



Assassin's Match

(Assassin's Magic #8)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I am broken. My magic is shattered.

Love is a promise I can't deny.

I should have been a powerful witch but an attempt on my life stole my magic, leaving me broken, unable to remember spells.

Ridiculed by other witches, I've spent my life trying to pull together the threads of power that still exist within me.

Falling in love was never supposed to be a possibility for me. Especially not with the formidable Master Assassin, Alexei Mason.

But when Alexei stepped into my life, he tore through every defense I'd built around my heart Until the moment I discovered his dark secret.

Now I must risk everything for a love he can't return. A love I'm determined to put my faith in and fight for, even if I'm fighting for it with broken magic.

It's time to believe in my heart.

Content information: Assassins Match is a 25,000 word novella.

It's intended for mature audiences due to steamy content, violence, and language. This is the final book in the Assassins Magic series and ends with a happily ever after. NO cliffhanger.

Total Pages (Source): 16

CHAPTER ONE

I fold the carefully written note and tuck it into the back pocket of my jeans. Stepping inside the ornate entrance to the Boston Public Library, I soak in the quiet after the noise of traffic sounds outside.

The ambience inside the library should be relaxing—it would be on any other day—but I’ve been planning this visit for months and I don’t expect it to go smoothly.

My fingertips linger at my waist. I try to ignore the urge to check the contents of my pockets once more. I carry a handwritten spell in each of them, spells I’ve spent a long time researching.

I pray I don’t need the one in my left pocket, but I’m prepared to use it if I have to.

The library’s entrance hall takes my breath away.

I climb the main staircase to the second level, passing the carved stone lions on my way up.

To most people, the lions are a testament to history and learning, but to magical beings, they’re a warning.

The supernaturals who guard this place will not tolerate an intrusion like the one I’m planning.

I'm about to break all the rules in the book, but I've run out of options. The library is my last hope.

I left my usual heels at home, opting for a pair of whisper-quiet ballet flats that allow me to creep through Bates Hall once I reach the second level.

The arched ceiling curves high above me while the sunlight hitting the solid wood tables and green lamps on either side creates an ethereal glow inside the elongated room.

Taking a deep breath—my last calm breath—I stride toward the wooden table at the front of the room where the librarian sits, studying a thick book that lies open in front of her.

She's a petite woman with piles of sandy-brown curls spilling across her shoulders.

She's dressed smartly in a skirt and suit jacket, her spectacles perched on her nose.

She looks like a typical librarian, but I know better.

It's impossible to sneak up on her. Her back stiffens as she senses my approach. She swivels in her seat, her shoulders rigid and her gaze narrowed, giving me a quick assessment.

Identifying me, she fails to hide the fear in her eyes fast enough.

For years, I was a recluse, remaining in my home on Saber Lane. I spent my time dispensing harmless spells for random clients like the good little witch that I was. I believed I had no say in my life, that I was damaged beyond repair and could do nothing more than wield the most basic magic.

But I've since learned that I'm much stronger than I realized. What's more, I associate with people who make killing their business. My friends are assassins who excel at their craft.

The librarian quickly relaxes, a forced slackening of her shoulders and unclenching of her fists as she rises from her seat.

A haughty expression replaces her surprise. I know what she's thinking: I can't be here to challenge her.

This library is the stronghold of the Boston Order of Angels. Nobody is stupid enough to take on one of their warrior angels within their home. Let alone me —a witch whose power is damaged.

"Tanzanina Gray," she says, keeping her voice low and unobtrusive. "This is an unexpected surprise."

I force my teeth to unclench. Nobody calls me 'Tanzanina' unless they want trouble. Tanzanina was the name my mother used to call me, and it holds a sacred place in my heart. Ever since her death, everyone calls me 'Tansy.'

"Hello, Iriel," I say, satisfied when she jolts with surprise. The angels guard their true names in the same way that I guard my full name. "My visit was inevitable. You have something I need."

Quickly hiding her surprise, she gives me a nonchalant stare. "What might that be?"

She knows exactly why I'm here. And I know that she knows. But it looks like we're going to play a little game.

"I need the revival spell contained in The Blessed Grimoire," I answer, maintaining a

pleasant tone. “Give it to me and I’ll leave you in peace.”

The Blessed Grimoire is hidden among the books in this room.

It will be concealed in plain sight, masquerading as an ordinary book—like a dictionary, or an encyclopedia, or even a memoir.

It’s cloaked in protective spells that prevent it being found by anyone who doesn’t already know its location. I need her to lead me to it.

The aura of light around her silhouette brightens as she braces for attack. Humans can’t see auras, but most magical beings have one—all different. It’s how I can tell another supernatural’s species without having to ask.

Among the people studying at the tables behind me, there are multiple shifters and a vampire. So far, I haven’t seen any other angels, but I’m certain they won’t be far away.

Iriel’s voice lowers to a soft snarl. “You can’t have it.”

Every syllable she speaks grates on my nerves. The back of my neck prickles, telling me she’s drawing on her angelic powers.

I take a step toward her despite the threat. “I need it?—”

“To repair your power.” She gives me another haughty stare. “Your pride will be your undoing, Tanzanina.”

I press my lips together. Nobody has ever called me ‘proud’ before. Stubborn, prickly, defensive—but not proud.

The librarian's condescending tone intensifies. "When your mother died in that unfortunate incident, you were left half a witch. It's common knowledge among the angels that you can't remember spells—despite the power burning inside you. You are no match for me."

Normally, I would take a deep breath at this point and force myself to calm down, but I deliberately allow her patronizing tone to rankle me.

It's true that I can't remember spells. I have to read them aloud, which is why I carry handwritten notes in my pockets.

But if I become emotional enough, I can access my instinctive power and react without thought. It doesn't happen often, and it's only triggered by pain, but I'm counting on my magic to show itself today.

I clench my teeth. "You will give me The Blessed Grimoire, Iriel."

She squares her shoulders and tips her chin. "You can't have it. The revival spell is too dangerous to be let out into the world."

"I'm aware of its danger, but it's my last hope."

Her jaw clenches before the smallest measure of pity passes across her expression, her eyes taking on a lustrous glow.

"You know I can't give it to you, no matter how compelling your reasons."

That spell can revive the dead, bring back lost memories, mend broken objects, rekindle an old romance...

Whatever you need revived, it can do it.

But the result will be chaos. Everything happens for a reason, Tanzanina.

Part of your power is gone and it is meant to remain gone. You will not get the book from me.”

I sigh inwardly. Sure, the revival spell could bring back my ability to remember spells, but what she doesn’t know is that I don’t want the spell for myself.

I casually hook my thumb into the top of my right pocket, pressing against the handwritten spell inside it.

She takes my moment of silence as acceptance of her decision. “I bid you well, Tanzanina.”

I shake my head. All that destiny crap. I accepted it once. Not anymore. Now I believe in making my own future.

With a calm movement, I lay my hand on her arm, keeping my tone pleasant. “I’m not leaving without it.”

She leans back, edging away from my hand, glancing at my face. “Do you intend to do this the hard way?”

Her angelic power tingles beneath my fingertips. Currents flow through her body. If she releases her wings, she’ll be able to access her full power. She’s physically stronger than me, faster than me, maybe more powerful than me, but that’s a risk I’m willing to take.

I smile. “I enjoy the hard way.”

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CHAPTER TWO

Up until this moment, Iriel's expression has remained dismissive. Now her eyes widen.

She whispers through gritted teeth. "You wouldn't dare attack me."

Without letting her go, I carefully slide the spell from my right pocket, flip it open between my thumb and forefinger, and whisper, "Perfect power protect this place with my presence."

Her forehead creases, but she seems confident enough in her abilities that she doesn't try to stop me. "That spell won't help you."

"It's not for me."

Her confusion deepens before her expression clears. "Protect this place... Oh ..."

Movement around us stops. The room falls completely silent. The humans and magical beings slow and freeze.

I've just placed a protection spell on them that has not only suspended them in time so they will remain unaware of what's about to happen, but also created a shield around them against any damage that might come their way.

What's more, anyone heading toward this room will suddenly have a strong urge to walk away.

Iriel considers me for a moment. “Well, I guess you’re not as reckless as I heard.”

“Collateral damage is always unacceptable.” I learned that from the assassins who are trained to kill with such speed and efficiency that collateral damage is not only unacceptable, it’s damn sloppy.

I grin at the angel as I allow the note to flutter to the ground. Her gaze follows it, providing the distraction I wanted.

My fist darts out, aimed squarely at her pretty little nose, but my aim is light and halfhearted, intended only to provoke her.

She dodges it easily and retaliates with a flat-handed shove against my chest, propelling me backward. “How dare you!”

I jolt back into the wooden table behind me, my hip hitting it hard. I allow the pain to shoot through me, allow my anger to rise with my adrenaline.

Anger is what I need—heightened emotion is the only way I can access my instinctive magic—and her shove delivered it to me.

My inner power floods to the surface, electrical currents sparking in the air.

The lamps dotting the wooden tables dim and flicker, the room around us grows dark, and the sunlight retreats with my rage.

A crimson glow grows at the corner of my vision—the color of my anger. I shouldn’t be able to affect the room because of the protection spell that I cast, but the power inside me is so strong that I’m in danger of breaking through it.

No spoken magic is powerful enough to defeat my inner power.

I advance on Iriel, threads of light like blood curling around my arms and hands. “Tell me where The Blessed Grimoire is located.”

Her eyes grow wide, but she also reacts instinctively. Her gorgeous white wings burst from her shoulders, her glistening, pearly feathers spreading across the space above the desks. Her wings are not as wide as some I’ve seen, but they’re no less impressive.

With a single sweep, she lifts from the ground, preparing to fly away from me, no doubt to seek reinforcements.

Rise.

The thought becomes a command inside my mind, my body reacting immediately. The air gathers beneath me, a force that propels me upward, effortlessly following her arc and intercepting her.

I give her the same treatment she gave me. My palms connect with her chest with a thump , propelling her back in the air.

The air whooshes out of her lungs, my power zaps through her wings, and she shudders before attempting to regain her balance. I chase after her, focusing on her hand, my gaze following its trajectory.

Snatching her hand into mine, I wrench her toward me, holding on tightly.

Lock.

She shrieks, trying to tug away from me, wildly flapping her wings and pulling with all her might. “Let me go!”

Our hands are locked together now, my magic binding us until I release her.

Up.

This time my command is for the spell in my left pocket. I can't use my instinctive magic for this one. It's too dangerous and my magic has a way of resulting in extreme repercussions.

The carefully handwritten note floats from my pocket, unfolding at eye level. Iriel continues to tug and shriek, her gaze shooting to the note. "What are you doing?"

She will never willingly tell me where the Grimoire is.

I read the compulsion spell carefully even though the words already burn within my mind now that my instinctive magic is free. "Terrible truth tear from trembling lips."

She jerks backward. "A truth spell!"

It's dangerous magic. The truth spell not only forces her to speak the truth, but combined with her angelic power to discern my inner nature, it allows her to see the truth in my thoughts.

There are many truths that her angelic power will allow her to see—many truths I don't want her to speak aloud, let alone know about.

Unable to stop herself, she gasps. "You aren't doing this for yourself!"

"Stop." My instinctive magic flows through my hand into hers, forcing her lips closed. I can't bear to hear her speak of the man who broke my heart, the one for whom I'm doing all of this.

“Tell me one thing, and one thing only,” I say. “Where is The Blessed Grimoire?”

She sags when I release her lips so she can talk again. “I can’t tell you.”

My brow furrows. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know where it is.”

Is she lying? Does she know a way around the truth spell? “Tell me the truth!”

“I am! It was stolen.”

I loosen my hold on her. “Stolen? Then... it’s not here.”

She shakes her head, her wings drooping.

My heart sinks, and my magic lowers us both to the floor. If the Grimoire isn’t here, then I’ve done all of this for nothing. “Why didn’t you say so at the start?”

“That would mean admitting I allowed one of the most dangerous books of sorcery out into the world,” she whispers. “The other angels don’t know it’s gone. I would lose my head if they found out.”

I consider her with some pity. Angels might have a reputation as pure and just beings, but they’re ruthless in the face of failure.

“Who took it?” I ask, relying on the truth spell to force her to tell me.

“Mother Kadris.”

My forehead creases. Mother Kadris is a myth, nothing more.

My mother told me bedtime stories about her.

Well, not so much bedtime stories as cautionary tales.

Mother Kadris was a witch who offered favors in exchange for people's souls.

The way the story goes, she wanted to achieve eternal life, but her actions backfired when a favor she granted led to the loss of the one she loved.

I shake my head with disbelief. "Mother Kadris doesn't exist."

"She's real. She was here."

I search Iriel's eyes for the truth. Her earnest expression tells me she truly believes Mother Kadris is real.

Either way, it's clear The Blessed Grimoire has been stolen by someone and that someone could very likely be the most formidable witch in our history.

Perhaps I should be worried, but all I feel is more determined. "Then I need to find her."

Iriel's pupils constrict with what appears to be a strange mix of fear and excitement.

"I heard a whisper that she can only be found once each year in a place where the monsters gather. You can only go if invited..." She leans forward, no longer pulling away from me.

"To a ball that I would gladly kill to attend."

I inch away from her, the sudden dark desire in her eyes making me shiver. I want to

break the contact as soon as possible now. “You mean The Monster Ball?”

She nods.

I narrow my eyes at her. The Monster Ball is another myth. Or at least... I think it is. Even if it's real, Iriel is right: I need an invitation and I'm not likely?—

“You will get one,” she says, shocking me with her declaration. “The brokenhearted always do.”

“That's enough.” I release her from the spell and quickly mutter, “Perfect power pardon this place from my presence.”

Iriel is in such a hurry to put away her wings before the humans see them that I make it five steps away before she attempts to follow after me.

I break into a quick stride, and she abandons her chase as soon as I draw attention from the students studying at the nearby desk. She won't want to make a scene that could lead to explanations about the lost Grimoire.

I race down the staircase past the lion statues, cringing as their frozen eyes fling silent accusations at me for invading this place of learning. I can only hope Iriel's prediction is correct.

If the stories are true, The Monster Ball takes place on All Hallows' Eve, which is only two nights from now.

A shiver of excitement flows through me.

The Monster Ball is a place where guests leave their inhibitions at the door—something I've never done. I've always thought ahead, planned, assessed each

situation before I act, protective of the people I love, knowing that my actions and choices can endanger them.

But at The Monster Ball... freedom beckons.

A night without consequences. There are many stories about The Proprietor of the Ball.

Nobody knows for sure what's true and what isn't.

Some say she's an all-seeing being with immense magical power.

I suspect she has spies everywhere just like the assassins do.

No matter, all I can hope is that Iriel's prediction will come true.

I will get a ticket and find Mother Kadris at the Ball.

CHAPTER THREE

I hail a cab one street over from the library and head back to my home on Saber Lane.

Once there, I race past the gray lampposts that stand at the entrance to the lane and I hurry up the front steps of the brownstone that sits on the corner. I inherited my home from my grandmother, who raised me after my mother died.

I used to call the assassins my enemies, afraid of the violence they brought with them, but now we protect this street and all of the magical beings who live here.

Still, I told no one about my plans today, fearing the explanations I would have to give if I failed. I grimace as I push open my front door. I have many flaws. Not being able to share my inner thoughts is one of them. But life taught me that to love means inviting pain into my life.

I closed my heart to love a long time ago, and when I finally took a chance and opened it...

Stormy gray eyes rise in my memory, the elusive scent of sandalwood aftershave, and arms that swept me off my feet and held me for mere seconds before the truth in his eyes shattered my hope.

With gritted teeth, I push away the memory of the only time that Alexei Mason nearly kissed me. Nearly. Until he realized that my power allowed me to see into his heart—to see that he could never love me.

That was when he let me go.

I shake off the memory. I have work to do.

If there's a chance I'm going to The Monster Ball, I'll need a dress. I can't go out and buy one because the assassins will notice and ask questions. They see everything and have spies everywhere in Boston—even in dress shops.

I race upstairs and rummage through my closet to find a simple black dress. It's nearly impossible to conjure something out of nothing, but I'm certain I can make a more elaborate dress out of this one.

Carrying it back downstairs to the parlor, I lay it over one of the chairs before I open the spellbook that sits on a pedestal in the center of the room.

"Pictures, not words," I murmur to myself as I flip through the book. It's my mantra, the trick that Alexei taught me to try to remember spells. I wasn't going to take any chances with the angel in the library, but I'm willing to take leaps of faith within the safety of my own home.

I scan the beautification spell, taking in the words and picturing what I want inside my mind before I close the book, holding firmly to the image of the dress I want to create...

Power rises within me, and it's like a dewdrop sliding from my shoulders to my outstretched hands.

The dress rises into the air in front of me, slowly turning.

Pictures... pictures...

As my power wraps around it, the entire dress morphs from opaque to diaphanous, layers of tulle taking shape into a sleeveless, plunging V-neck, tight waistline wrapped in a wide black ribbon, and gauzy folds falling to the floor.

The skirt splits from the hem to the waist to form a high slit on the left side.

There are enough layers that it will conceal my lady parts, but my silhouette will be clearly visible.

Just to be sure nobody could dare to try anything, I conjure fine black vines, as thin as threads, to twine across the front and back of the bodice.

Delicate vines also form inside the inner layer of the dress from the waist down.

Those will wrap around my upper thighs when I put the dress on.

A flower in the shape of a large, ruby-red rose forms, petal by petal on the dress's right shoulder, finishing off the neckline.

I approach the dress and run my fingertips along the vines, golden threads of power shimmering into it at my touch.

Then I step back with a wicked smile. The dress now has an inbuilt system of protection. If anyone tries to grab me, thorns will form along the vines and give them a nasty surprise.

If the stories are true, I won't be allowed to take weapons into the Ball, but the vines count as decoration, so I'm hoping The Proprietor will allow me to wear them.

I'm not done yet. I spend the next few hours carefully copying out the spells I might need onto slips of paper that I turn into black flower petals. The handwriting on them

disappears but will reappear at my touch in the shape of golden threads if I need it.

It's unlike me to dress so provocatively, but The Monster Ball is not a place for the faint of heart.

So many monsters in one place.

I have no doubt I belong among them.

Just as I put the dress safely away in my closet, ready for the moment when I might receive that elusive ticket to the Ball, a knock sounds at my front door.

I recognize Hunter's knock, but the heaviness in it immediately puts me on alert.

Hurrying back downstairs, I open the door to find her dressed in her assassin's suit, the material conforming to her six-months-pregnant tummy.

"Hunter?"

She tucks a few loose strands of her mahogany hair back behind her ear. "I have news."

My stomach instantly plummets and all thoughts of the Ball vanish. If it's about what I think it is...

Quickly, I usher her inside, taking note of the dark rings under her eyes. "Good or bad?"

She gives me a brave smile that lifts some of my dread. "Both?"

Well, that might be better than I feared then.

“Come. Sit down.” I urge her over to the two-seater lounge chair and sink into it beside her. “Give me the bad news first.”

She takes a deep breath. “It’s true: One of Typhon’s bones is still out there.”

No, not better after all.

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CHAPTER FOUR

I sink slowly back in the chair.

Typhon was a primordial deity and the father of all monsters. While he was imprisoned at great cost in the assassin's maze, four of his bones had been hidden in the outside world.

A single bone is capable of terrible power. One of them, known as the White Wand, had nearly destroyed every student at the Academy.

Destroying Typhon and his bones had almost cost the hellhound, Striker Draven, his life.

"Oh, no." My stomach swirls with dread. "I was hoping..."

"So was I." Hunter leans forward slightly to rub her lower back, a soothing action I quickly take over for her, bringing a relieved sigh to her lips.

She rarely releases her Valkyrie wings unless she's going on the attack, but the tension in her body tells me she wishes she could fully stretch them out right now.

"Oh, these twins are already making their presence very well known," she says. "This might be my last mission for a while."

While I focus on Hunter, I also can't shake the memory of the first night Striker stayed here in my home.

I used my magic to transport him directly from the forest outside the assassin's maze to the room upstairs.

It was lucky I was already practicing transportation spells when I was asked for help getting to and from the maze.

I had the spells already written on slips of paper in case I needed them.

I'll never forget the sight of Peyton, the Fury who has become my friend, carrying Striker's body from the maze.

He died in his fight with Typhon. His heart was ripped out.

It took all of my instinctive power to stabilize him, but he slipped into a coma and, after that, bringing him back here to my home was all I could do.

But in the moment that we arrived here, when only Hunter and I were with him, Striker regained consciousness.

It was only for a few seconds.

I suspect it was because of the force of the transportation spell, combined with the healing magic I was pouring into him to ensure he survived the trip. I can't be sure, but it must have jolted his mind awake, even if his body couldn't cope with his injuries.

His eyes had flown wide, wild and unfocused, and his voice was so slurred that I wanted to believe I'd misheard him when he said, "There were only two bones in the box."

His eyes immediately closed, and his heartbeat became dangerously slow. It was clear

that uttering the warning had cost him.

I spent my remaining energy that night trying to undo the harm to his brain of his sudden wakefulness.

When he finally woke from his coma, Hunter and I waited cautiously to see if he remembered anything, but he didn't mention the missing bone.

Attempting to prompt him, we gently asked him if he could talk about that final fight in the maze. His brow had furrowed, and he told us, "All I remember is the silence."

Now, I sense the weight on Hunter's shoulders. Since that night, she and I have been quietly trying to verify if what Striker warned of could be true.

Yesterday, she told me about a possible source in New York City—someone who might be able to verify if the third bone is, indeed, still out there. When I asked her who this source was, Hunter would only tell me that the meeting was happening in Central Park.

Judging by her decision to wear her assassin's suit, she wasn't expecting it to be a pleasant interaction.

My mind whirls, but the way forward is clear to me. "You mustn't have anything more to do with the missing bone. I'll take it from here."

Her eyes widen. "But, Tansy?—"

"It's too dangerous," I say, giving her a pointed stare. "Your daughter needs you, as do your unborn twins. Not to mention, none of your spies can go anywhere near it."

Her spies are the monsters who live at the Academy, a group that Hunter has quickly

come to think of as family. Working for Hunter gives them a purpose beyond the busy life of raising other Unknowns. Hunter won't risk their lives, and neither will I.

I hurry on before she can respond. "The bones are typically used by witches, so if a bone is out there, then the first place to start is the witching community. I can do that."

Even though, as we both know, I'm an outcast in the witching community, but it's about damn time I did something about that.

"Tansy—"

"I will find it," I say firmly, but even as I prepare to make a plan, I realize that she's giving me a gentle smile. "What?" I whisper.

She takes my hand. "First, I want to tell you how much it means to me that you would take this on, knowing how hard it would be for you, but second, I need to tell you the good news." She grimaces. "Or maybe it's just not such bad news."

"Oh?"

"According to my source, the final bone has made its way into Philadelphia, where it was seized by powerful warrior angels, possibly those called Sentinels."

I consider this news carefully. Iriel, the angel at the library is a warrior angel, but Sentinels are another threat altogether. They are the strongest angelic warriors and also the purest, rumored to guard the angels' most precious treasures.

It was surprising to me, actually, that The Blessed Grimoire wasn't hidden somewhere with Sentinels, but then, it's a book of witch magic and the angels are supposed to be independent custodians of it, not spirit it away for themselves.

“What does this mean?” I ask.

“The bone is safe,” she says, then adds, “For now. And if the Sentinels have it then I’m certain it will be hidden away from the world where dark creatures won’t be drawn to it.”

“That would make sense, since Peyton hasn’t said anything about being aware of it.”

“What’s more,” Hunter continues, “as far as the supernatural community is concerned, all of the bones have been destroyed.”

“Meaning nobody is going looking for it.” I chew my lip. Except possibly for us. And Hunter’s source. “Will your source tell anyone? Or seek it for themselves?”

She shakes her head with certainty. “No and no. My source is the type to take pleasure in knowing things other people don’t.

Telling anyone would mean someone else could acquire the bone’s power, and my source wouldn’t want that.

As far as they’re concerned, the bone should never see the light of day again.

But... what about Striker and Peyton?” Now, Hunter’s expression becomes troubled. “Do we warn them?”

The remainder of my worry lifts as I think of the life they’re building together.

“They’re happy, and they deserve to be,” I say firmly. “They’ve been through too much already. They need to be free of this.”

“Then this stays between us,” Hunter says with a nod. “Unless or until there’s any

hint of the bone resurfacing.”

“Agreed.”

I give her a determined smile. I’ll be ready should the people I care about once again face Typhon’s darkness, just as I’m determined to find the spell that holds the key to my fate and any future I might have with Alexei Mason.

That night, my sleep is fitful. Alexei’s voice is a deep rumble in my memory, a sound like growling thunder.

Tanzanina Gray, you are nothing more to me than a chess piece...

A chess piece...

Nothing more...

I wake with a scream on my lips. “Damn you, Alexei Mason!”

Damn the look in his eyes when he told me that his feelings for me were not formed from love but from logic.

Damn the look in his eyes when he told me he would rather never see me again than treat me like a chess piece.

Damn him for being a Master Assassin, for knowing how to slay my heart as easily as he breaks necks with hands that make me shiver...

I draw my knees to my chest as the cruel light of the moon taunts me.

Alexei Mason, one of the three Master Assassins, had stayed in my home for weeks

without ever crossing any lines. He never kissed me or touched me, but he was there for me, protected me, and at the end of that time, I was sure he loved me.

Then he told me the truth: that he was cursed a long time ago so he could never feel emotions. Not heartache. Not love. Not loss. Logic and reason dictate his actions. He told me that he was drawn to me because logic told him my power would be an asset to him.

He told me I deserved more. Then, he pushed me away.

I tried to lift his curse—tried to revive his emotions—and failed. Now, the revival spell is my last hope.

The moonlight flickers, making me squint. At first I think it's my tears—the tears I refuse to show anyone—but the beam of light shining through my window flashes brightly.

Magic washes over me, making me flinch and my heart leap. At its bright center, a silvery slip of parchment takes shape.

I jolt upright into the glare, shielding my eyes as I snatch the parchment into my hand.

The light fades, allowing me to read aloud the script on the front: “The Monster Ball.”

On the other side, the invitation states:

Just as the moon has brought me to you

So shall the moon bring you to the Ball

All Hallows' Eve

The Witching Hour

My first emotion is relief. My second is fear, but there was a time when I let fear rule my life. I'm done with that.

When midnight comes on All Hallows' Eve, I'll be ready.

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CHAPTER FIVE

The enchanted vines twine around my upper arms as I slip on the black dress.

While the lower vines slide around my thighs to hug them, I test my ability to move, pleased to find that the vines are flexible and move with me.

My makeup is already done. I don't normally wear much of it, but tonight I need a face. Blood-red lips and dark eyelashes highlight the gold in my hair, some of which I have twirled up into a loose bun while the rest hangs free.

For a final touch, I spin a spell to create another red rose, the stem of which pins my hair in place.

I give myself a last cursory glance in the mirror. Many supernaturals meet their match at The Monster Ball, many go to find love, but I am intent on going into battle.

At five minutes to midnight, I open my curtains and wait in the moonlight streaming through the window, the silver invitation clutched in my fist.

I count the spells attached to my dress, hoping they'll be enough.

The moonlight flashes, suddenly glinting off the window pane. My breath stops as I flinch away from the harsh glare.

Dirty pavers suddenly fill my field of view, and the sounds of a city alive with nightlife bursts into my hearing.

Just like that, I've been transported to another place, and it was certainly far more pleasant than any transportation spell I've conjured myself—those make me feel like the air is being squeezed out of my chest.

Drawing upright, I quickly assess my surroundings: a grimy sidewalk, trash cans, and an alley at the side.

Where am I?

I shiver, suddenly wishing I was wearing more than a few pieces of tulle and some flower petals.

The alleyway beckons on my left, its darkness appealing, and I can only trust in the magic of the event to guide me forward. There must be an opening to a venue somewhere nearby...

Worst case, I can hide in the alleyway and figure out what to do next.

As I hurry into the shadows, a bright red door at the end of the alley catches my eye. I begin to relax since this has to be the place.

Two stone gargoyles perch on either side of the door, level with its topmost edge. Their identical frozen forms don't fool me for a second.

I wonder for a moment if I'm in Chicago since that city has the last known population of gargoyles, none of whom I'd like to meet in a darkened alley, but something tells me these men are here for pleasure, not war.

As soon as I step within knocking distance of the door, the gargoyles transform into human form, their massive wings unfolding around them as they fly to the ground.

Both are muscular and well-dressed in slacks and button-up shirts, dreadlocks falling about their shoulders. They have nearly identical features although one wears his dreads a little longer than the other.

I clear my throat and stand tall, meeting the first one's gaze with a frosty glare.

He wears shiny, red shoes and an all-white jacket with embossed damask print.

At six feet tall, I'm accustomed to being eye-height, if not taller than most men.

Alexei was the first man I'd ever met who towered over me.

The gargoyle wearing the red shoes arches an eyebrow at me, the hint of a smile playing around his lips.

Yeah, my tough act isn't fooling him at all.

He shivers in an exaggerated manner and addresses his twin. "Lex, did the air just get a little too cold?"

Lex gives me a wink, stroking his goatee. "It shouldn't have, Bronx. Something tells me the lady is in for a warm evening."

Lex gives me a silent onceover with an amused expression before holding out his hand, and I assume it's for my ticket.

I hand it to him, conscious of other figures approaching behind me, and wait for the door to open.

I hurry inside, ignoring the click as the door closes behind me.

A long, decrepit hallway greets me, the peeling paint across its walls catching the distant light. It's not exactly what I was expecting. So far, the path to the Ball has been grimy and dark.

Maybe it's all a lie and The Proprietor lures supernaturals here to steal their power just like my aunt tried to steal mine. My own aunt... and when my mother tried to defend me...

I shake off the memories, burying them again, but it's nearly impossible to subdue my instinctive magic, which is rising with my unease.

Without realizing, I break into a run, racing toward the rainbow lights filling the end of the hallway and the deep, throbbing music, needing to prove my own conspiracy theories wrong.

I burst into a large room and pull up sharply when a perfectly normal dance floor presents itself. My magic washes ahead of me and I try desperately to rein it in, taking deep breaths and attempting to suck the magic back to myself.

I don't succeed before it zaps a man reclining on a furry white beanbag situated against the wall to my left. He's lying on his side, facing me.

His head jolts up, and his red lips part with surprise at the bite of magic. His female companion pulls him back to her neck, and he barely gives me another glance, fixating on her veins again.

Ugh. Lips red with blood .

He's dressed in an obnoxiously loud golden jacket with a gold bowtie that washes out his already pale skin and accentuates the dark rings under his eyes.

Farther along the wall, I make out the figure of another vampire with a gorgeous woman on his arm.

Unlike the bloodsucker nearest to me, this vampire is smartly dressed in an expensive-looking black suit and has glittering red eyes.

His date is slender with striking red hair.

They have an air of danger about them and I turn away quickly, glad that I didn't accidentally zap them.

I don't need to make enemies before I've even stepped into the room.

Although there are beanbags and couches lining this side of the room, the majority of the floor space is taken up by the large dance floor, where couples already groove to the thumping beat, their feet kicking up the misty haze of smoke that floats across the ground.

A thundercloud of neon lights fills the ceiling, obscuring everything farther up. I make out an overhanging loft that lines the perimeter on the second level and looks down on the dance floor where I stand.

My heart thumps in time to the music.

I fight my fear of new places, of being in an environment I don't control. After Mom's death, I rarely left Saber Lane. Even going to the library was a trip I planned well ahead of time.

Now I'm in a completely uncontrolled, unfamiliar environment.

The last thing I need is for my instinctive magic to rear its head in an ugly way.

The first time it burst out of me, I created a storm that blew a small army aside.

I don't think the partygoers in this room would take kindly to that sort of treatment.

Not least because they're all magical, all monsters like me.

I situate myself against the nearest wall, away from the vampires, to get a sense of my surroundings. I was hoping I'd be able to identify Mother Kadris right away, but the lighting makes it nearly impossible to recognize auras in this place.

I'll have to search each level. Starting with the dance floor.

An ironic smile spreads across my lips. Here I am, pressed up against the wall in a dress covered in nature.

I always was a wallflower.

Well, no more.

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CHAPTER SIX

Skirting the room, I head to the bar on the right-hand side at the front. I could use something to steady my nerves and moving through the room allows me to surveil it.

I take my time, assessing everyone I pass. Mother Kadris's power will be immense. Her presence should hit me like a sledgehammer, but so far... nothing.

Two bars line the front of the room, each with cement tops patterned with glowing crystals that pulse in time to the music.

Behind the bars, glowing shelves make bottles of liquid glitter—more liquids than I can identify, the most obvious ones being blood, soda, alcohol, and—to my surprise—simple water.

Squinting to identify the magical nature of each of the four bartenders, I quickly assess my options.

One of the bartenders at the bar on the right is a witch. I can just make out her aura around her head of long, pink hair. It's unlikely that Mother Kadris would work here, but I need to get closer to the pink-haired witch to be sure.

I take a seat in front of the other bartender at the same bar. He has piercing blue eyes, long dreads, and the aura of a shifter, but I'm not sure which kind. Freckles across the bridge of his nose dust his golden skin. He gives me a warm glance, leaning forward to speak above the thumping music.

“Alone tonight?” a deep African voice asks.

I don’t detect an insult in his words, but I bristle anyway. “I’m always alone.”

“Aren’t we all?” he muses, a philosophical light entering his eyes.

I only sat in front of him so I could check out the witch, but up close, I’m suddenly fascinated by the freckles on the shifter’s nose.

I squint. “Are you a... lion?”

I’ve never met a lion shifter before. Wolves, jaguars, and bears even, but lions are rare in my experience.

He gives me a nod and a smile that makes my heart skip a beat. A very good-looking lion .

“What can I get you to drink?” he asks.

I falter. My reclusive life on Saber Lane involved hot chocolates from Dean’s Diner more frequently than alcohol. I may be twenty-three years old, but my knowledge of alcohol is sorely lacking. I certainly don’t know the names of any of the drinks.

I press my lips together before I make a fool of myself and ask for water.

Taking a deep breath, I lean forward as if I know every drink there is. “What do you recommend?”

“Well, that would be my specialty: a drink I like to call ‘Shifts and Giggles.’”

The witch bartender suddenly angles toward us, taking a moment between serving

drinks. Her pink hair swishes around her shoulders, her brown eyes sparkling. “Oh, honey, don’t ask Barasa what you should drink. He’ll give you something boring.”

I flick a glance at the drink that continues to prepare itself at the bar where she was previously standing.

I try to hide my smile when I realize that she’s using her magic to mix drinks while she talks to me.

She’s powerful, but her power doesn’t bite me like Mother Kadris’s will. She’s not my target.

One witch down and however many more to go.

Barasa growls at her, but it’s a playful sound. There doesn’t seem to be a bad bone in his body, but I have no doubt that if push came to shove, this lion would be a formidable opponent. “Back off, Onyx. The lady can choose for herself. Don’t think I didn’t see you steal my luster dust just now.”

She huffs at him, rolls her eyes, and returns to her work.

Their playful encounter lightens my mood.

“Shifts and Giggles sounds good to me,” I declare, settling into the industrial metal stool.

I consider Barasa’s movements carefully as he mixes the drink from apple cider, spiced rum, and cranberry juice, pouring in a splash of grenadine and adding a pinch of what looks like fairy dust—which must be the luster dust he was talking about—before he shakes it over ice.

Just like his freckles, I'm fascinated by the rhythm in his drink-making, my gaze shifting from his hands to his piercing eyes.

He's gorgeous, and his growing smile makes my heart hammer, but my response is purely physical. My heart... has other ideas.

Barasa passes me the drink, and I gulp a mouthful before I lose my nerve and ask for water after all. The liquid is deliciously sweet, and I'm immediately filled with an odd sense of happiness and belonging.

Turning the drink around in my hands, I consider my next move.

Rainbow staircases are situated on each side of the room, leading to the overhanging loft, but I need to finish checking the dance floor first.

A flash of purple catches my eye. In the colorful lighting, it takes me a moment to identify a woman with lavender hair dancing nearby. Her black halter-neck dress sparkles as though stars are inlaid in the material and a silver nose ring catches the light as she grooves in time with the music.

The powerful aura around her is controlled in a way that makes me curious. She's a witch, but there's something missing, something I can't put my finger on. Her power is repressed somehow. She's alone but obviously not afraid to dance by herself.

I have to get up close to figure out if she's the one I seek.

What can a bit of dancing hurt me?

Swiveling back to Barasa, I take a final gulp of the drink he prepared for me and leave the empty glass on the counter. "Thank you."

“You’re welcome. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

I give him a quizzical glance. “Who says I’m looking for something?”

He winks. “Aren’t we all?”

I smile and slip off the stool, careful not to bump the blue-eyed genie in the suit and tie who just sat down next to me. The bar has become really crowded in the last few minutes, and I’m glad to move away from it.

As soon as I step onto the dance floor, the rhythm takes control as if the music reached out and grabbed hold of me, demanding that I enjoy myself.

I groove my way up to the lavender-haired witch, my heels tapping the floor, maneuvering around the couples grinding and bumping against each other to reach her.

“Safety in numbers, right?” I say, raising my voice to be heard above the music.

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, a man edges up to us, the scent of blood wafting around him as he attempts to wrap his arms around the purple-haired witch.

The dark smears on his hands tell me they’re coated in blood.

It’s the vampire I zapped when I first arrived, the one in the golden jacket. I’m not a big fan of vampires at the best of times, but the least he could do is wash his hands after feeding.

His speech slurs, no doubt an aftereffect of his blood high, while he paws at her. “Hello, ladies. You look like you need company.”

Blood. I don't do well with blood. The memory of my mother's final scream crashes across me.

I try to push it away, but it's too late.

My instinctive magic roars to the surface, triggered by the vampire's stale, copper scent.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The lights above us flicker as my power thuds through me, the music skips a beat, and a shot of electricity passes from my outstretched hand into the vampire's chest in the spot where I smack my palm against it.

Power as sharp as a blade shoots into him, a cutting pain that will make him feel as though I stabbed him from the inside.

At the same time, I inhale with a single sharp pull, dragging his energy into my lungs and sucking away a little of his life. Not enough to kill him, not even close, especially since I can't kill anyone in this protected environment, but it will be enough to scare the fangs off him.

I snarl at him. "Get lost!"

His mouth drops open, his arms shoot wide, and he lets go of the lavender-haired witch before he stumbles backward, clutching his heart and narrowly avoiding knocking into the couple dancing behind him.

The shock will have given his heart a nasty kick. That's if it's still beating. I've always lumped vampires in with the undead, so it's hard to be sure.

Unsteady on his feet, he staggers away through the crowd, no doubt in search of a willing blood donor now that I sapped his energy and killed his high.

Satisfied that he isn't coming back, I spin back to the witch.

She gives me a wide-eyed smile, smoothing her dress as if she's wiping off the contact of his grimy hands.

He's damn lucky he didn't try to grab me , or The Proprietor might have had a murder on her hands.

Alexei was the first man I ever allowed to get close to me physically, and even then, our relationship didn't progress beyond that one near-kiss.

After my aunt tried to steal my power, I learned that nobody could be trusted.

To take my power requires touching me, so physical touch is to be feared.

I return the witch's smile with an apologetic shrug. I'm suddenly worried in case he was a friend of hers. "I hope you don't mind; I saw him sucking blood from a woman's neck earlier."

"Good call," she says.

I grin, relieved that I didn't freak her out.

She's cool and calm, a lot calmer in the face of my power than many magical beings would be.

Every other witch I've met has looked on my power as a thing of envy—something to be stolen, sucked out of me just like I sucked a little of the vampire's life away.

All my life, other witches have been coming after me, trying to steal my power.

But this woman considers me in a way that tells me she's confident in herself, even if the sense I get from her is that she's seeking something elusive like I am.

“I’m Tansy,” I say.

“Sabine,” she answers, melting back into the beat of the music as if nothing happened.

The way she casually assesses the room while keeping me within her sights reminds me of the assassins. I’m sure she isn’t one, but the way she calculates the distance between us and remains conscious of the location of the other magical beings around us tells me she’s ready for anything.

Oddly enough, that makes me more comfortable with her. I’m used to being around people who know their own strength.

I let the music wash over me, soak it up, and twirl, the gauzy dress swirling around my legs.

As I turn, I catch sight of a tall man in the distance near the entrance next to the fluffy beanbags.

He’s half-turned and focused on the seats nearby. His broad shoulders and commanding presence make me miss a beat.

For a heart-stopping second... I think it’s Alexei.

That isn’t possible. He isn’t magical. He’s pure human.

So human, in fact, that his witch mother abandoned him at birth.

Out of respect for his human father, he didn’t go looking for her until his father died.

When he finally tried to find her, he sought help from the wrong witch, a woman who

promised to take away his pain.

Her promise was twisted—she cursed him so that he can't feel any emotion. Even if he wants to.

Because he's human, he can't be here even if everything inside me wishes he was.

I stumble backward, and Sabine reaches out a hand to steady me. "You okay, Tansy?"

"Yeah... uh... I'm sorry... I have to..." I gesture to the other side of the room near the bar, not really pointing at anything as I veer away from the dance floor, needing to escape the things I want and can't have.

I clamber up the rainbow stairs as fast as I can, kicking myself.

I thought a strategic path would work best—check each level carefully—but I need to start thinking like Mother Kadris. She's as old as the hills. She wouldn't waste her time bumping hips on a dance floor.

She would keep to the shadows.

I don't kid myself that I'll take her by surprise. She'll sense me coming a mile away. I need to find her before she locates me first and puts me on my ass.

Taking a deep breath, I tell myself to put fear into action. It's time to use my magic.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I stop halfway up the stairs, pretending to adjust my heels as I wait for the supernaturals behind me to pass.

Then I reach for one of the spells attached to my waist, passing my index finger across it as I cup it in my other palm.

At my touch, my golden handwriting appears.

I whisper the spell to myself: “Lovely ladybug locate the lost lady.”

The leaf curls and folds around on itself, reforming into the shape of a glowing crimson ladybug, its tiny transparent wings a glittering blur as it flits ahead of me.

I follow it with quick steps, reaching the second level loft that lines the perimeter of the building and opens to the dance floor below.

Massive cubes glow in each corner, and circular chairs line each side. To my immediate left, a pink cube, the size of a small room, glows iridescent. It’s pretty but takes up too much space to be a mere decoration. It’s large enough that I wonder if supernaturals are inside it.

I race after the ladybug as it zips to the right, passing a circular couch and two swing chairs—both occupied—before I approach the next corner cube, a purple one this time.

Striding along the row of soft-looking chairs that line the long edge of the building, I quickly assess the couples sitting in them. Mother Kadris is unlikely to be here with someone. A witch like her wouldn't compromise herself with random dalliances.

I halt outside the next corner cube, which is a soft neon blue color.

This one is open at the front, and I'm surprised to see that it has padded leather walls inside with a bed reaching all the way to the walls on each side.

Colorful pillows are scattered across the bed's surface.

It confirms my suspicion that the purple one is closed because someone is inside it.

Given the number of couples sucking each other's tongues nearby, I'm surprised this one is empty.

I hurry after the ladybug as it continues to flit past the next corner and all the way back to the pink corner cube I first stopped beside.

It suddenly bursts into a cloud of crimson glitter that sprinkles the floor, falling like my hope of finding Mother Kadris.

What now?

I fight my growing frustration—and lose the battle.

My instinctive magic rises like a boiling mass inside me, confused and unhelpful. I try to use it to reach out for her location, but it's like reaching into an abyss. Every time I close my eyes, all I see is darkness.

Feeding my worry into my fists, I bunch them in my skirt as I study the cube in front

of me.

Wait a minute...

The cube is open and a petite woman sits on a couch inside it in a short off-the-shoulder dress barely reaching her thighs. Waves of deep black hair fall beyond her waist, holding hints of red glinting in the light as she turns in my direction.

Her fingers are laden with rings, but it's the pack of cards she holds that draws my attention. Her grip on the cards is deceptively casual, and the air of power around her is deliberately controlled.

She must be a card mage, a powerful one, which means she'll protect her cards with her life. It also means she could read the cards to find out where Mother Kadris is...

I mentally debate the wisdom of asking a stranger for help, but the strong aura glowing around her draws me inside the cube.

It's only once I step through the entrance that I realize I cut in line. The supernaturals milling around the entrance as they wait for a card reading let me pass.

Perhaps I can thank the air of dangerous desperation around me for that.

As soon as I step beyond the entrance, magic takes hold behind me, making my senses fire as the cube closes, a wall forming that drops us into silence.

Trying not to react to the suddenly confined space, I meet the mage's eyes. "Blessings on your power," I say. "My name is Tansy. I need your help."

I stumble over my request. Asking for help has never been my strong point, but I clear my throat, lower my voice, and force myself to continue. "I need to locate a

witch who has feasted on souls. She's hiding at this Ball. Can you tell me where she is?"

The mage considers me carefully, a light of curiosity entering her eyes.

Her hands shift across her cards, an almost imperceptible movement.

Whether or not she's heard of Mother Kadris, a witch who feasts on souls will be a dangerous creature.

I'm sure the mage thinks I'm reckless—or equally dangerous—to be looking for her.

She crosses one leg over the other, her thigh-high boots accentuating the shape of her legs. I envy the way she wears her clothing. She's confident, comfortable in her power and her body. I wish I could be the same.

Just when I think she's going to deny my request, she nods. "I'm Katya. I can find what you seek."

I take a seat on the other end of the couch. The cards hum in Katya's hands, a curious energy that makes me both nervous and hopeful. I try not to let it show, hiding my desperation behind a blank mask I learned from the assassins. Their emotions are always closed off.

"Can you tell me where she is?" I ask.

"Yes."

Relief rises inside me, but Katya pauses. I suspect she's regretting helping me. I haven't told her why I'm looking for Mother Kadris, but the light of intelligence in her eyes tells me she doubts things will go well for me tonight.

“Well?” I sit forward, the ruby-red rose on my shoulder dipping toward her.

Katya taps the topmost card with her index finger, as if she’s considering whether or not she should tell me. “Will finding her this evening give you peace?”

I meet Katya’s eyes. “Nothing will give me peace. But finding her will give me closure.”

She hesitates another moment, then says, “Perhaps you should visit the rooftop. I understand there are conversation pits up there. In one, you shall find your witch. But tread lightly. A witch who has feasted on souls is potent.”

I push to my feet, still bunching the dress into my fists.

“Thank you,” I say, taking a deep breath. “For your help.”

She tips her chin at the door, and I step toward it, the magic in the cube taking hold and revealing the opening once more.

Outside, a man with the aura of a dark wizard has appeared, waiting to go inside. I shiver, wondering for a moment if I should stay, but I’m certain a mage as powerful as Katya will be able to handle any situation that might arise.

It’s time for me to face Mother Kadris.

CHAPTER NINE

I hurry past the circular white bar in the middle of the rooftop toward the sunken couches on the far side.

The staircase led me up through the colorful neon cloud that covered the ceiling and out into the open air at the top of the warehouse.

Multiple sunken couches line the edges of the rooftop, and a lone woman sits in the one to the far right. Her dark hair falls softly across the top of it, her features composed into an air of calm as she stares out over the sparkling city below us.

She looks about forty, despite the stories that she's hundreds of years old.

The power radiating out from her tells me she must be Mother Kadris. It bites like I expected it would, making my arms tingle and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

I have no doubt she's the witch I seek.

She could easily respond to my presence with violence, so I take each step slowly, reaching for the nearest spell attached to my dress. It's another protection spell like the one I used in the library in case things get nasty.

I'm not sure how far to trust the stories I've heard about The Proprietor's protection of this place, and I don't want a bunch of dead supernaturals on my hands.

Even so, suddenly, all of the spells I've attached to myself seem pitiful.

If I have to fight this woman, I'd better hope my instinctive magic is up to the task.

Mother Kadris sweeps her hair behind her ear as I approach. With a scant sideways glance at me, she returns her focus to the glass on the table in front of her, a smile gracing her lips. "Well met, Tansy Gray. Blessings on your power."

I'm surprised that she addresses me by my chosen name, let alone uses the traditional witch's greeting.

The couch is set into the floor, requiring me to step down and slide into it.

I cautiously settle into the seat opposite her before I give her a reserved nod and respond with the same respect she showed me. "Mother Kadris. Blessings on your power."

She takes a sip of what looks like plain water. I hide my surprise. I picked her for preferring something much stronger.

She meets my gaze. It's difficult to tell what color her eyes are in the glowing neon light. Every time the light changes, her eyes change color with it.

"I'm sorry I destroyed your ladybug," she says. "I needed to make sure everything was in place before you reached me."

Huh. And here I was thinking my spell was simply defective.

I press my lips together and cut to the chase. "You stole the revival spell from the angels. I want to know what it will take for you to give it to me."

She leans toward me, her gaze passing to the faint glow that grows around my silhouette. She won't miss my instinctive magic blossoming from my fear and determination.

She ignores my request. "Your magic is as strong as the rumors say. Why do you repress it?"

"I don't..." My brow furrows. "I don't control when it surfaces."

Her lips part with surprise. "Is that what you believe? Interesting."

The furrow in my brow deepens while she taps a finger against the back of her other hand and considers me for a moment.

"Very well," she says. "I will give you the revival spell if you do something for me. Something... that is very important to me."

Oh, this feels too easy. She agreed too quickly.

I brace myself for what her request could be. But then the set of her lips becomes serious, and her confident smile fades. The faintest hint of desperation creases her forehead, and I'm suddenly struck by the possibility that she might need me as much as I need her.

I tip my chin, testing the waters. "What could be so important that you can't accomplish it yourself?"

Her gaze flicks to the right, and for a moment, it looks like she's searching for something.

She quickly returns her attention to me, clears her throat, and wraps her arms around

herself as if she's cold.

"There are three rubies worn by a man at this Ball. A very powerful man who, like you, does not know the full extent of the power he controls. I need those rubies." She takes a deep breath.

"I need them badly enough to give you the spell I've kept safe until now. "

I scoff, "Kept safe? You stole it."

"From angels who would have succumbed to temptation, dear. Some angels would break any rule to ascend to heaven again. On the night I stole it, the angel Iriel planned to use the spell to revive her lost place in heaven." She leans forward again, her gaze piercing me.

"The revival spell must rest only in the hands of those who would use it for the benefit of others... not for themselves."

A shiver makes me rub my arms. "You think I'm that person."

"You might be. Bring me the rubies, and we will see." She glances to the right again, but this time, she smiles. "Ah. There he is."

I follow her gaze to the same man I saw earlier, the one who reminds me of Alexei.

He approaches the circular bar, taking powerful steps that emphasize the muscles beneath his dark pants and short-sleeved T-shirt. He's casually dressed—maybe he didn't believe the Ball was real and was taken by surprise when he was transported here.

His hair isn't all that long, but strands of it splash across his forehead, its dark tips

covering his eyes and obscuring his face so it's impossible to identify him. His hair is the biggest clue that he isn't Alexei. The Master Assassin's hair is always shaved close to his head.

Leaning casually into a widening gap at the bar, the newcomer draws the attention of the male bartender with long dark hair cropped short on the sides.

I pegged this new bartender as some sort of shifter like Barasa, and my guess is confirmed when I catch flashes of his aura between pulsing beats of music.

The tall man on the other hand... I can't place him at all.

I fight a smile as his mere presence creates a space at the bar. A few glances from the other patrons, and they leave him alone. Even the women, several of whom give his broad chest and muscled biceps an appreciative glance, give him a wide berth.

Alexei has that impact too, but he is never arrogant. It's a sign of true power that he always remains polite and in control of his actions. I guess that comes from knowing that when he chooses to act... the consequences can mean death.

"Who is he?" I swivel back to Mother Kadris—only to find her gone.

Damn . I shouldn't have taken my eyes off her. No doubt I'll only find her again when she wants me to.

She didn't explain why she needs the three rubies, but then... I didn't tell her why I need the revival spell, either.

We're both carrying secrets.

I snatch up the drink she left sitting on the table and gulp water to moisten my

suddenly dry mouth. Approaching dangerous men is not my forte. I never learned to flirt, only to freeze people out. Distrust was always my friend. Well, that's what I told myself.

I clamber out of the sunken couch, discovering that they're much easier to slide into than to get out of. I grab one of the spells attached to my hip, the words burning in my mind moments before my fingertip glides across the leaf.

"Levitate and leverage lightly," I whisper to myself.

Magic lifts me up, and I glide to the edge of the couch and onto the floor. Tipping my head back, I take gulps of air like a confidence pill.

With bold steps, I stride across the distance between me and the man at the bar, angling around a warlock who casts a smoky neon illusion of a fierce dragon that sails over the heads of the patrons in the sunken couches I'm leaving behind.

My gauzy dress floats around my legs as I reach the bar and carefully lean into the empty space beside the man who is Kadris's target. The other patrons have crowded in a little since his arrival, but there are still several clear feet on either side of him.

The tantalizing scent of sandalwood fills my senses.

Pasting a confident smile on my face, I turn to him. "I thought you could use some company." I gesture at the space around him. "Since you scared everyone away and all."

I sense his sharp inhale before he turns to face me fully, his hair falling away from his face as he tilts toward me.

"I have that effect on people." His eyes meet mine. Stormy gray eyes and a growing

smile greet me. “But you were never afraid of me.”

My heart stutters inside my chest.

Alexei ...

It's him.

It's... really him.

CHAPTER TEN

A lexei's presence is like a glass of liquid happiness, and I just drank a whole bottle of it.

My instinctive magic begins to glow, this time not from anger or fear but because I can't help it.

Alexei Mason is one of the most violent assassins I've ever encountered, preferring to kill with his bare hands or, if he's in a hurry, a single shot to the head.

I once saw him break a target's neck with a twist of his wrist. And yet...

he is one of the kindest, most astute men I have ever met.

He's a spectrum of contradictions wrapped up in a broad-shouldered package that destroys my inhibitions.

But he's human.

He can't be here in this place of monsters.

My jaw drops in shock. "Alexei?"

One corner of his mouth hitches up as his gaze drinks me in, passing from my face to the curve of my exposed neck, returning to pause on my lips. "Blessings on your power, Tansy Gray."

Everything else disappears from around us—the supernaturals, the music, all of it.

Being near Alexei has always been like stepping into a safe haven. All of my worries, pain—even my defenses—fall away.

Without thinking, I close the narrow gap between us to reach up and brush the hair falling across his cheek, my fingertips grazing his ear.

He allows me to rest my palm against his strong jaw.

“You grew your hair,” I say.

His answer is to place his palm over mine, dwarfing my little hand in his, a gentle touch from hands that could crack every bone in my fingertips, wrist, and arm in a single maneuver if he wished.

I’m not afraid. The only part of me he ever hurt was my heart.

“It’s been too long,” I add.

“Seven months, two weeks, and five days,” he says, his gaze capturing mine.

Months trying to find a way to lift Alexei’s curse, only to discover that the revival spell was my only hope.

“Too long without you, Solnyshka,” he says.

Little sun. That was what he used to call me. I never asked him why. I think it has something to do with the golden color of my hair, but I was never sure.

His fingers fold over mine, his thumb brushing over my palm in a way that makes me

shiver. A boldness takes over that I've never had before. "Why do you call me that?"

"Because without you, my day is dark."

I consider his expression, searching for what I'll never find—emotion behind his statement. Without emotion clouding his judgement, everything about him is logical, considered. If he's complimenting me, then it's for a purpose.

I am nothing more than a chess piece...

At least... I think so...

Confusion floods me as he returns my gaze with a heat I wasn't expecting. My stomach flutters as the brush of his thumb across my sensitive palm intensifies.

I swallow hard. "How... are you here?"

"I was looking for my mother," he answers in his truthful way. "An endless search."

He's always blunt, telling the truth even when it hurts—even when the person it hurts is himself.

"My search revealed that the only way to find her was to come to the Ball. Since I have no magical power, I gave up looking for her until..." He clears his throat with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

"I landed outside this warehouse on a beam of light."

"You were taken by surprise." A smile hijacks my lips. That would explain why he's dressed so casually. "You aren't often surprised."

His fingertips trail from my hand, along my outstretched arm and curl around my bare shoulder, drawing me forward. His thumb brushes the flower resting against the curve between my shoulder and my chest. “You arrived prepared.”

I try to breathe. “Did you find her? Is your mother here?”

He shakes his head. “I’ve searched every inch of this warehouse, but the truth is, I don’t know whom I’m looking for. I have no pictures, no clues.” He sighs. “I think it might be time to let go of the past.”

If only I could.

I sway into him, indulging in the pull of his gaze and the nearness of his body to mine, the rise and fall of his chest and the way his breath hitches as I curve my hand at the side of his waist.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he says, surprising me. “You saved my life, and then you walked out of it. Seeing you once more at the assassin’s maze was a gift for me, even if it was a time of near tragedy for others. I’ve missed you.”

I clear my throat, wanting to believe there’s emotion behind his statements.

I remember my panic, my fear the time he almost died.

We fought battles together, hard battles that nearly cost us everything.

All of it feels like a lifetime ago. “Only after you saved my life. You took bullets for me, Alexei.”

“Those were dark days. But they’re over now.” He brushes my cheek with a wry smile. “All I’ve wished for since is for darkness to return to my life so I would have

an excuse to call you back to me.”

My heart wrenches. When I saved Alexei’s life all that time ago, I tried to use my magic to lift his curse, but nothing worked. Every spell, every sort of magic that I tried... all I’m left with is the revival spell.

His eyes meet mine without a hint of a lie in them. For him to want darkness... just to see me...

He gives a short laugh. “I saw a genie at the bar downstairs earlier and I considered forcing him to grant me a wish so I could conjure you here. Now here you are.”

As his hand grazes my cheek, the assassin’s ring he wears on the forefinger of his left hand glints.

Three red rubies set into the chunky black ring glow in the iridescent lighting.

Our surroundings crash back into focus.

The red rubies!

Mother Kadris wants me to steal the rubies from Alexei’s assassin’s ring.

Every assassin wears a ring—all different—each one imbued with power that gives the assassin superhuman strength, agility, and the ability to merge into their surroundings, becoming invisible to the eye.

Even supernaturals can’t detect an assassin when they’re invisible.

It takes assassins years of training to fully master their magic, but Master Assassins like Alexei are the strongest, quickest, and most dangerous.

I wonder for a moment if The Proprietor somehow mistook the magic in Alexei's ring for some sort of inherent supernatural ability, but I shake off the idea immediately. She isn't likely to be fooled.

Stealing the rubies will be an impossible task.

Nobody messes with assassin's rings. The magic in them is too dangerous. I can only hope that the rubies are purely for decoration, so removing them won't hurt me, but... the removing part worries me even more. The only way to steal them will be to distract Alexei. In a big way.

How badly do I want this? Enough to endanger my heart even more than I already have?

For a moment, my resolve falters, and I stumble against the bar.

His other arm darts out to steady me.

I meet his gaze again, clearing my throat and leaning into him.

"Clumsy heels. I'd much rather take them off.

" I glance around, a deliberate surveillance of our surroundings.

I'm satisfied to see that all of the sunken couches are taken now because it gives me an excuse to move somewhere more private.

"Do you think we could find somewhere quieter?"

"I saw some free seats downstairs," he says.

I allow myself to smile, hoping I don't appear too eager. "That sounds perfect."

He leaves his drink untouched on the bar as he lightly takes my arm, but I scoop up the short glass, praying it contains vodka. Alexei's drink of choice. I take a quick sip to make sure.

He gives me a curious look, his eyes widening when I tip back my head and swallow the whole thing. The cold liquid burns my insides, giving me instant courage.

I give Alexei a challenging smile as I sashay ahead of him, tugging on his hand before I release it. "We'd better be quick or all the seats will be gone."

I twist back to him to check that he's following me, catching the way his gaze travels from my waist to my feet.

I don't flatter myself that he might be checking out my figure. A man like Alexei is always vigilant. His focus is on my pace. He won't have missed the fact that I'm suddenly more than happy to walk on my heels.

Making sure my ruse plays out, I wobble on my next step, deliberately reaching for him to balance myself. A slight narrowing of his eyes is the only indication that he distrusts my motives.

Damn it, he's too perceptive.

I hate myself. I've never played games with him. He may have always been blunt with me, but I've always been honest with him, too.

Still, I tell myself to stay the course.

I want that spell. I want him to feel emotion again.

If I don't get the spell, I'll regret it forever and I'm done living with regrets.

Not giving Alexei time to think, I draw him across the rooftop to the rainbow stairs, clambering through the neon cloud, squeezing past other couples walking upward, and leading him past the band as we return to the second level.

I'm grateful when he follows me, since I'm not strong enough to compel him to go anywhere. I quickly draw him past the purple cube and along the second-level walkway while the beat thumps around us and the dance floor lights glimmer from the level below.

Happily, I find that the circular chairs are all occupied.

I don't want a chair. I want a cube.

It's hard enough for me to let my guard down, let alone when I'm surrounded by people. What I need to do next requires me to let my guard down in a big way...

"Damn," I say, my speech exaggerated. "We'll be lucky to find a place to sit."

Please let a cube be free... Please let a cube be free...

Relief floods me when I see a vacant cube dead ahead.

Willfully ignoring the vacant swing chair nearby, I hurry forward, Alexei's hand firmly clutched in mine.

"Quick," I say. "Before someone else gets it first."

Just as we near the entrance, a man appears from the other direction, darting toward the cube. His aura tells me he's a shifter, some sort of bird, his face and body all

sharp angles and his movements furtive.

The darkness I sense from him makes my skin crawl, and a shudder shoots down my spine.

I have to get to the cube before him.

Just as I reach the entrance, he speeds in front of me, his movements so fast that he blocks my path before I can blink.

His lips twist into a snarl, his dark gaze drilling holes into me. “This cube is mine.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

My front foot is already planted inside the cube's entrance, my chest about to smash up against the shifter's.

I lurch back and to the side in an attempt to avoid contact without removing my foot.

He's even taller than Alexei but very thin, and up close the strength radiating off him makes the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck stand on end.

He may be a shifter but he's certainly aligned with dark magic.

A quick glance to the left tells me he isn't alone.

A gorgeous man with the aura of a warlock stands one step behind him together with a pale-skinned witch.

It takes me a moment to identify the warlock's power...

a necromancer? The way he's alert to our surroundings gives me the impression he's some sort of bodyguard.

My instinctive magic rushes to the surface. I'm ready to defend myself against all three of them, but Alexei's voice rings out behind me, a dangerous, protective growl as he focuses on bird shifter who claimed the cube. "It looks to me like the lady got here first."

The shifter darts a glance at Alexei, his shrewd gaze quickly studying Alexei's size and, no doubt, judging his power, pausing for a second on his assassin's ring.

The warlock notices it too, stepping up to the shifter with a questioning look. Any supernatural encountering a Master Assassin for the first time should be smart enough to consider their actions wisely.

The shifter, on the other hand...

A confident smile passes across his lips, and he waves his bodyguard away, saying, "I'm in no danger."

He ignores Alexei and leans down to me, his pointed nose a bare inch from mine. The shifter's dark power washes over me in a sickening wave as an angry hiss passes through his partially clenched teeth. "Get out of my cube."

My fingertips tingle as my instinctive magic sizzles through them. Electricity crackles in the air around me and the neon lights flicker above us, enough to make the nearby patrons glance up.

Despite the danger, the shifter considers me with amusement, arrogance oozing from every angle of his face and posture.

I can't back down. I need this cube. I'm not about to walk away now...

I grit my teeth, seconds away from releasing my power, when Alexei steps up beside me.

His fingers curl around my arm. It's the lightest touch, but the energy inside me immediately calms, and a sense of peace washes over me, radiating from his hand and cleansing the darkness of the shifter's power from my mind and body with startling

speed.

Surprise shoots through me, but I force myself not to react.

Is Alexei using his assassin's magic to calm my magic somehow?

The slow burst of power around Alexei is like nothing I've felt before.

A curious glow builds around us, mistakable for the haze that covers the dance floor on the level below us. It caresses my arms, waist, and hips like a shield, but it also pulls at me. Not at my body, but at my power...

The shifter is so close to me that he leans into it.

As soon as the glow touches his face, the dark power I sensed building inside him suddenly recedes as if it were being sucked into a void, the same way my magic has calmed and... disappeared ...

His eyes widen in a way that tells me he wants to step away from us, but that would be a sign of weakness.

He hides his surprise quickly, the momentary fluttering of his fingers his only movement. "What is this?"

Alexei's gray eyes are cold and hard. "Normally, I'd make you apologize to the lady, but in this case, I'll be happy to see the back of you." He leans forward while the soft haze around us merges with the neon lights. Any passerby will think the glow is simply an effect of the lighting.

Alexei lowers his voice. "You will walk away, and we will not see you again tonight. Is that clear?"

The shifter's lips twist into an angry line.

I sense his power sputter and then stop like an engine that keeps dying, as if he's trying to access it but can't make it work.

What is Alexei doing?

Alexei's hand tightens briefly, and the glow builds, illuminating the shifter's malevolent eyes...

Then he steps back, snapping at his bodyguard, "We will find a better cube."

He spins on his heel and stalks away, angrily gesturing for the warlock and witch to follow him.

"We won't see him again," Alexei says, and I hope he's right.

Questions burn inside me about what Alexei just did. Mother Kadris said he doesn't know the extent of his power and now, I'm questioning it too.

Putting aside my questions for the moment, I sink onto the end of the bed that dominates the cube. My feigned discomfort is becoming real. Standing with my legs at an awkward angle has given me genuinely sore arches and calves.

"Thank you," I murmur.

Alexei pauses in the entrance, not even attempting to hide the fact that he's assessing the safety of our surroundings outside the cube as well as its internal layout.

A bed takes up all of the space inside the cube, its sides reaching each wall with only a small space to move between the bed and the entrance. Cushions are strewn across

its surface, lending color to an otherwise white space—white leather walls and ceiling.

I bend to slip off one of my heels, not faking the sigh that passes my lips. I love my heels—I wear them all the time—but there’s nothing like taking them off.

As soon as Alexei steps into the cube, the magic takes hold and closes off the cube behind him.

I can’t hear anything from the outside now—not the thumping beat or the constant hum of voices.

I can’t see anything outside the cube, either.

Inside, soft lighting makes the air around us glow, but the silence feels... dangerous.

When I return my focus to Alexei, I find him standing in the only open space between the bed and the closed entrance, leaning up against the wall.

His gaze is steely and determined. The silver haze from his assassin’s ring melds with his muscular silhouette. The assassin’s magic he wields draws me to him, but I force myself to stay seated, two paces from his location.

“What did you do out there when you touched me?” I ask. “I’ve never felt assassin’s magic like that.”

His focus passes over the bed before he levels his gaze with mine in a way that tells me he wants answers too. “Why are we in here, Tansy?”

I won’t answer his question, the same way he’s avoiding mine.

“I’m here,” I say, gesturing to the cube. “To take off my shoes.”

I slide off my other stiletto and rub my aching calf, pushing aside my gauzy skirt to reach my lower leg.

At the same time, I consider all of the spells masquerading as flower petals around my body and which one I should use.

The protection spell will freeze Alexei. It will give me the chance to take the rubies at my leisure. But I would have to speak it very quickly since his reflexes are lightning fast.

I wear another spell that’s a compulsion spell—it would make him give me the ring, but he would be aware of it and come after me as soon as the spell wore off.

No, I need a short spell, maybe only two words that will pause him for long enough that I can remove the rubies from his ring without him realizing or retaliating.

Unless, of course, I’m bold enough to steal them while he’s alert...

I gasp as he drops to his knees in front of me, lightly cupping his hand around my exposed ankle.

His eyes meet mine. “May I?”

I’m not sure what he’s asking permission to do, but I nod, my stomach fluttering as he rubs my calf in slow circular motions, his fingertips warm and firm as he works his way down to my ankle and up to my knee.

I smother another sigh, this time of contentment and... something else I’m not familiar with... a deep need for more.

He brushes the material of my skirt aside and drops a kiss on my knee, his lips warm against my skin.

Raising his eyes to mine, he keeps his voice low as he asks again, “Why are we here, Tansy?”

My ulterior motives suddenly disappear, consumed by what I want. I’m here to steal the rubies and get the revival spell. I wish I could tell him about it, maybe even ask his permission to take the stones, but he would never allow me to tamper with the ring, not even for his own benefit.

But now, more is possible. It would be so easy to slide forward, curve my leg around his hip, and draw him close. It would be so easy to lean my head forward and brush my lips across his, to finally taste his mouth and know what it’s like to explore his body.

My lips part, and a response pours out of me, more honest than I planned. “I haven’t seen you in a long time—and I might not see you again. I don’t want to waste this chance...”

A faint smile curves his lips, but he doesn’t make it easy for me. “Chance for what?”

I search his eyes, telling myself I won’t see what I want to see, that the heat in his eyes and the way he strokes my calf aren’t because he wants me. Well, maybe logically he wants me, but it’s physical, not emotional.

My heart demands answers, but not from him. From myself: Why can’t I give in to this?

Even if he doesn’t feel anything for me, even if he can’t love me, why can’t I take what I can?

I plan on getting the revival spell tonight, but I have no guarantees. All that's certain is what's right in front of me.

The touch of his hand on my leg is more than I can bear, promising pleasure that I've never allowed myself to indulge in.

Why can't I give in to what my body wants even if it will leave my heart aching?

Without allowing myself to think any further about it, I reach out and curl my palm around the back of his neck, sliding forward at the same time so that my free leg hooks around his hips.

I balance there for a moment until his hand finds the small of my back, his fingers splaying against my spine, supporting me.

His body heat burns through my thin dress, but he's not as close as I want him to be. He has to let go of my other leg—bent at the knee and pressed up between us—to allow that to happen.

The question in his eyes is unbearable. I've never made a move like this toward him, other than kissing his cheek once, which was an impulsive gesture that led to revelations about his curse.

His lips are inches from mine, his breathing in control. Unlike mine.

“A chance to be with you,” I say.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I brush my lips against Alexei's, a light, unassuming touch. I move with caution, knowing that he may not choose to return my kiss.

The moment our lips touch, my heart kicks inside my chest. I gasp at the tingles that shoot through me, my inner power rising in response to the contact.

Just moments before, he calmed my power with his touch. Now... it's igniting.

One brief touch is not enough. I press my lips to his again, drinking in the contact for a moment before I pull away.

I want more, so much more, but I force myself to stop.

For an excruciating moment, he remains completely still, his eyes widening like storm clouds about to break.

Then, he sucks in a sharp breath, his hand flexes against my back, and he releases the leg that remained captured between us, allowing me to slide completely toward him.

My legs curve around him, and our lower halves press up against each other. His free hand rests lightly against my thigh and curves around the base of my hip.

He pauses for a beat, his mouth close to mine, before he presses a tantalizingly gentle kiss against the corner of my mouth.

I wait for him to deepen the kiss, but he brushes his lips across mine to plant another light kiss on the other corner of my mouth, then one against my cheek and over to my other cheek, trailing kisses to my chin, each one soft.

His fingers tangle in my hair, stroking through it, making me shiver all of the way to my toes.

Closing my eyes, I soak up the touch I've wanted for so long. My hands find all of the muscles of his back, loving the way they shift as he moves.

I draw him closer, boldly running my fingers into his hair as my lips seek his.

This time, he kisses me with a hunger that takes me by surprise. His fingers tighten around my hip, his other hand stroking up my back. I arch into him, losing myself in his kiss, sinking so far beneath the surface that I forget where I am and why I'm here.

I tilt my head to give him full access to my neck as he trails hungry kisses to my shoulders, pushing aside my dress strap to kiss my collarbone all the way from my shoulder to the space between my breasts.

When I wrap my legs around his waist and press my lower half against his, he responds with a groan, hooking his arms beneath me to lift me further up the bed and settle us onto it.

He pushes himself up off the surface so he doesn't crush me while my legs remain firmly clasped around him, refusing to let him go.

The rubies glint on his finger, pressed into the mattress at my eye level, reminding me what I need to do.

Trying to focus on my goal, I pull his left hand into my right, stretching our arms up

so that his body is drawn down to me. From this position, he'll have to crane his head back to see his outstretched hand and my own brushing against it.

With my left hand, I reach for the nearest spell, hoping it's the one I need. My fingers brush a leaf. Without looking at it, the words burn inside my mind.

They seem so natural...

I whisper against his lips, "Crimson crush come closer."

He raises his head to give me a quizzical look, but I quickly draw his lips back to mine to distract him.

With a brush of my fingertips over his ring, the rubies fall into my palm. I push them under the pillow at my head, drawing my fingertips back to his arm so he'll think nothing of it.

Free to do what I want now, I find the base of his shirt, tugging on it, wanting to know the feeling of his bare chest on mine.

He pulls us up into a sitting position, allowing me to draw his shirt over his head, dropping it onto the bed. I run my hands across his bare chest, exploring all of his muscles, loving the way his eyes close as I brush the hard planes of his stomach.

He responds with hungry kisses pressed to my neck, kisses that make me melt into him, his hands grazing my shoulders.

The vines that wrap around my arms and torso respond to his touch, willfully giving way as he draws the material slowly to my waist. He explores every new patch of skin that the descending material reveals, making me gasp and sigh.

By the time the material gathers at my waist, he has stroked and kissed every inch of my chest, and my body is burning.

I press against him, my chest against his, seeking relief from the intense need raging through me.

It doesn't help. I need all of him.

I reach for his belt buckle, but it's impossible to undress him positioned like this.

As I brush his stomach again, tugging at the top of his jeans, he groans against my mouth. "Tansy..."

His breathing is as erratic as mine, his full lips slightly parted.

I chase his mouth, wanting to feel his lips against me—all of me—but he pulls away, drawing his hand to my cheek.

He gives me a shake of his head. "This isn't what you want. We can't... do this..."

I've never abandoned my inhibitions like this before, let alone around him. But that doesn't mean I don't want to.

I shiver, my mind a mess of desire and now confusion. Is he pushing me away? If this is the only chance I have to be with him, then I'm not letting it go.

"Why not?" I challenge him. "Why can't we?"

His arms close around me, stroking my naked back in ways that contradict his declaration. "I know you, Tansy. This is a compromise. It isn't what you want."

I tip my head back to see his face, sudden anger coursing through me, my instinctive power rising with it. “How do you know what I want?”

He remains calm—he’s always calm even when he’s angry—and the fact that he’s regained his control so quickly infuriates me even more. As soon as my magic sparks between us, his palm spreads flat against my back, and at that single touch... all of the anger drains out of me.

My instinctive power calms. Just like before, it feels like he’s deliberately draining it from me.

I search for a sign that he’s accessing his assassin’s magic, wondering if that’s how he’s doing it, but there’s no telltale silver haze around him.

He says softly, “Because I want the same thing. I want to feel what you feel.”

My heart thuds inside my chest, a frantic beat. I search his eyes for emotions I desperately need to see. Are they there? Maybe hidden behind the assassin’s mask?

Stop kidding yourself.

I drop my head to his shoulder. My eyes burn. I can’t stop the tears that suddenly slide from my eyes and drip onto his shoulder. “But you can’t.”

His voice is a rumble at my ear, his heart still pounding against my palm where it’s squished between us. “You deserve more, Tansy.”

I whisper, “What if this is a compromise I’m willing to make?”

He’s quiet. Too quiet. His breathing comes slowly under control. “You might tell yourself that, but it isn’t true. You have to—” He swallows. “You have to let me go.

We have to let each other go.”

He pulls back, cupping his hand to my cheek. “You have so much love in your heart that you’re afraid to show anyone. You have so much to give. I want you to find someone who can return it.”

His gaze follows the tear trickling down my cheek. “You need to find someone who can give you everything, not just this.”

His hand brushes my shoulder, grazing my collar bone. My body burns, and all I want is to kiss him again.

What he doesn’t know is that I tried. I went on a few dates, had a few coffees, tried to be normal, but nobody compares to him, nobody’s presence makes my heart hammer and at the same time makes me feel like I belong, like I’ve found my place in the world.

“No!” My voice is a near shout.

Wrenching out of his arms, I push away from him up the bed. I wrestle my arms through the straps of my dress while the vines do the rest, curling around the gauzy material to slide the dress back into place.

“I refuse to find anyone else, Alexei Mason. I choose you.”

I push my way through the plush cushions, disguising my movements as I sweep the rubies into my fist. I find my feet on the floor at the end of the bed and clench both my fists in defiance—one to hide the rubies, the other... because anger is my friend right now.

Thorns rise along the edges of the vines, a defensive mechanism that I can’t stop.

Alexei's eyes widen in surprise. "You choose me, despite the fact that I can't love you?"

"Yes." My voice breaks. "I want you to be able to choose too. Whether or not you choose me, you deserve to know your own heart."

I want him to be able to feel again, for his heart to be whole, for his emotions to be returned. Once he does, he might not want me. He told me once that I was a logical choice: I was a witch like his mother, and I was both powerful and beautiful—his words, not mine.

Once logic no longer dominates his decisions, he might turn away from me. I'm prepared for that because at least I'll know it's a real choice, not one made by default.

I inch toward the cube's entrance. "I'll do whatever it takes to give you back your emotions."

His forehead creases. "Tansy...?"

I take a step toward the cube's front, praying it'll open immediately. Praying Alexei doesn't come after me.

His hand rises. "Please wait."

His quiet request reaches me just as the magic in the cube begins to trigger. I pause, sensing the magic is ready to release me from the cube. All it will take is a small step.

He twists toward me, still kneeling on the bed, his gaze burning through me. His fists press into the tops of his thighs as if he's fighting an inner war.

He curses quietly beneath his breath before he says, "I take it back. I don't want you

to leave.”

Surprise builds inside me. If I want to take the rubies to Mother Kadris, I should go now. The longer I delay, the greater the chance Alexei will see them, but his request makes me pause.

The weight of this moment settles onto my shoulders, freezing me to the spot.

He approaches me slowly, climbing across the bed’s surface. He’s still naked from the waist up. His hair is ruffled, but he doesn’t try to fix it. His disheveled appearance makes me want to close the gap and ruffle it even more.

Damn . How does he do that to me with a single look?

He slides off the edge of the bed, standing two paces from me in the confined space. “I don’t know what love feels like, but maybe this is the closest I’ll ever get.”

His gaze holds mine. “I don’t want to be selfish. I don’t want to be that guy. I should push you away. I should tell you to find someone better.”

“You did,” I whisper.

“But that’s not what I want.” He takes a deep breath, his big chest rising and falling as he takes a step toward me. “I want you in my life. I want to be selfish. I want to give you everything. I want to promise you...”

He doesn’t reach for me. Instead, he takes a knee. The space is barely big enough to accommodate him as he gazes up at me. “Tansy Gray, I will never betray you or walk away from you. Even if my heart can’t give you what you need, I will be yours always. If you want me.”

My heart is in my throat.

The rubies are like a burning flame inside my fist, filling me with guilt. I wish I'd left them hidden on the bed. I never expected him to stop me like this, to change his mind like this.

I never expected him to make any promises.

Confusion is a storm inside me. Alexei said he doesn't know what love feels like, but the way he's looking at me, the way he touches me, the way he has always treated me is beyond mere intellectual thought. It can't all be logic. Can it?

Or am I seeing what I desperately want to see, interpreting his soft touches as feeling, interpreting the tone of his voice as caring, not as carefully calculated decisions on his part to appear that way?

Despite my confusion, one thing I am sure of: he is always true to his word.

So I allow myself to wonder... What if I accept the life he's promising me?

What if I don't get the revival spell? What if I accept that he'll never love me, but he will do what he promises—never walk away or betray me.

I've always kept my emotions to myself. I found it so hard to show them, so hard to make myself vulnerable, but now I carefully drop to my knees, leaning in to wrap my arms around his big chest, careful not to reveal the rubies.

I tip my head back to press a kiss his lips. "Yes."

"Yes?"

“Yes. No matter what happens.”

A smile breaks across his face. A weight seems to lift from his shoulders. He scoops me up into his arms. If I didn’t know better, I would believe he was happy.

But I have a new problem. I nearly dropped the rubies, barely closing my fist in time. One of them slips to the edge of my fingers, and fear of discovery makes my palms sweat.

“Let’s go dance,” he says.

“Dance?” I gesture at the bed, my cheeks suddenly burning. I was counting on returning to the bed, where I could hide the rubies again. “But don’t you want to...?”

He gives me a lazy smile. “I have a lifetime to explore your body, Tansy. Let’s take it slow.”

He draws my arms from around him and the movement is a little too fast. I fumble with the rubies. He helpfully grasps my hand, and?—

One of the stones glints between my fingers.

He freezes. His gaze flies to his ring and back to me. Confusion floods his features. “Tansy, what are you doing with those?”

I wrench out of his grasp. “I need them.”

“What for?”

“I can’t tell you.” I dart toward the front of the cube, whispering a spell as I go. “Love linger, love delay, love stay.”

He lunges in my direction. “Tansy, wait!”

My spell takes hold, and he stops in his tracks, his feet glued to the floor. It won’t hold him for long, but it’ll give me long enough to get the rubies to Mother Kadris.

As I step through the entrance, the cube releases me.

I glance back one more time, poised in the opening.

The look on Alexei’s face freezes me to the spot.

Betrayal. It floods his features like a knife to my heart.

His gray eyes are a storm of thunderclouds as he asks, “Was any of this real?”

My voice fails me. He must think it was all a ruse to steal the rubies from his ring.

I force myself to speak. “All of it was real. I love you, Alexei Mason. I will do anything to give you the chance to love me back.”

I spin and race away before he can break free of the spell.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Rushing along the corridor, the rubies held firmly in one fist, I snatch up a leaf from my dress, its golden handwriting glowing at my touch. I release it into the air as I run toward the rainbow stairs, pushing through the revelers to take the stairs two at a time.

This spell is more dangerous than I would normally use, but I speak it anyway, recklessness overtaking caution. “Illuminate ill will.”

My instinctive magic pours through me, triggered by my heightened emotions, so strong that I’m not sure if I’m using the spell or my magic this time.

Show me Mother Kadriss ...

The leaf flies ahead of me, blazing a path toward the other side of the roof. A glow that only I will be able to see spirals over the rooftop, a swirl of light that settles on a far sunken couch, illuminating her head and shoulders.

I hurry across the distance, gratified when Mother Kadriss jolts as I slip into the seat opposite her. My chest heaves as I slap the rubies on the table and slide them across its smooth surface.

Her jaw drops. She stares at the stones and then at me.

I glare at her. “You didn’t think I’d find you without your permission, did you?”

Her startled eyes flash to mine. “I didn’t expect you to betray him.”

I pause at her choice of words, considering her carefully. “Betray him...?”

She continues to stare at the rubies. She seems oddly thrown. Her voice is a murmur. “I thought you would stay with him once you saw him again. I thought you would see that he...” She shakes herself. “You actually stole them.”

I struggle to make sense of what she’s saying. “We had a deal and I’ve kept my part of it.”

Mother Kadris’s eyes widen. She leans across the table toward me. “You don’t know what these rubies are, do you? He never told you?”

If she were cackling or triumphant right now, I wouldn’t think twice about her question, but her concern makes me worried. So far, she hasn’t taken the rubies, leaving them on the table instead.

I have to believe that Alexei will forgive me for snatching them. I can even conjure replacement gems for him. I can make it up to him. Once I have the revival spell, he’ll understand why I’ve done this.

My blank expression must speak volumes because Mother Kadris’s already-wide eyes grow to saucers.

“When Alexei received his assassin’s ring,” she says, “he had these stones set into it so he could keep them safe and with him always.”

My mouth is suddenly dry. “Why?”

Her gaze lowers to the rubies. “Because they’re his last connection to his mother.”

I force myself to speak. “In what way?”

“I’m sure you already know that his mother was cast out of her coven when she gave birth to a baby boy with no apparent magical ability.

She then abandoned the child too. What is not well known is that she had no choice but to leave him, or the coven would have killed him.

Before she left, she poured all of her love into these stones and left them with him so he would know that she loved him. ”

I’m chilled to the core. I stare at the three red stones glinting like a sharp accusation between us.

“Why three?” I ask.

“Because one was not enough to contain all of her love.”

My stomach sinks. An awful yawning trench opens up within my mind and swallows me.

I clench my jaw, trying to fight my fear. Fear of losing him now. “If that’s true, then why do you want them?”

She hesitates, shakes her head, studies me instead of the rubies. I’m finding all of her reactions completely confusing and contrary to how I expected this to play out. She’s hiding something, but I don’t know what. Or why.

“Because love is the most powerful magic of all,” she says.

And I took them away from Alexei. The only connection he has to his mother... all

her love... stolen... after he offered me everything he has to give...

I betrayed him.

I've made so many mistakes in my life. Helped where I shouldn't have helped. Refused to help where I should have helped...

Now I've made the worst mistake.

He will never forgive me.

My heart is cold. The warmth leaves me, and the air around me chills. My instinctive magic billows upward, taking control without my volition, freezing the air around us, making our breath frost.

I wrap my arms around my stomach, trying to quell the sick feeling invading my body, but it's no use.

Mother Kadris considers me for another moment before she sighs deeply, breathing out the frosty air, tapping her fingertips on the table next to the rubies. "You have a choice to make now, Tansy Gray. How badly do you want the revival spell?"

Earlier tonight she told me that only someone worthy should have the spell. I'm not worthy. I convinced myself I wanted the spell for Alexei, to give him the chance to feel love, but the truth is my motives are entirely selfish.

I want him to have the chance to love me .

He will never love me now.

I have to return the rubies to him, face the consequences of my actions, and then... I

have to let him go.

I reach across the table to take them back, but Mother Kadris darts forward and scoops the stones into her fist.

She swiftly deposits them into the pockets of her sleek black pants. “I’m sorry, Tansy. Your choices just disappeared.”

We are both half out of our seats, face to face across the table.

Her demeanor changed so rapidly that I’m left spinning. The quiet woman she was moments ago is gone, replaced by a witch of stony determination. Light glints across her face, her colorless eyes reflecting the neon rainbow around us.

For a second, her focus shifts to the people around us before it flashes back to me.

Only something important would have distracted her... Something that made her change course...

I glance left and freeze.

Alexei storms toward me across the rooftop, his assassin’s magic gleaming around his silhouette. Blazing silver light glows with every powerful step he takes.

I’m surprised he hasn’t put his shirt on. I’m not the only one who seems to notice. A number of women in the seats nearby crane their heads to watch him pass.

He stops at the edge of the sunken couch, a mountain of muscle towering over me.

His voice is a stern command. “Tanzanina Gray, we need to talk.”

Without conscious thought, I float up out of the couch to hover at eye level with him. My hair wafts out around me, and my dress swishes in the growing storm of my emotions.

Shame and guilt make my power spark. If I don't calm down, the other partygoers will need protection from me .

Regret fills my heart. "Alexei, I'm so sorry. I didn't know what the rubies meant to you."

His gaze softens, a perplexed crease forming across his forehead.

He sighs, shaking his head. "Tansy, you don't need to?—"

Movement to my right draws his attention. He freezes but only for a second. His arm darts out, and he pulls me into his side, holding me close, while his other hand rises toward Mother Kadris, his palm out in a defensive gesture. "Mother Kadris!"

Mother Kadris returns Alexei's glare with a haughty expression and a growing smile.

She floats up out of the couch to hover above the table, staying out of his reach. "Hello, Alexei. This meeting has been a long time coming."

"You're damn right it has. Your assassination has been sanctioned for hundreds of years, and my Faction is the last with a chance to try. Whatever you're doing here, you will walk away. Right now."

The look on his face tells me that if he could kill her, he would, but The Proprietor's magic stops anyone dying here.

She arches an eyebrow at him. "Oh, but Tansy and I were about to make a deal."

Alexei's arm tightens around me.

Mother Kadris's cold gaze falls on me, and my heart sinks.

In my mind, I replay every comment she made, every move... her initial desperation to get her hands on the rubies, then the surprise and concern when I brought them to her.

Her reactions have been a series of contradictions that I struggle to make sense of. The only answer is that she wanted to make sure I would be desperate to get the rubies back from her.

I made a deal with a witch who consumes souls, and she played me. Well and truly.

Alexei growls. "You can't have Tansy's soul."

Mother Kadris gives a cold smile. "Well, that's up to Tansy, isn't it?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Am I willing to risk my soul?

As I fight the shiver raging down my spine, a glance to my left tells me we're drawing attention.

I murmur, "Perfect power protect this place with my presence."

Every supernatural around us slows and stops moving. In the background the rooftop entertainment pauses, even the latest smoky neon illusion—a gorgeous stallion—pauses galloping through the air midstride.

The music stops and silence settles around us. The warehouse is still. Everyone in this place will remain unaware of what's happening around them and shielded from any magic that spills their way.

I tip my head back to meet Alexei's worried eyes. "I will get the rubies back. I promise."

I push myself from his arms even though he reaches for me. "No, Tansy?—"

I soar up to Mother Kadris, remaining beyond her reach. My scathing tone cuts across the space between us. "You're just like all the others. All of the witches coming after me for my supposedly unlimited power. Never mind that I'm irreversibly damaged."

Her mouth twists as she inhales as if she can already taste my power. I guess she can,

considering that it's sparking all over the place.

"Tanzanina Gray," she snarls, "your belief that you're damaged is born of guilt, not truth."

I flinch at her harsh tone. My mother's final whispered words echo back at me... It's not your fault, baby girl.

I was only three years old, but the memory replayed for years after. It was as if my power was stuck in that moment, and every time I tried to draw on the strength within me, the memory resurfaced. It took me years to learn how to repress it.

The neon lights flicker as my anger grows, clouds drawing across the stars, darkness descending over the rooftop. Crimson light builds around me as my rage grows. "Of course I feel guilty! It was my power that killed her!"

"It was your power, but your aunt was in control of it. She took you hostage and used your power to kill your mother. You had no control over that. You were only a child."

"I know that!"

Concern lights Mother Kadris's eyes. "Then forgive yourself! Until you do, you will never know your own power."

I recoil from her. She's playing mind games with me again, making me believe that she cares when she doesn't. It's all manipulation. It has to be.

I hone my rage into pinpoint focus. "You will give me back the rubies."

Her eyes narrow. Her grip relaxes on the rubies for a moment but then tightens again.

“Only in exchange for your soul.”

I grind out. “That’s not happening.”

She smiles. “Reach deep, Tansy. You will need your greatest power to defeat me.”

She rises further upward. Electricity crackles around her, and wind wails around us. The thunderclouds thicken in the sky above, forming a mass of darkness that descends toward us so rapidly that it obscures the rooftop within seconds.

Black clouds swirl around us, enveloping us in a cold mass that makes me shudder. Only the space between the three of us remains lit as the light from her power and my rage intermingle, crimson striking white.

Electricity gathers around Mother Kadris’s torso and arms. Her hand flies out, and a bolt of power streaks through the air, but not at me.

Alexei is already on the move, his assassin’s magic a silver haze as he darts through the clouds. Her lightning bolt hits the couch where my protection spell absorbs it without any damage.

She follows Alexei’s path, sending bolts of electricity streaking after him as he leaps to the next sunken couch and the frozen supernaturals in it and dives toward the table, scooping up two wine glasses.

In any other situation, he would be able to break them and use the glass as weapons, but my protection spell will prohibit that. Nothing in our surroundings can be damaged or broken.

I spin back to Mother Kadris, rage spiraling through me that she’s targeting Alexei, my protective instincts rising fast.

I step forward, my arms rising. I must have brushed the leaves on my dress because spells—so many spells—rush into my mind.

“Defenders defy death,” I whisper.

Creatures form in the darkness, solidifying out of the clouds and taking shape around her.

A fierce, black bear rises up, its claws bright in the lightning as it slashes at her, catching her sleeve and shredding it.

At the same time, a black stallion races toward her from the side, and a dragon soars over my head, breathing electricity.

Her eyes widen moments before a wash of dragon’s breath envelops her.

At the last moment, she spins and soars upward in the air, narrowly avoiding the claws and hooves, but the dragon’s fire singes her high heels as they slip off her feet. Her shoes fall to the ground, where they smolder in a heap.

I rise upward with her, and the dragon follows me, circling back, its wings whooshing, parting the clouds as it flies.

Mother Kadris gives me a wicked grin. “That’s more like it, Tansy.”

She spins, pouring her power through the bear and stallion and into the dragon, no doubt trying to break it before it breaks her.

Alexei is safe from her for now, but I don’t let up.

“Stun my heart. Feel my pain.” Crimson light pours from me, hitting her ribs just as

the dragon explodes in a whoosh of light that sends us both spinning to the ground.

I regain my balance, flinging light at her in stunning blows. She struggles to shield herself, a glistening barrier forming around her body before she retaliates.

Lightning streams my way. The two beams of light merge, my power racing along hers, meeting in the middle in an explosion of energy and thunder.

I dig my heels in and absorb the impact. The explosion is like a whisper across my skin, barely shifting me, while she screams and stumbles backward, nearly falling into a sunken couch full of frozen supernaturals.

Just then, Alexei darts from the cloud cover, running straight at Mother Kadris. He smashes both of the glasses against the edge of the nearest table as he runs so he's left holding the jagged stems.

I gasp with surprise, because he shouldn't be able to break the glass like that.

He leaps, one weapon punching toward her throat, the other clutched low.

At the last moment, Mother Kadris jolts out of his path, narrowly avoiding being impaled.

She snarls at Alexei as he ducks and rolls. "You missed!"

He dashes across the nearest tabletop and lands on his feet. "No, I didn't."

Still holding the jagged stems, he points at her waist.

She glances down. Her pants pocket is slit across the bottom, the material flapping in the wind.

Alexei raises his fist, the rubies glinting in his fingers.

Shock rages across her face.

He darts across to me, his hand outstretched. “Tansy, take them!”

Mother Kadris flings her free hand wide, screaming at him. “Pain!”

A bolt of green light spears at Alexei, striking him in the back. He jolts and drops to his knees, roaring out his agony.

His eyes squeeze closed, blood streaming from his nose. “Tan-sy!”

Bracing for the torture, I throw myself into the emerald light. Pain spears through me, burning my skin.

I gasp, scream, push against it, trying to shield us both.

He meets my eyes, his own widening. Maybe he didn’t think I would step in front of him. Maybe he thought I’d use my power first, but there isn’t any pain that I will let him suffer alone.

I don’t have time to wipe the blood streaming from my own nose.

Shield.

Power flickers around me, a protective shield forming, but not fast enough.

With a roar, Alexei twists and flings the glass stems at Mother Kadris, one aimed at her shoulder, the other at her neck.

She tilts her head, her power flares, and both stems rebound.

One strikes the floor, but the other...

Oomph.

Shock freezes me to the spot.

I stare down at the stem protruding from my stomach, sensing the blood trickling from the wound.

She shot the stem into me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A lexei's horrified shout meets my ears as I collapse.

He catches me as I fall, his big arms a welcome pressure around my back, supporting my head and neck. "Tansy!"

In the distance, Mother Kadris's quickly blurring figure screams another spell, and Alexei's upper arm swings in her direction, clearly against his will.

One of the rubies zips out of his hold before he clenches his fist, trying to hold on to the others, supporting me with one arm while his other is stretched beyond endurance.

He clenches his teeth, clutching on to the stones and me at the same time.

"You can't die here. It's forbidden." He forces sound between his teeth. "This can't be happening..."

I fight the pain and the threatening dark, straining upward to reach for his arm, wrapping my fingers around it. Lock.

His fist closes, holding the rubies tightly, but it's taking everything left in me to maintain the spell.

Mother Kadris shouts, "She can heal herself if she stops fighting me, Alex. If she doesn't, nothing will save her. It's her choice."

I try to catch his attention. “I can do this. I can hold on.”

“What’s more important to you, Alex?” calls Mother Kadris. “The rubies or her life?”

“I can do it,” I whisper again, my vision blurring, Alexei’s gray eyes fading from my view. “I can...”

His voice reaches me through a wash of pain. “I can’t lose you, Tansy. My light. My sunshine. I don’t need the rubies. I need you.”

My heart is breaking. How can he need me if he doesn’t love me?

I sense the power growing around him, the power he used to drain mine before. It steals into my torso and arms, into my mind, drawing my own magic away, weakening the lock on his arm...

My grip loosens. I try to hold on, but he bends his head, pressing his lips to mine, a terrible distraction.

The lock breaks?—

His fist opens, and the gems fly right into Mother Kadris’s waiting hands.

He deliberately let them go.

She smiles and shuts off the pain spell. The emerald light fades.

Alexei drags me into his chest, closing down his power, whispering to me, “Heal yourself.”

The healing spell rises to my mind, golden words as clear as if they were written in

the air in front of me. I give him a nod of permission, screaming as he wrenches the stem from my stomach.

Words quickly slip from my tongue, and my healing spell glows around us, lighting up the worry in his eyes before I sense my wound knitting together.

He drops his head to mine, pressing a kiss to my forehead, but as the pain recedes, I realize...

I didn't write a healing spell on the leaves attached to me.

I search his eyes. I'm still weak, but I want to fight. "The rubies?"

He shakes his head. "Let them go."

Craning her neck to hear us, Mother Kadris calls out, "Don't you want the rubies back? I promise I'll give them to you once I have Tansy's soul. I always honor my deals."

Alexei slides an arm around my waist, helping me rise. He brushes the hair from my face, plants a kiss against my cheek, and says, "I don't care about the rubies."

Mother Kadris floats closer. "But your mother gave them to you."

He holds me tightly as he roars, "Give up already! My mother is in my past. Tansy is my future. You can't have her soul."

Mother Kadris draws nearer, peering at him. "Why not, Alex?"

"Because... I..."

She scoffs. “Because what? You love her? You’re incapable of love.”

He turns to me, ignoring her. “If this isn’t love, I don’t know what is.”

I press my palm against the hand he holds to my cheek. So many people tell someone they love them without ever being willing to give up everything for the one they claim to love. Alexei has always shown me more love than I ever expected.

Mother Kadris taunts, “What about you, Tanzanina ? Are you prepared to walk away, damaged and broken? You didn’t get the revival spell. You lost the rubies. Are you really prepared to accept that?”

I close my eyes, then turn my cheek into Alexei’s palm, planting a kiss inside his wrist before I take his hand in mine and turn to her. “You were right, Mother Kadris. Part of me was broken, but it wasn’t my power. It was my belief in myself.”

Spells whoosh through my mind, so many to choose from...

“Through darkest night and brightest day, strongest heart will never stray, but stay the course, reverse the time, give back what’s lost...”

Her eyes widen. She takes a step back.

I smile before I complete the spell. “What’s lost is mine.”

The rubies fly out of her hand, wrenched away from her.

She tries to hold on to them, snatching at them as they fly ahead of her. Her feet race as she pursues them. She leaves the ground and leaps just as Alexei plucks the stones out of the air.

Her hand closes over his. The air sizzles, and her eyes widen.

Her lips part, she inhales, tries to wrench backward, starts to scream?—

Crimson light explodes between them, knocking me to the side. I tumble and right myself, jumping to my feet, ready to defend Alexei.

I freeze.

Their hands are still locked, both of them kneeling, facing each other. But now Alexei's hands are closed over hers.

Tears stream down Mother Kadris's face, her free palm pressed to her heart.

Alexei's expression is stunned, fierce, his eyebrows drawn down, but with a single word it sounds as if his heart is both breaking and healing. "Mother."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“ A lex...” Mother Kadris gasps, a broken sob, trying to pull away from him. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

He reaches forward to lay his other hand on her shaking shoulder, supporting her. “What was supposed to happen?”

Her shoulders slump, but she doesn’t shake him off. “I was supposed to make up for what I did. I was supposed to make it right. You weren’t meant to find out who I am.”

I draw nearer, approaching cautiously, but she isn’t accessing her power now.

Satisfied that she isn’t going to try anything, I settle quietly onto the floor.

A stern expression descends over Alexei’s face, an assassin’s countenance. “Explain.”

“It’s a long story,” she whispers.

Alexei glances at me, his stern mouth softening. “We have time.”

Her voice is soft, barely a whisper. “Hundreds of years ago... I was cold and cruel, ambitious. I traded favors for souls without a second thought. Then I met a powerful man and wanted his soul more than anything. He was willing to give it to me in exchange for a particular magical power. I didn’t care why.

I didn't even ask. I took his soul and gave him what he wanted, but he did unspeakable things to innocent supernaturals. ”

Alexei's gaze flashes to mine. “You're talking about the man who created assassin's magic. You gave him the power that started it all.”

She nods. “Josiah Baines. Slade Baines' ancestor. I gave Josiah the power over metal that allowed him to rip apart the wings of Valkyrie and Keres alike. He was the first ringmaker. He used his power for evil.

“I couldn't live with what I'd done. I found a coven that would take me, and I hid among them, only coming out at night, until one day... I met another man—an ordinary man, rough but kind, who ran a boxing ring. Imagine my surprise when I found out I was pregnant.”

She reaches for him. “But I became so sick, Alex. You started killing me from the moment of conception, draining my power until I could barely walk, barely breathe. Your father cared for me...” Her voice breaks. “He was a good man, Alex.”

Alexei's brow furrows. “Why do you call me that? I'm Alexei.”

She shakes her head. “That's what your father called you. I named you ‘Alex.’”

“Why did you leave us?”

“Because the other witches would have killed you if they knew what you could do. The nature of your power means you have no aura—you don't project energy, you take it.

I had to protect you. I told them that you were born powerless.

I convinced them that was why I was so sick.

They told me I was useless, that I was weak because I refused to take any more souls. They cast me out.”

She searches his eyes. “You have never used your power to its full extent. If you wanted to, you could drain the energy from every supernatural in this place. A power like yours is incredibly rare.”

His voice is gentle. “Why are you here now?”

“Because I wanted to reunite you with Tansy. I thought that if you saw each other again, you would realize you were meant to be together. I thought Tansy knew what the rubies meant to you, so she would never take them. I wanted you to...”

She chokes back a sob. “I wanted you to find happiness. Dance. Love. But then, she came back with the rubies. I realized that you would never believe the truth unless you fought for each other.”

Taking his face in her hands, she compels him to look at her.

“You turned Tansy away because you thought you couldn’t love her when actually her love broke your curse long ago.

You just didn’t realize it.” She spins to me.

“And you... Tansy... you locked yourself away, believing that you had nothing to give. When really you have more natural power than I ever had.”

Alexei is frozen beside me. “What happens now?”

Mother Kadris smiles, a real smile for the first time that lights up her eyes, gentle, gray like Alexei’s. “Now, you live your life.”

“And you?”

She draws back on her heels. “I will leave you in peace and live out what life I have left.”

He considers her for a moment.

He reaches for my hand. Then he tips his chin at his mother and says, “Our children will need a grandmother.”

She jolts a little, blinking at him.

I do, too.

Alexei casts me a smile that makes my heart flip and my stomach flutter. I scoot into his side without hesitation, and we stand together, all three of us.

From the corner of my eye, movement makes me turn.

A woman in a black feathered gown watches us from the shadows. She stands tall, a graceful figure, a mysterious smile on her lips. My forehead creases in confusion because nobody else should be moving right now. Unless she’s...

The Proprietor.

She arches a brow at me, giving a gentle wave of her hand in the air, and my protection spell immediately disappears.

Movement around us resumes, the music starts up right where it stopped, and the supernaturals continue their conversations as if they were never interrupted.

When I look again, The Proprietor is gone.

Mother Kadris squeezes Alexei's hand. "I will find you again soon, but right now... this is your night."

She steps back into the crowd, quickly disappearing through an illusion of mistletoe that rises into the air above us.

The smile Alexei casts me broadens as I turn into his arms, tilting my head back to meet his gaze. I always feel overly tall around others, but with Alexei... I feel perfect.

He gives me a gentle smile as he runs his hand down my arm to wrap around my waist. He begins to speak, but I stop him with a kiss.

Soon the night will end, and the magic will transport us home. If the stories are true, fireworks will light up the sky before we leave, but nothing will compare to the journey that lies ahead of us. We have a lot to work out, but I know we can make a life together.

He lifts me off my feet, wrapping me up in his arms, and I don't care that I'm glowing so brightly with happiness that the nearby supernaturals squint against the light.

He loves me, and I am whole.

I whisper against his lips. "Alexei Mason, I'm yours... if you want me."

"Forever," he says. "Always."