s hair, palms or teeth, allowed the user to learn their identity. Zach wasn’t interested in that part though, he was hoping the werewolf had left her, or *his*, trademark DNA behind.

Erin stood as he scanned the body, keeping a look out should anyone become suspicious of their presence, but judging from the commotion outside, she was certain that wouldn’t be the case.

“I’ve found something.” Zach moved over to the woman’s right side, making certain of what he thought he’d seen. Erin joined him, seeing almost immediately what had made him call out.

“That’s pretty disgusting,” she said, wrinkling her nose at the strands of wiry werewolf hair buried in one of the dead woman’s wounds.

“She must have grabbed at one of the claws or something, I don’t know, but whatever happened I’m glad it did,” Zach added.

“Can you get anything from that though? Wouldn’t it be all supernatural DNA?” Erin asked, knowing that many supernatural beings couldn’t be tracked using DNA markers. Zach stood, showing her the findings on the device.

“Jessica Lawson?” she queried, both the face and name unfamiliar to her.

“That’s our werewolf alright. The analyser’s able to pick up on the very human signatures hidden within the werewolf DNA. It wouldn’t be the same with lycans because they didn’t originate from human beings.”

Erin nodded understanding, “Maybe she was one of the werewolves they took back to Containment Unit 4, I’ll call it in and see if we can get any information on where she’s from or something.”

“Call on the way,” Zach suggested, already walking to the mall’s exit.

Erin ran to catch up, “What’s up, where are we going?”

“To Jessica Lawson’s house.”

Chapter 15

Zach pulled up to the curb across the street from the Lawson house and turned off the engine of their rental car.

“White picket fence, carnations, are you sure this is it?” Erin asked as she quickly inserted her customised contacts. When she looked back at the house, she could better see its environs and again could not fathom it being the base of a major werewolf operation.

“Came here earlier on foot and spoke to an old woman about her grandson and, a ‘Jessica Lawson’ is registered as living here too. Hold on,” Zach reached into the backseat for his Tablet PC, “I’ll check the database and see what it’s got on her.” As he inputted information and awaited results, Erin pulled her hair back from her face and slipped her tweed jacket back on. Like Zach, she much preferred her worn, black leather one to the fancy office wear that was her current attire.

“What’s it say?” she asked, adjusting the three daggers strapped to her waist before buttoning her jacket. Though she usually didn’t need them, she liked knowing that she had a backup plan should her magic not succeed against a target.

“Jessica’s the daughter and there’s another one,” Zach paused before continuing, checking the screen again, “Daryl Gregory, the kid’s father.”

“One big happy family,” Erin mumbled. She wasn’t at all sure what was going on, but hoped that finally they’d get a much needed lead when she was finished with her interrogation. “Wish me luck,” she said opening her car door, but Zach stopped her.

“I’ll take point on this one.” He didn’t look at her, pretending to focus on putting away his tablet.

“Huh? What are you talking about, I’m always the one who does this stuff,” Erin said, confused.

“Not this time.” Zach slipped his shades on and checked his gun. “You wait here.”

Erin grabbed his arm tight, “What’s going on Zach? You’ve been acting weird since I got back on duty.”

Zach sighed, not wanting to engage her in this conversation, knowing that anything else he said would most likely be some form of a lie. “I started this, so I can finish it.”

Erin wasn't buying it. Zach did any and everything he could to get out of these kinds of things. He hated door-to-doors and interrogations even more. At times Erin was sure that if he had his way, he'd let his gun do all the talking when it came to gathering information and it had been decided early on that she'd act as first contact during their investigations. She sunk back in her seat and asked again, “Are you going to tell me what's up or not?”

He released another heavy sigh and ran a hand through his dark hair, reaching for some other lie to tell, but saw no point in it. “The Director wants you protected on this one. He'd prefer if you only have contact when it's time to cast the binding spell,” he admitted quietly.

“Are you *serious*? Does Damian know about this?” she asked incredulously, her honey-brown eyes opening wide at his revelation.

Zach nodded impatiently, “Yes, who do you think gave me the order?”

Erin sat up straighter in her seat, “Is this about the stabbing? Cause the moment I was strong enough I healed myself completely.” She punched herself lightly where she'd been stabbed, “See, no pain at all anymore.”

Zach looked away, his hands gripping the steering wheel, “Yes, that's it.” He couldn't tell her more, he'd already told her more than he should have and their handler wouldn't be pleased with him if he knew Zach had spilled.

Erin's full lips pursed into a thin, unattractive line and her brow creased in a deep frown, “I don't care, this is my case too and they're not going to stop me from working it the way I always do,” she said, folding her arms across her chest defiantly.

“Don't be a child Erin. These are orders from the top and it's just an interrogation. We don't even know if these people have a clue what's going on at all. Earlier it seemed like the grandmother hardly knew what *day* it was, much less if wolves were running around.” He didn't mention to her that the senior *had* made mention of wolves, even though they were, as she'd described them, Halloween costumes.

Erin still wasn't ready to give in, "Call me whatever the hell you want, this isn't just your case and I'm not going to sit around doing nothing while you're in there working."

"So you think that's what I do all day? Zach retorted, aggravated, "Listen to you talk on our little earpieces and twiddle my goddamn thumbs?"

"For fucks sake Zach, you know that's not what I mean, it's just—"

"Shut up," he said hushing her and sunk into his seat, motioning her to do the same. Erin followed suit. Their argument could wait.

"What did you see?"

"A man on foot, about six feet, blonde hair, just turned into the Lawson's driveway."

"So?" Erin raised herself up just a bit, trying to see across the street to the Lawson house. She saw the back of the man Zach was referring to and that he was in animated conversation with whoever had opened the door. His large frame clad in a dark blue muscle shirt and black jeans, blocked her view of who it was and she sank back down.

"I'm not so sure why we're hiding Zach. If by some chance he knows what's going on, shouldn't we just storm in there and question him and whoever's inside right now?"

Zach looked at her the way he did when he thought she was being silly, "Do you honestly not remember that guy?"

Erin raised herself up again, already shaking her head. The man had stepped inside now and Erin could make out the figure of a woman just beyond him. She looked younger than the old woman Zach had described, so she assumed this was the daughter, Jessica. She sank back down again, racking her brain as she tried to sift through the faces of those they'd met at the Gathering in Albania last year.

She came up empty and shook her head, "Nope, the golden locks don't ring a bell," she said sarcastically.

Zach sighed for what seemed to Erin like the millionth time that day before answering, "That's Kaleb of the Reshu clan."

Erin sucked in a breath of disbelief. The clan was well known to the organisation, as they were one of the few who had rebelled against the rule of Ricard, the lycan Leader of

Clans. “What the hell’s he doing here?” Erin asked, still shocked. “He can’t be the one who’s—?”

“Let’s go find out.”

Chapter 16

It seemed to Erin that Zach had forgotten all about how adamant he was that she shouldn't leave the car and even if he hadn't, she'd taken the opportunity to make a beeline for the house when he'd indicated that they should go in. She gave the heavy oak door a few loud raps.

When a few moments passed and it appeared that no one would answer, she knocked again hard calling, "Ms. Lawson? TPS again, can we speak to you for a moment please?" Her Canadian accent was flawless, easily masking her Barbadian one. Soon after they heard a disturbance deeper in the house and she resisted the urge to head to one of the side doors or windows to investigate further. If it really was Kaleb in there, they needed to play this one by the book and be careful. The door finally flung open, revealing the older woman Zach had spoken to before.

He stepped forward, "Hi again mam, I'm Detective Williams, we spoke earlier, this is my partner Detective Clark. Could we come in and ask you a few questions?"

The old woman smiled happily, "My grandson won't like that, he doesn't like when people come in and interrupt his video music." She clapped her hands together gleefully and Zach and Erin exchanged a look. Erin adopted a softer tone,

"Why don't you go get your daughter for us then, Jessica? We'd like to speak to her too." As if a switch went off in her head, the old woman clammed up, her smile fading as she answered, simultaneously trying to close the door.

"Jessica's not here, she's out and I don't know when she will be back. Grummels might know, but I don't."

Erin stuck her foot in the doorway and smiled at the old woman, holding her brown-eyed gaze. "Anatu grenundun," she whispered, still maintaining eye contact. She touched the woman's shoulder and pushed past her slowly, the dazed expression on the older woman's face indicating that her spell of confusion had worked. It wouldn't hurt her in anyway, but she would not be able to focus on anything for a short while.

"*TPS*," Erin called again, heading further into the house. The large foyer soon gave way to a long hallway and Zach pulled his gun from its holster as he followed Erin, prepared should they be confronted aggressively. He remembered how Kaleb and his clan had stormed

out of the lycan clans' meeting at the last Gathering and why Erin would not have recalled him herself. She hadn't even *been* at that meeting, she'd been attending to other matters with Damian. "Hello?" Erin called again and peered questioningly back at Zach.

"We know you're in here, we just want to have a little chat," Zach tried now, his patience waning. Footsteps. Hearing them coming down the hallway the wardens pressed themselves against opposite walls, not sure what to expect, but not taking any chances either. The footsteps were closer now and Erin spread her fingers against the wall, allowing dark magical energy to flow through her arm to her fingertips, just as ready for a fight as her partner.

"Sorry to keep you waiting wardens." The two turned at the sound of the voice and soon after Kaleb came into view. They backed away, his sleazy smile not fooling either of them.

"Strange, lycans can hear a pin drop thirty miles away, I'm surprised you didn't hear us calling," Erin said, narrowing her gaze. Kaleb laughed, showing off perfect rows of white teeth as he did.

"Twenty maybe, thirty's a bit of a stretch."

"Enough. You know what we're doing here. You though, what's *your* role in all this?" Zach pointed his gun at Kaleb, his expression like stone.

"Not a clue what you mean." Kaleb stared at Erin as he spoke, ignoring Zach all together and obviously not the least put off by his weapon.

"We're not here to play lycan. Are you the one turning humans into werewolves?" Erin had been caught under the stare of many a creature in her time, but Kaleb's deep set emerald green eyes, shaded by thick long lashes, made her slightly uneasy. It made her imagine the horror prey hunted by a lycan must experience. It wasn't like with werewolves who ripped their victims to shreds and asked no questions later, lycans were calculating killers and those who didn't abide by the laws of their kind, were the most dangerous of them all.

"What if I am warden? What would you do then?" Kaleb moved past them swiftly using his supernatural speed and closed the door where the old woman was still standing

unmoved. Erin and Zach changed their positions, turning so that they were once again facing Kaleb.

“Erin, take the back door to the car,” Zach ordered, causing his partner to look at him in disbelief. He glanced at her briefly, “Don’t argue with me, I can’t have you getting hurt again.”

“What’s this?” Kaleb asked with a cheeky smile, “Trouble in paradise?”

“You’re the only one who’s in trouble lycan.” Erin ignored Zach’s shout for her to stop as she ran towards Kaleb. She moved quickly but was not fast enough and he sidestepped the bolt of conjured electricity that would have sent him flying across the room.

He shifted, his bones breaking and repositioning rapidly, until before them stood a wolf-like creature, with tough grey-coloured skin, which was covered with a thin layer of brown hair that was thicker only on his head and face. His clothes lay tattered on the floor, unable to stand up against the change. His face still had very human characteristics, like his straight nose and bushy eyebrows, but his cheekbones had shifted so that it was now more elongated and matched some elements of a wolf’s visage. Large canines protruded over thin, pulled back lips and his hands and feet had become dangerous claws, which he brandished at the wardens, obviously displeased with Erin’s attack.

He sprang at Erin, and Zach fired his gun. He’d replaced his regular customised bullets with those specifically made for hunting beings of this kind. They were solid silver, coated with wolfsbane and exploded upon contact. They wouldn’t kill a lycan that easily, but they would slow one down.

Kaleb moved even faster in his lycan form and Erin thrust both hands out, whispering a spell that would create a kind of force field in front of her. The lycan seemed to anticipate this and changed the trajectory of his jump in mid-air, catching one of Zach’s bullets in his side because of this, but ending up behind Erin as he’d intended. He reached out to claw her, but she turned, blasting him away as she did, the sheer force of the magic pulsing through her doing most of the work.

“Binding spell!” Zach shouted now, turning and dropping to one knee in order to shoot at the lycan as he came for them again. Erin did so immediately, saying the first word, then the second, when a fierce growl came from behind. She looked around quickly, seeing

only the hairy body of a werewolf as she did. Zach had stopped shooting and was lying unconscious after being thrown across the room by Kaleb. Realising the new danger, Erin tried to say the third word that would finish the binding spell, when she felt a blow to the head that sent her crashing headlong to the floor.

Chapter 17

Erin grimaced as she came to, feeling a throbbing pain at the back of her head where she'd been hit. Her first reaction was to reach behind and heal herself, but she soon realised that she'd been hog tied and left where she'd fallen. She turned her head, trying not to think about her face against the dirty beige carpet and scanned the area for Zach. He was a few feet away, tied up in much the same way she was.

Getting them both out of the ropes was not going to be a problem, but Erin didn't want to make any moves until she was certain they were alone. She listened, ignoring the creaks and groans of the old house and waiting only to see if any other foreign noises reached her ears. Satisfied that they were in the clear, she used her magic, allowing her tied hands to give off a kind of heat that singed the ropes enough for her to break free. She turned over on her back and sat up quickly.

"Not so fast." Kaleb had returned to human form and was staring at her mischievously from a corner of the room. She looked over at Zach who much to her relief was breathing evenly, though still unconscious.

"Where's your furry friend?" she asked, trying to curb her frustration. They'd let the lycan get the better of them and she was not very happy about it.

"She's right there." Kaleb pointed to a woman who stepped from the shadows of the hallway behind them. Her dark hair was cut to her ears and she shared the brown eyes of her mother. Unlike Kaleb, who remained naked after shifting back, she was clothed in a large white t-shirt.

"Jessica Lawson, I presume. Your mother must be proud." Jessica looked at Erin angrily but said nothing, taking her cues from Kaleb.

Erin played on her subservience. "Oh, he calls the shots is that it? Tell me, did you even want him to turn you? I imagine it must make you pretty mad, all the clothes you go through and everything." She smiled sweetly as Jessica lunged at her.

"Stop! Leave us," Kaleb commanded, just as Erin had hoped he would. He looked at her again with those disconcerting green eyes. "I haven't offended your pet have I?" he asked, pointing at Zach.

“He’s *not* my pet, and knocking him out wasn’t exactly the nicest thing you could have done,” she fired back.

“Oh, but if I didn’t, we wouldn’t be having this conversation, now would we?”

“I told you before lycan, I don’t want to play your games.”

“Please, call me Kaleb, after all one with abilities such as you, from a lineage as prominent as yours, may call me by my first name.” He smiled at her, still as cheeky as ever and Erin could tell he knew she had no idea what he was talking about. She’d tried to find out more about her background before, but whenever she did, she came up with the same stories that the organisation had fed her. She’d lived in Barbados until she was twelve, then been whisked off to England to begin training as a warden, that was all. She didn’t have memories of her past before her tenth birthday, but never found this strange as it was just the way it had always been.

“You’re trying to mess with my head and I really don’t like that.” Without warning she raised her hand and pointed it at him, her hope to at least stun the lycan, but just as swiftly he was beside her and grabbed it, gripping so tightly it hurt.

“Your power is only as great as the knowledge you possess. I will tell you what no one else will, about your true family, only if you release the males you have captured to me.” Erin felt her throat tightening. For a moment it was as if she couldn’t speak as he locked eyes with hers, telling her what couldn’t be true. *All my family’s dead, that’s why you’re an orphan dummy*, she told herself, pulling her hand from his grip. “Nice try lycan, but you’ve got the wrong girl.”

He shook his head, “Ponder my words and ask your pet, you’ll soon see I’m not the one who lies to you.” He shifted again into his lycan form, and Erin quickly tried to recite the binding spell. However, before she could lock him into the house with magic, he sprang through an open window, disappearing easily into the night.

Erin tried to clear her head, not wanting to believe anything the lycan had said. There was no doubt in her mind that he was the one behind the recent wave of werewolf attacks, but she didn’t want to entertain the thought that he knew more about her than *she* did and that her partner did too. *Zach!*

Remembering him still tied up on the floor, she hurried to release him. Using the same spell she'd attempted on her own bonds, it wasn't long before the rope was ripping and shredding. He was still unconscious, so she touched his forehead, feeling the magic flow through her as she healed him. Zach came to almost immediately after and she smiled at him, absently stroking the soft skin of his forehead.

"Gonna sleep all day? We've got a lycan on the loose." He sat up, moving his head from side to side in order to get rid of the kinks that had formed there.

"You let him get away? What about the damn spell?" Zach argued.

Erin breathed deep, trying not to get upset, "I tried, but my head wasn't in the game and he went way too fast."

The two stood and Zach looked around for his gun which had fallen when he'd been knocked out. "Head not in the game? Am I supposed to put that in a report?" he asked her now, more than a little irate at this development.

"I didn't get him, but jeez I did get *something*."

Zach turned, prepared to berate her some more, when the hulking figure of Jessica on all fours in her werewolf form confronted him. Erin cursed under her breath. She'd been more put off by Kaleb's words than she'd realised and had stupidly forgotten that he wasn't the only supernatural being in the house.

She spoke quietly, watching the werewolf come slowly towards them. "We've got to get the grandmother out Zach, she must be in a back room somewhere."

Zach glanced at Erin in disbelief. "You want to go around *her*?"

Erin didn't like her plan any more than Zach did, especially seeing those glinting teeth come closer as the werewolf salivated over her next kill, but they couldn't exactly leave an innocent woman to die. While contemplating how best to get to the old woman, Erin saw another being, more stooped, come from behind Jessica to face off with them.

"Scratch that. I don't think she needs saving."

Chapter 18

Zach fired. The silencer on his gun masked the sound of the bullets escaping their chamber, but as three hit Jessica's mother directly in the chest, her howls of pain as she fell back could no doubt be heard as far away as two neighbourhoods over. The bullets left gaping holes on impact, the mini explosions created afterwards enabling Zach's own brand of 'magic' and releasing the toxic blend of silver and wolfsbane into her blood stream.

"Zach, get down!" Erin shouted, seeing Jessica, her eyes turning dark amber in her rage, make a leap towards him. He followed her command, falling flat on the floor and Erin got to work, sending a series of flares which flew rapidly from her hands like dark spheres of light, at the werewolf. Her magic stunned Jessica and she bowed her large head, shaking it as she tried to refocus. *That might have been cute in another life*, Erin thought absently of the dog-like antics Jessica was now displaying.

"Let's get out of here," Zach said jumping up and backing away from the werewolves, "I'll hold them a while longer." The mother was still incapacitated, but as her regeneration abilities kicked in, it wouldn't be long before she was after them again. Erin used the time Zach bought her and recited the binding spell while running to open the front door. She was sure containment would soon be on the scene, as there was no way the neighbourhood's residents would have missed all the commotion. With Zach close behind, she gripped the door handle.

"She's *coming*." Zach was already shooting again, but this time, Jessica's fury gave her more strength and it seemed, speed. She took a swipe at him, sending him flying across the room and slashed at Erin with her impressive claws. Erin avoided what would have been a painful injury, by pelting Jessica with bursts of electrical energy, invisible to the naked eye, but which rode on air towards the werewolf and served to slow her down.

"Come on Zach," she urged, glancing over to make sure her partner was okay and saw that he was already up and coming to join her. Jessica, recovering from Erin's latest attacks, tried to spring at them again, but Erin destroyed the door, reducing it to splinters of wood and the two ran out into the night.

Jessica endeavoured to follow them through the door, but finding that this wouldn't work, she tested the windows and any other doors in the house. Her rage-filled howls were soon matched by her mother's, who was still not completely healed, but joined with her

daughter in the attempts to escape their new prison. As both became aware that this was not going to happen, their howls gave way to guttural wails as if they were being tortured and Erin cringed.

As was to be expected, a crowd started to gather around the Lawson house, the noise too much for them to ignore. They could plainly see the two werewolves and amidst the shock, cell phones were out as onlookers took pictures and video. However, neither Zach nor Erin was worried about this. In their time as wardens, they'd learnt that most people refused to believe that they were truly witnessing creatures from their favourite supernatural television shows come to life and even if they did, containment would take care of the loose ends. It wasn't long before officers would be on the scene and the wardens waited, anticipating their arrival.

"Here we go," Zach said under his breath, as a containment group of seven pulled up in an unmarked black van. They all wore the standard attire for containment unit officers who worked in the field. Black skin-tight body suits made of a titanium alloy and over these, about two inches away from their bodies, were silver-coloured inorganic exoskeletons. The exoskeletons did not reduce the flexibility of their suits, while simultaneously allowing them sufficient protection and there was more than met the eye to this skeletal outer layer. They were outfitted with several gadgets, weapons and digital equipment so skilfully embedded, that they were only seen if an officer revealed them.

Having received their orders, they ran out one by one, most towards the house, while others blended into the crowd. A red-haired, ruddy-faced man came up to them angrily.

"Commander Tremblay," he announced haughtily and spit. "Aren't you tired of us always having to clean up after you?"

Zach tensed beside her but was silent. She on the other hand, "That's your job. We're first response and you're ancillary, that's just the way it goes."

"You two are legends in the unit and that's *not* a good thing," he replied, still glaring at them. His light blonde eyebrows seemed to fade into his pale skin, over washed-out blue eyes.

"And what's *your* name again? Oh, that's right, not important enough for us to remember it."

The commander's cheeks reddened and his already thin lips pursed until they had almost disappeared into the folds of his skin. "Watch what you say bitch, you don't want me angry at you."

Erin was about to say something more, when Zach held onto her arm, "Forgive my partner, it's been a long day and we're both tired so—"

Erin's tongue often had a life of its own and as she cut Zach off, it was one of those times, "A long day of covering up for containment. Tell me, which of your people is in on this? Or maybe it's all of you. Just confess and I promise not to hurt you later." Commander Tremblay grit his teeth at what she'd said, but he walked away and said nothing more.

"What the *hell* did you do that for?" Zach asked, irritated at her rash decision to show their cards. "Isn't it enough to have most of them hate us, now you want to be on their shit list too?" He shook his head, still not believing what she'd just done.

"You never trust me. Didn't you see the way he shut down when I said it? He knows something."

"Erin, we *think* someone in containment is working with Kaleb, we can't know that for sure. It could be another supernatural in the mix and if it *is* someone from Containment Unit 4, you've just tipped them off that we're onto them." She grinned.

"Exactly and that's why we're going to follow them when they're finished and see where they take us."

"We can't, we've got to report this all in and get back to the containment unit to see the werewolves they brought in from the shopping mall, I'm betting it'll be the other male from this house. Maybe Greek and Matthew have new leads or something." Erin pulled her cell phone from her pants pocket and waved it at Zach.

"That's why we have these partner. Now come on, let's make them think we've gone. You can circle the block." She smiled at him, which served only to increase his annoyance.

"I'm tired of your schemes Erin, let's just do a job by the book for once." Erin paused, turning to look at Zach. She could see the frustration deep in his green eyes, but was not ready to let go of her bone,

“I said this before and I’ll say it again, you never trust me and yet I usually end up being right about these kinds of things. My gut tells me we should follow these guys. If I’m wrong, we lose a few hours and make up for it later anyway.”

Zach, not wanting to budge, replied dryly, “Last time I checked, losing a few hours was not a little thing Erin, we could be put back days on this case if we follow the wrong lead.”

Erin considered her next words carefully, “I see. As my partner I trust you wholly, but maybe Kaleb’s right, maybe I shouldn’t believe everything *you* say either.” Erin watched for a reaction, but Zach’s training soon came into play and even his anger seemed to evaporate.

He acted as though he hadn’t heard what she’d said as he replied, “Let’s circle the block.”

Chapter 19

“Finally,” Erin said, breathing a sigh of relief. She and Zach had sat in their rental car in silence for over an hour, watching from a safe distance as containment went through the motions. Another containment vehicle, this time a black truck with a large titanium and silver cage built into the back, had also arrived on the scene and after much hassle, the two werewolves were being transported back to the containment unit.

Every now and then she glanced at Zach, wondering what he was thinking behind his brooding stare. She knew him well enough to see the signs when he was trying to avoid a topic, but still wasn't ready to believe that all Kaleb had said was true. If she chose to give into that theory, it would mean that everything she'd thought about their relationship had to be called into question and she wasn't prepared to do that. She'd never tell him, but deep-down Erin truly cared about Zach.

Damian had paired her and Zach together more than a year before they'd met. Wardens were watched closely as they trained, and their individual traits were matched against others to see who would best fit as partners. Before they were assigned to a partner however, they had to pass a year of tests which included them working cases alone, so their superiors could assess how they responded to the many challenges that came along with the job.

Erin had noticed early on that there was a strange kind of respect for her among their superiors, one she believed was bred from her prowess with dark magic and ability to adapt very quickly to perilous situations. She didn't always follow the rules, but she got the job done, a fact that she'd been commended on many times.

At first Erin had believed that she would be paired with a supernatural warden. There were a few of them who worked for the organisation and often, as in the case of the vampires, were there as a sign of peace between the organisation and the supernatural realm. Though Erin possessed dark magic, those like her were not considered supernatural, but it was a well-known fact that those as gifted as she was, were often paired with supernaturals, as their abilities blended well together. She had been more than a little surprised when she'd met Zach and saw that he was an ordinary human. She'd worried that he would keep her back at first, but over the last two years and as she'd gotten to know him better, she had grown to

admire his intelligence and competence. When she was being honest with herself, she knew it was more than that too.

Those who didn't know Zach thought him aloof, but Erin knew that beneath his tough exterior and harsh words which were often directed at her, was a kind man who would protect her in any way he could. *He'd tell me if he really knew something about me*, she thought as Zach pulled away from the curb, trailing the first black van some kilometres behind.

Of the seven containment officers, just two remained in the van, the commander who had tried to get under their skin and another man who had performed the mind wipes on those gathering at the scene.

"See, they're probably just heading back in," Zach said as they came close to the street where Containment Unit 4 was located. When the van whizzed past, not even slowing down for a moment, he changed his tune. "It's procedure to check-in. What the hell are they up to?" he wondered aloud.

"We'll find out whenever they stop," Erin said, relieved that she'd been right to insist they follow them. After they'd driven for over forty minutes, Erin broke the silence again, "Should we get Matthew or Greek on the phone? Might be better than letting them be blindsided," she suggested.

Zach shook his head. "No, we're still not sure about this, these two could be going to get dinner or something," then quieter, "And we don't *know* that Matthew and Greek aren't in on it either."

Erin frowned, "You can't really think that. You're the one who told them about it in the first place."

Zach turned a corner as the black van did before answering, "Yea, I don't really believe that's the case, but we can't be sure, they're containment and we're wardens, if they had to, who do you think they'd stick up for?"

Erin pursed her lips. Zach was right. Though the organisation worked as one well-oiled machine, the cliques were obvious and seldom mixed with each other. Being such good friends with containment officers was an anomaly and though they'd come to each other's aid more than once, it didn't mean that either side wouldn't give up the other.

She was about to share her agreement, when something made her stop, “What the heck ... ?” she said softly, as Zach inched forward. Just as surprised, he didn’t look at her, but switched off his lights as he drove on. They’d turned onto a rural road and in the distance could see a copse. Beyond that was a large cream-coloured estate house that rose majestically into the night sky. The van came to a stop in front of the house and the containment officers got out. They’d removed their exoskeletons and approached comfortably, as if they’d done it a million times before.

“This can’t be right,” Zach said, turning the engine off, not wanting to get too close and give their location away.

“Fuck,” Erin breathed, still in shock. It wasn’t the house or the environs that left the two wardens in such disbelief, nor was it that Kaleb came out to greet the containment officers when they arrived and disappeared with them back into the dwelling. What had caused both wardens to hesitate, was that tied with heavy chains to opposite pillars at the bottom of the house’s front steps, were two werewolves as tame and in control as either of them had ever seen the creatures. Even Jessica, who had been kept at bay by Kaleb earlier, had seemed more on edge than these two.

“It doesn’t look like silver,” Zach offered now, knowing that the substance could contribute to their relaxed dispositions.

Erin leaned in closer, “Not silver, or wolfsbane either, they don’t have any bruising around the neck where they’re tied.”

“What the hell is going on?” Zach asked, echoing Erin’s earlier sentiment.

“*I can tell you,*” said a voice from above. This was followed by claws ripping their way through the sheet metal of the car’s roof and within seconds Kaleb was looking in at them. Zach and Erin tried to react, but were forcibly removed from the vehicle, claws digging deep into their shoulders.

“*Sacremen deruo—*” she tried, her mouth forming the words around an expulsion spell, when the world became black.

Chapter 20

As if the night couldn't get any worse, when they came to Erin and Zach were hanging, suspended from the upstairs balcony, just out of reach of the now riled up werewolves. The beasts clawed at the air, leaping high as they tried to reach the two wardens. Seeing their chains kept the werewolves far enough away from them, Erin swallowed the first hints of fear that had tried to possess her. She knew the chains wouldn't hold them for long but did not let this cloud her thoughts.

"You good Zach?" she called to her partner, strung up just a few feet away.

"I'm alive."

Satisfied Zach was okay, Erin wondered what their best bet of escape would be. She couldn't use magic without getting one of them hurt and there just wasn't enough wriggle room in her bonds to even get *close* to her knives.

"Good, you wake," Kaleb's cheerful voice came from below. "Come my pets, behave yourselves." From her vantage point, Erin could make out Kaleb stroking the heads of the werewolves. Watching was surreal and Erin knew that should they live to tell the tale, it would take some convincing for others to believe them. These things didn't happen among werewolves and lycans. Knowing lycans' distaste for them, werewolves avoided their distant cousins and certainly did not *bow* to them, but here were two doing just that, just as the Lawson women had earlier.

"This isn't a fair fight lycan," Erin shouted down at him, but Kaleb just laughed.

"You two should have stayed out of this, it didn't concern you." The new voice came from the containment commander who'd spoken to them earlier.

"Traitors, that's all you fuckers are." The anger in Zach's voice was palpable, but all his outburst was met with was more laughter.

"Fighting words from someone in your predicament," Commander Tremblay retorted.

"Gentlemen," Kaleb's tone was firm, "There's no reason we can't be civil. The wardens already know my price and should they agree to my terms, not only will I tell the girl of her lineage, but I will let them go free."

“You *can't* be serious, they know who we are, *everyone* in the organisation will know too if you let them live!” Yelled the commander, but Kaleb rebuffed his tirade,

“The politics of Praesidium have nothing to do with me or my clan, I would never betray the Reshu as you have. Maybe you deserve this punishment,” he chuckled.

Erin felt a stirring in the pit of her stomach. *This won't end well.*

“We did everything you asked and now you're saying that you won't protect us from the organisation? That wasn't our deal.” The commander's voice was almost trembling as he tried to control his rage.

“You have been paid all you asked for your services. Now I must hold your hand too?” came Kaleb's cheeky reply.

“You can't do this—” Commander Tremblay's speech was cut off by a loud snarl, but hanging upside down Erin strained to see what was happening.

The werewolves took action as the commander and the officer with him attacked Kaleb, while the lycan removed himself from the fray and allowed his werewolves to take charge. Without their skeletal armour, the werewolves made light work of the containment officers and Erin cringed each time she heard snapping jaws sinking deep into flesh or the screams of the men as they met their demise.

Zach too had listened with an increasingly sick feeling growing in his stomach. There was no way either of them would try to negotiate *their* lives for the male werewolves and that meant that if they couldn't find some other way to free themselves, they'd be dead before daybreak. He couldn't feel either of his guns anymore and assumed they'd been taken when they'd been tied up. His mind raced as he considered possibilities, when suddenly he thought of something,

“Hey Kaleb, even if we try to get the males out, you killed the only two containment officers who would have been able to transport them. We don't have the clearance to do that.”

Kaleb came closer so that he was standing right beneath them and peered up, “You will think of something.” He turned to walk away, Zach wasn't finished.

“How the hell did you guys pull this off anyway? And the males, Erin here thinks it’s evolution.” Kaleb looked up at them, with hints of pride, exactly what Zach had hoped for. He didn’t know why he hadn’t thought of playing this card before.

“You wardens think you are so wise, that we must bow to your leaders and the rules you make our kind impose. These last days the Reshu clan has proven that we are the greatest lycan clan on Earth and when we return for the Gathering, all will know this.”

“That still doesn’t explain how you were able to get males to live through the change. That’s *something* isn’t it Erin?”

Erin, catching on replied, “Can’t think straight hanging upside down like this, blood rushing and all that. Lycan, why don’t you cut us down so we can talk properly?”

Kaleb thought hard for a few moments, before springing into the air. With two quick slashes of his extended claws, he broke their bonds, sending them falling into the midst of the werewolves.

“Haruyei Nauhte!” Erin shouted, terror gripping her, then thankfully felt herself being flung backwards against the brick wall, as her disengage spell took effect. Zach crashed into her soon after and they both slumped to the floor.

Erin jumped up first, remembering where they were and what was with them. Her worries were unfounded however, as the werewolves were as silent as lambs, eyeing them with the same rage they were known for, but not willing to move an inch without Kaleb’s command.

“See, how do you make them obey you like that?” Erin asked, daring to come closer and Kaleb smiled at her, staring in the same disturbing way he had before.

“All will be revealed at the Gathering, *if* you make it there,” Kaleb replied.

Zach spoke up, “I’ll help you, but you can’t tell her the truth about who she is.” He looked over at Erin, holding her gaze for seconds, his expression saying what he needed her to do. She got into character, turning to her partner as if outraged,

“What’s this Zach? You know things about me and you won’t *tell me*?”

“We fight monsters Erin, what more do you want?” Zach fired back.

Erin turned back to Kaleb, a small smile on her face, “Him.” She could feel her dark magic pulsing through her and in an easy movement charged Kaleb. Taken off guard, he was unable to avoid her punch and fell down a few steps and into his werewolves. Erin didn’t stop moving and channelling all her power, jumped into the air, kicking one, then the other werewolf hard. She landed again, skidding in the blood of the dead containment officers and her adrenaline high, used the momentum to propel her forward.

Blue flame spewed from her hands, temporarily blinding her opponents, then pulling two of the daggers from her waist, she slit the blades clean across the neck of one. The werewolf fell, returning to her human form, blood spilling from the gash in her neck as she gagged for breath.

Kaleb reappeared now, fully transformed, his eyes bloodshot red. He was furious. He came at her, the other werewolf in tow and Erin, seeing the danger in going up against a lycan, but feeling as though her body had taken on a life of its own, met their charge, shouting with exhilaration as she went.

“*Out of the way Erin,*” Zach yelled, as he pulled four miniature explosives, each no bigger than a fingernail, from his back pocket and flung them in the direction of the fight. Erin didn’t listen. She crashed into Kaleb, her dark-caramel skin seeming to glow as a greater power overtook her. The explosives connected with their targets and Zach was pushed back from the sheer force.

After a few minutes had passed, he pushed himself up on shaky legs, worry etched on his face as the dust settled, “Oh my fucking God. *Erin?*” He shouted, stumbling forward at first, the aftershock of the impact still affecting him. He climbed over debris of the front of the house, seeing werewolf hair, charred skin and meat wherever he looked. He ran his hands through his dark hair and his breaths came fast and hard.

“I’m over here.” Zach looked to where the voice had come from, seeing Erin standing nearly untouched some feet away from him. Her hair had come loose in the ruckus and her curls now fell messily about her shoulders. To him she was as beautiful as ever in the light of the moon and unlike Zach, who now had a thick layer of dust covering his skin and clothing, would make anyone believe that she’d had no part in what had just taken place. He ran over to her, clutching her arms tightly as he inspected her face, making sure she was all right. She didn’t say anything, as relief washed over him.

“Sorry, I just had to make sure.” Zach released her, wanting to hug her really, but knowing better than to do so. “We should call this in right away, they need to know what went down here.”

Erin still didn't move. She'd felt something very different when she'd used magic this time. It was more powerful than anything she'd ever felt, as though she was invincible. “Kaleb got away,” she said, pointing at the rubble.

“Centuries-year-old lycan? I'm not surprised, I'll just call it in so we can get some wardens to try and track him down before he gets too far away.” Zach reached for his cell phone, then paused, noticing that Erin hadn't taken her eyes off him.

Her jaw tensed as she spoke. “Zach, what am I?”



** Chapters 21 – 30 **

Episode 3: Lust

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Chapter 21

Erin shook rainwater from her hair as she waited in the foyer of Palace Industries. A woman manning the front desk looked on disapprovingly and Erin glared at her, her honey-brown eyes daring the Asian beauty to say something. In the end the woman averted her gaze, focusing instead on the steady stream of calls that was coming in.

Erin usually enjoyed visiting Hong Kong as it was so different from anywhere else she'd been since being sent out into the field. It had been her third assignment, long before she'd been paired with Zach, so being in China alone again seemed fitting almost, though the reasons behind it were far from nostalgic.

She approached the front desk, "How much longer?" she asked the woman, Fen, her nametag read.

"You may have a seat Miss Erin, only a few more minutes," she replied graciously. Praesidium had a rule of no last names, but Erin still found it strange to be called 'Miss' in any sense.

"I'd rather stand," she replied and Fen nodded.

"Coffee? Tea?" the assistant asked and stood as if about to go get it before she got an answer.

"No." The word escaped her mouth in a sharper tone than she had intended, but Erin had found it difficult to be her usual polite and good-natured self in the last weeks. Fen nodded again, her smile still in place and Erin was thankful for her cordiality. In other parts of the world she was pretty sure she'd already be being cursed at among the office pool.

She looked around the foyer for what seemed like the hundredth time. She was the only one there and the blue and yellow pastels of the seating area matched with paintings featuring some of the most picturesque landmarks around the world, should have made Erin

feel a little more at ease, a little happier, but each time she tried to drown out the thoughts that were plaguing her, they re-emerged, ignoring her need to be rid of them. *Zach lied to me.*

She pulled her black leather jacket close to her body, a sudden chill coursing through her at the thought. Then, disgusted by her reaction, dropped her hands and leaned against a nearby wall. She wouldn't let this get to her, there was work to be done, that was why she was there. Her issues could wait.

“How much longer,” she called to Fen again. The dark-haired woman looked up, her pretty smile not nearly reaching her dark eyes,

“I will call Miss Wong and find out for you.” Erin watched as Fen pressed a button on her headset and listened as she spoke in Cantonese to the person on the other end. A few moments passed and she pressed the button again before turning to Erin.

“Miss Wong is still in her meeting. She has asked that you wait just ten more minutes and apologises for the delay.” Erin tried to control her growing annoyance,

“Fine,” she managed and settled again on the wall, putting one of her feet up against it, which made Fen stare at her military-style black boots hard, but she said nothing. *Yup, the crazy black girl strikes again* she thought, amusement almost replacing frustration. Almost. No matter what she did, all roads led back to Zach. She hadn't even had time to process the rest of it yet. The fact that there had always been more to her past and no one had told her, like she was some fragile piece of glass that needed to be protected from the truth. She shifted legs, her anger building again.

It was this anger that had led to Damian separating her and Zach. He'd ordered that they both clear their heads before returning to work together, but at this point, Erin wasn't sure how she could do the kind of work *they*, with someone she didn't trust.

She'd known something was different when she'd given into her powers during the fight with Kaleb back in Toronto. Her entire body had come alive, her nerves had felt as though they were electrified and she'd been almost tingling from her fingertips to her feet. It was this feeling, added to the fact that she'd been able to levitate and distance herself from the explosion *just* before it had happened – a thing she'd never done before – that had led Erin to ask Zach exactly what she was.

He hadn't answered. Even though she'd fought to get it out of him all the way back to Containment Unit 4, during the breaks in their hours of debriefing, on the plane ride back to England *and* on the train to Middlesbrough, whatever she did, however she asked, whenever she threatened, Zach simply clammed up and said nothing.

It would have been okay if he'd told her, if he'd given up his loyalty to Praesidium just once, in favour of loyalty to her. In the end it was Damian who'd revealed the truth, while Zach had sat there knowingly, his green eyes giving nothing away, simply listening to information he'd had all along and it made Erin furious whenever she thought of it.

When Damian suggested they work on different cases for a while, Erin had jumped at the chance. As far as she knew, Zach was still in Middlesbrough, doing what she didn't know and didn't care. If she didn't see his face for the next *six months*, it would be too soon.

Her cell phone rang and she put her foot back on the floor, ignoring another disapproving look from Fen as her ringtone echoed across the room. As she only used her phone for work, Erin fully expected it to be her handler on the other line checking in.

She pressed the answer button, "I haven't seen her yet Damian, you know how it is with these types," she began, when another familiar voice piped up.

"Erin, we have to talk about this." It was Zach. When she remained silent, he continued, "If I could have told you I would have Erin, but Mr. Kjaer didn't want you to know yet, how was I supposed to disobey the Director of *Praesidium*? Let's be real here." It was true, seldom did anyone deliberately get on Anders Kjaer's bad side, but Erin was unmoved. They were partners, friends, at least that's what she'd thought. She didn't trust herself to speak and didn't. "Erin? Come on, I know you're there."

"Miss Erin," Fen's voice cut in on her stand-off and phone still to her ear, she looked over questioningly, "She's ready for you," Fen continued, still smiling prettily.

"You're not even going to answer—?"

Erin ended the call.

Chapter 22

Entering the office of owner and Chief Executive Officer of Palace Industries Jiao Li Wong, was like stepping into some weird kind of fantasy world where only the loveliest things had survived. A small pond was built into the middle of the office and from it crystal clear waters bubbled happily, inhabited by a variety of nishikigoi and one or two lily pads. Under Erin's feet was the greenest and most luscious artificial grass money could buy and along the edges of this indoor lawn, were pink wisteria and red roses that bloomed unnaturally, their vines creeping up the vibrantly painted walls.

It was an explosion of colour at every turn, yet did not seem overdone, but as though everything was in its proper place. Erin sat in a large leather office chair. The armrests and back of the chair had been specially designed as a kind of fish tank, so that tiny fish could be seen darting this way and that. It was the same with the glass desk and the near identical leather chair that her host was soon to be seated in. She hadn't yet appeared and Erin was becoming more restless as the minutes ticked by. On another day she might have been tempted to be impressed by the extravagance of the office as she waited, but this was not that day and either way, it was no surprise, succubi were always a bit over the top.

"So sorry," came a cheery voice from behind her and Erin stood, turning to greet the CEO. She was a slender woman, fair-skinned with large slanted dark eyes which matched the dark hair that fell to her back and was in a word, striking. Erin shook her offered hand.

"It's no bother, I had nothing better to do," she said with a touch of sarcasm. Sitting behind her desk, the three-piece designer cream-coloured suit she wore making her look as though she were the centrefold of a Vogue shoot, the succubus merely smiled demurely as her assistant had.

"I feel better about my tardiness then," she replied, ignoring Erin's jab.

"Miss Wong, you called Praesidium, but wouldn't say why you needed us over the phone?" Erin asked, trying to move the meeting past small talk.

"Please, Jiao, after all, we are better friends than that are we not?" Jiao said and laughed, a tinkling sound that seemed to make the flowers dance right along with it and Erin tried to tune it out, knowing how easily one could be caught under a succubus' spell from something as simple as this. She had spelled herself against hypnotic influences even before

walking onto the Palace Industries building's street, wanting to take no chances as she did business with the Leader of the Succubi and Incubi Nation, more commonly referred to as S.I.N.

“Okay, Jiao, are you ready to tell me why you called us?” Jiao just looked at her for a little longer before throwing her well-manicured hands into the air.

“You don't want to catch up after all we've been through, so be it.” She laughed again and Erin grimaced. She might enjoy being in China, the culture, the food, the soda, but she couldn't exactly say that she'd *liked* the reason either of the times she'd been there previously.

Before Jiao was willing to see the value of being a part of the Gathering in Albania, she had ruled the succubi and incubi of the East with an iron fist. She was as beautiful as she was unrelenting and her particular talents had also allowed her to become one of the wealthiest individuals in all of China.

Erin's first meeting with Jiao had been to bring Praesidium's terms to her, an agreement Jiao had thrown back in her face. On the second attempt, Erin had been accompanied by a team of wardens and containment officers, who had made it clear to Jiao that all she had would be stripped from her, should she choose not to comply. If there was one thing succubi loved more than riches and the life of debauchery they lived, it was power, and Jiao, not ready to give up her position, had eagerly signed on for peace in the supernatural realm.

“Let's not pretend at being bosom buddies shall we? You kept me waiting for more than an hour and now you've decided to waste more of my time with your worthless chatter,” Erin said, hardening her tone, she stood before continuing, “I'll be at Hop Inn, call when you're ready to talk.” She turned and heard Jiao stand behind her,

“No, please sit,” she implored.

Erin turned to face her, Jiao's solemn expression making her relent. She sat again, folding her arms, “Go on.”

Jiao didn't sit, but turned away from Erin, looking out from her large glass windows at the busy street below. She spoke in Cantonese, her words flowing more effortlessly in her language, than they did in English.

“You remember Meihui Lang?” Jiao did not wait for Erin to answer and continued with little pause, “She has been invading my territory of late and buying up properties all over China in an attempt to overthrow me and all that I have built.” Erin frowned. Meihui was also of the succubi bloodline and was Jiao’s main business rival. She had been Praesidium’s first choice to take Jiao’s place if she hadn’t decided to work with the organisation, was a regular face at the Gathering and had not raised any red flags on the organisation’s radar as far as Erin knew. She answered carefully in her host’s native tongue,

“Our job isn’t to fight your battles for you Jiao. If Meihui *is* making a play for your businesses and land, then take it up with her lawyers. Now, if that’s all—”

“No, you have to listen!” Jiao’s head whipped round, and she looked at Erin angrily. Her eyes pooled inky black and Erin folded her lips, quite prepared to send the succubus flying through the window should she decide to make any moves. Almost as quickly as her anger had flared up, it subsided and Jiao took a breath, smiling at Erin as her eyes returned to their usual hue. “My outburst was uncalled for,” she said bowing apologetically.

“There’s obviously more to this than you’re telling me, so why don’t you save us both the trouble and clue me in,” Erin replied, not at all pleased with the way the day was turning out.

Jiao considered her words, then, touching the thin gold chain around her neck replied, “Succubi feed, but they must not kill, those are the rules of the Gathering. Meihui and her *harem* aren’t obeying this rule. You are a warden, you have no choice but to investigate my claim, am I not correct?” Jiao smiled smugly.

Erin sighed, “I hope you’re wrong.”

Chapter 23

Zach looked at his smartphone, considered dialling Erin again, then pocketed it. What *was* he after all, a schoolboy hoping the girl would call? Irritated, he ran a hand through his dark hair. Erin had made it clear she didn't wish to speak to him and though it had been five weeks since their last conversation, it didn't seem as though she was budging anytime soon. *Can't blame her*, the nagging voice in his head confirmed, *she trusted you and you betrayed her*. Zach dragged a hand across his face. He didn't want to hear all that, he'd done what anyone committed to the organisation would have if asked,

"Lied to my partner," he said under his breath.

"What was that lad?" Damian's balding head turned and he looked at Zach hard. Zach would be twenty-five in less than six months, but Damian still referred to him as 'boy' or 'lad', nicknames that Zach had become so accustomed to, that he seldom noticed when he did. This time it upset him.

"Nothing," he answered.

"Nothing eh? You'd do good to forget about the girl's problems and deal with your own. Anders is none too happy that you lost the lycan." His grey eyes looked glassy and wet, they watered frequently and Damian used an already sappy handkerchief to dab at them a few times before he went on. "He and the administration will want to talk to you again, trip you up if they can. It's hard for them to imagine that sworn containment officers could 'ave done all you said." He wiped his eyes again, stuffing the handkerchief back into his shirt pocket, before releasing a stream of loud sneezes that echoed through the small office space where they were working. Zach watched, wondering for the millionth time how Damian was still going.

He was perpetual chain smoker, who carried at least forty extra pounds than he *should* be lugging around in his standard grey or brown suits. His complexion was pale and ruddy, and skin so wrinkled in places, that it looked as though he'd been that way from birth. He'd once been a great warden, who later went on to become a commanding officer for Containment Unit 8, London and even now, old and - in some ways - decrepit as he was, there were few that would choose to mess with Damian.

“I’ll tell them the same story I have from the beginning cause it’s the truth, I’ve nothing to hide,” Zach said after a little while.

“I know that and *they* know that, but they don’t like it is what I’m saying lad and because of that they’re hoping your testimony isn’t quite right somewhere, so they can grab on and ‘ave you for dinner.” Damian strode over to the coffee maker in a far corner of the room and made himself a cup. He was a tall man, nearly six foot four and it was no wonder that with his impressive girth and stature, he was still as imposing in his late sixties as he had been years before. He stirred the added milk into the Styrofoam cup before coming to sit across from Zach.

“She’s working a case you know, probably why you ‘aven’t ‘eard from ‘er.” Zach’s ears had long ago adjusted to Damian’s guilty pleasure of falling into a more London cockney accent from time to time.

“Oh I doubt that’s all it is,” he replied, rummaging around in a desk drawer for some files he’d taken from storage, which contained information on the Reshu clan. The organisation had digitised all information collected over the last five hundred years of its existence, but hardcopies of that information still sat in a huge vault far beneath their feet.

Members often referred to the original documents when they were searching, hoping really, that something which could help a current case had been missed when uploaded to the database. So far Zach had been unsuccessful in finding anything that pointed them any closer to a location where Kaleb or his clan could be currently hiding out, a fact that made more than a few people nervous. He looked up, startled as Damian brought his face closer to his, pointing an accusing finger at him.

“You listen here, we couldn’t tell her before and now she knows, don’t you go on beating yourself up like a Nancy losing the queen of the show title, buck up and suck it up.”

Always inspiring, Zach thought and resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Instead he nodded, saying more confidently than he felt, “I’m good, she can’t run forever.”

Damian smiled, satisfied with his response. “There’s a good lad,” he said and took a long gulp of his coffee, then swore as it burnt his tongue going down.

Zach barely noticed, intrigued by what he was learning. “Did you know the Reshu clan bid for the right to lead the clans in the 1500s? The bid was rebuked by the other clans in

a vote of no confidence, no wonder they're so pissed," he said aloud as he flipped the pages of the document before him.

Damian had moved back to his desk and didn't look up from his typing as he responded, "I'm more concerned with 'ow they're turning the males, the scientists 'ave been running tests on the ones we captured, but nothing's turned up yet. It'll be a bloody mess if we don't catch them before the Gathering. No telling what they'll do." Zach was about to respond when the high-pitched ringing of the phone on his desk stopped him.

He picked the receiver up to answer, "This is Zach." He nodded, his expression slowly becoming more serious, "Send him up, we'll meet him." Hearing this, Damian looked at him enquiringly, especially curious as Zach had already stood and was shrugging into his jacket.

He answered the silent question, "Jacob's on his way up."

Chapter 24

For the second time that day, Erin was waiting, only this time, she didn't have to very long. She was seated in the large library of Meihui's rambling mansion in The Peak, an exclusive area in Hong Kong. The room was far from understated, lined wall to wall with first editions from some of the greatest writers who'd ever lived and paintings from the likes of Renoir and Ucello hung from the rustic walls, as though they'd been *meant* to grace them.

It was minimally furnished with velvet covered hassock chairs in a variety of earth tones and on five wooden pedestals, sat glass cases with rare stones within. Erin heard Meihui's sultry tone long before she saw her. She was speaking rapidly in Mandarin, arguing with one of her house staff for reasons Erin did not bother to listen to.

When she finally entered the room, the alluring scent of pomegranate and mint came with her, filling Erin's nostrils pleasantly as she came closer.

"Erin, you honour me with your presence." Erin stood as Meihui rounded the corner, glad that her dark-caramel skin didn't allow her a proper blush. The woman was just as stunning as Jiao and in her lacy red gown that clung to her body and fell effortlessly to the floor, she was nothing short of breathtaking. *Magic don't fail me now*, Erin thought to herself, amused at her reaction. Lesbian or not, it was hard to fight off the advances of this species of demon. Both succubi and incubi were renowned in the supernatural world for their ability to take almost anyone they wanted, *any way* they wanted, with little difficulty. Having originated in the East, most of the original bloodlines remained, while others had spread their wings and were now scattered across the world, mingling with humans and supernaturals alike.

"It's good to see you again," Erin said, meaning it. She'd always liked Meihui and had believed her to be a better candidate for S.I.N's representative at the Gathering. Meihui smiled and touched Erin's shoulder, her dark brown eyes drinking her in.

Feeling a sensation, not unlike rising lust, Erin artfully stepped away. "Never expected you to cut your hair, the last time I saw you it was almost to the floor," she said, the chitchat that she would not indulge with Jiao, coming naturally in this case. Meihui touched her short edges absently. Her hair was dyed a dark chestnut, with golden streaks that shone under the library's soft lighting.

“Yes, it became bothersome,” she answered, reverting to English.

Erin did the same, “It suits you.” They took in each other, neither saying anything for a few moments, memories of times past before Erin had understood the importance of protecting herself from the crafty wiles of the succubi, coming to the forefront.

Meihui broke the silence, “I thought I’d finally meet this new partner I have heard about.” This sobered Erin up and she frowned. It did not surprise her that Meihui would know about Zach. Those who attended the Gathering were kept informed about a few of Praesidium’s activities. Some of the information the organisation was willing to share was about new wardens and containment officers inducted into the organisation, which was important, as it made it easier when Praesidium employees were carrying out their jobs. In the case of Meihui, it was simply her personal interest in Erin which made her keep abreast of certain details regarding her. Something like a new partner, would have stood out.

“He’s working back in Middlesbrough,” was all she said and Meihui peered at her curiously for a moment, but said nothing more on the subject. She sat, motioning for Erin to do the same.

“We are to visit your side of the world in just under a week.”

Erin raised an eyebrow, “You’re going to England?” she asked, settling into the comfortable seat.

Meihui looked at her puzzled, then smiled as it became clear, “I forget that it is many years since you have called the island home.”

Erin swallowed hard. She’d wanted to visit for a long time, but it had been forbidden, and any cases within the Caribbean had always been handed off to other wardens. Erin hadn’t understood it at the time and now she did, the thought upset her.

“Business?” she asked casually, noticing how closely Meihui was watching her,

“Yes, for talks regarding buying some property there. The country’s market has taken some worrying hits, but with the right direction I feel we can get it back on the right path.” She leaned forward, her porcelain cleavage peaking from the depths of her dress. “Maybe you will join me there,” she said seductively.

Unfortunately for Meihui, she'd lost Erin with talk of Barbados and now all the warden wanted to do was get to the bottom of the accusations brought against her. "You know why I'm here." It wasn't a question and Meihui leaned back, all business as she fell back into Mandarin.

"Yes, Jiao Li Wong is trying to convince you of some wrongdoing on my part."

"Do you deny it?" Erin asked, watching for the slightest changes in her facial expression. There were none.

"Jiao will do anything to see the empire I have built fall. It is not enough that she has control of our nation, but she tries to break those who choose to better her." Though Erin found it hard to believe that what Jiao had said about Meihui's recent activities was true, it was her job to make sure of that.

The organisation would not tolerate the bloodshed of innocents and Erin needed to be certain. "Why would she lie Meihui? Why now? Just recently I read a magazine article where the two of you were shaking hands and smiling over a new joint venture, I assumed all was well." Erin had been reading a popular business magazine on the plane ride to Hong Kong, to distract her from her thoughts.

Meihui laughed bitterly, speaking again in English, "You of all people know of the faces we wear. You deceive people every day," she said.

"And others try to deceive me too, all the time," Erin replied, not missing a beat.

"I am not one of them. I respect all that the Gathering stands for, just as my mother before me did and her mother before her. I am a succubus and so I feed, but I do not kill, that is the rule for me and all those in my house." She looked earnestly at Erin and the warden opened her mouth to speak, when a man wearing a light blue changshan which was covered in blood, rushed into the room. He paused uncertainly when he saw Erin, then gave Meihui a slow nod. She returned the gesture and the man bowed low before he left. Erin immediately saw the worry etched on Meihui's face.

"You must excuse me, as you can see, Longwei my guard needs me urgently."

Erin caught her arm as she stood, "What's going on Meihui?" she asked. "That blood on his robe ...?"

Meihui regained her composure, pulling her arm gently from Erin's grip. "I must go now, please make yourself comfortable, I will send someone in with food and drink." Erin didn't reply, watching as Meihui fled the room. When a few minutes had passed the warden stood, allowing her magic to awaken within her, feeling new strength and confidence in her abilities.

"Let's see what you're up to," she said to no one and hurried out to follow Meihui's trail.

Chapter 25

“Is that all of it?” Jacob asked gravely.

“Yes,” Zach replied. He and Damian sat in a medium-sized conference room with the vampire, who had opted, as he always did, to occupy the head of the long, oak table in the centre of the room. Neither the warden nor his handler had protested. Jacob had been greatly respected by Praesidium’s founders, having been one of the supernaturals who had helped to ensure the organisation’s early success. This respect had trickled down over the years and as he continued to support and help the organisation, had only grown over time.

“There was no other choice?” Jacob followed-up.

This time Damian answered, “There’s always a choice, but Anders felt that in this case, it was time she knew.”

Jacob did not respond immediately, his spring-green eyes focused on the white wall behind them. Added to glossy white hair which fell to his shoulders and strong angular features, Jacob looked more like an androgynous new-age supermodel, than a near one thousand-year-old vampire. The white linen shirts, embroidered and pleated woollen jackets, tunics and pants he wore, were the only indications of the period he’d been reared in.

He turned to Zach, “She refuses to speak to you?”

“Yes,” was all he managed for the second time. He’d already told the story more times than he could count and would have to again during his fourth round before the administration. Zach was no longer sure what more he could say, especially when every time he thought of what he’d had to do to Erin, he felt irrationally upset with himself.

“Where is she now?” Jacob’s gaze rested on Damian, busy wiping his eyes.

“China, some business with S.I.N. She should be checking in soon,” Damian replied, tucking his handkerchief away.

This was news to Zach too. He hadn’t asked where Erin’s assignment was, knowing better than to do so, but now that he knew, found himself concerned for her safety. She’d told him of a slip-up with one of the succubi on her first case with the Nation and hoped she wouldn’t indulge as she had before. *She’s stronger now and smarter, stop looking for reasons to call her*, the annoying voice in his head chimed in.

“I must meet with her,” Jacob said matter-of-factly.

Damian cleared his throat, “That’ll be arranged the moment she gets back here, shouldn’t be more than a few days or so.”

“No. I will go to her. She must understand the nature of what she is,” he said first, then rephrasing, “What she is, *becoming*.”

Zach spoke up, not sure what the vampire meant. “Becoming? There’s more to this?”

Jacob’s look screamed pity, “The young know so little.”

Zach knew it wasn’t meant to be offensive but also wasn’t ready to let go of his bone. “Then teach me.”

“That’s enough lad, I won’t have you bothering Jacob here,” Damian broke in harshly.

Jacob only smiled sadly. “He has done nothing wrong. He cares for her and his affection makes him bold.” He extended his hand to Damian who took it in a firm shake, then did the same with Zach. “Do not fear, all will be well.” In the time it took for Zach’s brain to register that he was no longer shaking Jacob’s hand, the vampire’s superior speed had already seen him long gone from the conference room.

“Don’t you know any better boy? You don’t question Jacob or the likes of ‘im, bloody hell, what ‘ave I been teaching you all these years?”

Zach said nothing, his thoughts too heavily clouded with new questions to take on Damian’s quarrel. Jacob’s words kept playing over and over in his head, *what she’s becoming*.

When Zach had first found out about Erin’s roots he’d been in shock. He hadn’t even been sure *how* he’d keep a secret of such magnitude from her but had somehow done it long enough that it’d become second nature. The only reason he’d even been trusted with the information, was so he would keep a closer eye on her, inform their superiors of any changes in her character, or any new powers she suddenly developed. Zach would readily admit that he’d been more than relieved when none of these things happened, that is of course, until Toronto.

When he'd seen her standing there away from the destruction, untouched and gorgeous, something in him had *known* that she'd started to manifest what Damian called The Rising. Erin was one of the seven remaining vodun priestesses of the Kahwasira bloodline. Hundreds of years had passed since the last vodun priestesses rose and it would be hundreds more until a new seven breathed life again.

When The Rising began, the magic these women wielded was stronger than most and it was for this reason that it lay dormant, until some event drew it from the depths of their souls. Praesidium only had one of the priestesses -- Erin, three others already belonged to supernatural factions and the rest had not yet been discovered. Zach had learnt even more than he already did when Damian relayed the truth to Erin and there was some of it that if he were in her shoes, he couldn't even begin to imagine how he'd feel.

Knowing that she would die in less than two decades, that she would never be able to bear children or take a husband, knowing that as her magic continued to manifest and she became stronger, not only would her own memories be replaced by those of others who had gone before her, but those traits that made her who she was, would slowly disappear as it began to control her very being. Knowing all of this and still having to continue as though nothing had changed ... Zach could not imagine the burden.

He tried calling her again.

Chapter 26

Erin ignored the buzzing in her pocket as she traversed Meihui's mansion. It was even more richly adorned than the library and featured large luxurious rooms that spoke of her affluence. The scent of the succubus' perfume hung heavy in the air and Erin felt something like a trained hound as she followed the invisible path it left behind. Had Meihui not been so heavenly scented, magic would have done the job just as easily.

She went up a flight of stairs and stopped on the half-pace, listening. She could hear excited chatter and one of the voices was unmistakably Meihui's. Erin continued up another flight, reaching a landing with multiple rooms in both directions. Following the sound of the voices, she entered one painted deep red and vacant, except for hooks with leather harnesses hanging from the ceiling. Erin wrinkled her nose, in her mind there was no doubt what *this* room was used for.

She went further in, approaching a sheer black curtain that separated the red room from another. Just as she was about to pull the curtain aside, Meihui appeared from behind it. There was blood on her hands and Erin stepped back, looking at her coolly.

"You're not supposed to be here Erin, this is not your concern," Meihui said, her stance suggesting that she was not going to budge. She smiled pleasantly, gesturing to the door Erin had entered from, "Why don't you go back downstairs and I will join you shortly. There are things I need to ... take care of."

"Move." Meihui shook her head at Erin's command and the warden, her impatience mounting, tried once more, "Meihui, get out of my way." Still the succubus refused. *So this is how we're going to play it? Fine.*

Erin raised her hand from her side, watching as Meihui's body unwillingly copied the motion. The succubus looked at her frantically as though in shock, but she'd had her chance. Erin flung her hand out and without touching Meihui, threw her beyond the curtains as she did and followed her in. Meihui now lay on the floor, catching her breath from Erin's attack. There were three others in the room, one of them the incubus guard who'd first come to summon Meihui, another in the same traditional garb as he was and the third, a human lying bleeding on the bare stone floor.

“No!” Meihui exclaimed weakly, standing on shaky legs. She’d stopped her guards from going after Erin and obeying her wishes, they knelt again at the dying man’s side.

“Who is he Meihui?”

“You have learnt some new tricks I see,” she said, slow to answer.

If Erin had told Meihui the truth, it would have been that she didn’t know she’d been able to do what she just had. Before her dark magic had come like short bursts of energy through her, strong, but not nearly as powerful as what she felt now. She’d been testing it in the last weeks and becoming more aware that what Damian had told her was true. In time she wouldn’t need to do anything but think it, for her will to be done. To some extent it had been that way with Meihui, but there were still barriers there that she could feel keeping her full potential at bay.

Erin’s tone was cold, “Don’t make me ask you again.” To her surprise, Meihui began to laugh.

“Would you believe that I do not know?” She stepped over to where the man lay gasping for breath. “My man found him here. He was already in this state. I came to try and revive him.”

Erin looked at her with disbelief. “Doesn’t look like you’ve been doing a very good job,” then in Mandarin, “Why don’t you tell me what’s really going on here.”

Meihui shook her head, then knelt next to the man with her guards. “This is the truth Erin, when have you ever known my kind to kill in this way?” It was true, succubi and incubi used more ‘pleasurable’ acts to kill. They took from the unwitting victim’s life force, taking their energy in copious amounts, until the unfortunate soul breathed no more, the action too troublesome. The man on the floor had been stabbed multiple times and though it *could* be a crime of passion, Erin was no longer sure *what* to believe.

“Will you be able to save him?”

Meihui nodded in reply. Her guards moved away from her as she placed her lips to the dying man’s mouth. She touched his chest with both her hands then straddled him, snaking her body over his seductively as she did. Suddenly she was completely still and took his face in her hands, breathing life into him.

Erin watched as she repeated the action a few times, seeing that some of his wounds were starting to mend, organic tissue fighting to pull itself together so he could heal. Meihui flopped over and one of her guards lifted her with ease into his arms. He moved to take her from the room, but she stopped him when they were about to pass Erin. She lay in her guard's arms like a frail version of the vibrant woman who had first welcomed Erin into her home and the warden knew she would need time before she'd found her full strength again.

She whispered, "Those of my house did not do this, but I find it convenient that just as you are called to scrutinize me, such a tragedy occurs."

Erin wanted to believe, but it just wasn't enough, not yet. "We'll see. I'll have one of the containment officers pick this guy up, a Cyclops will give us the truth." Meihui nodded and the way she slumped back afterwards, made it clear that even that simple gesture was taxing in her present state.

"Very well, please, make my home yours until this is resolved. I do not wish for ..."

she stopped and Erin tensed. Somewhere in the house someone released an ear-piercing scream.

Chapter 27

Zach scanned his notes again before his meeting with admin. He refused to let his nervousness show, knowing that hidden cameras would be watching his every move. He'd given up trying Erin some hours before and as it became later in the day, his focus had turned to prepping for the upcoming interrogation. As he scrolled through his PC Tablet, he not only went over his reports for their Toronto assignment, but recapped any new information he'd picked up about Kaleb and the Reshu clan.

He was waiting in an outer office, which was more or less a holding room. There was no furniture and Zach shifted from leg to leg impatiently. He wondered if Erin had been through the wringer as he had before she'd left for China. Usually they talked about their dreaded admin experiences, with Zach the one who always felt that anytime they were called in, it was Erin's fault. This time, they'd both screwed up in one way or another and Erin wasn't even there to gloat.

"Come in," a voice boomed from a speaker he couldn't see and Zach obliged, immediately making his way into the judgement room.

"Good morning sirs, mam," he said as he entered, and nodded to the admin staff. They were six of them, arranged behind a semi-circular desk, each of them a few feet from the other. Praesidium's Director Anders Kjaer, a blonde man, well-built and in his late forties, sat in the most prominent position, peering at Zach expectantly over his wire-rimmed glasses. Zach took his place, facing them in a space that was much like a courtroom's witness box, with a curved wooden table and no seat. He stood confidently, preparing himself for whatever they would throw at him.

Anders spoke first, "You know why you are here?"

"Yes, Case 5558960, Toronto, Canada. Kaleb a lycan of the Reshu clan turned humans into werewolves, defying the law of the Leader of Clans in the process. Containment officers Commander Tremblay and Officer Skinner aided the lycan, using unauthorised mind wipes to—" Zach paused as Anders raised his hand for silence.

"Spare us what's in your reports, that's what's already in front of us. Your partner, did she let the lycan escape?"

Zach kept his expression neutral as he answered, “No. If you would refer to my report, after the explosion, Erin told me that Kaleb had escaped—”

“But you didn’t actually *see* this happen for yourself?” To the right of Anders was his deputy Lauren Monroe who’d cut Zach off, she had risen quickly in the organisation’s ranks and was well-known for her no-nonsense attitude and quick results, no matter the methods.

“No, as I said, when I’d recovered from the explosion, the first thing I did was make sure Erin was okay and that’s when I found out that—”

Lauren interrupted again, her brown eyes boring into his, “So you have no real evidence that she *didn’t* just let him go?”

Zach tried to control his indignation, choosing his words carefully. “The only evidence I have in this case is that I *trust* my partner and know that Erin wouldn’t let a known criminal escape justice.”

“Fancy words, but that’s all they are, words. Isn’t it true you have no idea what she’s capable of?”

Zach was about to argue in his defense, when Anders broke in. “Come now Lauren, why would he lie to us? After all, he kept the truth from this same partner he claims to trust, for more than two years.” This caused some murmurings among admin and Lauren gave him a self-righteous look, pushing her dark hair from her shoulder.

Zach finally spoke, “I kept the secret not because I didn’t trust Erin, but because I was *ordered* to by my superiors. What am I if not a man of my word? That may be tolerated in containment, but wardens hold higher standards.” He knew it was wrong the moment he said it and the annoyed expression that crossed Anders’ face confirmed it, but what could he do? *Can’t take it back now.* Zach waited for the proverbial shit to hit the quickly spinning fan.

“There is no need for such talk in this forum,” was all Anders said before shuffling through the papers on the table before him. “Where are you on the Reshu clan?”

That was a quick shift of gears, Zach thought, but was not surprised that Anders was against dwelling on the topic. It was a great embarrassment for Praesidium that their own officers had betrayed them and Zach wondered how far they would be able to sweep this slight under the rug.

Clearing his throat he answered, “Judging from their patterns over the last four centuries, they must be somewhere in Europe again. This close to the Gathering and with all that Kaleb said, I believe they’re already over there planning.”

Lauren spoke up surprised, “In Albania? We have units all over the country and no reports have been brought to us of such.”

Zach shook his head, “Not Albania, not yet, but they must be somewhere close, maybe Greece or Serbia? I have people flagging anything suspicious going through the ports in the surrounding countries.”

Lauren nodded as if she approved, but Zach soon realised this was too good to be true, “You have no leads,” she said dismissively, then conspiratorially to those at the head table, “We’re wasting our time here.”

“I’m inclined to agree with my colleague Zach. If there’s nothing else you can tell us, this meeting is concluded.” As though he was no longer in the room, admin started a new conversation among themselves.

Zach battled with a question. Thought against it asking, then did it anyway. “What’s going to happen to Erin?” Silence fell across the head table. Damian had advised that they keep Jacob’s intentions private but Zach rushed on, “Jacob has gone to see her in China, he plans to tell her more than maybe *any* of you know about her.” Seeing he had their full attention, he asked again, “What’s going to happen?”

Anders cleared his throat, but it was Lauren who spoke, “She’s not ready for this, Jacob must not be thinking straight.”

“You all already know about this?” Anders disregarded Zach’s question as he answered Lauren.

“When have you ever known that vampire not to be in complete control of his actions? No, there must be more.”

The silence deepened and Zach watched, anxiety building as the head table members sat deep in thought.

Finally, as though just remembering he was there, Anders said, “I’ll speak to Damian. This separation between the two of you ends now. When she returns from China, make sure you’re there to greet her, we’ll need you to observe her as you have in the past.”

“That’s what made her angry with me in the first place, I don’t think that—”

“Then don’t *think!* You’ll do as I say, her fate *and* all of ours, depend on it.”

Chapter 28

After working through the night and most of the day for the last five, Zach was worn out. The resting area was located two floors down from Praesidium's general offices, and Zach made himself as comfortable as possible in the tiny one-room apartment. He'd bought himself one in Manchester some years before, an impulse buy after receiving a hefty cheque from the organisation, but he'd sold it less than three months later, when he realised he was never going to use it as he would have liked. Instead the little bunkers, apartments and shared boarding that he inhabited across the world, had become home, as they had for many others like him.

Growing up in the system hadn't been as tough for Zach as some of the other stories he'd heard when he came to Praesidium. He'd shared a room with three other boys and they had been like brothers to him growing up. They looked out for each other and even when the adults in their lives got a little out of hand, they'd been able to deal with it together. He thought about them sometimes, times like this when he felt there was no one else to talk to.

Zach shook his head from his thoughts, wanting only to sleep his troubles away. He kept the room dark and was glad for the soundproofing that repelled some of the other raucous noises that sometimes came from those next to his. He tossed and turned for what seemed like a long time, having to eventually strip to nothing but boxers, as even the air-conditioning seemed determined to ditch him.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

The insistent sound woke him from what must have been less than ten minutes sleep and Zach reached for the place on the bedside table where he'd left his phone. He answered groggily, "This is Zach." As he listened he was forced awake and soon he was sitting up. He switched on the lamp that was beside him and grabbed for anything he could find to make notes. His tablet was still stashed away in his bag and in the end he scribbled on the table with a blue ballpoint pen. "What time was this?" he asked writing in shorthand that only he would understand. "Okay, thanks mate, tell me if you get anything else."

He looked at the notes he'd written then made a call. "Damian, who's in charge of Containment Unit 23?"

“Commander Kriskov, ‘e’s got twenty through twenty-four, why?” his handler wanted to know.

Zach toned down his excitement. “Remember Ashleigh, worked over here before she relocated to France?”

Damian laughed heartily, “I remember her all right, your first crush eh lad?”

Zach ignored the jibe, “She’s been looking into recent travel logs for me and something sparked her interest, it might be nothing but—”

“Out with it for fuck’s sake,” Damian ordered.

“A large number of tickets were recently purchased using the same credit card, for multiple flights to Bulgaria. Since I’d asked Ashleigh to keep an eye out, she followed the purchases and the passengers who took the trips over the last few days. Turns out each time it was a couple travelling together and when they arrived in Bulgaria, they were met by a woman, blonde, thirtyish, Russian maybe.”

“Can’t take coincidences to Anders. Could be businessmen in for some conference or other, I’ll not have you make me look foolish lad.”

Zach smiled, he’d figured Damian would say as much. “Ashleigh said that one of them matched the description of Kaleb I faxed over. Said it *had* to be him. We’ve got him Damian.”

Damian’s exuberance came through over the line, “Then *bloody* hell, let’s go get ‘im!”

Chapter 29

Erin ran. The steady rhythm of her legs pumping up and down and her feet meeting the stone floor, were the only sounds other than the continuous screaming. She jumped stairs and ran faster, aware that the screams were coming from below them. Meihui had tried to stop her, but she was not strong enough to do much more than flail her hands about weakly and the other guard who'd tried to get in her way, now lay in a tangled mess where she'd left him. She hadn't the time to fool around.

The screams were getting louder and Erin stopped for a moment, closing her eyes to listen. She was on the first floor now and the sound bounced and reverberated off the walls. She tuned everything out but the original sound, a trick taught to her in the early days of her warden training. Pinpointing the location, she took off in the direction opposite the library where Meihui had welcomed her.

She ran as adrenaline pumped through her, jumping another small flight of stairs, then another, until she came to a bamboo door. The bamboo had been woven and reweaved to create a kind of lattice work that Erin was unfamiliar with, but there was no time to admire it. She pushed harder than she needed to, as the door gave way the moment it was touched. Erin swallowed hard when she entered the room, not quite expecting what she saw before her.

The room itself was a veritable masterpiece. Satin and silk pillows in shades of pink, red and violet were strewn across a padded floor. The floor itself was layered with white chiffon and red rose petals lay underneath, giving an ethereal look to the scene when added to the dim, but inviting lighting. Two beds faced each other, their headrests embedded with virtual screens which were kept on mute and streamed erotic acts meant to further entice those in the room.

They were about fifteen occupants. Humans in various stages of undress and incubi and succubi using them for their pleasure. They didn't stop when Erin appeared and if anything, seemed more aroused that she was watching them. The room smelt as Meihui's perfume did and mingled with the sweat and sex of those enjoying the orgy, Erin felt herself somewhat lightheaded and blinked hard, recognising this as her spell wearing off. She'd performed it hours before, but like cloaking spells and some others, she was not yet able to use it again.

Clearing her head, she honed in on the screamer, a human girl who was indulging the fancy of one of the more depraved incubi, allowing him to whip her repeatedly across her legs and back. Erin was about to express her anger for thinking something was wrong, when she took a closer look. A few of the humans were not moving and the supernaturals simply continued to take for their pleasure, to feed, while the dead were ignored. They moaned and writhed, eyes changing shades as they gave into their demon-like selves.

“Erin.” Meihui was behind her and Erin stiffened. She didn’t look around right away, gearing herself up for what would come next.

“All lies,” she said, “And here I was almost ready to believe you.” She turned. Meihui still looked rather weak, but she must have taken from her guards as she was not as pale and drawn as she had been some minutes before.

She replied in Mandarin, “I know you will find this hard to believe, but these are not of my house. I cannot tell you from where they hail, but an idea forms.” Erin shook her head. She was so tired of the lies and pretense. She knew how difficult it was for a warden to have a true friend in a supernatural, but she’d thought that she and Meihui were at least a bit more than acquaintances.

I felt that way about Zach too, she remembered bitterly. “So they just happened to get past your security *and* make it all the way down to the basement of your house without *anyone* seeing them?” Erin retorted. Meihui tried to reach for her hand, but Erin pulled away.

“There is a passage, someone must have known of it, they could have used it to—”

“Stop,” Erin broke in, “Humans are dead Meihui, one of them almost died upstairs. You know what I have to do.”

Meihui’s expression turned to one of desperation and she reached for Erin again, this time clutching her arm tight, “Please Erin, Praesidium will *destroy* me. If this was my doing why would I have come down here alone to face you? To plead for my life? Why would I help that human before if I was killing others? Come now, none of this makes sense, Jiao must have somehow—”

“Jiao? It seems she was right about you.” Erin shook off Meihui’s hand. “Sacrem notios bellundon.” The binding spell rolled off her tongue and Meihui looked stricken. She fell back against the wall, tears filling her eyes, but Erin had no time to feel compassion. As

the other supernaturals in the room realised that she'd trapped them, their desire for the flesh was overshadowed by their need to escape.

Four incubi charged her and Erin used their nakedness against them, releasing a pulsing blue flame that singed and burnt their skin, until soon the intoxicating scents were consumed by that of burning flesh. Seeing her attack with such ferocity, humans and supernatural beings alike tried to flee the room, but Erin blocked the path; all that stood between them and life and unfortunately for them, she was not nearly done.

She strode towards a succubus, her dark eyes fearful as Erin touched her chest with her palm, pushing her back. Eyes opened wide, the succubus fell to the floor clutching her heart and gagged from the blood that was now spilling freely from her opened mouth. There were new screams now, but none of it fazed Erin. She felt the strength of her magic coursing through her and it made her feel as though nothing could touch her. She remembered this feeling. It was what she'd felt during her Kaleb fight. Something inside her told her she should pull back, but she didn't want to. Not quite yet.

Her rampage continued, excited by how powerless they were against her. These beings were strong, but against her dark magic, were little more than fawns to the slaughter.

“Not the humans, what are you *doing?*” Meihui's voice broke through the fog and Erin looked up, realising that she held a human in her grasp. She released the woman, not even sure when she'd done it and looked around at her handiwork. Her heart beat hard in her chest, as she surveyed the results of her execution style judgement. She'd done containment's job and much messier than they would have. The room was now reduced to a bloody tomb and the humans that remained huddled together terrified, looking at her as though they were sure they'd be next.

She turned to face Meihui. “Thanks for stopping me, but it doesn't change anything, there will still be justice for your crimes.”

Meihui shook her head sadly, “Erin, I swear to you, I don't know how they got in here, I never would have allowed such—” Meihui stopped talking, looking down at the sharp end of a brass spear slowly making its way through her heart. Blood pooled in her mouth and Erin reached out to hold onto her, but she fell forward, the spear breaking her fall as it pierced the padded floor.

From behind her stepped Jiao, a ravishing smile on lips painted luscious red. Erin threw up her hands to attack, but from behind she felt another pair of hands hold onto her neck. Immediately she felt the danger, as she was no longer protected by her repulsion spell. Her hands dropped involuntarily and giving into the new sensations overwhelming her, Erin leaned back into the arms of the incubus who held her.

Chapter 30

“You fucking bitch,” Erin said when she’d caught herself a bit. “You planned this whole thing and I fell for it. Fuck!”

Jiao gave Erin a broad smile, obviously pleased with herself. She stepped over Meihui’s body, looking down at it with fake pity. “Still as lovely as ever. Really, it makes my skin crawl,” she said coldly.

Erin tried to drag her arms away from the incubus, but paused, struck by his spell as he whispered into her ear. She couldn’t understand what he was saying, the tongue unfamiliar to her, but the words melted her. His tongue flickered out and touched her neck and ow powerless to resist the advances, she gasped at the sensation.

Jiao laughed, “Oh how the mighty have fallen. You’ve cleared a path for me little warden. You know, I’ve never liked you Praesidium types, always so high and mighty and telling us what we can and *cannot do*. Won’t *you* be surprised at the Gathering.”

Erin perked up, fighting her body as she tried to think straight. “The Gathering? What are you planning Jiao?”

Jiao smiled, letting her hand trace the outline of Erin’s face. Erin shivered with pleasure, hating herself for it. “It’s not what *I’m* planning, more like *we*.”

Erin’s mind raced. Kaleb had said something similar about the Reshu clan. *What the hell’s going on?* she wondered. “Do what you want with me, it doesn’t matter, I’ve already placed the binding spell and Containment will be here soon.”

Jiao threw back her head and laughed. “We’ll just have to change that then won’t we?” she replied with a cocky grin, then authoritatively, “Hiang.”

The incubus who held her whispered again, this time deep in her neck and held her tight around her waist. His energy touched her in places she wished it wouldn’t and closing her eyes, Erin soon found herself repeating the removal spell.

“See, that wasn’t so hard,” Jiao said.

Erin, nearly breathless, replied, “You think they won’t find you Jiao? There’s no getting away with this.”

Jiao touched her face again, "I already have." With that she nodded at Hiang and Erin felt him hold her tighter, caressing her body and leaving her weak as he took from her essence. She moaned reluctantly and fell limp in his arms, feeling the breath being swept from her. Erin was starting to feel her knees buckle, when she heard Jiao shout out in alarm. She opened her eyes wearily to see Jiao was running towards what she now observed was a hidden door in the room.

Meihui wasn't lying about that either, she thought absently. She heard breaking bones and then she was falling, her head hitting the padded floor first. She touched the chiffon, feeling it softer than anything else she'd ever felt and closed her eyes, her breaths coming short and laboured.

"I will protect you my love, do not fear," came a voice from above and suddenly Erin was floating, at least that's what it felt like. She glided on air with two strong arms about her and rested her head against the familiar chest. The scent of earth and rain trapped in the soft wool made her smile in the darkness of her own mind, comforting her as she felt herself die.



** Chapters 31 – 40 **

Episode 4: Taken

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Chapter 31

Zach took a sip of his Irish coffee and sank further back into the shadows. He wasn't much of a drinker, but the cold threatening to seep into his bones made it a necessity, at least until he could make himself warm. Having to blend in with the local scene also meant that a light winter jacket was the only real protection he had from the freezing night.

He was sitting in a quiet cafe watching the Russian woman who'd been picking up various members of the Reshu clan in the last weeks. Further digging had revealed her to be Nataliya Dernov, a real estate broker by day and apparently smuggler by night. She was what those in the supernatural realm called scientes, humans who were aware of the beings that inhabited the realm and worked for a chosen faction.

The warden had been following her for a few days now, a task that had taken him to Serbia, then Greece and finally Albania. Over that time, she'd travelled alone, or been accompanied by individuals identified as working with or members of the Reshu clan. Containment officers were on stand-by should orders be given to move in, but so far, Zach's only instructions had been to watch and wait until Kaleb showed himself again. Turned out that Ashleigh had been right when she'd fingered Kaleb passing through the Serbian airport, Zach's own inspection of the surveillance videos had proven that. He raised his hand for another of the vile concoctions and when it had been brought to him, took a deep sip, settling again into his seat.

Nataliya acted as if she hadn't a care in the world, going over papers that with his customised contacts, Zach saw were about her business, as they showed pictures of houses and condos. She'd sat in the same place for over four hours, ordering cappuccinos as though they were on tap, so that Zach praised the stability of her bladder. Her phone rang every half hour and Zach strained to listen whenever she answered, catching bits of information here or there as she rambled on in her native Russian, but hearing nothing that could be of any use to him.

Zach took another gulp of his life saving brew and looked guardedly around the cafe. It was not very full, but the steady stream of customers wanting to use the WiFi connection or get pastries and coffees, had allowed him to remain relatively inconspicuous in the time that he'd been there. Three others besides Nataliya had been around for the same period of time, so Zach had surreptitiously taken photos of them and, after uploading them to the database on his cell phone, was glad to find out that none had any affiliations within the supernatural realm. He knew that containment was a phone call away, but without his partner, Zach was starting to feel naked.

Sure he'd spent two years on his own before being partnered up with anyone, but after a few years of having a partner, he was accustomed to the added safety of another warden having his back. Containment was second response and that meant they weren't right there in the thick of it when things got ugly. A warden alone was impressive, however, some situations were better with two. He thought of Erin and glanced at his phone. Running a hand through his dark hair he considered calling her, but didn't. She still wasn't ready to speak to him it seemed and there was nothing he could do about that. Chasing her down wouldn't change anything.

He'd deliberately not asked about her when last he'd spoken to Damian and when his handler hadn't voluntarily given any information either, he'd figured this was the right decision. *She's probably back in England. So much for meeting her at the airport*, he thought glumly, then feeling like a fool, straightened up and finished his beverage.

He turned his attention back to Nataliya, who was speaking to the server who'd waited on all the seated customers that evening. The waiter seemed as though he'd rather be anywhere but working there, yet was so efficient with the orders, that Zach felt it made up for his otherwise sullen attitude. Either way he wasn't there for the coffee, *or* the whiskey. The waiter was taking a longer time speaking with Nataliya and Zach listened absently, hearing her tell him that she did not want cow's milk, but preferred soy. The server nodded and went off to complete the order, while Nataliya got back to work. Zach stifled a yawn, avoiding the urge to stretch in his boredom.

A teen with a short blonde bob and dark eyes entered the shop. Zach took notice of her as he had all the others who'd come in that evening, but where he'd glanced over others, mentally filing away information quickly before moving on, his green eyes lingered on her. There was just something . . .

She moved to the head of the line, causing a commotion as others she'd pushed past verbalised their annoyance, yet she paid no heed. Placing what looked like ten euros on the counter, she nodded to the waiter, who simply smiled and picked up the money before handing her two covered, disposable coffee cups.

Orders? Zach wondered, then recalled he hadn't seen any others do this. The teenager turned and left as quickly as she came in, still followed by curses and rude comments from other patrons. Zach looked over at Nataliya, whose head was still buried in papers oblivious to all that was happening. His gaze shifted to the waiter and his eyes followed the man as he approached Nataliya with her cappuccino.

Zach frowned and stood, seeing an unfamiliar bulge under his clothing. Nataliya looked up to thank the server as he set her coffee down and Zach pulled his gun from its holster, taking aim. The waiter didn't move away from her table and instead pulled a small grey pistol from his side. Zach squeezed the trigger of his Glock as Nataliya's pleasant expression changed to one of fear. Few others observed exactly what was happening, too wrapped up in their quest for the hot beverages, but when the waiter touched his chest, then removed it to look at the blood on his fingers that was rapidly spreading across the white t-shirt he wore, they started to take horrified notice.

Nataliya jumped back in terror as he fell clutching at the wooden table. She turned, her eyes falling on Zach, who had already put his gun away and was coming towards her. She tried to run.

Chapter 32

When Erin first woke, it was to complete silence. She opened her eyes slowly, unaware of where she was, the dimly lit room unfamiliar to her. As she sat up and blurred shapes became clearer, she took in the large studio apartment, sparsely furnished, with rich wooden panelling along the borders. She looked down at herself, noticing for the first time that she'd been stripped of most of her clothing and for a moment panic overtook her as she scanned the room for her clothes. Seeing them folded neatly over a bar stool near what appeared to be a kitchenette, she pushed off the duvet and stepped down from the bed.

Immediately she felt dizzy and allowed the bed to catch her as she fell back. She breathed in deeply and gathered herself before trying again, wanting to attempt self-healing, but not trusting the use of so much magical energy when she might need it for something else. *Like killing whoever brought me here.*

Broken details of what had happened became clearer. Jiao's fearful expression before she ran away, feeling high that was never going to end and the utter calm that had eventually settled upon her as she floated away. Erin launched herself up again, using her arms to gain some momentum and in a strange fashion, propelled herself across the room in a few quick, but shaky movements. When she reached her clothing, she grabbed onto the kitchen's bar counter, holding her head down as she tried to collect herself again. She raised it as the door to the apartment opened.

Erin remembered the man that stepped through it immediately. He was the same one who'd been talking to Zach after their Kentucky assignment. The one who'd sent them after the wolves. He smiled at her warmly and gestured to the bags he carried in his hands.

"I've brought you something to eat. I knew you would wake soon."

Erin didn't know what to say. She had millions of questions, but none of them seemed quite right in the moment, so she stood there, in her black bra and panties, staring at him dumbly.

"Why do you not come and have something to eat. You have been asleep for many days," he informed her, setting the food on a tiny dining table.

Many days? Erin wondered shocked and found her tongue. "What day is it?"

“Your voice graces my ears again, it is a welcome sound,” he said with a wistful smile, then answering her question, “Sunday.”

“It can’t be. You’re saying I’ve been out for nearly a week? How is that possible?”

“It is common to forget the kiss of the incubus and he kissed you well.” The man’s eyes, a bright spring green, seemed to darken and his expression turned sour as he told her. Remembering, Erin wrapped her hands around her body, the feeling of being violated a delayed response. She considered the stranger as he opened containers filled with bao and noodles.

“I guess you’re the one who saved me?”

He turned to look at her with an amused expression. “Many years ago it was you who saved me, this time, I have been able to return the favour.” He returned to his table setting, meticulously placing all the food and drinks he’d brought in an orderly fashion, before removing any waste products. It was only when he walked past her into the kitchen, that Erin remembered her state of undress and hurried to rectify it. She did not feel threatened by this man, but that didn’t mean she should parade her body before him.

“What do you mean *I* saved you?” she inquired, dragging her jeans on. “No, no, before all that, what’s your name? I know nothing about you and you’ve obviously seen way more of me than I have of you.” He grinned at her happily and though Erin was unfamiliar with his personality, something in her told her this was strange. He didn’t look like the type to smile much, let alone show rows of teeth.

“Let me make it even.” Before she could say anything more, he’d moved with a speed she knew only vampires possessed and in split seconds his clothes were in a neat pile next to him.

“Fuck, I didn’t mean it *that* way,” she exclaimed, keeping her true feelings to herself. He wasn’t an eyesore in the least.

He dressed himself just as quickly and smiled at her, coming closer. “My name is Jacob, and now we are even.” He took her hand and Erin resisted only for a moment, before shaking it firmly and releasing it. She moved away from him, being that close making her feel decidedly uncomfortable.

“Thanks for the food,” she said, taking a bite into a chicken filled bao. She always enjoyed this steamed version to bread and wasted no time polishing off a few more before she spoke again.

“I know you work for the organisation, what I don’t get is what you were doing here, did you just *happen* to know where I was?”

He shook his head, “You were in trouble and I helped, is that not all that is important?”

Erin was stone-faced, “No, I’m afraid it isn’t. I’m beyond tired of people trying to keep everything they can from me, if you’re going to be one of those people, you should leave now.”

He gave her a crooked smile. “I watch over you, protect you, let you stay in my home here in Hong Kong and *still* you wish to be rid of me. You are just as I remember you.”

Annoyed by his avoidance, Erin thought about him crashing into the far wall behind them, but before she could do so, he gripped her neck tightly, his eyes peering into hers tenderly.

“It is me, the one you vowed never to hurt. *Stop it.*”

Erin gagged as his grip tightened, but she nodded, wondering how he’d even had an inkling of her intention. His fingers loosened their hold and he touched her gently now, stroking the place where they had left a slight impression behind. She touched her neck when he sat back.

“What is this? What do you think we are to each other?” she managed to get out, understanding escaping her.

“You are mine and I will always be yours. It was I who protected you when you first awakened, and I have done the same for many centuries. Each time you are a little different, your mannerisms, your name, nevertheless, the blood flowing within you, it makes you the same. The fifth priestess of The Rising. I am yours and you will always be mine.”

Chapter 33

Zach looked on as members of Containment Unit 24 did their jobs. After apprehending Nataliya, he'd called in the damage done and they had been on the scene within minutes, rounding up civilians, including those who'd tried to leave in the midst of the disturbance. He was leaning against an unmarked blue containment vehicle and pulled his leather jacket closer to his body. A few Albanian police officers had also arrived at the cafe following up on a distress call from one of the patrons, but they were no match for the mind games containment played. Soon they were as complacent as everyone else, believing the call had been a false alarm. Zach straightened as one of the fully geared containment officers approached him.

“Why they send you here when we have our own wardens all over city?” the burly, dark haired man, with a huge bushy moustache asked in a heavy Albanian accent.

“This is my case,” was all Zach said, *containment douchebag*, was what he thought.

“Case is no longer yours,” the officer responded, gesturing wildly with his hands. “Within our borders, our jurisdiction.”

“Take that up with Commander Kriskov,” Zach said, excusing himself. He was referring to the leader of Containment Units 20 to 24, a competent man who was great friends with his handler Damian. It was never a good idea to argue with containment officers when they decided to become territorial and Zach was just one of the many wardens who chose to avoid the conflict which could easily spiral out of control, if any of them popped the bubble. It was for this reason that he sighed inwardly when the officer ran to catch up with him.

“What is this of Kriskov? He fight battle for you?”

Zach squared off with the officer, “I wasn't aware this was a battle.”

As if unsure if Zach was making fun of him or not, the officer cleared his throat loudly before changing the subject. “How many times you shoot?”

“Twice.”

“Ah, you miss first time don't you? Human too fast for bullets of English warden?”

Zach stared at the man, anger building within him. He changed his stance slightly, making it obvious that the conversation was going far past the right direction. “Why don’t you go shit on someone else’s night?”

The containment officer raised a bushy eyebrow, “What you say?”

“You heard me just fine, now bugger off,” he replied, deadpan expression still in place.

“You come to my country and you bring insult and—” the officer began gruffly, but Zach turned away as his phone buzzed in his pocket.

He strode further down the street, not willing to continue any part of the conversation with someone whose intention was to start a fight. “This is Zach,” he said, when he was far enough away.

“You ‘ave to get back to headquarters right now,” Damian ordered on the other end.

“What? But I’ve still got to hear Nataliya’s statement, she’ll be able to help us uncover more on the Reshu.”

Damian breathed heavily on the other end, a sign that he’d been smoking even more than usual. “The Albanians can handle it and we’re sending in wardens and containment from other countries to help them out, but there’s another job I need you and Erin on together.”

Zach sighed, “Damian, I haven’t heard anything at all from Erin in days, I don’t think she’s just going to work with me no questions asked again.”

“She doesn’t ‘ave a choice, when I talk to her, I’ll make sure she understands that. These orders are from the top,” he said, then lowering his voice, “It’s a bloody mess boy, a fucking shite storm of a mess.”

Zach frowned at the worry in Damian’s voice, “What’s happening?” he asked first, then remembering something else Damian had just said, “You *have* heard from Erin already right?”

Damian breathed heavily into the receiver, “She ‘asn’t checked in for days, but I’ve a pretty good idea where she is and who with.”

Jacob, Zach answered for himself. He had no idea what the deal was there, but hadn't missed the genuine concern the vampire seemed to have for Erin. "I'll just finish up my debrief here and be on the next plane then," Zach said, wanting to see Erin more than ever now.

"No." Damian's tone was sharp and left no room for argument. "You'll be excused from that until we handle this latest situation."

What the fuck's going on? "Damian ...?" he began, but his handler was already filling in the blanks.

"Lauren's daughter Lisbet has been taken."

"Taken?"

"Yea, was supposed to be in school on Wednesday, never made it there and no one's seen her since."

"Shit," Zach breathed into the phone.

"Exactly, and that's not the half of it."

Chapter 34

As Erin's phone rang she knew she should pick it up but didn't right away. She was staring at Jacob as he cleaned up the remains of all she'd consumed. She'd been hungrier than she thought and as they'd talked and he'd shared, eating seemed the easiest way to keep her mouth from dropping open and staying that way. She didn't remember even a fraction of what he'd told her about the others that had gone before but believed when he said the memories would return with time. Damian had told her as much, told her about the nostalgia that would kick in first, followed by memories of things she'd never done, but would seem more real than something she could touch.

Her phone started ringing again and she looked at it, considered answering, but again didn't. She continued to watch as Jacob moved around as though he was gliding, sure, confident steps that he sped up every now and then when a task became bothersome. His scent filled her nostrils and had from the time he'd returned to the apartment. It was the same one she could smell when he'd taken her from Meihui's house in The Peak. Earth and rain. There was something wonderful about the smell and Erin found herself wanting to bury her nose somewhere, *anywhere*, in his skin.

She cleared her head of these thoughts, sure that she should be angry with the way he'd manhandled her earlier, but she wasn't. She wasn't afraid of him, didn't believe for a moment that he'd really try to hurt her and as time passed and she learnt more about her role as a vodun priestess, she was more certain that the power that lay mostly dormant within her, was a thing that many supernaturals would be wary of. He sat across from her again, looking at her with curious, yet appreciative eyes. She could see that her curly red hair tumbling about her shoulders and the smooth dark-caramel of her skin were pleasing to him and soon he echoed her thoughts.

"You always were a thing of beauty," he said smiling and they fell into silence until her phone rang, interrupting the quiet that she was growing accustomed to.

This time she answered, "Hello?"

"Where in *God's* name have you been? You know you're not supposed to fall off the grid like this."

Erin responded calmly to Damian's outburst, "You know where I am, you've been tracking my phone haven't you?"

"That's not the bloody point. *You're* supposed to call in, it's as simple as that." Her eyes locked with Jacob's, she knew he'd be able to hear Damian on the other end and the half smile he wore told her as much.

"You're right, but I couldn't have if I wanted to." She gave him a brief account of all that had transpired in the last days, well, whatever she could remember in her waking moments. She left out the part about waking up half naked in Jacob's bed. Somehow, she didn't think the Director would like to hear about that, if it ever got back to him.

"Jacob saved the day did 'e? Isn't that *your* job?" Damian asked sarcastically. He grumbled some more before continuing, "That's not what I've called you for either way. You have to come back in right away, Zach will be here waiting so the two of you can head out on your next case."

Erin pushed her forefinger against her forehead and sighed, "I told you Damian, I can't work with him right now."

Pleasantries forgotten, Damian's tone hardened and he put her in her place with one sentence, "*You* don't tell *me*," he shouted, "I tell *you* what to do, and I'm saying get your bloody *arse* back in here and get to *work!*"

He hung up and Erin put her phone away, trying to calm the butterflies in her stomach. She wasn't ready to see Zach again much less work with him, though after Jacob's confessions to her, she almost couldn't recall why she'd been so mad at her partner in the first place. Almost.

"You must go?"

Erin didn't immediately respond. She listened to the question over and over in her head, his melodious tone gracing her ears, making her wonder if she really needed to do, *anything*.

"Yea," she decided finally, "Have to face him sometime."

Jacob looked at her closely, squinting a bit, "You feel emotion for this man."

Erin laughed uncomfortably at his assessment, “He’s been my partner for a while now, obviously I feel *something*.”

Jacob shook his head, “Coyness does not suit you. You know full well what I mean.” Erin did, but she had no intention of getting into it now, especially with an ancient vampire who’d told her he’d loved her or rather, those of her bloodline, for more than half of that time.

The affair had begun back in the thirteenth century, long before humans showed any leniency towards supernaturals they discovered. Jacob had been sentenced to death, his meanderings in those early years leaving a trail of blood and carnage behind. Erin’s ancestor had seen something in him, something she liked and had saved him from the hand of his persecutors. In the process she had destroyed an entire village and those that survived referred to her and others like her as the dark omen – women who brought misery to all. Her actions made life difficult for all practising witches at the time and many across the world were burnt at the stake, some simple peasants using herbs for healing and nothing more.

Jacob had fallen in love with this powerful woman and had stayed by her side until she died. He told Erin that when another rose to take her place, it was as if a pull that was stronger than anything he’d felt before had called him to her, and he’d come running, only to find she did not remember him. This had made him search related annals for any information he could find on her kind and the others like her. Though, no matter what he did, he’d always only locate the fifth priestess.

“As if the gods did not intend it any other way,” he’d said to Erin and she had sat listening, stunned at all he’d revealed.

There had been more, much more, but Erin hadn’t been able to process it yet. She wouldn’t be able to for a little while she supposed and what better way to take her mind away from destinies and bloodlines than with good old-fashioned work. This should have cheered her, but as she thought of heading back to England, the inevitable crossed her mind, *Zach*.

“Shit.”

Chapter 35

Sitting next to Erin in their small office at Praesidium's headquarters, felt colder than being in Albania's biting night air. She hadn't acknowledged his presence even though he'd tried to speak to her twice and quite frankly, was starting to get on Zach's nerves.

"I'm the only one you're going to single out for this bullshit?" he asked, taking off his jacket and cranking up the air conditioning. Erin might be giving him the chills emotionally, but he'd gotten accustomed to the colder climes and now his body felt as though it was overheating as they waited for Damian. His partner's expression remained indifferent and he threw his hands up,

"I'm not going to do this with you anymore Erin, like really, what the fuck? Don't you think I would have told you if I could?"

Erin turned slowly towards him, disbelief mixing with resentment that he'd heard from her, lacing her tone as she spoke, "What. The. Rasshole. Are you *kidding* me right now?" Zach was surprised. He'd only heard Erin use that word a few times before and it was always when she was beyond irate and it'd never been directed at him. It was Barbadian profanity and the one time she'd explained it *and* the many ways it could be used, both good and bad, Zach had long ago decided it wasn't one of those that he'd want to experience in the latter instance.

First time for everything, he thought and softened his tone, "I felt like I was doing the right thing, I'm sorry I hurt you but—"

Erin turned on him again, "*Hurt* me? I'm sorry, but when did we enter some teen drama? You *betrayed* me and you did it for months not caring for *one* minute how it'd make me feel."

Zach stood and paced the floor, trying hard to temper his rising emotions. "You can't be serious. All *did* was think about how it'd make you feel, I even tried to get out of it, but this is our job Erin, we do as we're told, at least *some* of us do."

Erin jumped to her feet just as angrily, looking at him squarely, making him stand still to face her. "Oh sure, turn this all around on me, I should just feel fantastic that my upstanding, grade A partner here does everything by the book no questions asked, well last

time I checked, you're supposed to look out for your partner, not go behind their back and screw them over."

Zach threw his hands into the air again, "I'm fucking done. When the fuck did I *ever* screw you over? I've covered for you, kept you out of lockup more than once, done loads of things I never would have on jobs and gotten into masses of trouble *constantly* all because of you, and now you have the *fucking gall* to say I screwed you over? What a bloody laugh."

Erin opened her mouth to say something else, but Zach turned away. He slumped into the chair at his desk, the conversation over for him. He didn't want to hear any more of her baseless accusations and if she wanted to continue arguing, she could do it with someone else.

"You two don't intend to kiss and make up then?" Damian entered the office, looking just as grave as they both felt.

"You were listening," Erin observed. No wonder he'd excused himself just as she'd arrived. He'd left her and Zach to hash things out and work out their issues before doing anything else.

"Plan didn't work," Zach added, catching on.

Damian slammed his fist on the nearest table and broke into one of his tirades. "You lot listen to me. Your petty shite ends here, do you hear me? You're not getting split up and you'll be working together for a while, so sort it, to *fuck, out*. Do you hear me?" He looked at each of them in turn, their petulant nods no better than children. Damian pulled up another chair and motioned Erin to sit. "No one's filled you in yea?" he asked her.

"No," she replied, shaking her head. She'd heard bits and pieces of what was going on, but with the staff running around as though they'd lost their heads, it had been hard to get full sentences out of anyone. Damian began to speak, then as if thinking better of it, he opened the floor to Zach instead.

"Ms. Monroe's daughter—"

"You mean Lauren," Erin interjected and Zach ignored her. She was always on his case for referring to their superiors by titles.

“She’s gone missing and has been for a few days now, almost as long as you were with Jacob.” He didn’t look at her, could feel her annoyance as she stared daggers at him.

“Any leads?” Erin asked, directing her question at Damian.

“The boy’s all over it, you can ask ‘im.”

Damian you cheeky bastard, Zach thought.

Erin’s gaze settled on her partner, “Well?”

Zach could think of many things he wanted to say to that little word ... he gave into his sensible side instead. “There was a note left in Ms. Monroe’s bedroom, she says it’s in Lisbet’s handwriting, but the analysis hasn’t come back from the lab yet. We’ll know soon if it was really her who wrote it.”

“What’d it say?” she asked.

Damian interjected, “Don’t look for me, I don’t want to be found”

“Doesn’t mean it’s her that wrote it, someone could have made her,” Erin said thoughtfully.

“We’ve considered that and would be running with it if it wasn’t for this.” Zach handed a file to Erin, who refrained from snatching it from him.

She opened it, its contents giving her pause, “Is that?”

“Yes, Nikolai.” Nikolai Henrikson was Lisbet’s father. He was a vampire of the highest order who had fathered two dhampirs, Lisbet and her half-brother Aleksander. Though Lauren and Nikolai were on good terms, it was with the understanding that he would have no contact with Lisbet, an agreement made before she was born. However, the photographs Erin now held in her hands, showed the seventeen-year-old Lisbet with her brother and father, laughing together at a small eatery near her private school, the time dates scattered over a period of more than six months.

“They’ve been in contact for a while,” Erin murmured.

“You can imagine how her mother’s taking that bit on top of it all.”

Erin looked up at both Damian and Zach, “So what happens if the note is real and she doesn’t want to come back to Lauren? Wouldn’t exactly be a surprise, she’s not the easiest person to deal with.”

Damian hushed her, “The Deputy Director of Praesidium’s daughter has gone missing, doesn’t matter what the *girl* wants, you’ve got to bring her back.”

Chapter 36

“Want one?” Zach asked, getting into the rental car. When she didn’t answer, he put away three of the sodas he’d bought from Sainsbury’s and uncapped the fourth. “Make arrangements for the car to be picked up will you?”

Erin still didn’t say anything but took out her cell phone and did as he asked. They were in London on their way Gatwick, so they could travel to Capri, Italy. Nikolai had his official residence there and Damian believed that judging from the photos, whether Lisbet had gone willingly or not, that was where she’d be. Zach glanced over at Erin. She’d pulled her hair back into a ponytail, which highlighted the elegant contours of her face *and* her unreadable expression.

“Met Jacob huh?” Zach inquired, trying to break the ice.

“Yup.”

He glanced at her again, but her eyes were trained on the road. “What was that like?”

“What’s it like meeting any vampire?” she quipped.

Zach went on undeterred, *at least she’s talking to me now*. “Jacob’s different though don’t you think? He’s not driven by blood or power as some of the others are.”

Erin arched an eyebrow, “You think you know what drives him?” she asked,

“That’s not what I said, haven’t spoken to him long enough to know much about him,” he confessed.

“I have.”

“What happened over there Erin?” he asked, taking a glance in the rear-view mirror. He’d been watching it on and off from the time they’d left the convenience store, monitoring a grey sedan that had been in his sights since then. He wouldn’t share this with Erin until he was sure they were being followed.

“I did a job, I came back home,” she answered.

Zach sighed, focusing on driving instead of his partner freezing him out. They passed a few traffic lights and zebra crossings and turned three corners onto new roads, still Zach saw the car behind them. It was at tailing distance too, an obvious surveillance manoeuvre.

“Put in your contacts, grey sedan, who are they?” Erin did as she was told, reaching into her bag for her customised contacts and quickly inserted them. Her vision adjusted to the new boost in visibility and she looked back, her eyes focused on the occupants of the vehicle.

“Two, a male and female, black, license plates of a rental, backseat appears clear,” she told him and Zach nodded.

“We might have to make a detour,” he said, then looked at the timestamp on the car’s clock, “Our flight’s in three hours, we should have enough time.”

“Sure, whatever,” Erin replied nonchalantly. Zach paid it no mind, knowing that Erin knew just as well as he did, how important it was that any loose ends they could tie up, were, before they got on their way.

Wardens worldwide were already travelling to Albania and those that weren’t, would be working cases like the Reshu clan or others that couldn’t be put off until after the Gathering. Praesidium’s wheels didn’t stop turning even for the Gathering, however, many of their most respected and competent members were sent to oversee proceedings. Often some of these were attacked before they could arrive, by those who wanted the Gathering to fail. And, with both Zach and Erin making waves in the supernatural realm working most wanted cases like Kaleb’s and Jiao’s, they had to be even more careful.

Zach pulled off the road that would take them directly to the highway and drove onto an empty side street. As he suspected, their tail pulled up a few yards behind them.

“Ready?” he asked Erin, adjusting his silencer as he checked his gun. She responded by opening her door to get out. Zach followed to back her up, cursing under his breath.

“We’re here now,” Erin said loudly in a singsong voice, “Why don’t you tell us what you want.” As if her words fell on deaf ears, neither occupant exited the vehicle, but as Zach watched the man, he saw his eyes go from black to white and black again, flipping back and forth between the colours at random intervals.

“Shifters,” he told Erin under his breath. Eventually the one Zach’s gaze rested on got out of the sedan. The shifter approached as his mate watched, ready should he need assistance. Shifters were bound to their mates from birth and were not separated until one of them passed.

The male spoke to Zach, but his eyes settled on Erin, “No quarrel with you human. It is the vodun woman we seek.”

Zach stepped protectively in front of Erin. “Been some kind of mistake, no vodun woman here,” he replied calmly.

“Zach, move.” The soft tone she used did not hide the implicit command and Zach found himself allowing her into the view of the shifters, even though he didn’t want that to be the case. It was as if he could not help himself.

“What do you want with me?” Erin asked the shifter male.

“I have a message from Baako.”

Erin smiled mischievously. He was referring to the shifter king. “He’ll be at the Gathering won’t he? He can tell me himself.” She turned away, already walking back to the car.

“This he says you must know now, to prepare for what is coming.”

Zach frowned, Jacob had said much of the same.

Erin looked at him again, curious, “And what might that be?”

The shifter’s eyes settled on white, a shocking contrast against his dark skin. “Baako says, we have one of the vodun women and she is the one who will live.”

Zach saw Erin’s expression change. She raised her hands and he reached for his gun, knowing what was coming next.

“Erin, don’t!”

Chapter 37

Erin flung the shifter into a nearby wall, Zach's words ignored. She would not be threatened. His mate got out of the car, running swiftly at Erin and her clothes fell to the floor as she shifted into a cluster of tarantulas. Among morphing into multiple creatures, shifters were able to give the illusion of higher numbers. Erin looked closely at the mass of deadly spiders, trying to see which one was the shifter. When she found her, blue flame shot from her hands, burning the copycats and leaving behind mere traces that they had ever existed.

The naked woman shifted again, this time into a leopard and her mate, recovering from his fall, joined her as a hawk coming in for the kill. Zach shot at him and the tortured sound coming from the shifter signalled that he'd met his mark. Still his attack was disregarded, as Erin was their only real concern. She reached her hands out towards the shifters, paused for a moment, then brought them crashing down to the ground. As the movement of her arms took control of the flying shifter, the hawk hurtled into the ground, transforming into his human form as he lay thrashing about in pain. Focusing on the man had taken Erin's attention from the big cat and even as Zach shouted warning, she was too slow and though she jumped back, Erin could not avoid the deadly claws as they glanced off her leg, leaving a deep gash.

Zach tried to come between them, but Erin pushed him away. She couldn't feel the pain as blood spewed from her wound, all she saw in the tunnel vision of the moment, was her need to hurt the shifter. As the leopard opened her mouth showing off razor-sharp fangs with only one intention, Erin lunged forward. She made a fist, sending her punch into the opened mouth, feeling hot breath and saliva on her bare arm. Then she spread her fingers, allowing a powerful vibration to flow through them as she whispered a fatal spell.

A very human expression broke through the eyes of the leopard. It was the shock of understanding that she was going to die. Erin pulled her hand out just as quickly as she'd plunged it in and watched the results of her dark magic at work as the leopard's head split in two. She blinked and lying on the floor now was the naked human form of the woman, Erin's choice of demise a gruesome picture.

"What the fuck Erin?" Zach managed to get out. He'd never seen anything like it before from a non-supernatural.

“Better call containment, this needs to be cleaned up fast,” was all Erin said, already performing a healing spell on her wound. She could feel her power draining as she did and hated how weak it made her feel as she tried to make her body heal faster. When she was finished, she knelt beside the male shifter who had stopped writhing as he slowly healed. Zach stepped forward, worried about what she would do to him, but paused as she leaned in to speak.

“Tell Baako that his priestess doesn’t scare me.” She stood, walking back to the car and got in.

Zach looked after her, not sure what to make of anything that had just happened. He knew that Erin hadn’t *needed* to kill the shifter, she could have just hurt her as badly as she had her mate. She’d *chosen* to end her life. *No way I can put that in my report*, he realised. He stormed back to the car to confront her, frustration getting the better of him as he thought of having to cover her tracks again, while she continued to treat him badly.

“Okay Erin enough is enough. I screwed up and ... so have you,” he waved his hand over to the shifter’s corpse. “We’re partners and as Damian said, that’s not going to change anytime soon, we really have to move past this.” To his surprise she just nodded. Zach kept his relief to himself, using the lull to call in Containment Unit 8, London.

“Hey this is Zach, identification Z489, reporting a clean-up situation on—”

“They’re all going to try to kill me,” Erin said quietly.

Zach caught himself and continued his call. “You can track my phone for the location, we’ll be here waiting until you arrive.” He ended it, more intrigued by what she had to say, than giving directions to containment. “What do you mean Erin?”

“They’re six others, they’re all going to want to live, just like I do. The only way any of us can live past the next two decades, is if the others die. It’s the only way,” she said solemnly.

“Come on, that can’t be true, the organisation won’t—”

“The organisation won’t do *what*? Won’t use me as they have my ancestors for centuries? Won’t try to find out if I’m the most powerful and if they *think* I’m not, feed me

up to whoever's willing so they can have 'the one'? They won't do *what Zach?*" When he didn't say anything, she added, "Exactly."

"So that's what message from Baako meant? They can't touch you at the Gathering so I wouldn't worry so much Erin, we'll figure it out." He touched her hand lightly, wanting to hold her, wanting to be her source of comfort, but knowing he couldn't be. "I assume Jacob told you all of this?"

She nodded. "He taught me more in a few hours, than anyone's told me my whole life. They've lied to me all along Zach, none of them cared. You have to understand," she glanced shyly at him, "I couldn't take it when I felt like you'd been on their side, it was too much."

He grabbed both her hands, green eyes peering at her intently, "I won't ever keep anything from you again. I promise Erin."

A sad smile played on her lips. He'd always loved those lips. He didn't think. He kissed her.

Chapter 38

Zach and Erin arrived on Capri early the next morning. It was a breath-taking island with clear blue waters and in another life, Erin could see she would have loved to visit, be a tourist for a few days, meet someone and fall in love. She watched Zach as he paid for their hotel accommodation. They hadn't spoken much after he'd kissed her, but the tension didn't stem from her anger this time. If she was honest with herself, she'd admit how easy it had been to kiss him back, but it was something she didn't want as her focus now. There was just too much going on.

"Grazie," he said, giving a quick wave to the front desk clerk. "I'll get the directions on my tablet," he said as he joined her, pulling it from his backpack. He was just as unwilling to think about the foolish thing he'd done. He'd been fighting a losing battle with himself the entire plane ride to Italy and subsequent ferry trip to Capri, appalled that he could have been stupid enough to act on his feelings for his partner.

"So are we getting a taxi or walking or ...?" Erin let the question hang in the air. She still relied on Zach to handle the little details like this one and was sure he'd already planned their course of action long before they'd even landed in Italy.

"It isn't so far away so we can walk there. Nikolai's villas should be just beyond the Fragolini Rocks." There weren't many vehicles on Capri to begin with, as few of the roads were opened to traffic. Most people got around by bus, taxi or foot.

They started out, moving quickly. Erin was glad that they were there in the off-season. She'd never been to Capri before, but knew most tourist activities in little European places like this started to slack off during the winter months. Though this was the case, she and Zach only had to wear their leather jackets, as the cold was not so intense that they needed to be bundled up much more than that.

As if reading her thoughts, Zach pointed out, "Probably thirteen to fifteen degrees. Hell of a lot better than Albania was."

"Don't remind me," Erin found herself saying, "Not looking forward to the cold when we get there." This chit chat carried them all the way to Nikolai's villas. He had bought three in a long row and turned them into his personal residence, where he and a few of the vampires he'd made that were closest to him, stayed. His son Aleksander was also said to live

with him, but between years at boarding school and then university to become the future face of his father's companies, it was said that he'd rarely spent time in Italy growing up.

Erin had heard the rumours early on about Lauren's little Lisbet. Where her brother wisely hid his special talents, the result of his father's supernatural genes, Lisbet regularly revealed her abilities when she shouldn't, causing the organisation to have to intervene often over the years. As she grew older, she became less defiant and seemed intent to follow her mother's rules about hiding her heritage.

"Should we just go knock on the door?" Zach asked, already knowing what Erin would do. She didn't disappoint and pushed at the looming wrought iron gates they stood behind, her dark magic causing them to open easily. They walked in, flanked by flora that grew all year round.

"Asleep you think?" Erin asked with a laugh at the obvious question. Vampires weren't very active during the day. Though some of the older more powerful ones were able to stay awake at will, often they chose not to, being at their most formidable when they were fully revitalised. Zach whistled as they rounded a sharp corner and their gaze fell upon the main villa, which was constructed in typical Mediterranean style. They were white, large arches and columns, with a pretty fountain bubbling from a marble statue that depicted chiselled bodies of a man and woman locked in embrace. They followed the terracotta tiles up to the entrance, where there was a heavy wooden door with a knocker sculpted to look like a gargoyle. The wardens glanced at each other.

"Go ahead." Zach took Erin's cue and lifted the knocker, banging it against the door four times before he stopped. Soon they heard it being unlocked and stepped back, Erin as prepared as Zach who touched the butt of his gun, ready should he need to use it.

As the door swung open, Erin almost believed it was going to be one of those times when no one was behind it. She swore she heard it creak louder with every movement, then scolded herself for the ridiculous notions that were running through her mind at such an inopportune moment.

At first they didn't see anyone, when suddenly, a figure stepped fully into the light. Her hair was wavy and dark brown, skin sun-touched and her eyes a rustic brown, with dancing flecks of gold. The floral-printed, strapless summer dress she wore brushed the floor

and the light material accentuated her budding curves. Her full lips, glossy with a sheer pink lip stain, spread around perfectly white teeth as she smiled at them. It was Lisbet.

Chapter 39

Lisbet allowed them in, stepping aside so they could enter. She closed the door behind them, locking it as securely as it had been before. When she was finished, she led them deeper into the dwelling, across more terracotta, white stucco and majolica tiles. The rooms they passed through were elegantly furnished with a range of antique furniture, creating a cosy atmosphere. The house itself smelt of baked goods and the only sound besides their feet was a television set on an infomercial channel, that could be heard faintly from another room.

The smell of pastry grew stronger and soon they were in the villa's kitchen. It boasted many modern amenities, but had still managed to maintain a weathered, lived-in look. Erin found herself wondering who had first built the place, as they would have had no clue that vampires would someday invade it.

"Are you here alone?" she asked Lisbet casually. The teenager bent to remove a tray of chocolate cookies, then croissants from the oven, answering in a posh Chelsea accent.

"I'm sure you already know the answer to that warden's," she replied, opening the Sub-Zero refrigerator door to remove more trays of unbaked goodness.

"You know who we are, that saves us some time," Erin replied.

When Lisbet had placed the new assortment of pastry dough into the oven and set the timer, she beckoned them to follow her. "Didn't someone in that god-awful place read my note?" she asked, hips swaying enticingly as she led them past numerous rooms, until they were in an open courtyard, which led them into a smaller villa.

"That's the first thing we did, but we couldn't be sure that it wasn't written under duress. Now we see you here playing house, you've made it clear it wasn't," Zach answered. He bent his head to avoid colliding with the low ceiling and Erin stifled a laugh.

Not the time, she chided herself.

"This is my brother's place by the way," Lisbet informed them, turning to look at them briefly. "Father likes us to be close to him."

"Won't Aleksander mind you having strangers all over it?" Erin asked.

Lisbet laughed, “He isn’t here and even if he was it wouldn’t matter. They both dote on me. I’m the baby of the family.” She giggled lightly.

Not a care in the world, Erin thought, almost jealous. “Whenever this little sightseeing trip you’ve got us on is over, you *have* to know that we’re going to take back.”

“You can try,” Lisbet countered, giggling some more. “Here we are.” They came to a stop and looked past her to where she had wanted to take them. It was a tiny garden, no bigger than most of the smaller villa’s rooms, with a skylight. There were carved stone seats on both sides, one with a view of the sea and the other, the distant hills.

“This is my favourite place in the entire world,” said Lisbet. “The first time I came here five years ago, mother thought I was in France on holiday.”

“You’ve been seeing Nikolai ... your dad for *that* long? How the heck did you manage to keep it a secret?” Erin wanted to know.

Lisbet twirled and laughed until she came to stop facing them. “Mother doesn’t care about anything but Praesidium, I could die and it wouldn’t matter.”

Zach stepped in, “If she didn’t care she wouldn’t have us out looking for you.”

Lisbet burst out laughing again and gave him the look of ‘you’re an idiot’, that all teenagers perfected. “That hasn’t a thing to do with me, it’s all about what people will think of *her*. Can you imagine? Her daughter runs off to live with her vampire dad? It’s priceless really.” She danced on her tiptoes, gracefully moving from one point to another, her ballet training shining through.

“Whether that’s true or not, you’re going back with us, you can take it up with Lauren when we’re back,” Erin said firmly, growing weary of the girl’s first world problems.

Lisbet stopped dancing and stared coldly at her. “I’m not going with you and you can’t make me.”

It was Erin’s turn to smile, “Course I can, why do you think they sent *us*?” She stepped towards Lisbet, who broke into a pretty grin.

“You probably shouldn’t do that.”

Erin’s gaze narrowed, “And why not?” she took another step.

“Erin ... steady,” Zach warned, not liking where this was going, especially after witnessing what she’d done to the shifters just a day before.

Lisbet echoed Zach’s sentiments, “You should listen to your friend.”

Erin ignored them both, “Oh really? You can tell me all about it on the plane back home.”

Lisbet grinned, but this time it wasn’t pretty or warm. The expression in her eyes made her face look ugly and Zach, concerned, pulled his gun from its holster.

“Do you know what happened to the curious cat?” Lisbet asked them, her gaze shifting first from Erin slowly stepping forward, to Zach, his gun aimed directly at her. It didn’t contain wooden or silver bullets, but customised steel ones that would injure, not kill a vampire or dhampir. Lauren had made it clear that neither her daughter nor Nikolai should be mortally wounded. When the wardens refused to answer her question, Lisbet continued, her expression darkening with every word.

“The curious cat is a story I heard when I was young. He was a skilled hunter and had many mice night after night for dinner, but one day, he came upon what looked like a large tail.” As Zach listened, he moved away from Erin, so he had a clear path should he need to intervene. “The old cat, warned the curious cat about the tail from nowhere, but the curious cat was too excited and of course, too *curious* to leave it alone, so you know what he did?”

“I’m sure you’re going to tell us,” Erin said dryly.

Lisbet’s smile turned hideous. “When the curious cat got just close enough, the vampire . . . ate him.” On her last word the ground opened beneath them. Both Erin and Zach tottered and struggled to avoid falling into the unknown below, while Lisbet, knowledgeable about the mechanism, remained safely out of harm’s way. Erin had just enough time to whisper a protection spell, before they both completely lost their footing, and fell.

Chapter 40

“Shit, thanks for that, would’ve been a nasty one,” Zach said, mentally praising the gods of all things good that he was working with Erin again. Had he been alone, the near seven-foot drop would have been much more terrifying and painful.

“Where the fuck are we? Or don’t you know?” she asked looking around. It was a dank, basement-like area, lit with torches that were secured to the walls.

Zach had a pretty good idea where they’d ended up and didn’t like it one bit. “Could be the sleeping chambers.”

“Ding ding ding! You’d be right. Not just a pretty face, I like that Mr. Warden.” They turned to face Lisbet, who had jumped down behind them. Her supernatural abilities made things that would kill another human, simple for her.

“So what? Is daddy going to come rip our heads off now?” Erin asked, her tone soaked in sarcasm.

“Why don’t we head back upstairs and talk about this rationally, we don’t want to end up hurting you,” Zach tried, but this only made Lisbet laugh.

“You mean you *can’t* hurt me.”

“Maybe *he* can’t.” Erin ran towards Lisbet, punching her hard in the face. The girl seemed too shocked to respond to the abuse for a moment and held her jaw.

“*Erin what the hell?*” Zach exclaimed, but by then Lisbet had dissolved into another fit of giggles. The bruise that had begun to form was healing just as quickly and the pain that would have been associated with it, was clearly disappearing as well.

She held her hands up in surrender, “Yes please, take me Mr. and Mrs. Warden, take me back to my hellish mother, I’ll go, please.” She was laughing so hard now that she fell back against one of the pillars and Erin, fighting to control her irritation - but failing – approached.

Zach, stepped between the two and faced his partner. “This isn’t worth it Erin, we’ll call in back-up and work it out, at least we know where she is now.”

Erin agreed, her hands dropping to her sides. “Fine,” she mumbled, looking around him at Lisbet, “But I won’t like ... *fuck*.” She saw the danger too late. Lisbet’s polished red fingernails came bursting through Zach’s stomach with a force that left him breathless. She pulled her hand out and he fell to his knees, looking up at Erin, then at his wound as though he couldn’t believe what had happened. He tried to press his hand against it, but with the wind knocked out of him, simply fell face-first against the damp stone floor, as Lisbet laughed at her own joke.

Erin’s heartbeat sped up. Her head pounded and her vision blurred. The laughter in her ears grew louder and she tried to swallow past the knot forming in her throat. She tried to speak, to say *anything*. She tried to reach for Zach, but her body wasn’t moving. *She* wasn’t moving. Only, she was.

When her faculties returned to her, Erin heard not laughter, but Lisbet’s gasping breaths. She had her poised against the pillar, her forearm jammed up under her neck. The dhampir tried to get out of the hold but could not. Erin was a woman possessed and as she thought of the fact that Zach could be dying at her feet, she pressed harder, pushed harder, until Lisbet’s brown eyes rolled to the back of her head. Erin could hear the dhampir’s breaths coming slower now and zeroed in for the kill, looking at her victim as her eyes fluttered close, when a hand pulled her away violently.

She struck one of the supporting pillars and the figure came at her again, this time grabbing her by her own neck and flinging her against another. Erin fought back, bringing her defenses up, but disoriented from the suddenness of it all, her aim was off and the phantom figure got her again, this time lifting her high into the air, before slamming her body down to the dusty floor.

A voice whispered in her ear, “Lay thy hand on her flesh ne’er again.”

She knew who it was without seeing him. Nikolai spoke as many of the vampires of Roman times did. Erin rolled over on her back, hearing a frenzied, “Daughter, you must wake,” as she did. She coughed, using her resources to heal, rather than hurt and having enough energy to crawl to Zach’s side, pressed her hand against his wound. He lay shivering as Erin whispered every healing spell she knew one after another, but did not open his eyes. “Rest my child, heal,” Nikolai whispered, laying Lisbet down carefully.

When he was sure his offspring would survive, he came at Erin again, walking over to her purposefully, “You raise your hand against my house? You try to steal my daughter?”

Erin didn’t speak, her bloodstained hands glowing a dull blue as she tried to heal Zach. She looked up at Nikolai. His skin seemed golden and he shared his daughter’s dark hair and eyes, though the latter were a paler version. He was a muscular man, wearing a knee-length toga and with scars wrought before he had become immortal. He looked at her hard, eyebrows crinkling, then touched her chin, tilting it so he could look at her properly.

“You are ... no,” he began, then frowning, “this is a thing that cannot be.” His hand fell away from her face as his puzzlement grew, “The fifth priestess? When not but a century has passed?” His eyes fell again on Erin, who by this time was only concerned with Zach’s safety. Nikolai grimaced and strolled as a man broken back over to his daughter. He knelt, stroking her hair as she slept.

“Dark days cometh.”



Chapters 41 – 52; epilogue

Episode 5: Cemetery Party

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Chapter 41

Erin watched Zach sleep. At her suggestion one of Nikolai's vampires had moved him onto a beige, suede futon in the solarium of the main house where gentle ocean breezes flowed through. This seemed to bode well for her partner, as he had hardly moved in the hours that he'd been dead to the world. She lifted his t-shirt and checked his wound again, pleased with the progress. Where there had been a gaping hole, was now a small gash that continued to mend and heal with each passing moment.

She shifted uncomfortably, sitting in one position for so long a detriment to her own wounds. Nikolai's impulsive actions as he'd punished her for trying to kill his daughter, had left her more than a little bruised and having used most of the magical energy she had on Zach, her own healing had been much slower than usual. She touched her ribs gently, feeling a shock of intense pain as she did and grimacing, let her hand fall again to her lap.

Two vampires stood on either side of the doorway behind her, but Erin paid no attention to them. Her ears remained pricked for any sudden movements from his lackeys should Nikolai go back on his word and as she waited for her dark magic to replenish itself, she became more aware of the daggers at her side should she need to use them.

She and Nikolai had come to an agreement hours before, one that Praesidium had hesitantly signed off on. Lisbet would stay with Nikolai until the time of the gathering and would not harm the wardens any further. In exchange, the vampire high council of which he was one of the four members, would be given some control over the gargoyles of the Twelfth State.

Nikolai readily agreed as the council had lobbied for this honour for many years, when it was discovered that the gargoyles had not faced complete extinction, as was previously believed. The Twelfth State was an uncharted island in the Maldives that belonged to Praesidium, where the gargoyles, an exceptionally powerful species, lived as a peaceful tribe. Being around them strengthened other supernatural beings and as such they had been highly sought after in the Middle Ages. To protect their interest, Praesidium used dark magic

to prevent any other supernatural being from landing on the island. Giving the vampires access to this treasure, was a big step, but one that came with much fine print and warnings from the Praesidium admin.

Erin didn't care about the politics of it all. She knew that somehow the organisation would find a way to deter the vampire high council from making their way to the Twelfth State. Gargoyles were just too important a commodity. *Like me*, she thought and shifted again in her chair. It was a hard-backed wooden one with not much cushion to speak of, but she'd chosen it for the simple reason that she didn't want to become so comfortable that she fell asleep. There were not among friends and though the organisation and the vampire high council were usually on good terms, Erin knew she needed to be on her guard.

"I really thought I'd killed him," came a voice from behind her and Erin grimaced. Lisbet giggled as she hovered over Zach, pressing her ear to his chest as though listening to him breathe. "Good thing he had you around," she added, sitting on the couch's armrest as she stared at Erin.

Erin resisted the urge to kick her off it, especially when Zach stirred. He turned on his side, then as though feeling the pain of that motion in his sleep, returned to his back and fell once again into a deep slumber, light snores playing on their ears.

Lisbet was still looking at her hard, so that Erin finally asked, "Is there something you want?"

Lisbet's eyes brightened and she quipped, "Oh I have what I want, I get to stay with father," she laughed, obviously finding the situation funnier than anyone else did. "Mother must be having a fit," she added still giggling and Erin decided to ignore her. Nikolai might have opened his home in efforts to be hospitable as Zach healed, but there was no reason she needed to be nice to his brat of a daughter.

When the teenager realised that Erin would not rise to her bait, she switched gears. "Father says you're some kind of guru awesome witch genie thing?"

Erin took her eyes away from Zach's steady breathing, "Yes, that sounds exactly like what your dad would say," she answered sarcastically.

Lisbet laughed, "Oh come on, you know what I mean," she pointed a finger at Erin, "You're supposed to be special."

Don't feel like it, Erin thought.

“We should probably be quiet and let Zach rest,” she said looking at Lisbet with a steely gaze. If the girl noticed her desire to be alone with him, she pretended not to.

“You’re right, so you should go see father now. I’ll stay with Mr. Warden.”

Erin’s gaze narrowed. “That’s okay, I’m good here.”

Lisbet’s smile twisted, “You’re not understanding me, father asked me to summon you and so I am.” Her face softened again as she became the pretty, teenage girl that would fool anyone with her charm.

“Fine,” Erin replied standing. She looked at Zach and tried to hide her worry. She couldn’t yet cast a protection spell and was basically leaving him in the hands of the dhampir who’d put him in this position and two other vampires who had only kept their teeth to themselves, because Nikolai had ordered it. She swallowed the threat outlining what she would do if any of them harmed Zach as it rose to her tongue, asking instead, “Where is he?”

Lisbet smiled sweetly, “Follow the yellow brick road and when you get lost, ask the tin man,” she laughed and angered by her silly japes Erin exited, wishing she’d been allowed to finish the job she’d started.

Chapter 42

Despite Lisbet's vague directions, Erin didn't have much trouble locating Nikolai. The vampires she'd passed along the way looked at her with hungry eyes, but Erin showed no fear. Fear aroused them and young vampires found it especially difficult to control themselves if they believed you were afraid.

Nikolai referred to them as his children – those he had created and were dear to his heart. Over the years the numbers had increased, so that though Erin didn't know exactly how many roamed the open spaces of the three villas, she knew she was always being watched by more than a few pairs of eyes at any given time.

“You wanted to see me?” she asked when she found him, backing her as he looked out an open window. He'd replaced his knee-length toga with a white, linen pants and his broad, bare, back revealed more scarring of his body. Though Nikolai had risen in the vampire ranks, Erin wondered what'd he'd been before, when he was still human. She determined that it must have been a slave, not believing that nobility would carry those kinds of scars. The smell of grilled meat wafted up from another villa and Erin's stomach rumbled, she couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten.

Nikolai didn't turn, but spoke, “The other has awoken?”

“No, he's still out,” she answered. “Probably won't get up for a little while yet, Lisbet got him pretty good,” she said, her tone even.

“My teachings resonate with her and she has made me proud,” was all he said. Erin stared at his back for a little while, then past it to the dark blue sky with its smattering of stars. As the silence deepened and Nikolai seemed to have no intention of breaking it.

Erin did, “If that's all, I'm going to get back to it.” She turned on her heel but before she could make a step Nikolai blocked her path with supernatural speed. He touched her cheek with a cold hand and Erin braced herself. His dark eyes bore into her honey-brown ones and she kept her gaze level, refusing to let him see her flinch.

He spoke, his breath hot against her face, “I smell the stench of Jacob upon you.” The distaste in his voice matched the wretched smile his daughter gave whenever she became angry.

Erin kept her cool, “If that’s all—” she began again.

Nikolai interrupted. “A vampire who believes himself above the council, who chooses another over his own kind, who follows like a lost dog, her excrement his cherished meal.”

Erin took a step back, not liking his palm against her skin. She understood that his crude statement was directed at Jacob’s relationship with those who had gone before her and his budding one with her, but didn’t know enough about any of it to even fathom a snarky remark.

She decided to take the high ground, “Whatever this is, it has nothing to do with me.”

Nikolai looked at her thoughtfully. “Your words tell some truth priestess of vodun. The vampire Jacob’s failure maketh *my* heart weep and so this trouble is betwixt he and I.” He moved swiftly again, this time standing behind her, his bare chest pressing against her, “Had he not been burdened by a woman of dark omens, he would have soared above most of his age so that the reverence he now commands would pale in comparison.”

Erin turned to face him, her irritation growing, “So you hate Jacob because he was loyal to others like me? Big whoop, isn’t there something else you should put your energy into?” She gestured to the open window, “Like parasailing or something?”

Nikolai looked at her hard, his strong jaw locked tight as he controlled his anger. “My children hail from many cities and all of them I love as a father will, those of human loins most of all. Their fragility, their strength, it draws me closer.”

Erin feigned interest, her worry about Zach enforcing her need to be finished with the conversation.

“Others have many scattered across the face of the Earth, yet in all the centuries only two have been wrought of my pleasure.” He paused for a moment, considering her, then commanded, “Question my reasons, so that I may answer.”

Erin sighed inwardly, “Why only two?” He touched her face again, then took his hand away as though burnt.

“Many years have passed since you burnt those I loved, young vampires blind in their love for me going willingly to their graves so that I might live. The fifth priestess, the one who hunted my bloodline for generations, a rivalry caused by petty sins that no one yet

remembers.” Erin fidgeted uncomfortably. She was certain she didn’t want to know what Nikolai would say next, but knew she had no choice but to listen. “My dhampirs, my heart, *my soul*, children I could not bear to lose. Therefore one remains with your Praesidium, so that you may never harm her.”

Erin’s mind raced. So many things were starting to make sense, but she felt as though the second she learnt one thing, another floodgate opened to release a gush of knowledge that that wouldn’t be dammed. Which was ironic as she was starting to feel she was damned.

She replied, treading carefully, “It wasn’t *me* that did *any* of those things, just some weird twisted version in the past. As for Jacob loving me or whatever, I never asked him to, I don’t even know him,” she said exasperatedly.

Nikolai looked at her as though he was staring straight through her. He reached to touch her face again, then thought better of it. “Each time your words are the same,” he said quietly, “Each time I wish to rip the tongue of lies from your opened mouth and each time I wait, until the time proves right, until your memories collide, until your eyes look upon me with the hate I have grown to know.”

Erin shook her head emphatically, “Believe me when I say I want *nothing* to do with you. If it wasn’t for this fucking case I wouldn’t even be here.” She was so angry. Only two months before she’d been her regular self and now there were psycho vampires and death bound sisters to deal with. There was only so much one person could take. Sensing her frustration but not caring in the least, Nikolai sealed her coffin with words that sent chills down Erin’s spine.

“Your past is your present, your future your past, it will circle and return as it always has and though your rising is far earlier than expected I, as has always been, will be the one who sends you back to the depths of the world from whence you came.”

Chapter 43

“Next!” Zach heard Gorgon call out and he pushed off the wall he’d been slumped on. He was still pretty worn out after the trip to Capri and though he’d been back in Middlesbrough for almost three days, every now and then the phantom pain where Lisbet’s fist had made a pit stop reared its memorable head. Erin’s magic had fixed most of the damage, but it wasn’t every day your guts were served up for you to see and he now had a tiny scar to remember the incident by.

“Long day eh Gorgon?” he said to the Cyclops when he came near. Zach was one in a long line of wardens who were going to Albania in just over a week. Those who were to be a part of the festivities all returned to headquarters to receive their official badges for the three-day long event.

“I handle it,” Gorgon said and guffawed. He was seven feet of pure muscle and dark-skinned. As leader of the Order of Cyclops, Gorgon’s position was coveted as they were among the only supernatural beings trusted by Praesidium with a task as important as identifying their employees whenever it became a necessity, like going to the dungeon or approving those to be a part of the gathering. Their abilities allowed them to not only see the truth in an individual’s identity, but what was in their hearts. Terrorism was as much a threat in the supernatural realm as it was in the human one and Praesidium was nothing if not careful.

Zach stood perfectly still as Gorgon inspected him with his large pale-blue eye. He was one of the few of his kind who didn’t hide the other open socket with a glass eye, so that Zach could see the utter nothingness from the gaping hole. Gorgon nodded,

“You’ll do,” he said and Zach rolled up his shirtsleeve and held it out, palm facing up. Gorgon held it, his skin rough to the touch and reached for a large silver needle. He plunged it into Zach’s flesh and nodded, “You go through.” Zach smiled his thanks and walked past the Cyclops, his arm tensing as he micro-chip that would act as his identification throughout the time of the gathering, adjusted to its new surroundings. As he rolled his sleeve back down a small, red bump was beginning to form. Zach entered the armoury where all weapons technology was kept, some of the offerings Zach’s creations. He laid eyes on the familiar, stocky build of one of his acquaintances.

“Levy, mate, long time,” Zach greeted the short albino man with a warm handshake. He was a warden who’d come up in the ranks alongside Zach, but had been transferred to the Middle East early on.

“All’s right in my world, but what of you? Heard you lost the Monroe girl.” Levy laughed. He was teasing Zach knew, but it didn’t make it any less embarrassing, especially since if Levy knew that probably meant that the story had reached more than a few ears already. He changed the subject,

“Where’s Hilda?”

Levy shook his head, “Over there being the ice queen as usual.” Zach looked to where Levy was pointing and immediately saw what he meant. Hilda looked as chic as ever, her long, woollen trench coat buttoned to her neck accentuated with leather stiletto boots. It wasn’t her clothing that gave her personality away however, her thin lips were set in their usual pout and she was giving another warden Zach didn’t know the most scathing look as he tried to explain a piece of equipment to her.

Zach laughed saying, “That’s why you guys are a perfect match, you’re too damn laid back to give a shit about her attitude.”

Levy joined him, nodding. “Where’s the red-haired fox of yours then?” he asked, checking his nine-millimetre pistol.

“Already in Albania,” Zach answered.

Levy gave him a strange look, “Moving up in the world then isn’t she?”

“She’s a talented warden,” was all Zach said. He knew what Levy was getting at. Only a few wardens and containment officers were chosen to inspect the castle and perimeter where the gathering was being held and they were usually those who were considered the most gifted and had often been with Praesidium for many years. However, Zach couldn’t exactly say the real reason Erin was there could he? From what he could tell knew, no one else knew what his partner was and as far as he was concerned, the longer it stayed that way, the better. Levy accepted his response with a grain of salt,

“She’s a pretty one, maybe one of the admin are giving into the jungle fever, eh?” He laughed loudly causing Hilda to turn giving him a loathing look, before returning to her

degradation of the warden who was trying to help her. Zach smiled as though agreeing. He knew how to handle Levy and if making him think Erin was sleeping her way to the top kept his mind at rest and away from asking questions, then so be it.

“You know how it is, pity there’s only one woman on admin’s staff and we all know she’s not into any of us.” A few others heard what he’d said and joined in the laughter. It was a well-known fact that Laura Monroe preferred men with a bit more kick. This was one of the reasons it hadn’t been a surprise when she’d become pregnant with Lisbet, by Nikolai.

He patted Levy’s shoulder, “Anyway mate, been good to see you, but need more bullets and things before I head back up, see you there?”

Levy nodded emphatically, “Of course, we’ll do the drink of the champions even better than last year!” He laughed again and as the artillery filled with more wardens, the noise level rose as those who hadn’t seen each other for some time caught up on new events.

Zach slipped into an adjoining room where he could test his gun. He pushed a button and as his target came into focus he shot at it, satisfied with the results. His thoughts slipped to Erin and all she’d told him as they’d waited for their respective flights. Nikolai had threatened her life and though Zach knew he had to think rationally about these things, his mind was working overtime. Whatever happened, he wouldn’t let anyone harm Erin. He pulled the trigger again.

Chapter 44

Erin took a satisfied sip of her bottled Coke. It had always been her favourite, especially as it was the one soda she could find no matter where she travelled to. She finished the bottle then zipped up her winter jacket. It was her turn to make the perimeter rounds and with Praesidium's director Anders breathing down all their necks over the last days, didn't want to make him any more paranoid by being just a few seconds late to her duties. He and the other admin members were staying in the East wing of the castle, where they would later be joined by the heads of the supernatural beings who were a part of the gathering.

Despite her jacket, Erin could feel the biting cold as she stepped outside and rubbed her leather gloved hands together briskly as she looked around. Human construction workers were hard at work constructing the flag poles for the flags that would be raised at the opening ceremony of the gathering. City officials unaware of the true nature of what was going on allowed their palms to be greased well annually in exchange for a 'no questions asked' attitude towards the event. As for curious citizens, it helped that the castle was surrounded by high walls that kept what was going on hidden from prying eyes, however, as a precaution containment officers guarded the gates and points along the wall day and night, to prevent any breaches of privacy.

Erin nodded as she passed the workers and followed the path she'd taken just six hours before. She found it the most effective route and realised early on that it allowed her to finish the task more quickly. The grounds were massive, with multiple mini-gardens, fountains and stone gazebos strategically placed for maximum decorative flare. The walls rose more than ten feet into the air and just inside them running most of the way around, were trees which were losing most of their leaves as the days wore on and winter knocked harder at autumn's door.

Last year's gathering had been the first that Erin had attended and one that she'd been surprised she'd even been given an invitation to. She remembered how excited she'd been, how taken aback by the lights that had strewn from those same trees and lit up the entire castle like something from a fairy tale. She'd wondered then if that was what Christmas was like, the made-up holiday celebrated for all the wrong reasons in the human realm. Thinking back on her naivete now, Erin almost laughed. She'd been like a child who'd just discovered something grand, when really, they'd been preparing her for this, telling her the truth, destroying whatever semblance of normalcy she'd allowed herself to have.

Erin came to the stables which had long ago been renovated into a sizeable guesthouse. She opened the door to take a quick look around, almost gagging at the perfumed scents that wafted up to greet her.

“Crap open a window,” she said covering her face, as she stepped carefully over the soft rugs that were placed throughout the house. It had been prepared as was customary for the arrival of its guests, a thing that was done more to ensure their continued cooperation, that because Praesidium cared about the occupants.

There were six chateaus on the property and were among the only modern constructions. They had been built as a matter of convenience sometime in the last century. Previously humans the supernatural beings fed on for the duration of the gathering had to be brought in daily from outside the gates. With the guesthouses, these humans stayed for the weekend and though they came voluntarily, containment cleansed them of any memories of the event. No one wanted to take any chances that something that could be publicised in the human realm had slipped in conversation.

Erin pushed open one of the bedroom doors, twisting her face up at the gifts that lay on the bed. There were chocolates, red roses, silks and thin white boxes which she assumed contained clothing. When she entered the adjoining bathroom, Erin’s frown deepened. A selection of sex toys and condoms greeted her snooping,

“S.I.N.,” she said knowingly, recognising the requirements of the Succubi and Incubi Nation. She closed the door and traipsed through the other rooms finding more of the same, that is, until she inspected the last. Erin pushed open the door, expecting to find the usual array of pleasure seeker’s paradise, when she paused, concerned. Laying in the bathtub, his dark eyes vacant as he stared at the wall, was a man his throat ripped out by what could only have been strong claws. Erin collected herself and pulling her cell phone out she called her handler,

“Damian,” she said when he answered, “The Reshu’s already here.”

Chapter 45

“For fuck’s sake someone get the body out of the tub!” Damian shouted to anyone who would listen, then took a long drag of his cigarette. Erin knew he was flustered, there was no one present who wasn’t. Further inspection with a DNA analyser had determined that the victim, one of the construction workers taking a break where he shouldn’t have been, had been killed by a werewolf and that had put the organisation’s members even more on edge. “Sure you didn’t hear anything?” Damian asked her, watching as containment officers followed his orders.

Erin shook her head. “No, was doing my rounds and there he was.” Containment Officer Marshall of Unit 15, New York, pulled off his latex gloves and threw them away. He was the one who’d inspected the body looking for any more clues.

He sighed, shaking his head, “Been dead for less than two hours, someone *obviously* wasn’t doing their job,” he glanced at Erin, brown eyes conveying his message.

“Last time I checked it was containment on the wall,” she said.

Officer Marshall opened his mouth to retaliate but Damian silenced him.

“You two can ‘ave your bloody pissing match later.” He turned to Erin, “You’re sure you didn’t see or hear anything?” he asked again.

“No Damian. I’d just come on shift, you have to ask Kit, she was on just before me.”

“Oh, trust me, I’m not the one that’s going to be asking her any questions,” he said and walked past her to the open doorway.

When he was gone, Officer Marshall came at her again, “There’s talk about you. No one knows why you’re even here already.”

“Someone has to make sure containment cleans up their messes.”

He laughed in disbelief, “*Our* messes? Wasn’t it you and that partner of yours who let Kaleb get away in the first place? If you hadn’t, we could have found out what the Reshu’s planning.”

Erin glared at him, her anger building, “What is this? Are you one the leaks? Trying to get me off my guard?”

Officer Marshall pointed his finger at her irately, “You can’t talk to me like that. I’m not even *from* Containment Unit 4. I don’t shit where I eat.”

Erin didn’t even hear him, “Take your hand out of my face,” she said quietly.

Confused, then defiant, Officer Marshall asked, “Or what?” He jabbed his finger at her again, laughing childishly at his own joke. “You wardens think way too much about yourselves,” he said raising his voice, so that two other containment officers who’d been in the other room, came to see what was happening. When they entered, he looked over her head to continue the play, “So this one tells me,” he said, then pointed, “That I shouldn’t put my hand in her—” His shout of pain rang out loudly and Erin cocked her head. She’d imagined his finger breaking, then another, then two more and as she had her dark magic had done it for her.

“*Oh crap!*” Exclaimed an officer, grabbing her from behind. She let him hold her for a moment, then her instincts taking over, raised her hand so that she could reach his neck and pushed him back.

“She’s gone crazy or something, get someone down here *now*,” the second was saying frantically into his cell phone but he wasn’t Erin’s concern. Officer Marshall tried to punch her with his other hand and she broke it at the elbow, leaving him to look at his dangling limb horrified.

“Look, you just need to calm down,” came the same voice who’d called for help and Erin turned slowly to look at him.

“What are you talking about?” she asked only mildly confused at this point. The officer wore the same look Zach had when she’d gone to town on the shifters.

“Are you serious?”

She followed his gaze which landed on Officer Marshall who lay in obvious pain, his bones displaced and deformed. Looking behind her, she saw the other officer who she couldn’t recall putting there, unconscious, but thankfully breathing. Erin closed her eyes tight. *I’ve done it again.*

The first time had been with Kaleb, then the human she’d almost killed, Lisbet, and now her own people. The thing is she wasn’t fully aware that she’d been doing it.

All kinds of thoughts raged in her head when she was like that, but none of them let her in on the fact that she was doing what she was thinking. How she'd felt in those moments as Officer Marshall had made fun of her, belittled her, had brought out a rage in her that she wasn't remotely accustomed to. Sure, she sometimes got riled up for stupid things, but it was different now, it was a feeling that took over her very being, giving her magic free reign to punish as it liked and though initially it had been exhilarating being able to do things she didn't think were possible for her, lately it was starting to do nothing but worry her.

"Let me help," she said now, springing into action as she reached to use her powers of healing on Officer Marshall.

He backed away from her, eyes flaming with rage and pain. "*Don't come near me,*" he cried out and Erin tried again, not wanting him to suffer any more for her mistake.

Before she could, a voice gravelly and low commanded, "Erin, come."

Chapter 46

“This happened when?” Zach inquired, moving a little away from the group he was with.

“Yesterday, bloody went mental or something,” Damian answered. “Knew this was coming, just didn’t figure it’d be so soon.” Zach listened as his handler gave a detailed account of what had transpired the afternoon before. “They thought the demons had got her, of course we couldn’t bloody well tell them what’s *actually* happening.”

“Yea, I’ve had to do my share of covering up of late too, wardens wanting to know why she was chosen to go to Albania early.”

“Well you’ve got to just keep your story simple,” Damian was saying, but Zach tuned out. The busy airport where he was standing waiting with a team of four other wardens for Nikolai to arrive seemed to blur in front of him. He kept seeing people passing him by but as he thought about the details of the recent events, it seemed as though all he saw were colours and shapes.

“Has she done anything like this recently?” Damian asked now and Zach gave himself a mental shake as he gathered his focus. On his lips was the truth, the ‘yes she has’, but not wanting to get Erin into any more trouble, he lied.

“No, Erin’s been right as rain. Haven’t noticed anything out of the ordinary since Canada.” Just as he’d known he couldn’t share the details of the shifter attack in his follow-up report, he knew he couldn’t tell the truth here either. He’d done that before and his partner hadn’t wanted anything to do with him. This time he needed to show her that she could trust him. This has nothing to do with Jacob, he told himself, though deep down he knew he truth. When Erin had shared about Jacob before, she’d seemed at ease, something he doubted she still felt with him, at least not yet.

“Shite, it’s a bloody awful time for this to ‘appen.”

Zach nodded, then remembering that Damian couldn’t see him said, “Yea, but hopefully it’ll blow over soon.”

“It’ll have to lad, she’s the fifth priestess and word’s spreading among the supernatural ranks that she was discovered. The big boys in admin aren’t going to send her packing back home, it’ll make them look weak.”

Zach was surprised, it was seldom that Damian shared what he thought about the dealings of the organisation so easily. He smiled, he knew what it was, “She’ll be okay Damian, Erin’s tough.” Damian cleared his throat loudly, obviously displeased that Zach had been able to translate his words into his true worry for Erin.

“Enough of that pansy talk, when’s Nikolai to arrive?”

Zach sigh into the receiver, “Supposedly two hours ago, we’ve already missed the first flight.” The team he was with were there to transport Nikolai, his daughter and those vampires he’d chosen to accompany them to Albania. They’d had no choice but to come days early as Nikolai had insisted that he would not travel to Albania until he had paid homage to his lost children in Rome. The organisation had given in, not wanting to agitate the vampire while Lisbet was still with him.

“Keep your eyes and ears open boy,” Damian said in closing and hung up before Damian could reply. He re-joined the team, most of whom looked bored or tired. Preparing for the gathering was taxing on wardens and containment alike as many went through pre-admittance combat training before they returned. They studied as though they were in college, needing to be familiar with every leader, their bloodlines, enemies and allies.

“Anything?” He asked when he was standing with the group again.

Levy answered, “Not yet, we should check and see if—”

“There they are,” another said, and Zach looked over.

Lisbet led the procession fully made-up and her dark hair now boasting golden highlights, hung loosely to her shoulders. She wore a clingy dark green woollen dress which ended at her thigh, with black stilettos and her outfit was accentuated with golden earrings and chain. She was laughing at some joke the young man next to her had told. He was the splitting image of Nikolai, right down to the dark hair and eyes, so that there was no doubt that he was his son Aleksander.

Both he and his father wore long grey trench coats over designer clothing, though the Nikolai had chosen to button his up, while Aleksander's hung open, revealing his impressive physique. The entire family's taste was impeccable and the nine vampires who walked behind them were just as chic, so that patrons, whether they realised or not, were turning their heads to look at them with interest.

"Here we go," Zach heard another of his team say and echoed the sentiment. He knew he'd been put on the team because of his and Erin's recent engagement with Nikolai, a chance to redeem himself if nothing else, but he wouldn't have minded being left out this time. He didn't like Nikolai, especially after what Erin had said and now he'd have to spend more than a couple days with him and the daughter who'd thoughtlessly tried to kill him. He gave a stiff smile as he greeted them,

"Hello Nikolai, Lisbet, Aleksander," he said giving a slight nod. Lisbet whispered something to her brother and they both laughed.

"My children, their joy is music," Nikolai said, motioning one of the vampires behind him to hand their luggage to the wardens.

This irritated Zach, "We're here to escort you, that's all. If you wanted baggage carriers, you pay like everyone else." If Nikolai was offended, he didn't show it and merely nodded to the vampire to forget about it.

"Aren't you the big man now, Mr. Warden," Lisbet said giggling, "Is it because Mrs. Warden's not here?" A snicker came from behind him and he looked back to see Levy pretending to cough.

"If you'll all follow us," he said, not wanting to get swept up in his own frustration. Lisbet existed to needle others it seemed.

"My sister says she tried to give you a hand job and you refused."

Zach stiffened as Aleksander made light of his sister's attack, "How commendable, she might be of age, but that's no way to treat a lady." More stifled laughter from Levy and this time he didn't hide it, raising his hand in apology. The other wardens remained stone-faced, but Zach was no fool, he was well aware that if he didn't do something he'd be the butt of all kinds of jokes all weekend long.

He paused, bringing the procession to a sudden halt, “Levy?” the warden looked at him expectantly, “why don’t you grab those bags from Nikolai’s guy.” Levy frowned surprised at the order, but when Zach’s stance didn’t change he gave in. “Good. Now Lisbet,” he said, trying to keep smugness from his tone, “Let’s get you back home to your mother.”

Chapter 47

Erin was pulled from less than desirable dreams when she felt her chair kicked. She'd been kept under lock and key for hours in the basement of the south wing and judging from the rays of sun forcing their way through the boarded-up windows of the downstairs rooms, she saw that hours had turned into a new day. This part of the castle was relatively unused, all for the rats and insects that chose to call it home.

“Brought you food,” the gravelly voice said. It had been unfamiliar to her at first, but now Erin knew who it was. Alfonse was one of the older wardens. He didn't go out into the field anymore and spent most of his time overseeing those in lockup. In Albania he acted as a gaoler of sorts keeping the rowdy or uncouth in line when they messed up. Erin was certain he hadn't expected to be dealing with her issues instead of some drunken idiot's misdemeanours.

She turned her nose up at the ceramic plate's contents. She couldn't abide tuna sandwiches and even if it was something she loved Erin didn't think she'd be able to eat. Hunger was the furthest thing from her mind. She met Alfonse's dull brown eyes. They sat on red, pockmarked face, with thick lips, broad nose and thin greying moustache.

“No thanks, you have it.”

Alfonse shrugged and sat across from her, taking a big bite out of the sandwich. He finished it in two more and washed it down with the glass of water he'd brought in with it.

“How much longer do I have to be in here?” she asked exasperatedly.

“When they decide you can come out, you can come out.”

Erin slumped back in her chair. She wondered what Zach was up to. She hadn't seen him before she'd left for Albania and hadn't checked in since she'd been there. The memory of their kiss was still fresh in her mind and now that she knew he'd be okay, she wanted to talk to him about it, get everything out in the open, but wasn't quite ready for *that* talk yet.

“Any other wardens arrive yet?”

“Wardens, containment, be a mess of them by tomorrow evening.”

Erin nodded. The gathering would officially begin in two days and she wondered if she'd be there to see it. Her trial, as admin liked to call such interrogations, had not gone well. Anders had yelled at her for nearly an hour, asking her everything from if she was out of her mind, to if she didn't use her head. At one of these Erin had replied 'only when necessary' and this had resulted in a new tirade, as Lauren joined in to bash Erin unmercifully for what they saw as her making light of a very serious situation.

They were afraid, that was clear. Afraid of the consequences when her origins became common knowledge. What she didn't quite understand was why. The shifters and Nikolai had proven that some in the supernatural world were becoming aware that the fifth priestess had risen, but the concern from admin that those in Praesidium should remain in the dark, that was the thing that made her uneasy. Shouldn't they be the first to know? She cast her line and tried again,

"Come on Alfonse, give me some of the fresh gossip. Have they tracked down the Reshu werewolf?"

Alfonse leaned over conspiratorially, and Erin leaned in as he whispered, "All anyone's talking about is the bitch of a warden who beat up containment officers." He laughed at her scrunched-up face as he told her nothing she didn't already know, adding, "Between you and me, it's about time."

They fell into silence again and Erin made up her own assumptions about the werewolf. She couldn't hear anything on the outside this far away from the action, but Alfonse laidback attitude told her that the castle couldn't still be on high alert. That either meant that the werewolf had been found and dealt with, or admin would rely on placing more sentries and guards to ensure there were no more breaches. The quiet was interrupted by a loud pounding at the locked wooden door. Alfonse rose to open it immediately and stood uncomfortably straight as Anders entered. Erin straightened too under the steady gaze of the director.

"Those who knew about your indiscretion have been warned that they mustn't speak of it or have a one-way flight back to wherever they hail from." He sat in the chair facing her and unbuttoned the jacket of his navy-blue three-piece suit. "I'm going to give you a pass," he said and Erin sighed relieved, "this time."

“Of course, thank you so much Anders ... Mr. Kjaer,” she amended, remembering herself.

“Leave,” Anders said to Alfonse, though he didn’t turn to look at the man. He narrowed his eyes, thin blonde brows furrowed, “Do you know why Jacob’s so respected by Praesidium?”

“He was the one who got lots of the supernatural realm to take part in the Gathering.”

Anders nodded approvingly at her quick response. “Do you know *why* he was so helpful?”

She stumbled on this one, “I suppose he wanted peace?”

Anders shook his head. “That’s part of it, but the real reason was so he could protect you. He wanted a place where whenever another like you rose, you could be safe. The only thing wrong with that plan is that every time, every single time, you turn on the very people who looked after you, who took you from that orphanage and helped you to reach your full potential. Every time, you turn on Praesidium.”

Erin stuttered, “Th-that doesn’t mean that this time it’ll be like—”

Anders raised his hand for silence. “You’re a valued member of Praesidium Erin and I’m sure you know that a big part of this is your particular brand of talents. All I’m saying to you, and I want you to hear me, is, learn to control what you are, or we *will* put you down.” He stood, smiling at her as though he hadn’t just threatened her life and left.

Alfonse appeared soon after, “What are you still sitting there for? Get out of here,” Alfonse said good-naturedly.

Erin nodded, not really paying attention as she swallowed her terror whole.

Chapter 48

When Zach finally laid eyes on Erin, he found himself nervous. He'd arrived with Nikolai and his party just hours before and since then had been relaying his version of events to admin. Lisbet seemed much less than happy to see her mother, but Nikolai had urged her to show respect at least and eventually the teen had kissed her mother lightly on the cheek. Zach saw the saddened look on Nikolai's face as Lisbet sat by her mother and the squeeze of reassurance he gave to Aleksander. Then the picture of mother and daughter, Lauren so detached and Lisbet pretending to smile, made the warden wonder if any of it had been for the right purpose.

"Thought you would never get here," Erin said cheerfully and Zach, who'd thought things would be awkward between them, put his mind at ease.

"I was leading the escort team for Nikolai and her royal highness of Brathaven." The two laughed and fell into step beside each other on their way to the grand hall. Praesidium employees and supernatural beings alike dressed up for this occasion and Zach side glanced Erin appreciatively in her pale-yellow gown, floor length gown, which complimented her caramel-coloured complexion. He'd opted for black slacks and silk shirt, which he wore with a black understated tuxedo jacket.

They followed others heading into the hall. Most were talking and joking with each other on this the only night of the gathering that they were allowed to do anything like it. The rest of the time would be spent working in shifts to ensure that everything ran smoothly. Most dreaded the prospect, as it often meant breaking up petty squabbles between supernaturals and enforcing the rules of the gathering which protected the humans who were fed on, but the bad was usurped by the good, which was a much-deserved night off.

"You are the picture of radiance," Zach heard, then saw Noah beside Erin. The old style of his attire added to his allure and he'd pulled his voluminous white hair pulled back into a low ponytail.

"Flattery will get you nowhere," Erin replied dryly, but she was smiling.

"Good to see you again Jacob," Zach interjected, "Admin will be glad you were able to attend."

"Nothing would keep me away," he said more to Erin than Zach.

“We’ll talk afterwards Jacob, Zach doesn’t want to hear you fawning over me,” Erin said laughing uncomfortably.

You’re right, I don’t, Zach thought.

Jacob nodded, “Very well, I will find you.” With that he was off, disappearing into the crowd. The two wardens didn’t say anything to each other for a little while, ignoring the obvious as they hailed those they knew, or pausing for short conversations.

When they’d taken their seats, Zach spoke, “Damian told me about the Reshu.” Erin stiffened beside him and did not immediately respond, more interested in what was going on around her than indulging in the conversation.

The grand hall was a windowless circular room, with an intricately designed mosaic in red and brown bricks across the floor. It was a phoenix, rising into the sun and was the room’s focal point when it was not covered by furniture. In the centre of the room was the Table of Leaders, where those who ruled the factions of the supernatural realm would take their places of honour. Like the room it was circular, so that no one leader would sit at its head, as a show of fealty between the leaders. Carved from a white oak tree, which possessed magical properties, the table had been the one used from the Gathering’s inception.

“They didn’t find the werewolf and containment’s convinced they’ve got it covered, but Kaleb was crafty, I imagine his leader is more so,” she said then changing the subject, “Want to bet on the fights after?”

Zach laughed. She was referring to the clan battles the lycans orchestrated in an amphitheatre one floor down from the grand hall. “Sure why not,” he said laughing at her enthusiasm. “This time I keep the money though,” he added, remembering how much she’d lost wanting to root for the underdog the year before. He’d tried to tell her that the strongest lycans always came out on top, but Erin had been hopeful.

He glanced at her again, seeing that same hope shining somewhere inside her as she watched the hall full up, but there was something more there too. She’d matured he could tell. She wasn’t the same girl who’d sat next to him a year ago, she was becoming a woman. Zach was about to say something else, when a hush fell over the crowd. Lauren, in a regal black gown had called for silence.

“All hail the Table of Leaders, let noise be shunned as they grace us with their presence, so that the gods may smile upon them and us, in their glorious light.” She stepped out of view and some moments later Anders appeared. He strode confidently in, bedecked in an impeccable, black three-piece suit and leather shoes.

He raised his hand, acknowledging those gathered before sitting, then said loudly, “Join me my friends, let the Gathering begin.”

Chapter 49

On Lauren's word, the demon lord Athulla entered next, his horn-shaped, iron crown embedded in his bald head. His eyes were pools of liquid black, skin dark as soot and bare feet with claw like nails scraped across the stone floor. He grinned constantly, broken and yellowing teeth the framework of what was a wider than natural mouth. His lips were painted brightest red and from his ear lobes hung human and animal bones, which fell way past his bare chest. His wrap of red and gold covered his stomach and legs and made a swishing sound as he walked.

"Hail Athulla, lord of demons," came the call across the room and Erin wondered when this had become a thing. They'd all have to repeat identical words for everyone that came through those doors to be seated at the table, yet if it came down to it Praesidium would try to wipe them all from the face of the Earth. Her little chat with Anders had proven that.

As the words came back to her she shuddered involuntarily, so that Zach leaned over and asked, "Are you okay?"

She didn't respond, her eyes meeting Jacob's. He sat across the room from her and had been watching for much of the time since they'd sat down. She'd tried not to notice, averted her gaze whenever she could, but with him directly in her line of site, this had become a difficult task.

Ricard, Leader of the Clans, sat in his position of honour and the chant went up again. He was an imposing figure, with eyes that looked like burning amber gold. Thick dark hair cascaded down his back and his light-ochre complexion was scarred with the markings of the clans loyal to his rule. Erin didn't think she'd ever seen Ricard smile and in comparison to Athulla, was like the 'lord of doom', instead of a grinning fool.

Baako the shifter leader came next, a brown-skinned man with eyes moving from black to white as he surveyed he room. He wore traditional African tribal garb, as did the shifters who had taken the journey to Albania with him. They were a proud people and never missed the opportunity to proclaim their roots.

"Hail Baako, leader of shifters," Erin said with the rest, though she vividly remembered the threat he'd sent her way. She looked over to where the shifters were standing

in a small group a respectful gesture for their leader, but could not tell if any among them was the priestess she'd been warned about.

“The Vampire High Council, Amelie, Ragnor, Nikolai, and Sekti,” Lauren called out in introduction and from behind her they came. Wearing cotton robes that brushed the floor and silver chokers around their necks, they looked more like they were on their way to be baptised by a Christian priest, than sit at the elite table.

Erin glanced at Lisbet who was sitting among the vampires with Aleksander, a look of total pride on her face. The four VHC members sat and another loud hail went up before Lauren introduced the final member of the Table of Leaders.

“Wonder who it'll be,” Zach whispered. Erin had to admit she was curious too. Her stupidity had single-handedly left Jiao in the wind and Meihui dead, so Erin didn't have a clue who was about to be named as S.I.N's leader.

“The Leader of the Succubus and Incubi Nation, Delun Chong.” Erin's eyes were trained on the door and through it came four samurais in traditional yoroi armour, their swords sheathed and strapped ominously at their sides. They made their own path, standing in columns and facing each other, a thing that was not considered strange as it was customary for S.I.N leaders to travel with skilled warriors.

An incubus, tall and sleek, with thick dark hair cut short and slanted dark eyes, entered. His designer black suit was elegantly understated, smiling pleasantly as he bowed low to those at the head table before sitting.

So this is your replacement Jiao, Erin mused, eyeing him curiously. She hadn't met him before and couldn't remember seeing him at last year's Gathering, yet S.I.N had chosen him to lead them. She supposed he could be filling in until one of the more seasoned officials stepped in, especially as Jiao had been stripped so abruptly.

“Guess Praesidium trusts him,” Zach whispered. Erin nodded. That was another possibility. Jiao was sure to still have friends within their nation, so the organisation may have simply made the choice that would be least likely to step out of line, as opposed to the best one for S.I.N. Whatever the reason, she hoped he'd be as good a leader as she knew Meihui would have been. Lauren stepped back into the room, her warm smile betraying how truly scathing she could be,

“Praesidium welcomes you all and thanks you for your continued loyalty. Now,” she began with a slight laugh, “Let the feast begin.” A raucous cheer went up and next to her Zach asked her something, but Erin wasn’t paying attention. Delun was staring at her with a curious gaze, dark eyes roving over her suggestively. He smiled.

Chapter 50

The party was well under way when Erin slipped away unnoticed. She'd eaten very little and as more plates of meat, rice, potatoes and pretty much every dessert she could think of started to make their way into the dining hall to which they'd adjourned, eventually she'd needed to get some air. Some were already indulging their basic needs and humans were scattered across the room as supernaturals fed and satiated their deepest desires.

She made her way out to the terrace some doors down from the dining room and pulled a hand through her curly hair. At first after the heat of inside the cold air didn't run her away and she allowed it to pass over her skin gently, causing prickly goose flesh to form until eventually she had to give it up and retreat indoors.

She hadn't been back inside for more than a few minutes, when Jacob was whispering in her ear,

"I told you I would find you."

I don't want to be found. She turned to him, her brightest smile in place, though she didn't feel it for a moment, "So you did." They sat together in a small lounge area and Erin let him look at her for a while longer before she said, "I met Nikolai."

His expression changed, "I had hoped that would not be the case for some time yet."

"Didn't have a choice, his dhampir daughter Lisbet ran off to be with daddy and of course we had to go get her so—"

Jacob was beside her in a moment, touching her face lightly, searching her eyes, "Tell me he did not hurt you."

She breathed deep, inhaling his scent, wishing she didn't like it so much. "Not yet at least."

Jacob looked her dead in the eye, "This time he will not, ever."

So it's all true, Erin thought, her stomach sinking. He was still looking at her, his face so close to hers, that Erin's discomfort started to grow. She said the next thing that came to her head, "Looks like the Reshu changed their minds about coming," she said with a forced laugh.

Jacob gave her a half-smile and leaned closer, his lips brushing hers. He pulled back before they parted, touching her hair, “Sorry my love, I know you are not yet ready for this—” Erin stopped him with a kiss of her own, liking the strange taste of him as they did. He embraced her, pulling her closer to him and put her hand against his chest, liking the feel of the rippling muscles underneath. He pulled away, pushing himself away from her in a movement so swift to be seen by the naked eye.

He shook his head sadly, “It is not yet time.” He didn’t say anything else, but left the room, his supernatural speed taking him faster than she could ever hope to keep up with. Erin sat there puzzled. She wasn’t even sure she’d really wanted to kiss Jacob, but it had been a quiet escape from the mental warfare she was dealing with. As she’d kissed him, she hadn’t thought about anything else. She got up, deciding to make her way to the amphitheatre where Zach would probably be already waiting for her.

As she made her way down the stairs, Delun was coming up. He looked at her seductively and Erin nodded about to pass, when he stopped her.

“You were staring at me,” he said in Mandarin.

Erin’s eyes widened, “Me staring at you, I’m sure it was the other way round.”

He grinned perfectly white teeth, attributing to his gorgeous smile.

“Very well, we’ll call it even,” he answered in English and winked at her.

She threw her hands up, “Fine, whatever,” she said, about to descend more steps when he touched her arm.

“That’s not going to work, I spelled myself before coming to this shingdig.”

It was her turn to grin and he touched his heart as though hurt, “I wouldn’t dare take a woman against her will.”

Erin laughed as he continued to flirt with her. “The leader of S.I.N can have the bounty of humans here, why don’t you go find one of them to play with?”

“What if I’d rather play with you?” He asked coming closer to her.

“Maybe I don’t want to be played with,” she retorted.

“That’s not what my spies tell me.” He grinned mischievously and Erin noted that he was talking about her liason with Jacob.

She tried not to let it upset her, “So you have people watching me?”

Unfazed he said, “Not people, just him.” Erin turned and saw one of the samurai who Delun had entered the grand hall with standing a few yards away.

She shook her head at the weirdness of it all, “Okay, that’s enough stalking for one night. It’s been real,” she said and stepped past him to continue her journey down the stairs, when he caught her arm.

“Let me finish what the vampire started. I promise I won’t leave you stranded as he did.”

Erin paused, considering his offer. He was quite handsome and incubi were known to be amazing lovers. All around them wardens and containment alike were giving into their inhibitions and having a good time. *Why can't I?* Even if it was for all the wrong reasons.

She remembered Zach, “I should let my partner know, he’s waiting for me in the—” Delun stopped her, in much the same way as she had with Jacob, though his was a hard kiss. He put his arm possessively around her waist and smiled when he finally released her.

“Come.” He led her back up the stairs, then up another flight to a drawing room. Erin didn’t have the time to look around before Delun was on her, ripping straps from shoulders, pushing up her dress and taking her against the panelled wall. She cried out, allowing herself to give in to what he was making her feel, forgetting about anything else in those moments. He whispered to her, words she did not understand, the ancient language of their nation.

Then in Mandarin, his breath hot upon her ear he said, “Now I take your essence as you took the life of my sister Meihui.”

Chapter 51

When Zach saw Erin again, she'd changed her clothes and was back in her usual black jeans, vest and leather jacket. Her plush lips were folded into a thin line, her nostrils flared and she was frowning.

"What's got you in a fix?" he asked as she came and plopped down into the seat he'd saved for her in the Amphitheatre.

"Not gonna talk about it," she replied and winced when a loud cheer went up.

Zach knew when he shouldn't press, so caught her up on the results instead, "Moved onto two-on-twos, this monster of a guy won the single matches, you would've loved it."

Erin grunted and Zach gave up, it was obvious she was in no mood for talking and until she was, it made little sense trying to coerce her. Another loud cheer erupted from the audience as a lycan was flung into one of the titanium posts that held up the barbed wire ring.

"Come on lads!" Zach shouted affably and clapped his hands loudly. He'd bet on the opposing side and having done pretty well for himself in the first rounds of competition, didn't want to lose his current wagers.

"Think I'm gonna go." Erin stood before Zach had a chance to stop her and was moving through the crowd so swiftly, that he had to crane his neck to see where she was headed. At first he was just going to let her go, not sure he wanted to navigate the foul waters of her mood, but after a few minutes passed and the fight fell further out of his favour, Zach ran to catch up with her, cursing under his breath.

Following the direction she'd taken was easy enough, as it was an arcade that led out to one of the larger gardens. However, it wasn't some time before he found her, sitting with her knees drawn up under her chin behind one of the arches. He made some noise as he approached so she'd know someone was there, but she didn't turn.

"If I didn't know you better I'd say you were hiding," he said with a smile and sat a little ways from her, crossing his legs. She didn't say anything immediately and he looked out at what must have been a ballroom when the castle had first been built. The room was huge and

heavy crimson velvet curtains hung from large lancets. “Praesidium must have paid a pretty penny for this place,|| he tried now, knowing that he’d said something like that to her the last time they were there, but not knowing what else to say in the moment.

To his surprise, she made it easy, I’m hiding from you, Jacob, myself ... everyone,” she said, turning to look at him. He’d never seen Erin cry before and though it looked like her eyes were filling with water, she didn’t allow it to spill, blinking hard.

“None of you understand. I have all these people telling me what I am, what someone who looked like me a hundred years ago did and I feel, the same. Only I know I’m not. A part of me isn’t who I remember myself to be and none of you, none of you *gets it*.”

Zach was lost for words, so came and sat closer, hoping this at least could be a comfort to her. It seemed to have the opposite effect as she flinched, though she didn’t move. “I’m sorry I made life more complicated for you Erin. I never would have kissed you.”

She looked at him and laughed, “That’s the least of it Zach. What did you think was going to happen? We’d settle down, have a batch of kids, some threesomes in the morning with Jacob the sexy vampire?” she sucked her teeth, creating a sound she only made on rare occasions, another backlash from her childhood in Barbados.

He wished her words hadn’t hurt. “I didn’t expect anything from you. I thought there was a moment and I took it, that’s all.”

“Well there wasn’t,” she snapped, “so why don’t you go have some fun like everyone else? I’d rather be alone anyway.”

He nodded, “Right,” he said and stood, unwilling to play into her immature antics. He walked back towards the Amphitheatre, wondering if any of the other fights he’d bet on had begun, when something struck him as strange. *Way too quiet*. They’d been no more signs of Reshu activity, and guards were on double-alert, but Zach could *feel* something wrong.

He kept walking, pulling his ever-faithful gun from its holster as he moved forward, slightly bent and keeping his body close to the wall. He rounded a corner and just as quickly put his back up against it, what he saw giving him pause.

Werewolves on leashes held by lycans, snapped and snarled at patrons, leading Zach to believe it was the Reshu clan. Jiao had also been with them, standing proud with more than ten samurai with their swords drawn. Zach was at a loss as to why none of those who were there for the Gathering were making any moves. The Reshu and Jiao's small army were not nearly enough compared to the force of those in attendance.

He risked peeping again. A woman stood in the midst of them, fair-skinned, with straw-coloured hair shaved in a buzz cut. Her palms spread and faced upwards. She was smiling, whatever magic she was using keeping other supernaturals at bay. It's not that they don't want to move, they just can't, Zach realised with a start. The woman's eyes opened, large and bright blue and looked directly at him.

Zach wasted no more time, turning and making a run back to where Erin was sitting. He pulled his cell phone out as he did, hoping that Damian would pick up. They needed to get admin and the other leaders to safety before everything went to shit. He knew without question, she was another vodun priestess.

Chapter 52

Erin shed her pity party pants the second Zach came for her. He explained what he'd seen to her and Damian simultaneously as he spoke to their handler on the phone and she listened carefully.

Damian screamed a few orders at Zach, then her partner handed her the phone, "He wants to talk to you."

Erin answered, a cold kind of calm seeping into her belly. "Yes?"

"I was telling the boy, I'm here with Anders and the others and they've ordered you both to stand down. They killed a few of the containment officers guarding the walls and if she's really controlling that many with her magic, you can't go after her, she'll have you for lunch."

"Okay," Erin replied, not as scared as Damian probably thought she should be. She handed Zach the phone and looked down at her hands, flexing her fingers. *Is dying such a bad thing? Another version of me will be reborn anyway. Who cares how it happens? It's going to.* She understood why Jacob wanted to believe differently, but all roads pointed to some kind of gruesome death at the hands of those who hated her, or wanted to destroy her so they could live longer.

"Maybe I don't need to live longer," she said to the wind and Zach gave her a strange look.

"Erin you can't be thinking ...? Christ almighty Erin, don't do something fucking stupid."

It's not stupid, she thought, but she said, "Okay." She turned in the direction Zach had come, walking purposefully forward.

He grabbed her arm, "Admin wants us to hold off Erin, don't do this, you'll get yourself killed," she tried to shake his hand off, but he held fast, pleading with her with those green eyes that she liked so much. She raised her other hand and swiped it across her body, her dark magic sending Zach flying.

Can't stop, the voice in her head said.

She'd walked a few steps more, when a figure came alone from the other direction. She was just as Zach had described, a rail-thin blonde woman who looked more like a young boy. Her eyes though, they were something special, so huge and blue that to Erin it almost seemed as though they glowed.

"The third priestess, Bellona," Erin breathed, not knowing *how* she knew.

Her sister of sorts smiled at her knowingly. "The fifth," she said with a thick accent that placed her origins somewhere in Spain. "I'll make this business with you quick, my spell will hold them for only so long and there is much my masters wish of me."

"Masters?" Erin repeated scornfully.

The smile slipped from Bellona's face, "Oh you think you are better? You are as much a slave to the humans as I am to the lycans, only, they don't keep my truth from me."

That blow hurt, especially as Erin knew it couldn't have come from anyone but Kaleb. She decided to let it pass. "So you're the one behind the male werewolves? And the way they're suddenly so passive?"

"I simply helped a species progress," she shrugged. "Enough talk." Bellona spread her fingers, sending an unnatural pulse towards Erin. The warden was pushed back, her nerves on edge as she felt a tremble course through her, but Bellona was already on her again. She blew some non-existent thing from the palm of her hand and before long Erin could feel her body burn as though from the inside out.

"Raeinu heyito," she said quickly, cleansing herself of the curse. She imagined Bellona's legs breaking, but her opponent was faster and her protection spell kept the damage at bay. Erin spewed blue flame from her hands, watching as it zipped and sped after Bellona, only to be stopped midway and reversed back to her, so that she had to swiftly throw up an invisible shield to protect herself.

Bellona laughed, "They taught you nothing? You are pitifully weak." She threw Erin back again, her laughter filling the night with a sound that was grating on Erin's nerves. The warden tried a series of tricks she used often, but nothing worked, Bellona was always one

step ahead. When Bellona had Erin balled up in pain on the floor, she came and stood over her, then crouched beside her.

“Had I known you would have been so easy, I would have come for you when I first saw you.”

“What?”

Bellona laughed at her confusion, “Yes, you wouldn’t know would you? I’ve watched you for a while fifth.” She leaned in and Erin could smell the faint musky scent of her. She tensed as Bellona continued, “After we are done, maybe I’ll take the pretty one you work with for myself. He looks tough, but I can make him scream. In the end, they all do.”

Her words rushed through Erin like a tidal wave. This time she recognised what was happening, but as usual, was powerless to stop it. Bellona’s reference to Zach had hit a nerve and Erin would not allow the shit-hole that had become her life, to destroy his. *I just won’t let that happen.*

Her dark magic coursed through her more effortlessly than before. Her head was pounding, but she let the steady rhythm wash over her, wanting to feel what she was. Her heart raced and beat fast and her eyes flittered this way and that, so that though closed, she felt as though she had more clarity than ever before.

Somewhere in the fog she could hear screams. There were more than a few, many in fact, from various sources. She heard growling, biting, felt something like claws take possession of her skin and just as quickly disappear. She felt herself moving forward, felt her tongue speak words in a language she didn’t know, heard something, then many things, as they fell around her.

“Erin,” a familiar voice called, then another, older, called to her too, but she couldn’t reach them, not yet, not ...

The rumbling caused her to open her eyes and she felt the structure tremble. Around her were slain bodies, lycan and werewolves, demons and succubi, wherever she looked, there was death. Erin fell to her knees, turning her head to see that Bellona lay with her neck broken, body twisted so grotesquely, that Erin looked away in disgust.

Black and red mingled, pouring into cracks in the stone floor, combining to create a strange kind of treacle that dribbled and flowed away from opened mouths and wounds. Chunks of meat, not from the dinner table, but belonging to those strewn haphazardly across the floor, became one in death, as their owners never really had been in life.

A few retreated, not once looking back to save friend or foe, some looked around dazed, not yet sure what had actually transpired, clinging to stubs that were once limbs, while others still, tried only to muster the strength that would allow them to push fallen comrades off their own bodies.

Erin choked on her breath, then swallowed hard. She could hear footsteps in the distance closing in fast and she trembled, not with fear, but overwhelmed by the injustice of it all. Maybe if someone had told her, shown her how to control herself, maybe then...

The only survivor of Jiao's samurais stood. His mistress had fallen, a red pool beneath her spreading quickly to meet the tributaries that linked the dead. Jiao's mouth was opened as though she would speak, but the vacancy in her eyes told a different tale. The samurai looked at Erin, his eyes filled not with hate or anger, but sadness, and unsheathing his sword, he plunged it into his stomach, the only honourable death for his failure.

She wanted to look around for Zach, but couldn't bring herself to. *If supernaturals didn't survive, how could he?*

"*Praesidium burn* and your Gathering with you!" An outraged demon screamed. She wailed, clutching the head of another, ripped from a body that Erin could not find amidst the carnage. The demon shouted the words again, fury causing her body to shake violently, and Erin shuddered. The demons were among the organisation's most faithful allies, could it be that she had broken these ties with her senseless killing?

Her hands fell to the floor as she coaxed herself to breathe. She had broken the rules of the Gathering, maybe even destroyed it. She'd done it all, it was her handiwork, and even though it was like being in a dream where everything happened while she watched, this time had been very different.

She'd felt every movement, revelled in every death, even the innocent had paid the price of her celebration. She was the fifth, a woman of dark omens, the one who had made whole

villages fall. *You're Erin*, a truer voice said, as she was gripped and roughly pulled to her feet.

Erin tried to listen.

Epilogue

Zach ran as quickly as he could down to lockup. He'd been back in Middlesbrough for less than half hour and needed to make sure that she was okay. He ran, ignoring the puzzled looks from fellow employees as he whizzed by them. When he finally reached his destination, he waved his hand over the door. It opened smoothly, recognising his identification code, then closed with a soft click behind him.

“Where is she Alfonse, I have to make sure she's okay.”

Alfonse looked up from his newspaper warily, “You already know that's not going to happen,” he said frankly and went back to his paper.

“Two minutes, I haven't seen her since it happened, she has to know everything's okay, that *I'm* okay.”

“Didn't you hear me? No.”

Zach was at his wit's end, “*Fuck!* At least tell me how she's doing, you can at least do that right?”

“If it'll let me get back to my paper,” Alfonse grumbled. “She hasn't spoken to anyone, kind of just stares, doesn't even blink when the lights go on.”

Zach dragged a hand across his face, “No one's telling me anything, how long?” he asked more politely, hoping that Alfonse would let him know when Erin would be released from lockup. It was the worst kind of prison, where wardens and containment officers who'd screwed up badly enough, were sent to consider their actions. There was no physical contact, little food and the tiny cells were mostly kept dark.

Alfonse sighed as if considering if he should answer Zach or not. He looked back down at his paper clearing his throat, “Not sure they're ever going to let her out.”

THANK YOU!

*Thanks for reading **The Wardens Series Season 1!** The Wardens series continues with **Episode 7: Blood & Stone (S02E07)**. Settle in, this one is unlike any of the other episodes. It reveals sides of all your favourites you've never seen before, deepens resentment and jealousy, oh and, introduces a race with a mind-bending ability ^_^.*

Much appreciation!

~ Jackie Jones

Other Info

This is a first edition and includes Chapters 1 – 52, and the epilogue. It is a The Wardens Universe (TWU) series.

To join the ranks and dive into the world, visit [The Wardens Universe \(TWU\)](#).

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For more information about Jackie Jones, her stories, and other content, please visit: [Pages Unforgotten](#).

Formatting

This is the earliest version of this series and you may come across formatting errors. *E.g.: Underlined words = italics.*

Author's Note

Special Editions of The Wardens Universe books/episodes including behind-the-scenes content, convenient tools like Table of Contents, and Previously On (so you can skip ahead if you want), and more, will be available in April 2021.

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A TWU series

