In Search of Fire

by Arken_Stone1

Summary

When Wren Bryant returns home to golden plains of Lincoln, Nebraska and encounters the enigmatic, charismatic Corwyn Darcy, she begins an electrifying and unbelievable journey of self-discovery. With his strange beauty and otherworldly aura, magnetism and preternatural talents, Corwyn is undeniable and dangerous. Until now, he has been aloof to all those around him, but Wren is the quirky catalyst that undoes his centuries old defenses. What Corwyn doesn't realize is the closer they become, the more he risks his family and possible war. Wren Bryant has a few secrets of her own. Compelling and unpredictable, In Search of Fire will draw you to it's fire until the last word is read.
Homecoming

Welcome to my world. I buckled up, regretting that I hadn't called Uber for a ride.

It started all in Aunt Della's car. She drove me to the bus terminal in a blue hybrid compact sedan that lacked enough horsepower to go an entire city block, let alone across Denver. Aunt Della's haphazard driving techniques don't work well with her car because it ran on batteries: great on gas, but low on punch. To make sure that Fate ruled in my favor, I wore my lucky sweater, a long-sleeved, purple knit turtleneck from my favorite thrift store. I didn't know if I would survive the commute to see my unknown future, so I decided I needed all the help I could get.

I knew I was the prodigal granddaughter returning home after a long, painful absence. For three years, I drifted from relative to relative, to whoever needed my help most at the time. After my fiancé died, I went to Indianapolis to live with my older brother, Justin, to help edit the manuscript of his latest novel while he navigated through a messy divorce. Then, I traveled north to Rapid City to live with Great-Uncle Garrett from the Broderick side of the family, providing much-needed customer service at his souvenir shop while he dealt with an I.R.S. tax audit. Finally, I found my way to Denver, working in Aunt Della’s New Age store doing bookwork and providing more customer service.

Matthew’s death equaled pain and I embraced my state of denial. It wasn't just a river in Egypt for me; it was an ocean of comfort, but I could only tread water for so long before drowning. After searching my soul for magical answers that never came, I decided to haul my existential self home. I decided that living vicariously through everyone else was a coward's way of dealing with reality and I wanted my life back on my terms. Father Fubar had handed me enough crap for me to start selling porta-potties and I decided to turn it into fertilizer for a better life. My running away started in Lincoln and I needed to return home, face my guilt and get over it.

It sounded great when I said it to my reflection in the bathroom mirror while brushing my teeth the morning before I left Denver.

Lincoln, Nebraska is both a large town and a small city. The population is approximately two hundred fifty thousand, give or take a few University students and a few dozen cows. Surrounded by irrigated cornfields and a sea of University of Nebraska football fans, some see it as a quaint paradise or just another blip located in the middle of fly-over country. I spent my entire life in Lincoln until I turned fifteen and Jack decided to send me to a private school in Eastern Europe after one too many instances of rebellious behavior. I’ll get to that story later. Now, I headed home to Lincoln to help my grandfather, Jack, deal with the funeral of his third wife, Emma, and work through the grieving process.

Funerals: more fun than watching paint dry and less painful than having a root canal done; not exactly my idea of a good time. However, when Jack and I spoke on the phone, we discussed the idea of my return to Lincoln for a short visit but never found the right catalyst to get me home. By fate or design, we had one now.

I loved Lincoln with its unlikely blend of urban and agricultural, progressive and historic. If someone told me one couldn’t find anything to do in Lincoln, then I knew that he or she had never toured the State Capital Building, visited the museums or attended the Lancaster County Fair. I knew things had changed in the past three years but I figured that I could seek out bold new adventures. In truth, it excited me to go home and get back to my grandfather’s acreage.

I wasn’t going to miss Denver at all.
“Wren,” Della gently shook my shoulder, pulling me out of my wistful reverie. “Are you sure that you want to go back to Lincoln? Jack’s a big boy. He can handle the funeral arrangements, you know.”

“I know,” When Matthew died and had no surviving family, the responsibility fell to Jack to make the arrangements with the funeral home: picking the pastor, selecting the music and giving the eulogy while I suffered an emotional meltdown. With my head securely fastened on to my shoulders, I wanted to return the favor. Jack is the foundation and center of our dispersed clan; I owed him too much not to help him in his time of need. He isn’t a man of many words but the few he spoke to me in our last phone conversation implied he didn’t want to be alone and I empathized. “I’m going, Della.”

Della carries the best traits of the Bryant clan: black hair that curls perfectly, olive skin that compliments onyx eyes. She embodies that quirky spirit that defines the essence of all things Bryant. Guilt racked me when I thought about leaving her behind to get my life in order. Who would do the accounting for her store, order inventory each month and make sure everything in her life ran smoothly once I was gone?

Bryants are passionate about two things: magic and family. I think they’re insane about the first, but I agree with them wholeheartedly about the second. I figured she could talk to whatever spirit guide, ghost, or whatever entity attached itself to her for the time being. I knew I wanted to there for Jack because he was the one who needed me now.

“Are you sure?” she wheedled. “You have a good life here in Denver. You’ve got your friends, a job that pays the bills, and of course, your karaoke.”

“Positive,” I replied. “I am tired of running away from life and hiding under my proverbial rock. I’m much with the whole get-my-life-together mentality.”

“Give Jack my regards.”

“No worries.”

“Promise me that you’ll write,” Della pleaded, haphazardly weaving between long streams of traffic, taking the off-ramp to the bus terminal ten miles over the speed limit. I checked to make sure that my seat belt was securely fastened. “You can always come back because I’m only a bus ticket or a phone call away. You can always come visit—”

I love Aunt Della, quirky and capricious as she is, but she’s prone to long soliloquies which occasionally mutate into babbling. I held my hand up in midair to stop another spiel of worry mingled with persuasion. “I’ll be fine, Della, a little trust would be good. Who loves ya?”

“You do.” She gave me a large grin as she jumped the curve when she turned too quickly into the bus terminal parking lot. Long good-byes are not my strong suit and she draws out farewells longer than needed. After helping me with my bags, she gave me a quick hug and sped back to the car before she burst into tears.

I boarded the bus, promptly putting my carry-on bag on the shelf above me. I kept my mind occupied with a good paranormal romance and music from my smartphone. Had I rented a car, the trip’s length would have been roughly eight hours. Riding the bus, the trip lasted around eighteen hours, but I saved over a hundred dollars. When it arrived in Lincoln, I looked like Frankenstein’s little sister.

When I told Jack that I was coming home, he told me that he was happier than a Husker fan at a
National Championship game. He is a man of many interests: football, poker, hunting, horticulture and woodworking. He also has a peculiar gift just like Della; he speaks to animals and they talk back to him. He plied that talent well by being a veterinarian with a successful practice in Havelock, a quaint little neighborhood in northeast Lincoln. He says little and does much. Couple those qualities with a quick mind and a generous heart and you have Jack. It didn’t matter if I had been gone ten days or ten years, we’d pick up right where we left off without missing a beat and I looked forward to that comfortable familiarity.

One thing about Nebraska weather, if you don’t like the weather conditions just wait ten minutes and it will change. When I crossed into the panhandle earlier that afternoon, it had been warm for a late winter day. Now, in Lincoln at midnight, sleet and rain filled the air and I wished that I had brought a heavier coat than my windbreaker.

Jack pulled into the bus depot shortly after I had arrived, driving his mud-splattered tan 4x4 pickup that he affectionately called, ‘The Beast.’ I had several goals that I wanted to accomplish such as getting a job, renting an apartment and buying a car. I didn’t want to inconvenience him by making him my chauffeur and walking everywhere takes too much time, especially in four-inch heels.

Jack is a tall man standing six-two in his stocking feet and one hundred percent lean, raw muscle. Like Della, his black hair gleams in the moonlight and his dark eyes see much and reveal nothing. I knew him at once as he walked through the rain because I spotted his trademark leather duster and black cowboy hat. When he saw me, he tipped his hat to me then crushed me in one of his bone-breaking bear hugs.

“Welcome home, Rascal,” he greeted me warmly, looking down at me with that perfect white smile. You see, there is another unusual trait that runs in my family; we don’t age like other people. Jack is sixty years old but looks no older than thirty. No wrinkles line his tanned face and no gray hairs show except for the distinctive white stripe that everyone else in the family has but me. That’s what marks my family all as Solomonari. Don’t worry. I’ll get to that later.

“It’s good to be home,” I mumbled into the wet leather of his leather duster. I stepped back and looked up at him to meet his gaze. “Jack, I’m sorry about Nana Wren.”

A pause fell between us for a long, awkward moment. I wondered if I had just had another bout of foot-in-mouth disease as I watched him cough and look away. He gave me one quick nod. “Thanks, Wren. I appreciate that. She was a good woman.”

Jack is the strapping, quiet type that doesn’t let much bother him. In that instant, I saw a quick flash of his human vulnerability. I wanted to hug him and say everything would be all right; that we’d make it through this together. He isn’t a man for platitudes or syrupy sympathies and I knew he wanted to keep his dignity intact so I stayed quiet. “Let’s get your bags and go home.”

“Sounds great.” I pointed to my duffel bag and my suitcase. “That is everything I own, emotional and otherwise.”

“That’s it?” One thick black brow rose in disbelief. “Two bags?”

“Pretty much.” All of my life was packed into those two pieces of luggage. I had enough proverbial baggage and didn’t see the need to complicate my existence with too many things.

With strength that he possessed as a result of many years of hard labor, he tossed my suitcase and duffel bag into the back of the truck. I looked at him, finding it hard to believe he was my grandfather. He didn’t look much older than Della and she was pushing forty but passed for twenty-five hands down. I admired my eccentric, charmed family and always felt like the Powers-
That-Be blessed me in that aspect. At least I knew that I would age well.

We finally arrived at the acreage around twelve-thirty in the morning and I was exhausted after the long trek across two states. I took in the large three-story white Victorian manor with its shuttered windows and massive wraparound front porch. I remembered every summer swinging in the porch swing, sipping sun tea with Jack and Emma. It was good to be home.

I trudged through the foyer up to the stairs until I reached the last room at the right end of the hall. Opening the door and flipping on the light, relief filled me when I realized that my room hadn’t changed in the last three years. The honey oak floor, polished and gleaming, complimented the handcrafted oak bookshelves painted white that Jack gave me on my fourteenth birthday. The room was awash with color, turquoise and lemon sherbert walls accented with lime and coral. I saw my large four-poster bed and leapt from where I stood, sinking into the yielding, overstuffed mattress. Every muscle in my body melted into the softness that cradled me.

The next morning, I unpacked my things and went immediately to work planning Nana Wren’s funeral. By noon, we finalized arrangements but I felt drained. If choosing a casket is a barrel of laughs, then buying a headstone is an absolute riot. Throughout the ordeal, Jack sat quietly, leaning back with the brim of his cowboy hat shading his eyes, making it impossible to know his reaction or to read his mood. That left the funeral director and me to discuss options for Emma’s service. The only sign of life Jack gave was a rough grunt when the director pushed all the paperwork in front of him to sign.

I missed Nana Wren’s hectic pace, her creative frenzies when she decided to take on a new project or redecorate the house for the third time in five years. I stared at the picture of her and Jack sitting on my antique roll-top desk, letting a few tears fall down my cheeks. Without her warm presence, the house felt hollow and stale. She kept everything running smoothly. Without her in the world, life threatened to overwhelm Jack, leaving him emotionally weary and me mentally vegetative.

Jack interrupted my private trip down memory lane when he rapped quietly on my door. Peeking in, he gave me a measured gaze. “Hey, Rascal, are you hungry?”

“Much,” I admitted, hearing my stomach growl in agreement.

We drove into town, eating lunch at a little greasy hole in the wall famous for its homemade hamburgers and chocolate malts. I brought along my laptop, surfing the local job-hunting websites as we ate our meal in relative silence. I thumbed through the local paper, circling the want ads that promised any possibility of immediate employment.

Each member of my family possesses a unique talent or two. Della is a psychomancer who chitchats with the dearly departed, Jack is an faunamancer and zoolinguist, meaning he controls plants and speaks with animals. Uncle Garrett is a tribal shaman who is a shapeshifter and a psychic healer. My older brother, Justin, controls the weather and water. Me? I wasn’t a Solomonar like the rest of my family. It was an inside joke when they referred to me as a “Reg.” In other words, I’m regular and mundane without an ounce of supernatural ability. My talent, you ask? Spin doctor. I solve problems with common sense, creative solutions and with computer savvy.

I honed my natural talents through tenacity, dedication and hard work. While I wasn’t a whiz with numbers, I accurately did accounting for more than one family business on the edge of financial chaos. With an eye for detail, I reveled in research and organization. If something needed streamlined and made efficient, I tweaked it. I depended upon logic more than intuition to guide my decisions and I consider myself a practical person. I was the boring, conventional conservative in my oddball clan of magical misfits.
“Are you hardwired to that thing?” Jack gave me a reproachful look as I typed furiously on my keyboard.

“I need a job, Jack,” I sighed wistfully, posting my resume online. “A girl’s gotta eat.”

“You don’t have to worry about working right away,” he said gruffly. “I’ve got a little jingle in the bank. Let me spoil my granddaughter for awhile.”

“I’m so broke I can’t afford to pay attention,” I scoffed as I clicked the ‘Submit’ button at the bottom of my online application, sending it to a potential employer. “I always pay my own way. You know that, Jack.”

“Stars and garters, girl, relax!” Jack commanded as he took another bite of his steak. “You’re gonna give yourself a heart attack if you keep this up. Did you sleep last night?”

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead. No rest for the wicked, so, I won’t be napping anytime soon,” I chuckled wryly.

“Wicked? Nah, Wren, just uptight. Sometimes, you just have to let things rest once in awhile,” he nodded toward my laptop as I turned it off and stuffed it into my briefcase. “Any bites?”

“Not yet. I just started applying today. This afternoon, I’ll take the bus downtown and put in my application at some temporary agencies and see if I hit pay dirt,” I mused, drawing lazy circles in my ketchup with my French fry. “I’m trying to wrap my head around what I really want to do for a living.”

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“You like helping people,” Jack stabbed another piece of his sirloin. “customer service.”

“Not much love for retail, Jack. Instead, I’ve been applying for every administrative and clerical job available,” I popped the fry into my mouth. “I made a good cup of coffee and give great phone voice. Somebody must need a Girl Friday even in this day and age.”

He shoved the daily newspaper in front of me. “Tried the want ads?”

“Not yet. I usually find them wanting,” I scoffed. “Online company sites are the way to go.”

“There’s another thing we need to talk about,” he said quietly. We sat at an isolated booth while the rest of the lunch crowd congregated at the front of the restaurant. “A little magic never hurts.”

“Magic is fire to my gasoline: not a good mix. You know this, Jack,” I sighed in exasperation, resisting the temptation to roll my eyes. “Magic is not a cure-all. With every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, or in my case, massive catastrophe alert. It's like Murphy's Law; whatever can go wrong will and Murphy has a warrant out for my arrest. No, thank you!”

“You can't shoot the magic bullet without a gun,” he tapped the paper twice with his finger. “Let's get you some firepower and give it a go. Try.”

He stared meaningfully at the paper.

“I’ll show you magic,” I pushed my plate aside. Reaching into my purse, I grabbed an orange highlighting pen and opened the newspaper in front of me. Waving my fingers over the classifieds, I tried to stifle a giggle. “Hocus-pocus, mumbo jumbo and abracadabra! Findus jobus.”

“My magic is tragic. Do I look like Hermione Granger?” I snorted, scanning the classifieds section of the newspaper. “I’ll get more out of casting my eyes upon ye old want ads and job websites than casting a ritual. Magic these days, Jack, is knowing how to tap into the Internet and using my smartphone apps.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of you packing a magical forty-five Magnum,” he smirked. “Maybe a talisman or an amulet.”

I lifted the lanyard hanging around my neck, dangling it in front of his nose. “My flash drive is my amulet. Modern modem magic at my fingertips, baby.”

“Well, I think packing some magical firepower never hurts,” Jack gave me a guarded look as he reached into his pocket, pulling out a rectangular black velvet box. He slid it across the table. “It was your Nana Wren’s.”

I studied the raw emotion flickering in his dark eyes. If he was giving me something that belonged to the love of his life, I knew it was important. “What’s this?”

“Open it.” He nodded toward the box.

Curious, I wondered what it might be. Laying down the highlighter, I gingerly reached for the black box sitting in front of me. Flipping open the lid, a glint of silver chain caught the light where it lay upon blue velvet. I removed the intricately braided metal from the box, holding it in front of me to examine it. On the end of the chain hung a diamond-shaped amulet adorned with an oval amethyst in the middle.

“I gave to your grandmother on our wedding day,” Jack’s hoarse voice dropped an octave. “I know she’d want you to have it.”

“Oh, Jack,” I gasped quietly, touched by his rare display of emotion. “It’s beautiful. I remember this pendant, she never took it off.”

“It’s a good luck and a powerful protection amulet. It carries a good, stiff charge and it helped her out many times through the years. It belonged to your mom for a while and now I want you to have it. If either one of those women held an ounce of sense in their heads, they’d never would have taken the damned thing off.”

What he meant was that if either woman had worn the amulet, neither would have died. The women in our family are headstrong and tend to die young.

I don’t want to lose you too, Rascal. Put it on and keep it on.”

I fumbled with the clasp, fastening the slender chain around my neck. A faint buzz pulsed along my skin when I felt the amulet’s magic seep into me, the warm tingling made my skin itch. Violet sparks danced along my flesh and swirled around me. “Thank you.”

“It also had a good dose of Lady Luck in there,” Jack nodded at the necklace. “Now, lock and load, Wren. Take aim, use your mind to visualize what you want. Peruse those want ads again, but with focus.”

I shot him a skeptical glance because I wanted to make my way in the world on my merits, not using amulets or magic. They were all innovative entrepreneurs and talented practitioners while I was the one who always someone's employee. I was also the one who always there to rescue them when they headed into financial troubles. It was all about pride: I didn't want to need their magic to help me, I wanted my practical, mundane talents to rescue them. I was tired of pride and being
frightened of the unknown. By using the amulet, nothing would happen or I'd accidentally blow up the diner. So, why not?

Anyone can cast a spell, not needing to be Einstein to manifest results. It demands clear desire, hard concentration, and the skill to conduct energy toward the exact manifestation of one's will. Depending upon the caster's ability, the result isn't always what the caster intended. Sometimes, the effect is better than originally pictured or something goes haywire. The odds usually favor the latter when I use magic of any kind. To put it simply: ready, aim, fire, DUCK!

I picked up the paper, closed my eyes and imagined that specific job perfect for me and being its perfect candidate. Under the “Office/ Clerical” heading, an ad immediately jumped out at me. The black font seemed to float like a ribbon of letters off the page, dancing in a spiral just above the newsprint.

Administrative Assistant. Has anyone ever told you that you have a gift for helping others? Here is your chance to aid others in reaching their potential. We are looking for an assistant to perform various office duties. We train. Want to make a difference? Come work with us. Call Pastor Tristan Darcy at the Archangelus Foundation at 555-NO-LIMIT or apply online at Archangelus.com.

I dropped the paper, saturating the ad with thick orange streaks. An amazed grin spread across my face as I gawked at the ad, then at Jack and back to the ad. He gave me one of his lazy grins and a knowing nod.

“Did you do that?” I tapped the ad with the highlighter pen.

“Nope. You did,” pointing at me with his fork.

“You honestly think that the amulet made this ad jump out at me, Jack?” I asked, amazed that it had worked for me at all. "I'm preternaturally challenged. This amulet isn't supposed to work on a Reg."

"Maybe, you're coming into your own or maybe there's just enough mojo in your bloodline for that amulet to give you the kick-start you need," Jack sipped his coffee. "I saw what it did and it worked for you. We both saw it, Wren."

“Jack, I’m a Reg and we both know it. My preternatural talents are somewhere between slim and zilch.”

“Maybe you're changing along with your focus,” Jack sipped his coffee, getting the edges of his mustache stamp. "Maybe, your luck is changing."

“Lady Luck doesn’t give a rat's ass about me and you know it. Usually, it’s Father Fubar that screws with me,” I chewed on the cap of the highlighter pen. “You might turn me into a practitioner yer. I have to admit, this job sounds perfect for me.”

“Magic is fifty-one percent faith and forty-nine percent elbow grease,” Jack replied solemnly. "Faith is the duct tape that holds it all together, whether there’s magic or miracles. They’re one and the same. We Bryants just have a better handle on it than most."

“Thank you, Obi-wan,” I gave him a quick wink. “Duct tape is the Force of the Universe. It has a light side, a dark side and hold everything in place. I have seen the light, Jack. Hallelujah!”

“Don't knock it,” Jack looked at me beneath the brim of his Stetson. “Just because you don't believe doesn't make it false.”
"I know magic exists, but I don't believe it works for me.” I knew this wasn't an argument that I could win with Jack. When dealing with one my relatives, I find it best to nod and humor them. “I digress. After everything is settled, I’ll go apply.”

The next few days were the hardest I had been through since I’d left Lincoln three years earlier. Nana Wren’s funeral was a simple, but elegant service kept purposely short for Jack’s sake. Horrible weather in the form the frozen rain and overcast clouds painted the entire world in a dingy, lifeless gray. The minister gave a thankfully short sermon and the singer was on key. Jack and I put on our best smiles, nodding and greeting people at the potluck hosted afterward by a family friend at our house.

Toward the end of the evening, I saw Jack standing over in the corner of the living room speaking with a man that seemed out of place among the somber, mourning people filling the space. Athletic in stature, tousled waves of golden hair framed his clean-shaven features. His jaw, strong and square, appeared carved from stone by an artist’s hand. He looked more like a celebrity than a local.

What caught my attention most were those eyes, deep blue with green flecks encircled by gleaming amber rings around the irises. I shivered when he shifted his gaze to me, staring at me with keen interest. What astonished me was the copper hint to his skin that reminded me of polished metal. He was a walking metallic god of delight. I wondered if Michelangelo had been into metallurgy? Who was this walking sex on legs?

An unsettling thought crossed my mind as I studied the handsome man standing next to Jack: no Human looked that good. Don’t ask me how I knew, but there was a quality about him that screamed supernatural. Whether it was his metallic coloring or his flawless attractiveness, nothing about him was neither mundane nor regular. Had my mind functioned properly, my self-preservation instincts would have screamed at me to run. My good instincts mutated into twinges of curiosity as they pushed aside my common sense. He cast me a bright smile when he caught me gawking at him.

“Wren, I want you to meet a friend of mine,” Jack patted the man on his shoulder while motioning me with his other hand to come closer. My eyes never strayed from the Adonis standing next him, engulfed in golden fire. “Pastor Tristan Darcy.”

The silver charm thrummed around my neck, spitting violet sparks as if protesting the man’s presence. I quickly covered the small pendant with my hand, hoping no one saw the miniature pyrotechnics display. I found my mind hijacked by the stranger and the intangible aura surrounding him. Thick blonde brows rose in silent question as he stared back at me. I felt a wave of need flow over me and that confirmed it for me: definitely not human.

I blamed my skewed perceptions on too much tuna casserole and too little sleep. Guardedly, I stopped a few feet shy of them, my eyes narrowing with suspicion. My curiosity kicked into overdrive, compelling me to stare. My eyes watered from staring too long, forcing me to blink. When I looked at him again, the fiery radiance vanished, leaving his skin lightly tan but without that subtle copper glint. He appeared stunning, but only human. He and Jack glanced at each other and I saw the Pastor's brow furrow, giving Jack a quick nod. I watched Jack's dark brows proverbially fly off his brow with surprise. Looked at the Pastor, preservation instincts kicked into high gear and I wanted to run.

“Wren, are you all right?” Jack’s voice jarred me back from the surrealistic vision.

A wave of dizziness hit me and I shook my head to get rid of it. I felt tingling above my eyes in the center of my forehead and I rubbed the spot to eliminate the odd sensation. “Uh, yeah, Jack. I’m
fine. I’m more tired than I thought. Sorry.”

“Okay,” he said, worry heavy in his voice.

Remembering the ad, I wondered if his appearance at the house was by chance or design. I figured he was there to pay his final respects to Emma. Then, Pastor Darcy extended his hand. Taking it in mine, his skin felt smooth like chrome and unusually warm to the touch. I gave it one quick shake and jerked mine back, my skin hot from where his hand grasped mine. He flashed me a smile of dazzling white that was a dentist’s dream. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Wren. I’m glad that Jack has your strength during this challenging time.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear,” the smile I gave him felt tight and artificial on my face. Keeping my eyes locked on him, I couldn’t help but think, and only half of what you see.

“Tristan is one of the founders of the Archangelus Foundation,” Jack explained. “They provide a lot of things that the poor people in this county need.”

Julian quietly coughed, as if embarrassed by Jack’s glowing praise. “We do our best.”

Not knowing what to say, I opted for the safest response and nodded. “Hmm.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Wren,” Tristan’s voice ran over my senses like sun-warmed molasses, soothing my frazzled nerves and shaky emotions. His voice was deep and masculine with a strange resonance that didn't sound normal. I looked around to see if my brother, Justin, was playing some kind of magical practical joke with the room's acoustics but he wasn’t anywhere in the room. Then, the first shockwave of pain hit me in the temples, causing me backward in four inch heels.

Tristan’s eyes widened at my bizarre reaction. I don’t know what bothered me more: his unusual appearance or the fact that I was the only one in the room who noticed it.

“Thank you,” I said as the pain subsided.

"Rascal, are you all right?” Jack asked, his hands landing on my shoulders.

"You didn't hear it? That strange echo when the Pastor spoke?” I asked.

Jack shook his head, "Sorry, Darlin', didn't hear a thing."

I didn't miss the second long eye conversation the two men held as if I weren't present.

"Wren, the good Pastor here is also a pediatrician," Jack said, pushing back the brim of his Stetson to see me more clearly. "Maybe, he'd he wouldn't mind looking you over-"

H to the E to the double L no! My instinct to run heightened to DEFCON 1. I held up my hand to stop him, "I'm good, Jack. We don't need to impose upon Pastor Darcy that way.”

"It'd be no trouble at all, Wren," the Pastor's voice soothed my pain as much as it had caused it. "The examination room is on first floor -",

"Thank you, but no, I'm fine. Really." I wasn't comfortable being alone with something or someone other than what he appeared. I'm quirky, not stupid. "Moving forward, Pastor,"

“Jack says that you’re seeking employment and tells me you have excellent administrative skills. When you have an opportunity, I hope that you’ll come by the Foundation so we can talk.”

“I will,” I said. Whoever Tristan was, he inspired edginess in me that I didn’t understand. I felt
guilty doubting a man whom Jack considered trustworthy, but I wasn't one to ignore logic when it
told me to listen to my intuition. He possessed a presence that demanded my full attention.

I glanced warily at Tristan Darcy before shifting my gaze to Jack, an awkward silence hung
between us while I waited for an explanation. Pastor Darcy quietly cleared his throat and gave a
parting nod. “Jack, I know you have other guests so I won't take up any more of your time.”

“Not a problem, Tristan,” he shook his hand. “Thanks for coming.”

“Again, you have my condolences,” Tristan turned to me. “If you need anything, please call.”

“We appreciate your concern,” I said tightly, trying to make sense of the unearthly man that Jack
called friend.

Toward the end of the evening, I watched Jack make his excuses and head upstairs. His shoulders
slumped a little, his head hung down and in one hand I saw him carry a six-pack of his favorite
beer. I quietly said my farewells to everyone, softly treading the stairs a few minutes behind Jack. I
found the door to the upstairs study slightly ajar. Jack is a man who values his privacy and I didn’t
want to intrude on a personal moment. I rapped lightly on the door and called out softly to him.
“Jack?”

“Yeah, come on in,” he greeted me roughly. I stepped inside, seeing him with beer in hand sitting
in the large worn leather recliner. His skin seemed paler and he looked haggard. Defeated. Lost. I
didn’t know what to say to him. Was there anything to be said? He held up a long-neck to me.
“Want some?”

It’s never good to drink alone, even if I hated the taste of beer. “Sure.”

I screwed off the metal cap of the longneck bottle and took a long swig. It tasted like sour battery
fluid but it felt good, cool and soothing, as it washed down the back of my throat. I sat down on the
floor beside him and rested my head on his knee like I did when I was a little girl. For moments, we
sat that way in silence and let the numbness seep out of our bones. I felt his large, calloused hands
stroke my hair much the way he did to soothe me the night that I found out my parents had died. I
think he took as much comfort in the gesture as I did. While it didn’t make the pain lessen, it made
it almost bearable.

“I loved your Nana Wren,” Jack said simply, as he drank long from the long-neck “How do I live
without her?”

“I buried myself in work,” I admitted. I turned toward him, holding my bottle up in toast. “To Nana
Wren.”

“To Nana Wren,” Jack clinked his bottle against mine. We didn’t say anything after that as we sat
in the dim light of the study. It isn’t the Bryant way to weep and go into histrionics. We are a quiet
family when it comes to grief, to the loss of one of our own. We’ve had too much practice to do it
any other way.

“Jack, I have to ask,” I said, swallowing the last swig of beer. “Tristan Darcy. What is he?”

“He’s a good man.”

“Let me repeat my question.” I cleared my throat. “What is he?”

Jack mumbled, “You wanna know? Go ask him.”
“He isn't human,” I turned around, looking up toward my grandfather. "His voice echoed, he glowed and he has some major mojo going on, Jack. That person is something other than Human.

“I thought you said your magic is tragic, Rascal," Jack took another swig of his beer. "If you're just a run-of-the-mill Reg, there is no way that you could know if he is anything else other than human."

“I know enough about magic to recognize mesmerism and a glamour by looks and by feel. I don't have to be magically inclined to know what I experienced today. You don't have to be a Solomonar necessarily to know magic or psychic ability when either manifests. So, was he using a glamour to hide what he is?"

“You'll just have to figure that one out for yourself,” Jack said.

I made my excuses, told Jack good night and went to the safe haven of my bedroom. I locked the door and laid down to regain my balance. Whatever happened downstairs was a first and it went beyond my comfort zone. Seeing Jack alone in his grief shook me to my core because I wasn't used to him any other way but strong, rugged and composed. Tonight, I caught a glimpse of the man beneath the cowboy hat and it frightened me to see him vulnerable. Human. What I saw in Tristan Darcy wasn't human and I didn’t like it one bit.

There were other things more important than my emerging theories. I sank into the welcoming mattress, trying to forget the pain and the stress of the last several days. My eyes stung and I made no attempt to wipe away the tears that hadn’t flowed since Matthew’s funeral.

The next morning when I went downstairs, I saw that the dining room table and every inch of counter space in the kitchen was covered with casseroles and desserts, left for us by people who loved Nana Wren. We had enough food to last a week or two.

I needed a reprieve from the post-funeral insanity that ensued that previous day. After cleaning the kitchen, I plugged in my laptop and scanned several job-hunting websites for any possible bites that seemed interesting. I went to the Archangelus Foundation site, deciding that I wanted to know more about what the company did and how they operated in Lancaster County. At the top of the website, their mission statement appeared in bold letters.

“The goal of the Archangelus Foundation is to increase opportunities for families and young people, eliminating obstacles and promoting achievement and independence.”

I scanned the contents of the home page until at the bottom I found the different options. Clicking on the ‘Careers’ option, I brought up the application portion of the website. I read the job description for the Administrative Assistant position and a strange tingle traveled along my skin, an electric current of knowing. I knew that job was the one I needed to take to truly make a difference.

I rarely use intuition to make decisions and it warned me that what I noticed about Tristan Darcy bordered on the fantastic. Intuition warned me not to go into a situation that appeared unusual or supernatural. Logic stated the Administrative Assistant job was a tailor-made opportunity for me and a chance to delve into mystery that Tristan Darcy presented. Since it was Foundation also involved Pastor Darcy, I hesitated. Did I really want to go where my instinct told me it was dangerous? Decisions, decisions. I submitted my resume

I felt a buzzing just beneath the hollow of my throat. Looking down, I saw the amethyst gem in my necklace glimmer in the early morning light streaming through the window. A light brush swept across my shoulder and I knew I wasn’t alone. Looking behind me, I thought I saw my sweet golden Matthew out of the corner of my eye. Swiveling around in the computer chair, I skinned
the room for any signs of his presence, but the sensation left as suddenly as it came. A comforting peace washed over me.

I shut down my laptop and scurried downstairs, beating Jack to the kitchen. While I’m not an egg lover, bacon and eggs with a side of pancakes is his favorite breakfast. Just as I finished cooking the eggs, I heard Jack’s cowboy boots clomp down the stairs. The look on his face when he saw breakfast waiting for him was the first smile I had seen on his face since I had returned home.

We didn’t talk much except that he told me he had to inspect cattle at a livestock auction and the he wouldn’t be home until much later that night. When he left, I tried to decide what I wanted to do for the rest of the day. I figured I’d catch the morning news online and then visit a few temporary employment agencies to submit more applications. My cell phone rang. Glancing at the clock on the wall, I noticed it was just a few minutes past nine. Who would be calling so early in the morning?

I picked up my phone. “Hello?”

A deep baritone with a hint of accent greeted me on the other end of the line. “Good morning, Wren. This is Pastor Darcy. I hope I'm not calling early.”

“No, not a problem,” I assured him. That was fast.

“I checked our recent applications for the Administrative Assistant position and I saw that you applied. If you have time today, I'd like to schedule an interview.”

I listened to his words, deep and beckoning. His voice compelled me to comply with his request and I had to pull my phone away from my ear to shake off the euphoric effect. I considered hanging up but wondered what chance I might have of landing another possibility like this one. Taking a second, I willed my voice to sound calm and professional. “What time is convenient for you?”

“Would ten-thirty work for you?” I made my choice.

I glanced at the clock and it read nine-fifteen. “Ten-thirty is fine.”

“I’ll see you in my office. Do you know our address?”

“Yes,” I hedged. “Should I bring anything with me?”

“Whatever you think you need.” He answered smoothly, his rich voice echoing through the phone lines. “I’ll see you then.”

“Thank you, Pastor Darcy.” I made no attempt to hide my appreciation.

“Please, call me Tristan.”

“All right then, Tristan, I’ll see you in a little while.”

“Good.” The line went dead. I wasn't sure if I had landed the opportunity of a lifetime or if I had just lost the last bit of my sanity.

I sprinted back upstairs and quickly showered. I decided to wear my lucky purple turtleneck with charcoal gray slacks and a pair of black pumps that had been a splurge at one of Denver’s more expensive shoe stores. Then, I remembered as I darted out the door, I didn’t have a ride.

I let out an expletive that would have made a trucker blush. Rummaging through my purse, I found
I had fourteen dollars and twenty-five cents to my name. I remembered that there was a bus stop a half a mile away. I fingered the pendant around my neck.

“All right, amulet, I need a ride.”

I felt a warm thrumming against my skin and I knew it was working because I saw Jack pull up into the driveway. I darted out to meet him.

“Hey, what brings you back?”

“I forgot my lunch,” he shrugged. "And you need a ride."

I looked down at the amulet with reluctant admiration. “Sneaky.”

He held up his wrist, showing off a masculine bracelet with a large Amethyst caboshon twinkling in the early morning sunlight. "You swear louder than my Wren ever did. I heard you a mile away."

"These amulets pack one heck of a punch," I said, stunned by the information. "I didn't see that coming."

“I need a ride to the Archangelus Foundation,” I told Jack as he walked past me into the house. “I just received a call from Tristan Darcy.”

“Kinda figured,” he yelled from inside, then quickly came out again with a brown bag in hand. “Hop in, I’ll give you a ride.”

On the way, I checked to make sure that I had everything in my briefcase that I needed. To say that I'm detail-oriented is a severe understatement. A few minutes later, Jack and I were in the middle of downtown Lincoln; pulling into the parking lot of one of the most opulent buildings I had ever seen.

Given the ornate art deco facade that graced the skyscraper, it appeared to have been built in the 1940s. Towering ten stories over the rest of the city's skyline, it dwarfed all the other downtown buildings. What caught my eye were the two angels, one on each side, standing a few yards in front of the main entrance with their majestic wings extending behind them by several feet. With their arms outstretched, each angel held a gently arched concrete banner read in Roman letters. “Archangelus Foundation.”

“Not much with the subtle, are they?” I asked Jack as I took in the grandiose sight.

“Nope,” he chuckled. “Penelope likes to do everything big.”

“Who is Penelope?” I asked.

“Tristan’s wife,” he answered cryptically, giving me a quick wink. “You'll see.”

I glanced at Jack’s watch, seeing that I had fifteen minutes to spare. I gave Jack a quick peck on the cheek. “Wish me luck.”

“You already have luck.” Jack gave a meaningful glance to the amethyst pendant hanging around my neck. “Now, use your skills.”

I entered the building though the large glass doors, spotting a long greeting desk sculptured from a single piece of white Italian marble. I saw an older woman, maybe in her fifties, with silver hair
and bejeweled spectacles, sitting there doing a crossword puzzle.

“Excuse me,” I said.

“How can I help you?” she asked pleasantly.

“My name is Wren Bryant and I have a ten-thirty appointment with Pastor Darcy.” I tried keeping my voice calm and steady.

“Are you a patient or a client?” she asked pleasantly.

“Neither,” I held up my resume. “Job applicant.”

“Please have a seat and I’ll let him know you’re here.”

I sat down, resisting the urge to chew my fingernails because Acrylic nails are expensive and I had just had them done. I decided that thumbing through a computer magazine looked better than appearing fidgety. I knew many bosses factored in their secretary's opinion when considering prospective candidates. So, I did my best to look relaxed.

“Pastor Darcy said to go on up. Do you know how to find his office?”

“No, Ma’am,” I shook my head.

“Take the elevator at the end of the hall up to the sixth floor. When you get there, turn right and his office is the last one on the right.”

“Thank you.”

“Good luck,” she called after me.

I rode the elevator to the sixth floor and headed down the hall toward the last office on the right. A young man sat at a desk in front of an office door immersed in whatever he was listening to on his MP3 player. Looking down, I saw that the nameplate in front of him read “Nicholas Cho.”

Looking up at me though stylishly shaggy bangs, he greeted me then announced on the phone to Tristan that I had arrived.

The interview was surprisingly brief and I found that my tongue didn’t tie itself in knots when Tristan asked me questions. He perused my resume for a few seconds before inquiring about my work experience. I gave the appropriate answers that emphasized my strongest qualities and put all of my best information before him. While his echoing voice resonated like it had the previous day, I had expected it and the effect wasn't as strong as it had been. I wryly thought that the Inquisition had been less painful.

Appearing satisfied with my answers, Tristan directed Nicholas to have me take several assessment tests and fill out paperwork. No one bothered to check on me or popped in to see how I was doing.

When I finished the last test, I returned the pile of papers to Nicholas's desk.

“They’re out to lunch,” he said, a slightly nasal tone in his voice that made me want to seal his mouth shut with duct tape. “Call back tomorrow and maybe I can give you a report on your application.”

He pulled out his cell phone and began chatting with someone named called Gretchen. I wondered if Nicholas’s boss knew that he gabbed on his cell phone during company time. Nitwit.
Walking downtown on concrete in platform pumps isn't easy on the feet. I made sure I regained some kind of independence by buying a city bus pass and picking up several bus schedules. I also promised my aching feet that with my first paycheck to buy a pair of comfortable pair of flats.

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Later that night, Jack and I sat in front of the television watching our favorite science fiction show while feasting on TV dinners. Neither of us had been in the mood to cook anything more spectacular and, frankly, I just wanted to vegetate. My phone rang. Glancing down, I noticed the front screen said “Unavailable.”

“Aren’t you going answer it?” Jack pointed at my phone with his fork.

“Probably a telemarketer,” I shrugged, glancing at the time. “It’s seven-thirty and the number is blocked.”

I felt a warm pulse on my collarbone just below the hollow of my throat. Looking down, I saw the amethyst on Nana Wren’s necklace glowing brightly against its silver backing. Jack pointed at me with his fork before sticking the piece of barbecue cutlet in his mouth. “You better answer that.”

Pushing the send button, I carefully held the phone to my ear. “Hello, Wren here.”

“Wren, This is Tristan Darcy.” The voice lacked any of the haunting special effects compared to the last time I had heard it.

“Hello.” I wasn’t quite what sure to say next.

“I hope that I’m not calling at a bad time.”

I gave Jack a bewildered look. Pointing toward the phone, I mouthed Tristan Darcy’s name and shrugged. Jack motioned toward my cell. “Talk to him.”

“No worries, Tristan.”

“Nicholas told me you had left before I could review your assessment test results.”

“He told me to call tomorrow for an update on my application,” I said.

“Penelope and I have reviewed your test results and want to offer you the position.” The silence between us lasted several seconds.

“Wait a minute.” Excitement bubbled inside me despite my better judgment. “Do you mean I have the job?”

“Yes,” Tristan’s warm response over the phone likes carried a hint of reverberation. He was charming and far too captivating. “If you want it.”

“I do.”

“Then, we’ll see you tomorrow at nine. Welcome to the Archangelus Foundation.”
Sleep is for slackers and corpses, I joke about no rest for the wicked. The best sleep that I'll ever get is when I get to take a dirt nap on satin sheets with a granite headboard. When I sleep, I dream - not the kind of sweet cuddlies or those inspire nocturnal emissions. I dream of what the conscious mind can't or won't see. I dream in 3-D, surround sound nightmares.

I've been to sleep specialists, tried hypnosis, even a few potions that work for awhile before the side-effects turn me into a shaking mass of nerves. If I sold all of my sleep-disorder prescriptions on the black market, I'd be wealthy. If I fall asleep, I stay that way. I have three alarms in my room: two electronic and one old-fashioned obnoxious ringer that clamors loudly until I pound it into the nightstand.

I micromanage my life and document it in triplicate between cans of diet soda and iced-double-shot-espresso, occasionally living my life instead of organizing it. I'm a creature that craves security and normalcy, always on the go to get things done. Some family members think I suffer from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, I prefer to think that I've honed organization into an art form.

I believe that if I have control over everything, then when something goes wrong I can circumvent the damage.

Yeah, right. That’s only good until I oversleep. I do that at least once a month.

My alarms went off at eight o’clock instead of nine, giving me too little time to go through my carefully planned regimen for pampering myself in the shower and carefully selecting the perfect outfit to wear for my first day of work. I took a five-minute shower, threw on my favorite blue blouse, and the first pair of slacks that I found in my closet. The hair took five minutes and the makeup ten before I flew out the door to catch the bus a few blocks away. I missed it by thirty seconds. By the way, Profanity is my second language but I speak it live a native. When the bus roared past me, it's large tires splashing muddy water over my newly dry-cleaned slacks, I loudly commented on the bus driver's sexual inclinations toward his mother and his questionable paternity.

I looked down at the innocuous pendant, muttering another expletive under my breath. I felt a sharp jolt send a strong shock through my hand that inspired another eruption of swear words. I wrapped my hand around the amulet, ready to yank it from my neck. “You piece of.”

The loud roar of a truck engine interrupted my blue streak. Jack pulled up beside in his tan beast. “Let me guess, you missed the bus.”


“Well, I forgot my toolbox and I see you forgot these,” he chuckled, not fooled for an instant. He held up my laptop in one hand and an iced latte in the other. “I thought you might need a morning pick-me-up.”

Pastor Darcy’s office where the orientation meeting was being held. Along with ten other new employees, we sat down and waited for the board’s arrival. Two women came in, a tall and skinny blonde followed by a short, curvy brunette. Seeing Nicholas, they quickly sat down beside us and talked quietly among themselves.
“Hey, Ladies, this is Wren Bryant. She’s going to be Penelope’s Administrative Assistant,” he motioned to me while speaking to the blonde. “Wren, this is Gretchen Roberts. She’s Pastor Darcy’s assistant.”

“Hey there, nice to meet you.” Gretchen told me in a low, husky voice tinged with a bit of Oklahoma twang. Her blue eyes twinkled; matching the big smile she wore when she extended her hand to me.

For a moment, I saw a faint, thin gleam of pink surrounding her like a halo. Thinking that I hadn’t slept enough the past few days, I rubbed my eyes. When I looked at her again, the glow disappeared. I firmly shook her hand. “Right back at you, Gretchen.”

She pointed her thumb next to the petite, shapely brunette with the short black curls. She made me think that Betty Boop had been taken from a comic book and brought to life. “This is Shannon Two Paws. She’s in the Information Technology department. If your computer crashes, talk to her.”

“Welcome to the company, Wren,” she answered. While Gretchen’s voice carried twang, Shannon’s radiated Deep South Bayou brogue. I’d watched enough Dukes of Hazard and True Blood to know her drawl was genuine and not something fabricated by a dialect coach.

“Thanks, Shannon.”

Nicholas spent the next several minutes introducing me to the rest of the orientation class, an assortment of men and women working in various capacities throughout the foundation. They varied in race and gender, but most were retired or approaching retirement age. Nicholas explained that it was company policy to actively seek out senior citizens for employment.

We sat in the front row, chatting quietly for several minutes. I found out that Gretchen was an avid dog lover and fisherman while Shannon was an amateur horticulturalist with a garden that she had affectionately nicknamed Eden. I managed to find out that the trio also loved Dungeons and Dragons and singing in karaoke bars. The day was off to a good start.

I heard the door open behind us and I turned around to see who had come into the room. A group of unlikely types sat down at the conference table a few feet in front of us, destroying every preconceived notion in my mind about this Board of Directors. Each exuded an aura that captivated me, keeping my attention fixated. I expected them to wear conservative suits, carry briefcases and be very staid and corporate and instead I found I stood in the presence of rock gods and movie stars.

Tristan Darcy entered the room wearing a navy blue turtleneck and khaki slacks that complimented his golden good looks. The next man sitting next to him was his antithesis; a brawny powerhouse of bulked muscle who looked more like a linebacker than a corporate executive. Every muscle on his body threatened to rip through the seams of the white dress shirt he wore. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, revealing colorful tattoos that covered every square inch of his forearms. His dark hair was short and spiked, the ends colored bright green, the short cut showed off the multiple piercings in his ears. I smirked when I thought of how difficult it must be for him to go through a metal detector.

I gently nudged Nick in the arm. “Who’s the walking newspaper?”

Nick cracked a smile. “That’s Liam. Women around here go crazy for him.”

I subtly pointed towards Liam. "Surely, you jest, Nick. Him?"
"Surely, I don't," he grinned. "Don't as me how, but half of the employees think he's smokin' hot."

“Hmm,” I murmured. "And his job title?"

“Outreach Coordinator.”

The man next to Liam was lithe and sinewy with every muscle defined as if a male model stepped from the pages of some fashion magazine. While the man to his left looked like a football player, he had the slender build of a dancer. His wavy hair was a mixture of auburn streaked with gold. Fashionably long, the waves brushed the collar of his shirt. Dressed in a white collared shirt unbuttoned enough to reveal a string of small red beads around his neck.

The temperature around me rose twenty degrees in five seconds.

“The hottie next to Liam is Corwyn Darcy,” Nick explained, his voice barely above a whisper. “Vice-president of Operations.”

“He never dates anybody,” Gretchen sighed.

“I think he’s gay,” Shannon glanced up briefly from the doodles she was making on her notepad.

“Honey, if he were gay, I would know,” Nicholas chided her.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes while Nick let out a heavy sigh. “Trust me, he's not.”

"Don't really care,” I said. "Moving forward, Nicholas."

“Hey, only my mom calls me Nicholas. Nick is just fine.”

I rubbed my eyes to give me a reason to stop gawking at Corwyn Darcy like an infatuated teenager. I forced my eyes to travel to the man immediately sitting to Corwyn's right. A cold blast traveled through me, leaving an icy, queasy feeling in my stomach. He wore a black pinstriped suit and black shirt with a satin green tie that epitomized urban chic. With flaming red hair and perfectly trimmed goatee, I half-expected him to sprout horns and a tail. He stared back at me with deep-set green eyes that reminded me of some rare jungle cat on the prowl. An unfamiliar sensation crept along my skin: fear.

“Who’s the one sitting next to Corwyn that looks like Satan?”

“That’s Esteban,” Gretchen chuckled at my assessment. “He's the legal brain of the Foundation. He’s the one you don’t want to make angry. People make him unhappy and they disappear.”

“As in dead?” I asked, stealing another glimpse of the sinister man.

“Almost as bad,” Nick dramatically whispered. “as in fired.”

“Esteban Darcy,” I smiled wryly. “I'll definitely remember not to get on his bad side.”

The three women sat at the other end of the table. One came in dressed in a classically tailored suit, but she had all the warmth of an armor-wearing Amazon. Long coppery hair cascaded her back framing her pale face, but it was her eyes that held me. They were ice blue, devoid of warmth and sparkling with a temper barely contained beneath her icy exterior.

“Zenobia,” Gretchen answered.

“She’s the battle-axe,” Nicholas said with disdain.
“Do you mean the one with the long hair?” I asked.

“That’s the one,” Nick did his best to keep a sneer off his face, but he didn’t quite succeed. “Now, the one next to her is Cordelia and she’s the nicest one out of the bunch.

I studied the woman sitting next to Zenobia who was in every way the Amazon's opposite. The waif next to her was petite and slender, with short platinum curls that accentuated her gamine features and wide blue eyes that were the color of a tropical sea. Her smile was warm and genuine, erasing the frigidity of the ice queen to her left.

The last woman on the very end was a lavender skirt and jacket, her honey-blonde hair pinned neatly at the nape of her neck. She fit the conceived notions I held in my mind of how a corporate executive appeared and behaved. She appeared interested in the papers she shuffled, making certain everything was organized in front of her. I appreciated that quality.

“Who's the woman on the end?” I nodded toward the woman in the lavender suit.

“That's your boss-to-be,” Nick smiled. “Penelope. She’s a southern belle with brass balls and a lockbox to match. Nice lady, but her backbone is steel covered in satin. She’s the force behind the family and the Director of the Archangelus Foundation. She heads the music program for troubled youth.”

The group was a motley assortment of personae and personalities, yet they all shared distinct traits that made them stand out from the rest of the people in the room. They all had a slight metallic copper glint to their skin and all of their eyes were unusually vivid shades of blue or green with bright orange rings around their irises. Like Tristan Darcy, they seemed too bright and stunning to be human. Something about the entire Board of Directors set me on edge and I didn’t like the feeling.

“Starstruck,” Nicholas chuckled.

“How so?” I asked.

“It happens to everybody. The Darcys make everyone look twice.”

“You seem to know all of the company gossip,” I whispered, hoping no one heard me. “What's the back story?”

“No one knows too much about them. They live on a large estate between here and Omaha. They're wealthy and mysterious,” Shannon looked up from her doodling. “They showed up about four years ago out of nowhere and started the Archangelus Foundation.”

Each of the family spoke in turn, explaining the mission statement of the Foundation and going into great detail about the several programs they offered to assist the community. New employees had an opportunity after the introductions to ask questions and mingle with our new employers. The vibes that I felt emanating from the Darcy clan made me jittery, complete with clammy palms and heat flashes. I began second-guessing my wisdom of using an amulet to help me land a dream job.

Before I continue, Dear Reader, let me explain a few things under the umbrella of magic. Witches utilize magic by conforming external energies and desires into will while Solomonari tap into the mind's energies to manifest desire into reality. Both groups adhere to some common rules, “Do as thou wilt but let it harm none. Whatever thou dost will return to thee threefold.” There is black, white and gray magic in the world, each kind determined by the motivation of the practitioner.
Black is when magic is cast without the consent of the recipient or with the intent to cause harm. White is cast with both the recipient's knowledge and consent. Gray is the murky in-between that may be well-intentioned, but not always planned well.

While I was kicking myself for being insane to think magic could solve my problems, Tristan caught me before I left the conference room and formally introduced me to his wife, Penelope. We stood only a foot away from each other, but I stood several inches taller at five-seven. Her French-manicured nails and perfectly coiffed chignon told me that she was an exacting woman.

Penelope gave my hand a gentle shake and smiled. "Why, I do believe you will a welcome addition to our little family here at the Foundation."

While Tristan’s voice was deep and reminded me of melted chocolate, hers was soft and gentle like a mountain brook bubbling over water-tumbled stones. Shannon's accent was one hundred percent Louisiana Cajun but Penelope’s inflection made me think once lived on an antebellum plantation straight out of Gone With the Wind. She was Scarlet O'Hara in a business suit. I shivered at the thought.

"It's a pleasure," I put on my best artificial smile.

We spoke for a few minutes and she explained to me the full extent of my job duties. She made her excuses to mingle with the rest of the new employees and that made our conversation efficient but brief.

Over the next few days I concentrated on learning her administrative style. Penelope preferred to be the decisive force with a good team to back her. She told me how she liked things to be simple and efficient. I also found that while Penelope’s backbone was steel, her attitude was brass and her heart was platinum. I watched how unruly gang bangers called her ma’am, responding to her warmth and dedication. There was an inherent compassion that defined Penelope Darcy, leaving me in awe of her talent and goodness, and made me doubt my initial impressions that bordered on wary.

Again, I am a creature of habit and I gladly embrace routine. One day happily blurred into another as I settled into the duties of my new job as Penelope’s Administrative Assistant, flitting daily between departments and constantly filing, copying, faxing or documenting some memo or correspondence. Nick, Gretchen, Shannon and I formed our private little clique and made it a daily ritual to meet at our favorite lunch table in the break room to catch up on the latest gossip. I began keeping money in my desk because it was a chronic battle to remember to pack my lunch and take it with me to work.

One of the programs that Penelope mentored was a music choir for troubled youth and I found my place in the natural ebb and flow of the Foundation’s work. Each day, I made my way to the auditorium to assist the choir in learning their parts for the upcoming performance. One day the accompanist had called in sick, so it was left to me to plunk out the melody on the piano. Yes, I can sing but no, my hand-to-eye coordination at a keyboard leaves something to be desired. Penelope displayed the patience of an angel as I painfully picked out the notes as best I could but I heard some of the kids grimacing.

Penelope kept her eyes fixed on two teenagers on the risers who were giggling and fidgeting when strolled across the stage to come stand beside me. Laying a manicured hand on my shoulder, she bent forward and whispered in my ear, “Sweet Pea, those two need a little help on their melody and their manners. Be a dear and go stand between them.”

“Of course,” I glanced at the music as I rose from the piano bench. Penelope understood my
unspoken question of who would accompany the group, nodding toward the auditorium door. Over my shoulder, I saw Zenobia swing open both doors, strutting down the aisle as if she were on the runway modeling high-fashion attire. Behind her strode in the young man with the auburn mane and golden highlights. In the semi-darkness of the auditorium, I watched his eyes glow crimson for a moment before they dimmed to their natural jade green.

“Ladies and gentleman,” Penelope smiled, holding up her music folder. “The piece we’re about to learn is difficult and intricate, so I’ve brought in an extra set of voices to help us learn the parts. It’s a pop song from a few years back but we’re going to make it sound like a classic.”

The kids parted back as I climbed the risers to the top where Penelope indicated that she wanted me. I heard the collective ‘ahhs’ of several young women around me when Corwyn Darcy followed after me, taking a place on the risers beside me. He held a black leather folder that contained the music and accompaniment.

When he took his place beside me, he stood between me and a young man named Caleb who had shown more attention toward a young woman named Patrice than to his music. Their loud whispers and laughing stopped now that two people were separating them. My skin prickled, causing the tiny hairs along my neck to stand up on end when Corwyn moved closer to me. The amulet I wore became hot, vibrating against my skin. The air around me flowed with a rush of heat, rustling the pages of the music I held.

I tried to inch away from Corwyn. Something about him compelled my protective instinct to surge to the front of my mind. I glanced up at him, knowing he saw the wary stare that I wore on my face. A surprised expression crossed his handsome features, but he said nothing as he flipped the music open to the first page.

A hint of cinnamon and smoke filled the air, prompting me to look around to see if anything was burning. I felt a burst of heat explode beside me, making my temperature rise by several degrees in just a few seconds. Zenobia took her place at the piano, playing the piece without error, inspiring my silent envy as I heard the flawless melody fill the auditorium. The entire scene turned surreal as the introduction played and the tenors began their portion of the piece.

I pulled out the music from the back of the folder and read the title. A large lump formed in my throat when I realized that it was the song Matthew had sang to me the night he had proposed to me. It was our song. I felt a sting of liquid behind my eyelids and I shut them quickly, squelching the anguish that threatened to spill over onto my cheeks.

I heard Corwyn’s rich tenor lead the section as they sang in unsure unison. Some voices couldn’t find the right key while others boomed across the stage, drowning out the quieter ones. His voice filled my ears with a frequency I can only describe as beatific. The notes he sang carried a haunting, eerie echo that rang in my ears that caused my head to spin. Penelope had placed me on the edge of the second soprano section, so I sang when she cued us.

My voice is trained, but it’s distinct. I’ve been told I sing like an angel, a very loud angel that likes to sing without a microphone. My voice held strong, countering the uncanny reverberation filling my ears. Corwyn’s voice prompted images of things that I didn’t want to think of at that moment: Matthew’s mangled body in the car wreck when I had been the driver, Nana Wren lying at rest in her casket during the funeral and the image of my parents resting on metal table in the morgue when I had been forced to identify their remains. I heard Death in his voice.

Tears came to my eyes followed shortly by anger. I sang my part clear and strong to combat the unexpected barrage of images filling my mind. I needed to lose my pain in the music and I poured every ounce of sadness weighing on my soul into the melody I sang. I let the music flow around
me as invisible bands of protection, circling me in a melodic cocoon of sound to block out the siren’s voice of the man beside me. My hair fell across my eyes, letting me steal a peak of Corwyn Darcy. When he heard my voice, I saw his body go rigid. His hand clenched the music folder tightly while his free hand formed into a tight fist.

Something about Corwyn Darcy awakened a painful part of my soul that I thought was long dead and something about his music ripped through it as if it were little more than a piece of paper fluttering in the wind. I visualized my voice as armor and shielding against the seductive grief that his singing attempted to draw out of me. Some primal force within me that I didn’t understand took the challenge and took to battle, warring against the strange sensations Corwyn Darcy inspired.

Staring at the sheet music, I glanced over at him through the hair that veiled my eyes, strangely curious about the man beside me. He glowered at me and I saw that his once green eyes now flamed fiery amber. I involuntarily cringed, realizing that whoever or whatever stood beside me wasn’t human. Since when did human have eyes that glowed as if on fire? Who or what was Corwyn Darcy?

He inspired an unnameable fear that was quickly replaced by righteous anger and curiosity. He had tried to work some kind of mojo on the young people around us and I felt it swirling around me. The choir around us was placid and calm as they sang the song but I had been around magic all of my life. I felt magic flowing through me rather than seeing other people using it. I didn't like the feeling at all and my amulet thrummed in protest.

I spent four years studying magic and its theories with a tutor to know when the supernatural was afoot. The first Great Mandate of the Solomonari Creed is that free will powers all magic. The second Mandate is that one never works magic on another without that person’s knowledge or consent. Corwyn had done both and I realized that my singing had countered its effects, at least on me. I understood in that moment that the Darcys were adept practitioners that bent the rules to their liking and, somehow, I had the ability to negate that effect. One never uses magic to curb free will unless it is for self-defense. Otherwise, it's a mortal no-no.

What amazed me most of all was the fact that I had felt it. I was a Reg and shouldn’t have felt anything. What astounded me was that I had been able to shield myself from its effects. I silently thanked Jack for giving me the pendant. It was all that was protecting me from the consequences of whatever spells the Darcys used.

Once choir practice was over, I watched the kids disperse, calm and quiet. Fluidly, Corwyn bound off the risers toward the auditorium door. With a tenacity that I hadn’t felt in years, I went chased after him. I had to find out who or what he was and determine if he was a threat. I felt a sudden heat against my chest just beneath my collarbone and a burning sensation against my skin. My hand went to my neck where Nana’s charm hung, but I found it gone.

“Oh, criminy.” Corwyn Darcy was a mystery for another day. Nana Wren’s amulet came first. Looking skyward, I asked the Powers-That-Be, "Really? Seriously?"

I scanned the stage looking for it, knowing I’d been in ten kinds of trouble if Jack knew I had lost it. Finally, I saw it lying on the floor beneath the risers. I felt Penelope’s quizzical stare on my back as I scampered on hands and knees to retrieve the family heirloom. In my fingers, it felt hot to the touch but I quickly fastened it around my neck.

"Oh, criminy." Corwyn Darcy was a mystery for another day. Nana Wren’s amulet came first. Looking skyward, I asked the Powers-That-Be, "Really? Seriously?"

I rose to my feet, a thousand questions on the tip of my tongue demanding answers to what had just happened. She was by my side before I had time to blink, helping dust off the lint on my sweater from my scrambling on the floor. I saw her pale, lavender eyes stare back at me.
“Are you all right, Dear?” I heard the heavy concern in her voice.

“Right as rain,” I said with more cheer than I felt.

She laid a hand on my shoulder. A quiet surge of comfort flowed through me but I shook it off. “You looked as if you were about to cry.”

“Just sentiment,” I said. It wasn't a lie. "It's amazing how quickly those kids calmed down, isn't it. How did you do that?"

“Years of practice,” Penelope flashed me a warm smile.

“Hmm,” I took a step away from her. "Corwyn has the same affect."

“Really?,” Penelope asked, never taking her eyes off me.

“Just an observation,” I also know the art of the cryptic tongue and hedging.

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “You have a great eye for detail.”

I felt her warm touch grow hot on my shoulder and wondered if she'd burn a hole in my blouse. I thought I heard the word "forget." I shook off the command, my inner cheekiness rising to the challenge. "I also have an incredible memory if I do say so myself. I rarely forget anything. It is a talent that I find useful."

I looked at her. I sensed nothing sinister but her power was tangible. I couldn’t see it, but I felt it subtly probe my mind. I put my hands to my temples to ward off the headache and I hurriedly stepped away from her. “Wren, it’s all right.”

“I'll need to finish filing the sheet music you put on my desk,” I held up my hand to ward off any further effect from her voice. “If you'll excuse me.”

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I fought the urge to immediately leave the Foundation and never return. I needed more information or confirmation about what I had seen and experience, stepping into to a janitor's closet on first floor. If anyone knew what was going on there, it was Jack. If he didn't, it was my obligation to tell him. He wouldn't allow the Darcys to manipulate innocent humans as I just saw them do. My fingers trembled as I dialed his number, hoping desperately that he would answer.

“Hello,” his gruff voice came on the line after the first ring.

“Jack, come get me now,” I whispered into the phone. “Something is going on at the Foundation. The Darcys are using magic on innocents. They're mentally manipulating the kids here with some kind of mind control and I witnessed it firsthand.”

“Listen to me, Wren,” his voice was steady. “Calm down. I think your imagination is working overtime. I know those people and they'd never do anything to hurt anyone.”

“How do you know?” I protested, fighting the urge to scream my protest. “Penelope tried working some kind of psychic manipulation on me and it nearly worked.”

“Take my advice,” he spoke in a carefully measured cadence. “Don't do anything rash. Just finish out your day and you'll be fine. I know it's all a little confusing, but we will talk about this when you get home. They aren't hurting anyone and they won't hurt you. You were meant for that job
and there's a reason for you being there. Trust me on this one and just go back to work. You won't regret it."

“Jack, they're not human. They glow, damn it!” I hissed into the phone. “We can't let these creatures do this to unsuspecting bystanders. Solomonari are supposed to protect the world from things like them.”

“Things aren't always what they seem. I think you're coming into your own, Wren and it can be frightening. Do you trust me?”

“Up until today, every time. Now, I'm not so sure. You're so hellbent on protecting them. How can I be sure that you aren't under their influence?”

“I'm James Elliott Bryant and no one controls me,” he said in a low growl that me he was still in command of his faculties. He never used his full name unless he was angry or trying to prove a point. “Finish out the day and we'll talk when I get there.”

I followed his advice and had no further trouble, but I didn't see any of the Darcys for the rest of the day. I decided not to give Penelope my resignation until Jack had a chance to explain to me everything that I experienced. He picked me up as usual and when I tried broaching the subject, he dismissed it saying that he'd explain everything to me when I was ready to listen. Jack was no pushover but I silently questioned his abrupt change in attitude about discussing the day's events. Against my better judgment, I left the issue alone for the time being. I trusted that Jack would tell me what was going on at the Foundation.

The evening with Jack flowed with a harmony that I hadn’t felt since I had been a teenager. Together in the kitchen, we chatted about the day’s events as we prepared together a variety of dishes we both liked. One night it was baked chicken smothered in mozzarella and mushrooms while on another night we made green bean casserole. An easy rapport established itself between us and I enjoyed every minute of it.

He wasn’t the type of person to make the mess and then refuse to do his share of the cleaning. He was right there beside me, loading the dishes in the dishwasher and wiping the counters clean. Afterward, he and I sat on the front porch drinking sweet tea and I sat entranced as he spoke to the owls that hovered around our house after twilight.

I called Aunt Della later that night, updating her on the recent events occurring at work. She advised me to go with my gut instead of my brain on the matter and ask Jack again about what I experienced earlier that day. We chatted for several minutes and asked me if I were homesick for Denver. I told her that while I missed it, I was enjoying my return to Lincoln. I told her about my new job at the Archangelus Foundation and how I finally had a chance to use my music to help some kids raise money for a playground at one of the local schools.

When she and I said our goodbyes for the evening, I looked at the clock and realized it was still early. I browsed the shelves containing the books that I had collected through the years, hoping that I would find something to keep me entertained until bedtime. Nothing really caught my interest and I decided to dress in my favorite pj’s and head downstairs.

I found Jack sitting at the table going through his Key of Solomon (our familial grimoire) and scribbling something down in an archaic script that was a mixture of Akkadian, Sumerian and Greek.

“What are you working on?” I asked.
“Just an elixir to help Bob Brown with his corn crop,” he muttered, never looking up from his page as he wrote down words in the same jumbled script. He set down his pen when he was finished and gave me a wink. “So, how’s work?”

It started out fine until things went wonky,” I replied honestly. “I love what I do and knowing that I’m helping to make a difference. I’m helping Penelope Darcy with a choir she’s directing. She’s talented, Jack. The kids are learning an original composition of hers that they’re going to sing at a Fund Raiser later this spring to help raise money for a new playground at one of the local grade schools.”

“That’s impressive,” he gave me a grudging nod. “Not everybody gets to work with the Darcys. Have you made any friends?”

“A few. There’s Nick Cho, Pastor Darcy’s administrative assistant and there’s also Gretchen Roberts and Shannon Two Paws who work in the I.T. department. They’re as quirky as me and we share a lot of the same interests.”

“So, why don’t we hold a get-together her and you invite them over?” he suggested brightly. “Say, like a barbecue?”

“I’m not ready to be that sociable.”

“You live like a hermit, Wren. You need to get out more.”

“I live just fine, Jack.” I countered sharply.

“Yeah, right!” he exclaimed. “You’re a smart woman with a good head on your shoulders. You’re too young to shut yourself away and not live life.”

“Jack, I’m not ready to talk about that,” I said in a grave tone.

“Wren, it’s been three years since Matthew died,” he said gently, covering his hand with mine. “He wouldn’t want you to lock yourself away like this. He’d want you to move on, be happy, and live a good life.”

“Jack, you just lost Nana Wren.” I looked at him, feeling sadness wrap my heart in chains. “You know how hard it is to just ‘move on.’ It’s just not easily done.”

“Rascal, that’s true, but I don’t live my foot in the grave with her,” he countered gently.

“That’s what Aunt Della said when she spoke with him last,” I said ruefully. “Why do you think I moved back to Lincoln, Jack? The last thing I needed was to have the spirit of my dead fiance haunting the house where I lived. I couldn’t see him or hear him, but I felt him everywhere I went. I lost a part of my soul when he died and there was nothing I could do to save him.”

I felt stinging tears well up in my eyes just at the very mention of Matthew. Nothing broke my heart more painfully than to think of him encased in a death shroud of winding metal and broken glass while I had walked away without a scratch. I hastily wiped the salty droplets away, willing myself to regain my composure. At least in Lincoln, I could face the ghosts haunting me. “Maybe if I had a gift like Aunt Della, I could tell him how sorry I was for not driving more carefully and that I never meant for him to die like that. I could tell him I love him and maybe even good-bye, but I can’t.”

Jack laid one hand on my shoulder in a comforting, but awkward, gesture. “Maybe you do, Wren. You said that you saw the Darcys glow and that you thought they were using mind control. Maybe
feeling Matthew hanging around isn't your imagination. Maybe, you're coming into your gifts.”

“I doubt it,” I sniffed, reaching for a box of tissue setting beside me. “The gift shows up at puberty or a catalyst prompts it. This only started happening once I put on Nana's amulet. I think I need to take it off.”

“Suit yourself,” he pulled out a stick of chewing gum, unwrapping the silver wrapper and shoving the candy into his mouth. It was his preferred method of coping after he quit smoking. He offered me one but I declined.

“It should have happened when I lost Mom or three years ago when I killed Matthew,” I blew my nose, not caring that I sounded like a foghorn. I slammed my fist angrily on the dinner table. “I am mortal. The magic gene skipped me and I'm fine with that. Why would it show up now?”

“You tell me,” Jack wadded up the silver wrapper and threw it across the kitchen in a perfect arc before landing in the trash can. “Think about it, what's different?”

“I've pulled my cranium out of my backside and started living my life,” I shrugged.

“Exactly,” Jack nodded at me in agreement. “You're not hiding anymore, you're living. You're facing all that grief you've kept buried for too long and you're facing it. That ain't an easy thing to do. You're reaching out to folks, not just keeping to yourself. You're changing your existence, Wren.”

“That's not exactly a catalyst,” I argued. "People deal with loss everyday."

“For you, it is,” Jack said so softly that I had to strain to hear him. “Have you met anyone at work that piques your interest?”

“No really,” I said, noticing the black streaks on my fingers from my very non-waterproof mascara.

“No one, not even a little bit?” Jack pressed gently.

“Well, one... ” I answered hesitantly. I grew tired of the conversational diversion. With new resolve, I broached the subject that weighed heavily on me all evening. “No more stalling, Jack. What is going on at the Foundation? Who are the Darcys?”

He shoved the aside. “Fine, I'll tell you.”

“Finally, some straight answers.”

“Pastor Darcy is a philanthropist with a heart of gold and a wallet to match. He’s been a real boon to Lincoln with his starting the Archangelus Foundation and helping lots of people in need. Granted, I thought the bunch of them were just rich, spoiled people with nothing better to do than flaunt their money, but they really care about this community, Wren. People like to gossip about them just because they're jealous.”

“Oh, so true,” I quietly agreed, secretly grateful for the change of subject. Jack’s admiration for the Darcys was obvious by the way he spoke about them. Very few people made an impact on him and when someone did, it was a lasting impression. “However, that doesn't explain what I saw and felt Penelope and Corwyn doing today. They're not Solomonari, that much I know. Spill it, Jack. What are they?”

“You're right, Rascal, but that's for them to know and you to tell you if they choose,” he spoke
slowly. “They love humanity just like us and put their pants on every morning the same way we do. Like us, they use their abilities to help people in need, but they’re different than us, Wren. They don’t follow the same rules we do. They won’t intentionally harm anyone but, they have no reservations about stopping something if it’s going to be a problem.”

“I can’t just ignore the fact that they’re using mind control, Jack.”

“Don’t ignore it,” he pushed the Key of Solomon in front of me. “Read it, observe them. Do what’s in your blood and go find out. Maybe you’ll learn something.”

Jack remained stubborn, refusing to discuss the subject further. I knew I wouldn’t get anywhere further with him and decided to let it go. The conversation dwindled and I decided to excuse myself and get a good night’s sleep. Matthew’s blonde good-looks and resounding baritone echoed in my thoughts and made a few extra cracks in my heart that I had struggled to put back together with Super Glue. I dreamed nothing that night and I found myself the next day better rested than I had been since I first arrived.

The next day, Penelope acted as if nothing had happened. However, she sent me over to Tristan’s office to work on some paperwork that needed organized since Gretchen had called in sick that day. I heard him talk to a troubled teen experiencing occasional anger outbursts who came in cursing and then admitted to Tristan that his dad had left the month before. Using that strange vocal technique in his voice, Tristan gently asked questions of the boy who admitted he was furious with his father for leaving. There is no rule in the Key of Solomon that says, “Thou shalt not eavesdrop.”

The next day after that, Penelope pawned me off to Esteban, whom I secretly called Jaguar because of his predatory presence. I took notes for him at a meeting where he represented pro bono a client who experienced an injury while doing construction work. The owner of the business denied all liability at the beginning of the meeting but, at the end admitted that some of the construction equipment had failed safety inspections. The injury suit was settled in the room that day for several thousand dollars rather than going to court. He agreed to also pay all the client’s medical expenses in lieu of an expensive lawsuit. Esteban seemed to have a talent for reading minds and used it to his advantage.

Corwyn Darcy was nowhere to be seen for the next several days at work. Through the office grapevine I found out that he was on an extended business trip. It made sense since he was the Vice-president of Operations. At least I wouldn’t have to follow him around and watch him work his mojo. I followed Jack’s advise about socializing more with the people at work, extending an invitation to Nick, Gretchen and Shannon to come over to the house for a barbecue. We planned a night of grilled burgers and then, afterward, Dungeons and Dragons.

At work, I spent the better part of that week filing some paperwork that Penelope needed organized and sorted. I sorted each document alphanumerically and labeled each folder by category and date. Organization and detail are my strong suits and I found unexpected solace being alone with files in the large file room adjacent to her office. She called to me on the intercom to come to her office because she had another errand that she wanted me to run.

Dressed in a pale rose-colored business suit and a cream blouse adorned with a pearl necklace, she looked like a goddess with her nearly metallic complexion and honey-hued hair falling around her shoulders. I never grew tired of the beauty of the Darcys when I looked at them and I never grew accustomed to it. They were generous people, but they about them made my intuition tingle with edginess.

“Wren, dear, I need you to run these memos down to Tristan’s office,” she pointed to the tall stack
of folders sitting on the edge of her mahogany desk. “After that, Human Resources needs help with some filing and I told them that you’d be more than happy to help them.”

“Always.”

She looked for a moment, as if gathering her thoughts. Slowly, she lifted her gaze from her paperwork to look at me, her eyes gleaming with a fiery amber hue. She readjusted her glasses, her eyes never leaving mine. I silently wondered if she had just given me a revelations or a warning. With a chuckle, I asked myself the silent question if laser beams shot out of her eyes, would I be reduced to a pile of ash. “I think once you understand us, Wren, you will better understand our mission here at the Foundation. I think you have much to offer this Foundation. I hope that we get the chance to know you better.”

What a strange thing to say of all things. I was officially brick-smacked. The pleasantness in her voice felt like a warm breeze against my skin and my amulet sparked and thrummed, whether in agreement or warning I couldn't tell. I clasped my hand over it, hoping that the sparks wouldn't make burn marks in my new sweater. “I look forward to the opportunity, Penelope.”

After dropping off the memos to Pastor Darcy and helping the better part of the morning in HR with the much-needed filing, I decided to join Nick and the others in the break room. My head still reeled from Penelope's words and a hot meal was the remedy I needed to feel better. I joined the trio at our usual table and thoroughly enjoyed the hot chicken noodle soup and turkey sandwich on my plate. Vending machine food never tasted better than it did at that moment and life suddenly looked much brighter. I had a good life here in Lincoln living with Jack, becoming friends with the people at work, and earning a good living helping make a difference in people's lives. Jack was right. It was time that I moved past Matthew’s death and look forward to life rather than dwelling on the past.

“Well, look who’s back in town and hot as ever,” Gretchen gave a low whistle.

I turned, looking over my shoulder in the direction she nodded and saw five Darcys sitting at their normal table away from the rest of the lunchtime crowd. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but I could tell by their smiles and animated gestures that they were thoroughly enjoying whatever conversation they were having. I gave a 'hmm,' returning my attention to the delicious chicken noodle soup that my stomach craved. "Oh, hello, tasty."

“You got that right, Wrennie. Hot Stuff is staring hard at you, girl,” Gretchen grinned.

“Who?” I looked up from my soup as if she had just lost her mind. “Who’s Hot Stuff?”

“The unobtainable Corwyn Darcy,” she grinned. “He’s looking at you as if you were the main entrée on the menu.”

“Get over it, Gretchen,” I said pointedly. “Not interested.”

“Liar,” she teased.

“No,” I drawled slowly. “Just not interested.”

She was smart enough to know that I didn’t want that topic of conversation to continue and we moved on to making plans for the upcoming barbecue. Men were not on my agenda and I needed time to acclimate to my new, stable life. I don’t like showing my emotions to anyone, be they family or friends, and received much comfort in organizing and planning. It didn’t shatter my heart into a thousand pieces to decide who was bringing potato salad or hamburger buns to the upcoming
After lunch, I made my way to the auditorium as usual, hoping that my usual fear of heights didn’t impede my singing. I’d grown somewhat used to standing five feet off of the ground and was grateful that I never had to stand on the edge. I made sure to bend my knees a little when I sang so I didn’t grow lightheaded and crash backward onto the ground. It was early and not all of the kids had made their way onto the risers yet when I felt a powerful heat beside me.

I moved to step off the risers to stand somewhere else when a light touch on my shoulder stopped me. The warmth of the touch immediately seeped through my light sweater and made me melt right where I stood. Then, I realized who was standing next to me and I shook his hand away from my shoulder as I moved further down the risers.

Corwyn Darcy followed me. He was the last person that I wanted to see while my hormones felt otherwise.

“Wren, isn't it?” He asked, flashing me a pristine smile.

“That's right,” I kept my expression neutral.

“Don't run off right away. Penelope said that you'll be with me today. I wanted to introduce myself properly,” he spoke in a calm, melodious tone that caused my heart to beat faster. I gave him a wary glance and a quick nod before I took my place beside Patrice and held the other half of the musical folder we shared.

He didn’t give up so easily when I felt a finger lightly tap my shoulder. “How can I help you?” I asked, trying to keep the annoyance out my voice that Hot Stuff provoked by being exasperatingly persistent.

“I’m Corwyn Darcy,” he extended his hand toward me. His manscaping and manicure shrieked 'player.' “We seemed to get off to a bad start last week.”

“Wren Bryant,” I answered, taking his hand and giving it one quick shake. The heat of his grasp verged on scalding, prompting me to quickly pull my hand out his hold. I didn't need another black mark my work record, doing my best to hide my discomfort. I turned the music to the first page while the last of the kids surrounded us.

“Penelope speaks highly of you,” he continued, ignoring my scorn. “She says that you get everything done with breakneck efficiency.”

“I’m glad that she’s pleased with my work performance,” I smiled and returned my attention to the sheet music in front of me. I was secretly pleased that Penelope thought so well of me, in spite of the fact that her brother-in-law irritated me beyond imagination.

I glanced at Penelope who stared quizzically at us. “She wants us to sing and help this kids. So, let’s do it.”

“Agreed,” he said.

We sang for the next hour and the singing washed the annoyance from my mind. Penelope wanted me to help one of the first tenors in the section and had me trade places with Corwyn because she figured out that I knew how to sight-read music. The part was almost too low for my range but I managed to growl my way through it. Corwyn and I shared a music folder and I felt his body tense as we sung the part together in unison. Surprised by his reaction, I looked up at him and found his eyes wide, gleaming orange in their brilliance. He looked at me and then back at the music in front of us.
"What's wrong, Corwyn?"

"Nothing," he snapped. I snorted at the irony that he felt uncomfortable around me. That was a first.

The session ended and I bounded off the risers as fast as my feet permitted me to get away from the infuriating man next to me. Penelope glanced over at Corwyn and me as she tapped her lip in silent contemplation. “I think you two should sing a duet together."

“What?” We exclaimed simultaneously, looking at each other with abject panic.

“Your voices blend well,” she said cheerfully. “We need one more number for the fundraiser and I think you two would fit the bill nicely. Corwyn, take Wren to my office and select something contemporary, a nice ballad, I think.”

My eyes widened at the mention of the word, ‘ballad.’ I hated ballads and I certainly didn’t want to sing one with the cocky playboy who stood beside me. I glanced at her with silent pleading, but to no avail, she didn’t see the desperation in my eyes.

“We'll find something,” he promised her. As I made my way to the auditorium door, Corwyn gallantly opened it for me and let me go through first.

“How are you enjoying Lincoln?” he asked. I couldn’t help but wonder why he was wasting his time and mine with idle chitchat. The last time he saw me he couldn’t get away from me fast enough and the abrupt turnabout in his demeanor left me dazed and befuddled.

“Just fine. Thanks for asking,” I said in an artificially sweet tone. I knew better than to cross odds with Penelope by being overtly rude to her brother-in-law as he had been to me just a few weeks prior.

“You don’t like me,” he stated with absolute confidence.

“Whatever gave you that idea,” I hedged.

“I can feel it. It's coming off you in waves,” he said gently.

“If I've given you that impression, I apologize,” I nearly choked on the words. “I'm shy.”

“Hardly,” he chuckled. “Penelope thinks you could tell someone to go to Hell and make them think was their idea.”

“Hmm,”

“If we're going to be working together on a semi-regular basis, I'd like to get to know you better,” Corwyn told me. “Tell me about yourself.”

“Not much to tell,” I dodged another question.

“I know you're hurting inside.” Corwyn's green eyes narrowed slightly. “The pain runs deep.”

“No, I’m not,” I refuted much too quickly to be convincing. “And no, it doesn't.”

“Yes, you are,” he said in a quiet voice that sounded like an angel singing softly in my ear. “I heard it in your voice today, Wren, and it’s tearing your soul apart. What’s wrong?”

“No offense, Corwyn, but my life is my business,” I said crisply. "My personal life is private and
He touched my shoulder, his touch charging every cell of my skin when he gently caught my arm. I looked at his hand and then at him. "Remove your hand or you'll lose fingers."

Corwyn removed his hand.

"If you're hurting," he started gently, almost tenderly. "I'd like to know if I could help."

I don't know what collapsed all of my emotional and mental defenses. Maybe it was the sincerity I heard in his voice or the compassion I saw in his bright green eyes. All I know is at that moment, I wanted to tell him everything going on inside and didn't want to fight back the pain. I just wanted it to go away.

"Thank you for your concern," Some of my anger melted as the previous night's raw emotion bubbled to the surface of my heart, spilling into my voice. "But, what part of 'it's-none-of-your-business' do you not understand?"

"Ouch, that's harsh, Wren," he softly replied. "You're harder than most, but it do you well to talk to someone. I'm a good listener."

I stood there in corridor, stunned by Corwyn's unexpected empathy toward me. I wasn’t accustomed to people truly wanting to know what I felt or thought. Jack did his best, but he knew better than to press too hard or an invisible wall built itself around me. I purposely talked much, but said little. I noticed that Corwyn’s eyes now appeared jade rather than the color of burning embers as they had earlier in the auditorium. I was accustomed to that particular Darcy trait decided against commenting on it. His sincere expression silently compelled me and before I could stop myself, the words spilled out of my mouth.

"Fine," I sighed. "You win. My fiancé died and the song the choir is singing for the fundraiser was our song."

"I’m sorry for your loss, Wren,” he murmured softly. "When?"

"Morbid much?"

"No,” he whispered. “Just listening.”

"Three years, seven months this month,” I heard the break in my voice that revealed the agony that I thought had finally left my heart.

"Your heart still aches for him."

"It does,” I admitted. “Every day, every night, every moment of my life. I went to Denver to get away from the pain but it followed. I decided I could be miserable there or come back to the city I loved to deal with it and get over it. Three years in the grave is too long for me to be there since I'm still alive.”

"You’re strong, determined,” he surmised. "Brave."

"No. Pragmatic.” I corrected him. “Crying and mourning won’t get the job done. I’m here to work and to move on with my life. End of story.”

"You’re like a churning sea with swirling undercurrents,” he commented. "Full of hidden
emotion.”

“I didn't want to tell you,” I said curtly. “You whammied me with your charismatic mojo and wore me down. You won.”

“No, I didn't,” Corwyn replied quietly. “No compelling voice. That admission was all you, Wren, I swear. You've been wanting to tell someone for a long time because the weight of carrying around was too heavy for your heart to bear.”

“Are you a shrink?” I asked wryly.

“No,” he laughed. “I'm an artist, musician, and sometimes composer.”

“You're a sensitive soul," I was surprised by that revelation as I said it aloud. "Is everyone in your family insanely talented?”

“Yes,” Corwyn said. “I heard the pain in your voice today and I wanted to cry with you as you sang. I heard you calling out to him with every note, Wren.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

“Yes, you will.”

His voice had been quiet that I barely heard him as he spoke to me. We stood there in silence as the elevator doors chimed open. I stepped inside and he followed close behind me. The doors closed and then he pushed the stop button, trapping us between floors.

“What are you doing?” I asked, wanting to get as far away from persuasive Corwyn Darcy as possible.

“Trying to see what you won’t let others see.”

“Stop,” I demanded, turning toward him. “Leave me alone.”

“You don’t want me to leave you alone," Corwyn's arm remained between me and the button panel of the elevator. “I sense that from you. You're as curious about me as I am about you.”

I said nothing as I reached under his arm, pushing the go button. The elevator resumed its downward dissension to second floor. I couldn’t believe the audacity I just displayed by pouring my heart and soul out to the nosy, stunning and compassionate Casanova standing beside me. He moved to the other side of the small elevator, displaying that rigid posture that his body had held the first day we met.

“I felt your pain as if it were mine,” he gave me a wide-eyed, painful stare. “Every shard of emotion ripping through you tore at me.”

“Then, don’t listen.”

“You aren’t as cold as you portray yourself to be,” he turned to face me.

We spent the rest of our time in silence as we made our way to Penelope’s office and sifted through the various songs and scores that I had recently filed. Corwyn shook his head in exasperation. “Nothing here is good enough.”

“She has over five thousand songs in her music library,” I motioned to the file cabinets filling the room. “If we can't find something then, I think we’re being too picky.”
“No. I want something meant for you and me alone without ghosts coming back from the grave at the sound of your voice.” The expression on his face was unreadable. “I want a song that will bring you joy.”

“Good luck with that,” I gave him a watery smile.

“Then your luck is about to change.”

“Jack told me the same thing,” I muttered. “There is no such thing as luck. You're both insane.”

“It’s part of my charm,” he quipped lightly. “I’ll let Penelope know that we’ll be singing an original composition.”

Before I could protest, he left me alone in the filing room.

At the end of work that day, I left fatigued and also relieved to be leaving. Corwyn stared at me as I walked past him and out the door to meet Jack who was parked in front of the building. I never gave Corwyn so much as a passing glance as I made my way to the parking lot. Yet, I couldn’t shake the feeling that his eyes followed me all the way to the pick-up and never left me as Jack pulled out onto the street. For whatever reason, I had captured his attention and curiosity that caused my instincts to scream at me that I would be his new found interest for the foreseeable future. I was less than thrilled. I was absolutely petrified.
When I awoke to bright sunny rays bursting through my window blinding me, I knew I was in trouble. A clanging sound filled my ears as I scanned the room to find the source of the irritating sound: an old-fashioned alarm clack that rang with too much enthusiasm. My eyes focused upon its face for a second before I knocked it off the end table, effectively ending its clamor.

Groaning in frustration, I forced my body out of bed while I scrounged for business attire. I scrambled into a pair of slacks, a nondescript sweater and a sensible pair of shoes, wondering how to get to work. Jack had already left for work which meant that I was without reliable transportation, but I still had a chance of catching the bus. Since the farmhouse stood on the northeast end of Havelock, I knew that meant sprinting every step of the way. Grabbing my purse, I bolted out of the farmhouse and made it to the bus stop out of breath, but just in time for the bus to pull up in front of me. I grabbed my amulet, visualizing a ride to appear.

Anxiety wrapped itself around me and squeezed when I thought about going to work. My heart fluttered in my chest and my pulse surged at the thought of entering that strange, surrealistic environment. The Darcys with their metallic skin and echoing voices made goosebumps form on my otherwise warm skin. Psychic gifts used to manipulate and persuade others to do their bidding left a heavy feeling of dread in my chest that immediately sank to my stomach. Jack volunteered there three times a week and yet seemed unconcerned by what I had described. Every instinct begged my to run.

Still, a part of me sensed there was more to the Darcys and the Archangelous Foundation than what I saw. I enjoyed the motivating work environment, helping kids find alternative ways to spend their afternoons rather than getting into trouble. I contributed to a greater good, seeing results as troubled teenagers began investing themselves into the choir. The paycheck allowed me to pull together the beginnings of my independence. By fate or design, I had friends at work and outside of my immediate family. What confused me the most, driving my mind into a flight-versus-fight state of panic, was Corwyn Darcy.

Common sense dictated that I stay away from him after the previous day's emotional exposé. Traits about him that I couldn't define made me both wary and curious: eyes that seemed too colorful to be natural, the eerie resonance in his voice that sounded as if it passed through some kind of special-effects voice modulator. He honed in on my emotions as if he felt everything that I had suppressed for over three years and brought it all to the surface with a few words. He destroyed every inner wall that I had built to protect myself and reduced me to raw emotion. Instead of numbness, I felt painfully alive and I hated Corwyn Darcy for stripping me of all my defenses. I wasn't ready yet to let them all go at once.

The few times we spoke, I kept my answers short and remained professional. He evoked a passionate response from me that made me feel uncomfortable. I felt comfortably numb in my deadness and he burned me, searing me back to life and it hurt. I knew Corwyn was fire to my gasoline and that those two substances never mixed well. What I didn't understand was with all of this, why was there a part of me that couldn't wait to see him? Addiction? Thrill-seeking? Death wish? As I rode the bus to work, I concluded that I was temporarily insane and was in serious need of a brick hitting me on the head to bring me to my senses. No, chocolate was cheaper and much more effective.

Penelope's eyes locked onto me the moment I entered her office. She said nothing, but she cast a meaningful glance toward the clock before returning those penetrating eyes to me. My cheeks
blazed with embarrassment as I muttered a clumsy apology. She gave me a sympathetic smile and gently patted my shoulder. "Don't worry, Wren. It happens to everyone sometime but, try not to make it a habit."

For the rest of the morning, I kept my nose close to my computer monitor, buried in the tall pile of folders heaped on my desk and focused solely on getting them alphabetized and filed. I skipped my normal lunch break to complete them, not wanting to invoke Penelope's displeasure. Unhappy boss meant short job life-span. It also allowed me to avoid running into Corwyn in the break room. I wasn't in the mood to endure another round of emotional inquisition from him and he couldn't ask pointed personal questions of me during choir practice. I just wanted my annoying awareness of him out of my system and avoidance was an effective method of self-preservation. Not being seen meant not being remembered; all I wanted was to get him out of my head. I finally admitted to myself that I found him incredibly hot, pardon the pun, Dear Reader.

When I finished the last file of sheet music, my stomach growled in hungry protest and I dropped by the break room to grab a bag of chips from one of the vending machines. I saw Nick, Gretchen and Shannon sitting at one of the tables and overheard them making plans for the upcoming barbecue. I said a quick hello, but my mind wandered worriedly back to several music scores that Penelope had placed on my desk at the last second that needed indexed and filed.

I refused to dwell on the negative, concentrating on the financial incentives that the job provided, such as buying a car. I saw the Darcy clan enter the break room and I made a dash for the office. I felt jade eyes sear a hole into me when I walked by and heard a quiet voice speak my name. I gave a quick smile and a 'hello' as I rushed by Corwyn without a cursory glance. Shame made my cheeks blaze when I remembered how I had babbled to Hot Stuff about my tragic life of woe.

Damn it, I silently cursed. Where was my backbone? Get over thy wimpy self, Wren, and grow one.

I embraced my inner bad-ass self with much enthusiasm as snarky determination inspired me to smirk. I scoffed as I imagined Corwyn's face with eyes wide and jaw lax from the fact that I wasn't swooning in his presence like every other female between fifteen and fifty. Fifty-one percent fireball, forty-nine percent cuddly sweetheart and I decided to push fifty-one to ninety-five in order to survive the day.

My walls remained intact from Corwyn's charm and I left the break room unscathed except for a twinge of conscience haranguing me about being rude. I figured that anything that didn't rock my emotional boat was a good thing and I didn't want to deal with all of the emotions he revived. Besides, he'd live and I'd get over it.

After returning to the office, I finished indexing the remaining music scores and felt brave enough to go to choir. Putting on my best face, I opened the auditorium doors and made my way to the risers. Scanning the auditorium, relief and disappointment simultaneously flooded through me when I saw Corywn was absent. I took my place on the risers a moment before Penelope walked to her podium. Within minutes, the choir sang relatively in unison and only slightly off-key.

I felt that unexpected feeling of bittersweetness swell within me at a certain point in the song. Looking up from my music, I saw Corwyn standing on the other side of the auditorium. As the world stilled, I saw his jade eyes flash and a smile illuminate his handsome features. For a moment, I felt as though we were the only ones in the room and everything descended into chaos. I heard snapping and crackling above me and the sharp bending of metal. I glanced upward to see sparks erupt from the swinging light assembly that had somehow come loose from it's wall fastenings. Somewhere in the noise, I heard someone call out my name.
Several things happened in unison as sound and motion blurred together into one mangled perception. At that moment, time slowed and Corwyn's face held an frozen expression of terror. He was a point of light in the rolling darkness as he and the choir remained in awe, all looking upward to see the lighting rig swing precariously in the rafters above the stage. With sparking cables swaying freely through the air, sparks rained down and bolts of blue electricity arced above us. My eyes followed one cable's path of trajectory, seeing Caleb and Patrice as potential victims standing in the way. My brain shut down and instinct took over before I had time to breathe.

I crashed into the kids with a headlong tackle that sent them tumbling off the risers and to the ground, out of the way of the swinging lighting rig and snapping cables. Me? I wasn't so lucky. It takes a lot of talent to be as clumsy as I am. My right foot tripped on one of the risers and I found myself sailing through the air. My hands sprawled out before me, trying to protect my body from the oncoming crash, burn, and bone-crunching. A final rending of metal screeched above us and, for once, I wished that I'd kept my health insurance active because I knew that day I needed it.

Just as I heard the earsplitting roar of the rig bend the risers into a metal pretzel and mash them into pulp, something pushed me backward. My neck whipped back abruptly as a swift jolt of pain tore through my spine and my head impacted with a hard surface. Dancing gold flecks flitted across my eyes as I staggered to my feet, still half-stunned by the shock I had received. I saw that the lighting rig was still falling in mid-air and had caught on a rafter, pulling the steel beam along with it. I knew in that moment that my life was over. Damn.

A gentle rush of air blew my hair back and I felt someone catch me before my knees buckled. A rich, quiet voice spoke my name as a strong arm wrapped around me, pulling me close to a hard muscular body. My vision cleared enough for me to see another arm grab the falling lighting rig and hold it only a few feet above the heads of some of the teenagers. I saw a flash of auburn hair and the scent of smoke and cinnamon filled my nostrils a nanosecond before I realized who held me. Corwyn deftly pulled me out of the way of the exposed cable that crackled with a powerful electric charge. One inch in the wrong direction meant that I was a crispy critter that deprived Lincoln of power for a few days.

My heart stopped beating for a second when the swaying cable with it's blue webs of electricity hit Corwyn squarely in the back. I called out his name as I watched the current flow through his body. He never flinched as electricity coursed through him and, in the back of my mind, I thought it strange that he neither smoked nor caught fire. I never felt a second jolt of power run through my body even though the cable brushed across his back.

Corwyn's eyes smoldered tangerine and his skin gleamed with a coppery luster. The sparks bounded around him as if deflected by some invisible force. Where electricity should have burned his skin, the cable danced inches above him. That sweet, heavy blend of cinnamon and smoke hung in the air; a heavy mist overwhelming my senses to the point of physical pain. A glowing corona of light surrounded Corwyn, extending out from him by several inches and I noticed that I was caught within the glowing umbrella of protective energy. No human had the ability to project an energy field and my suspicions were confirmed: definitely not human.

A heaviness weighed down my body and darkness enveloped me. Sight and sound stopped as the blackness pressed down, holding me in place unable to move, see or speak. I fought against the shroud that threatened to suffocate me, clawing though the haze toward anything that seemed bright or alive. Somewhere, far away, I thought I heard Corwyn calling my name, demanding that I wake up. A subtle warmth wrapped around me as the resonating tenor voice gently urged me back to consciousness.

Everything became too harsh, too bright and too loud when I opened my eyes. I heard an alarm
shrilly blaring over the intercom system while Penelope instructed all students to calmly exit the auditorium. Several teenagers rapidly pulled out their cell phones to text their friends or call their parents about the sudden excitement as police and firefighters entered the concert hall.

In the chaos, I was dimly aware of being carried down the stairs exiting the stage and through the auditorium doors.

"Don't worry, Wren, you're going to be all right," a masculine voice whispered in my ear. Blinking away the blur, I saw Corwyn's bright green eyes intently watching me. "I have you now."

"Yay Team Us. What about the kids?" I asked, trying to look around him but not being able to see past the wall of chest and shoulders. "Was anyone hurt?"

"No, no one was hurt. Your quick thinking kept everyone from injury but you," he chuckled darkly. I looked into jade eyes that suddenly flashed with golden-hot flame.

"Remind me to go through open enrollment for the Foundation's health insurance," I gave him a weak thumbs-up sign. "It takes years to master Olympic-level klutziness."

"How can you joke after you've just been..." Corwyn's voice trailed off, unwilling to finished the sentence.

"Electrocuted?" I finished for him, punching him the arm. "Sometimes, you gotta look on the brighter side of death, Hot Stuff. Father Fubar didn't get me today, so it's a good day."

He gave me a puzzled glance as he entered the corridor. "Father Fubar?"

"Yeah." I mumbled, trying to work through the numbness to feel my lower extremities. "Fubar. Fowled up beyond all recognition. By the way, the first responders are the other way. Shouldn't they be giving me the once-over?"

"I'm taking you to the company clinic," he said tersely. "If what you say is true, then you won't be able to afford the ambulance ride to the hospital."

"I'm so glad to see you're so concerned for my welfare, Corwyn," I straightened my sweater that smelled like burning trash. "I'm going back to work."

"We have better facilities to to treat you and it won't cost you a thing," He gave me a quick smile. "Besides, I don't think you'd want Jack worrying about you."

Corwyn's voice carried a subtle lilt that sounded sweet in my ears, rich and full as a cello playing the lead solo in a concerto. It compelled me to comply, making me want to do anything he told me until the exploding pain in my temples made his voice sound like fingernails on a blackboard. I saw his eyes tighten when I brought my hands to my temples to ward off the hypnotic effects of his voice. "Please, don't do that. It hurts."

"We need to get you to clinic right now," he gently grabbed my elbow and I shrugged off his arm.

"Shut up, please, you're voice sounds two decibels too loud with too much auto-tune and it hurts," I moaned, closing my eyes.

"I'm sorry," he spoke softly, all hints of mesmerism gone. "I'd rather die than hurt you."

"Good. Better you than me." A rushed breath escaped my lungs. His concerned expression froze his angular features in place as his body tensed. Our eyes met when I dared to look beyond the fire
staring at me. My intuition told me Corwyn was genuinely worried about my condition. Before I thought about the consequences, I reached out to softly brush my hand again his chiseled cheek. "I'm sorry for snapping at you. That was rude. Thank you. I think you just saved my life."

I yelped when a sharp pain shot through my upper arm and into my shoulder. Corwyn's words came fast and urgent. "Wren, where are you hurt?"

I took several long breaths to steady myself before I answered. "My arm and shoulder."

Corwyn carefully sat down in one of the chairs in the clinic lobby before gathering me into his lap. Facing me forward, he examined my back. I felt his warm fingertips find a rather large hole in the back of my sweater. When they swept over a large, sensitive area of skin, I screamed several curse words that made the receptionist gawk in our direction.

"What's the prognosis?" I grunted as the area he touched throbbed in heated agony.

"First and second-degree burns and lacerations along your upper left arm and shoulder," Corwyn confirmed. I turned halfway to face him and saw the blaze in his eyes flicker and cool to muted jade.

"What the hell am I doing here sitting on your lap? Let me up, Corwyn. The EMTs can take care of me." Blistering pain throbbed along my skin. His steely arms kept me firmly locked in place. The look on his face reminded me of someone barely in control or horribly constipated.

"Can you afford the several hundred dollars you'll incur by going to the emergency room?" Corwyn asked.

"No," I admitted muttered. Damn, I hated when the arrogant playboy knew how to get me.

"Then, put your pride aside, woman, and let me help you," Corwyn framed my face firmly, but gently, in his hands. "Must you always be so stubborn?"

"Yes, it's part of my bloody charm and you have a point about being as broke as a church mouse, but damn it, let me up," I conceded and yelped when cold air hit my scorched skin. I tried to slide from his grasp and off his lap. His arms loosened around me but my body refused to move when I tried to make it comply. "Corwyn, I don't have health insurance and the Foundation's insurance hasn't kicked in. I can't afford to go to the hospital."

"Then, please, Wren," he looked at me with an intensity that made me want to comfort him. "Will you please go to the company clinic? It will be no cost to you and if further treatment is needed, then I'll take you to the emergency room myself."

We both knew he was right. "Thank you."

Gretchen came out to the lobby and led me back to one of the examination rooms. After sterilizing the burn, she applied anti-burn ointment that soothed the scorching pain spreading along my skin. She gave me several samples to take home with me along with directions on how often to apply the salve. When it was over, I walked out to the lobby to find Corwyn sitting there with brow furrowed and feet tapping an impatient tattoo on the tile floor.

"Here. Try this on, Wren." Corwyn shoved a designer gift bag in my hands with silver foil tissue erupting from the top. Surprised by the strange turn of events, I slowly removed the metallic wrap from the sack, unwrapping what was inside it. Soft cashmere brushed along my fingertips and I unfolded a brilliant violet sweater. "I guessed your size. If it isn't to your liking, I can return it and find you something more suitable."
"This is more than fine," I stammered when I read the designer name on the label that also stated it was hand-knit. "This is beautiful."

"Will you let me help you?" Corwyn asked.

He didn't demand, command or coerce. He only asked.

"Yes, please."

He carefully draped it across my shoulders, covering the burn holes left by the exposed electrical cable. I pulled the soft sweater around me because I felt oddly vulnerable, wondering if Corwyn had used some of his persuasive abilities to work past my defenses. He flashed me a flawless smile of and I felt a sudden surge of excitement from his attention. I turned to face him and my burn scraped again the soft fabric. Wincing in pain, I remembered this ‘man’ was anything but human. I firmly grabbed him by the wrist, pulling him into the unisex bathroom across the lobby. Too surprised by my abrupt shift in mood, Corwyn didn't have time to resist or respond. I pushed him into small washroom, locked the door behind me and blocked his only way of escape by placing myself between him and the door.

"Okay, Hot Stuff. Time to talk." I stood between Corwyn and the door. "I want answers."

"Wren, are you trying to kidnap me?" He asked, putting more charm into his voice and making it difficult to resist.

"No, I'm holding you hostage," I pressed, wincing in pain when I felt him trying to compel me. "What just happened in the auditorium? How did you keep from becoming Kentucky Fried Corwyn?"

"Wren, we were very lucky," he said smoothly, soothingly. "You've had quite the day-"

"Don't patronize me, Corwyn Darcy. Besides, Penelope tried the Jedi mind trick recently and it didn't work because I was pissed." An epiphany flashed through my mind. The mental manipulations that the Darcys used didn't work on me when I was angry. How was I immune? Regs weren't immune to psychic manipulation. I'd deal with that later, I decided. "Table-turning time. It's your turn to come clean. Don't lie to me, Corwyn, please. Just answer my questions."

He held his hands up in surrender. "Ask."

"Will you stop with the psychic compulsion crap, please? It hurts."

"No more," Corwyn promised, nodding once.

"Wren, you're traumatized by what just happened. Gretchen needs to give you further care." He began to reach around me for the doorknob.

As he said the words, a mossy green aura surrounded Corwyn in a series of spikes and flashes. I noticed deep blue flashes around his throat wilted in mid-air, fluttering to the floor like burning embers. The colors seemed dingy, dirty, and faded as if tainted by deceit even though his eyes never left my gaze. I knew in my gut that Hot Stuff was lying to me and expected me to absorb it without question. I lived on a farm but didn't just come off one. I don't know which insulted me more: his lies or that he thought I'd be gullible enough to believe them.

I pushed him away from the door into the tile wall behind him, wincing in pain as my burn protested from being tested beyond it's limit. "Wrong answer. Not traumatized whatsoever, just scared as f-"
I remembered the twisted metal of Matthew's car wrapped around us like a holiday bow as EMTs desperately worked the Jaws of Life to free us from the crumpled wreckage. "The falling lighting rig was a picnic compared to what I've seen."

His hand swept a stray dark lock away from my face, the back of his hand tenderly brushed my cheek. I felt a warm current dart along my skin that made me giddy, making me forget the burning ache along my arm and all of the questions that I wanted to ask. I bit my lip to bring my mind back into reality. He was smooth. "Wren, you're not ready for the truth."

"Not ready, my ass, Corwyn." I glowered, his repeated attempts at distraction fueled my anger. I shook off the heady sensations he caused and focused my tenacity on getting honest answers. "Strike Two."

"If you won't agree to see Gretchen, then let me call Jack. He can help you through this better than anyone," his voice carried a hint of the ominous but I remained steadfastly stubborn.

"No, we'll worry about my own insanity later, but I know what I saw. You were lit up brighter than a neon sign deflecting the sparks and redirecting the electrical current. We should have been fried when the cable hit you in the back, but not a damn thing happened. There isn't a single burn or scorch mark on you."

His fingers framed my face in his hands. Corwyn's voice was smooth, sweet as caramel and honey blended with chocolate into a rich, dark confection. "Wren, I was on the risers beside you when you tripped and fell."

I spit out an expletive that indicated my skepticism as I impatiently batted his hands away. Another rogue wave of bliss coursed through me that made me want to forget everything but Corwyn Darcy. My anger mutated into outrage at his patronizing denials and continued attempts of mesmerism. "No, you weren't. Humans don't glow, Corwyn. The Fae glow. Aliens glow. Humans don't. Humans don't control fire and redirect electricity as you did. You're not human, so what are you?"

"Who do you think I am?" His eyes brightened into twin emerald flames, his brow furrowed in what I could interpret only as incredulity or frustration. I smirked, knowing I didn't fall for his mind mojo and it irked him to the point of absolute vexation. Score one for the humans, I thought.

"Definitely not human," I glared at him. "Try telling me the truth, Corwyn. I know there are a lot of things normal people can't or refuse to believe. I know more than the average bear and I want to know if you intend on hurting those kids or using them for your personal gain."

"Then you don't know me at all and the answer is NO," his anger flared around him in scarlet and black. "You're asking the wrong questions. Believe me when I tell you, Wren, you're not ready for the answers. It's better if you don't know."

"You'd be surprised," I scoffed.

"I am telling the truth, Wren."

"I don't trust anyone who tries to confuse me with proverbial smoke and mirrors," I breathed deeply to keep my temper in check. "It's not working on me, in case you haven't noticed."

"I've noticed." He huffed, frustration wiped the charming tone from his voice. "Why are you annoyingly stubborn?"

"It's a skill. So, what's the story?" I asked. "Tell me."
"No," Corwyn's lips pressed into a hard line. "I can't."

"Why?" Silence was the only reply. "You mean you won't," I concluded. "I won't allow you to manipulate human beings for whatever reasons you have in mind. It isn't right."

"No one is manipulating anyone. Leave it alone, Wren," he urged.

"I might if you tell me the truth and help me to understand who you are," I offered. We glowered at each other in silence for several seconds. Unstoppable force meets unmovable object. Worlds collide. My nagging conscience reminded me that Corwyn did save my life. "Tell me why I should leave it alone. Give me one good reason."

"It's a world not meant for you."

"You know nothing about my world." I shook my head in disbelief. "I refuse to stand by while you and whoever else try to use mind mojo on innocents. That's not ethical use of the ability."

"What would you know about it?" he asked, his piercing gaze never leaving me. I realized that I had slipped, saying more that I planned and accidentally opened a box that better remained closed.

"I watch Supernatural reruns," I quipped lightly. I gave into the temptation, daring to trace a path along his sculptured jawline. "Now, I'm curious and I'll figure out the mystery."

He shivered as my finger brushed along his heated, stubbled skin. He leaned forward, his eyes molten gold and his voice husky with urgency. "Wren, please. you're not ready."

"Says who? I have an army of angels behind me."

"Agreed," he muttered through clenched teeth. "I'm trying to protect you."

"From what, Corwyn?" I said, glancing at him once over my shoulder. "Truth is the best weapon in any arsenal. Now, that's real protection. You should try it. We're done."

I slipped quietly out the side door of the clinic and returned to Penelope's office. Her worried gaze melted into one of relief when I entered the main room. She started toward me, but halted when I held up my hands to stop her.

"How are you, Dear?" Penelope asked in sweet, concerned voice.

"Better than I deserve. Gretchen patched me and made me good as new," I lied. She glanced at the clock on the wall behind me. "Go home, Wren, and get some rest."

"That's the best idea I've heard today." I admitted, tugging the violet sweater over my shoulder to hide the burn holes in the older one beneath it. "The next bus will be by in twenty minutes."

"No," Penelope protested warmly. "I'm driving you home."

There was no resonance ringing in her voice, no echo to cloud my senses. I saw only worried glances exchanged between her and Corwyn. Her gift was similar to Corwyn's, but much more polished and subtle. Her persuasive attempts were much harder to detect and I couldn't tell if they were affecting me or not. "Thanks for the offer, but I have a bus pass. Besides, the day wouldn't be complete without a caramel latte extra sweet from the coffee shop down the street."

"I can get you home sooner and I'll buy," she countered kindly. "I insist."
I took a millisecond to weigh my options. I didn't know what I was dealing with and I didn't know this family's intentions. I'd seen at least three attempts of mesmerism used to alter the reactions and perceptions of others and that went against every ethic I held sacred. Still, when everything came apart in the auditorium, Corwyn saved my life. He attempted using his mojo on me, but in the end resorted to good, old-fashioned begging to not pursue this mystery of who and what he was and what was happening to me. My instincts told me that evil monsters using mind control didn't save the lives of intended victims, but saints also didn't alter the free will of innocents. More research was needed, I decided.

"I'll just call Jack, let him know that I'm arriving home early." I pulled out my phone. If Penelope protested, then I knew something was brewing. Instead, she nodded in agreement as I dialed Jack's number. I left a message on his voicemail, hoping he would soon check it and give me a return call.

The trip home was uneventful and pleasant despite my snarky mood and frazzled nerves. Penelope drove through the drive-thru window as promised and purchased my caramel latte extra sweet. We made small chitchat, but I edited my answers and kept my replies neutral. I replayed the day's events repeatedly in my mind as she drove, trying to make sense of everything seen, heard and felt. Corwyn's fantastic displays in the auditorium confirmed for me that his family was something more than human but, I couldn't easily determine their agenda or motives. If there is one thing my mind loves, it's a good mystery.

Penelope dropped me off at the edge of the driveway and I was relieved to find Jack's pick-up parked in front of the house. I knew that Jack wouldn't help me figure out the mystery because of deep-abiding admiration for the Darcy clan. I gingerly slipped my injured arm out of the sweater and threw the burnt garment in the trash.

I wanted to unravel the enigma of Corwyn Darcy and figure what was going on with the wonky visions and painful headaches. Serendipity blessed me with an opportunity when Jack knocked on my door.

"Rascal, I've got a craving for an eight-ounce rib-eye. Want one?"

"No thanks. I think I'm going to grab a sandwich and hit the books."

"Hit the books?" One thick black brow rose in question. "In the hayloft?"

Jack looked down at me from beneath the brim of his black Stetson, staring at me in silence for what seemed about a minute. "What for? You avoid magic like the plague."

"I've reconsidering my options."

"Yeah," he scoffed. "Since when?"

"Since now," I answered. "I need to do some research. Can I be honest with you, Jack?"

"Always." Jack's gruff answer reassured me.

"I saw strange things today that made me ask questions, but no one is giving answers. I know something is going on with the Darcy clan that is supernatural, but I want to make sure I know what I'm dealing with before I decide my options."

"Wait, Wren, what are you seeing?" Jack pushed back the brim of his black stetson to reveal those dark eyes wide with concern.

"Oh, just trace signatures of psychic activity and auras," I nonchalantly shrugged. "Nothing
Regular, but, I'll worry about that later. Right now, I have strange beings pretending to be human and they're not. I don't know what I've walked into, but I'm about to find out.

He gave me a slow grin. Reaching into his pocket, he drew out a set of antique silver skeleton keys dangling from a cast iron ring. He held them in front of me before I quickly took them off his finger. "Do you want some help?"

"I'm not sure," I replied, not certain how to answer. "I need to do this alone."

"You know we Bryants find our strength in numbers," Jack said.

"Thanks, Jack, but I've got this." I gave him a reassuring smile.

"You keep me posted, young lady." Jack's mock sternness didn't match the smile he wore. "You sure you don't want anything from the diner?"

"Pastrami with provolone and tomato, extra olives and a side of curly fries." I shrugged when my stomach growled in agreement.

"Done." he gave me one quick nod.

"Thanks, Jack."

Jack wasn't one to pry into my personal life and I was appreciative that wouldn't press the matter. The look on his face told me he was concerned, but trusted me in the family's archive room. The hayloft housed our familial legacy and centuries of arcane knowledge. One didn't just ask for the keys like a teenager did for the the family car.

"Wren, be careful where you go digging. You might find gold or something that you're not ready for."

"I'll dig with a sharp shovel, keep a keen eye, and wear good protective gear." I crossed my heart with a big 'x' as I made the vow. "This is important to me."

"Yeah, Rascal, it is," he said simply with a quick nod and then he was gone.

I left the kitchen with keys in hand and quietly made my way across the yard to the large white barn behind the garage at the north end of the acreage. With a weather vane, complete with rooster and lightning rods adorning the arched roof, it was a piece of rural Americana plucked from a Norman Rockwell painting. Above the main entrance, a large violet and green eight-pointed hex sign decorated the white hayloft door. To the unknowing passerby, it was just another quaint country design one found commonly in quilts or painted on barns. However, that octagonal star represented our family legacy also provided the acreage with powerful protection unwanted preternatural forces.

Jack and Justin painted the star on the barn the summer before I left for Europe. I should know because I served them sandwiches and lemonade at lunchtime while they dangled in harnesses perfecting the design. I remember well what Jack told me about its history and why that hallowed emblem was emblazoned on everything from his business logo, Nana Wren’s quilts, our jewelry, our coat of arms and on our barn.

“Be proud of that star, Wren.” he told me when he had finished the final brush stroke, the wet paint gleaming in the late July sun. “It’s part family crest, protection glyph and a damn good territorial marker. The Regs think it’s pretty and old-fashioned. To us, it symbolizes who we are. No one will mess with us if they have any common sense.”
Jack’s words echoed in my mind as I walked along the dusty concrete floor inside the barn. The fresh smell of hay, horses and oiled leather saddles filled my senses with the scent of nostalgia. The saddles, tack and other gear for the horses hanging on the walls brought back memories of Jack's rodeo competitions and Justin's livestock exhibitions at the county fair. I knew I was truly home.

At the north end of the barn was a steep narrow stairwell that led to the hayloft. Happiness bubbled within me, the joy of being home filled as I raced up the stairs, skipping every other one. At the top of the stairs was a heavy oak door secured with a handcrafted cast-iron padlock. I inserted the skeleton key into the lock, turning it slowly, until I heard a satisfying click. With a sense of excitement and reverence, I pushed open the door and stepped into the room that I had thought was no longer a part of my life.

The room both fascinated and thrilled me for all it represented: all of the knowledge of the Bryant family legacy. It was also a place that I hadn’t visited for several years because of the cynicism I held for that same history. Nearly four years ago when I had locked that door, I left a part of my soul behind in that room. Now, I returned to it with enthusiasm and focus to find answers that I needed. I had to face the things in my past if I wanted any kind of life in the here and now.

When I stepped inside, a thousand memories and sentiments flooded my mind as I surveyed my surroundings. Jack’s oak handcrafted bookshelves lined the walls and the late afternoon sun streamed through the stained-glass windows made by Aunt Della, painting a colorful mosaic on the floor. Ancient books and scroll cases neatly lined the shelves on one side while sealed mason jars of herbs and mysterious components filled the shelves of the opposite wall.

Being a Reg in a gifted family of Solomonari presented unique challenges to me in my teens, but I refused to let those obstacles limit me. I contributed by labeling the arcane ingredients within the mason jars or arranging the volumes and manuscripts by author and year of publication. Like others in my family, I spent my high school years in Europe where my family had attended school for generations. I learned a few things while I was there.

The private academy epitomized Bryant family tradition from which all of us had graduated. Nestled between the Cibin and Cindrel Mountains on the edge of a lake and surrounded by forest, it was paradise to me. What most people didn’t know was that it was located in the heart of central Romania not far from the city of Sibiu in the middle of Transylvania.

Ten invitations are extended annually to young, hopeful recipients showing great promise and I received mine because my grandfather and my mother, Melanie, were alma mater and gave generous donations resulting in the Bryant Library at the Academy. Despite my lack of psychic talent, I possessed natural academic aptitude that resulted in the Headmaster overlooking my lack of preternatural talent. While I attended school I concentrated my strengths where I knew they’d most effective: research. Just because I couldn’t scry, transmute or summon didn’t mean I couldn't whip up a good potion. I made it my life’s mission to become a walking encyclopedia about all things magical. I worked in the library researching topics for professors or transferring ancient texts onto flash drives.

Every Solomonari family has practitioners, but only three families can claim they have a Sage and the Bryant family was one of them. What is a Sage, you ask? A Sage is a Solomonar that transcribes all knowledge into the Key of Solomon and keeps endless amounts of information archived inside his or her brain. In other words, I'm a font of knowledge and good at it. Being the family's "go-to-guru" allowed me to attend school while placating those who protested my attendance due to my lack of talent. I eventually parlayed my academic record from the Academy into a Bachelor of Science in Library Science at the University when I returned home.
Don’t get the wrong idea; I don’t hate the arcane. In fact, the opposite couldn’t be truer because it is the quintessential essence of my family. It is frustrating that my family defines itself exclusively through it, always depending on it more than the other talents with that they possess. I wanted to participate in my family’s legacy and I my perseverance made it happen.

I perused the shelves for several minutes until I found the text I needed, The Key of Solomon. It isn’t just a history book used to chronicle magical beasts, spell research and ancient histories. It contains nearly three thousand years of Solomonari magic dating back to approximately 930 B.C. Whenever I look at it, a sense of pride runs through me.

I ran my fingers along the heavy book, letting my fingers trace a path along the slightly textured brown leather cover. On the front of the tome was our family crest: an octagonal star with a key hanging from the bottom point. I scanned several pages, starting with the first word relevant to my search. I was in search of fire.

Reading the words, the entry on fire mentioned that in many languages it described the essence of angels and demons, epitomizing the passions carried within them and composed the basis of their divine abilities. I learned that fire comprised the primal energies of these beings just as calcium, carbon and water form the basis of the human body. Then, I saw a handwritten note in the pages out margin that read, “The Djinn.”

I hurriedly flipped through the pages with growing excitement until I found the information I wanted. The Djinn were mentioned in legends throughout the world and there were varying myths regarding them. I found it interesting that Solomon enslaved the Djinn to complete several building projects for him. Who were these Djinn and where did they originate? Why hadn’t I heard about them while in school? I wanted more information to answer my questions but the Key of Solomon wasn’t forthcoming.

Using that as a starting point, I inspected the other scrolls and books lining the shelves and found them mostly in Jack’s areas of expertise: Horticulture, Biology and Botany. I realized that I needed to delve into other areas if I wanted the information I craved.

Throughout the night I scoured Jack’s extensive library, but I didn’t have much luck in finding what I needed. At that point, I decided to work some Internet mojo on my laptop. I prowled several search engines, using the keywords “Djinn” and "Fire.” I found a blog that looked particularly promising and I began to read.

"The Djinn were assigned by the Creator to guide and instruct Humanity. The sensations of corporeality enthralled the Djinn, enslaving them to intense passions such as love, joy, lust, hatred and greed. Caught in the Great War between the Fallen and the Host, the Djinn chose to remain rather than betray their Creator or fight their brethren. They were exiled from Heaven for their neutral stance. Once earthbound, they assumed physical bodies, intent on living an existence laden with emotion, experience and sensation. They took notice of their human charges; lust and love drew them to the Daughters and Sons of Men compelling them to take them as their consorts. They experienced the primal devotion of passion as they loved their mates and brought forth children.

"From these unions, the Djinn sired half-human children. With unearthly beauty and charm, these children possessed heated skin flaming to the touch and gleaming eyes that grew brighter with fury, joy, or sorrow. Said to be born without a heartbeat, pulse or breath until it reached its seventh year, upon it’s birthday, a half-Djinn child gleamed with the bale fire of it’s fallen lineage. Glorious and exotic, their human relatives saw them as demons when a young child accidentally incinerated an innocent or caused a young suitor to spontaneously combust. Hunted by the Host or their minions, these children often met a quick end before reaching maturity.
"Legends claim these creatures have many intrinsic abilities used to wreck havoc and bend reality to their will. All create fire and call lightning from the sky. Possessing empathy, telepathy and unearthly charisma, a Djinn can sway even the strongest-hearted individual to its whims. Like its full-blooded parent, it has powerful hungers that neither food nor drink can satisfy. Some are addicted to the taste of the pure human life-force, seeking to satiate their craving by infusing their bodies with humanity's most powerful emotions. The most common method of feeding is seduction whereby the Djinn satisfies its hunger but leaves its victim spent or drained. In many cases, some victims unexpectedly erupt into flame until only ashes are left.

Being nearly immortal, they are almost impossible to kill. Only when the Great Flood occurred were most destroy, but some clergy theorize some still survive to this day, feeding off innocent humans until nothing remains but piles of ashes or dried husks. One of known ways known to vanquish a Djinn is to immerse one in water from a divine wellspring also known as Angel Tears. The Dionysian Codex states some have a natural immunity to tho a Djinn's charms, usually a psychic or a magical practitioner.

I let the legend float around in my head and still found it difficult to believe. My excitement grew as I digested the information, wrapping my mind around it. I knew soothsayers and psychomancers were normal in my family, that the Loch Ness Monster actually existed and werewolves could drink anybody under the table. Yet, the thought of Djinn was an entirely new concept for me. They were real. Heated skin, flashing eyes, incredible strength and speed were all qualities that Corwyn Darcy displayed when he saved my life. The blog said that the half-Djinn children inherit the powers of their parent which meant the ability to control fire and call lightning. Electricity.

I quickly turned off my laptop and left the room, locking the door behind me. I wasn’t completely certain that the information was accurate and I wanted a second opinion. Jack was a practitioner whose specialties were plants and animals, not djinn. I had always assumed they were mythical creatures who lived in lamps and granted wishes. Speaking about this with him was going to be a novel and awkward experience. How I was going to get him to believe me was my largest concern. More research was required, I realized.

The next day at work was chaotic and bizarre. I found that I was the latest source of gossip around the water cooler. Nick proved to be the biggest annoyance as he hammered me with questions about what happened. I decided to edit out the supernatural element and told him that Corwyn had been the one to whisk me out of danger with his quick thinking.

Corwyn was admired from a distance by the majority of the female staff at the Archangelus Foundation, but appeared aloof and unapproachable. Penelope lent me out to other departments that week to do filing and mail processing, giving me a reprieve from him. The only time I ever saw him now was when I went to the break room for lunch where I saw him sitting with his family.

Throughout the day, I pondered the possibility that Corwyn was a Djinn. It wasn’t entirely impossible because members of my family saw dead people and talked with animals. I knew such creatures existed but I never had seen one nor had they been discussed much in school. Not all Djinn were evil just as all Humans weren’t saints I breathed a little easier when I realized that Corwyn was probably one of the good guys, if there could be such a thing as a ‘good Djinn.’ I remembered from one of my lectures from the Academy that discussed how some beings never had the opportunity to overcome their fiendish pasts.

Gretchen and Shannon noticed that I was quieter than usual and I lied about how I was recovering from my near-death experience. They took my word at face value, letting the matter drop. By Friday, the whole lighting rig episode was old news and everything began getting back to normal. I
resumed my routine that day of helping the choir practice their music in one of the conference rooms while the auditorium was being renovated.

The piece was coming together nicely and I realized that the concert was only a few weeks away. For the first time in four days, I saw Corwyn but I said nothing to him as I took my place in the choir. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him scrutinizing every move I made and every note I sang. There was a tangible mood in the air that emanated from him and I knew it to be a mixture of curiosity and frustration.

I was secretly thankful for Nana Wren’s amulet hanging around my neck. Whether it was by its magic or my will, I managed to keep the promises I had made to myself about staying away from him. I wanted to get him alone to ask him a thousand questions about his family and his lineage yet I wasn’t ready to have my theories disproved. I looked at him with new eyes filled with wonder, interest and awe. Corwyn’s bright eyes met mine for an instant and I noticed they held an expression of concern before he looked away.

I returned my eyes to the sheet music in front of me and found that I had no clue where the choir was at in the music. Part of me rued the tenacity that prompted me to do my research while another side drove me to confront him with what I knew. I was crazy, but I wasn’t stupid. If he truly was one of the Djinn, then that meant I was way out of my league and best leave him alone. When choir practice ended, I darted for the door as fast as my feet could hit the floor.

“Wren?” His voice melted over me like warm chocolate and it had been the voice that I had dreamt about for the past week.

I began walking fast down the corridor, ignoring him so that I wouldn’t have to speak to him. Damn it! Where was my courage and bravado now when I needed it?

“Wren?” He called after me softly and I felt a warm hand touch my shoulder. I didn’t want to feel the strong emotions he inspired and I knew that if I stared at his dangerous beauty that I’d be a quivering mass of jelly in front of him. I stopped abruptly mid-stride without glancing over my shoulder.

“Yes, Corwyn?” I asked lightly with all the non-chalance I could muster.

“When will you quit avoiding me?”

“When will you quit stalking me,” I said as rudely as possible and it was believable. “Penelope has been keeping me busy. Do you want something?”

“No,” he admitted. “I think with all that’s happened, I thought we might be friends by now.”

“Since when are have we been friends? Friends are honest with each other,” I said coolly. “Friends don’t lie to each other, Corwyn.”

"You were that iron exterior for all to see, yet it is nothing more than a glamour," he gave me a sad smile. "I see beyond it to the gentle, kind and frightened woman hiding behind its exterior.

"You are so full of it-" I seethed, enraged that the playboy in front of me dared to tell me what I felt and thought.

“There is something more between us than that,” he spoke softly, his warm breath only inches from my ear as he stood too close behind me. “I wish you could see that.”

“You know what, Corwyn?” I made a face as though a skunk had passed under my nose. "You're
right, there is one thing something between us and I'm going to more of it between us: space. Excuse me, I have some errands that Penelope wants me to run.” With those final words, I continued walking down the corridor without looking back.

I returned to my desk and found a list of names sitting on the keyboard to my computer. Penelope had left me a memo stating that she wanted me to call supporters of the Foundation, informing them about the upcoming fund-raising concert. I also saw the company newsletter lying on my desk and I saw the words “company picnic.” Curious, I read the newsletter, finding that the picnic was being held in just a few days and that all employees were asked to bring a covered dish. I also found it oddly comforting that she still preferred to have everything in print rather than send it in a company email.

“Earth to Wren,” A cheerful voice broke my concentration. Looking up, I found Nick leaning over my desk staring down at me.

“Hi, Nick,” I dutifully greeted him, just wishing he’d leave me alone in my silent reverie. His dark eyes glanced at the newsletter on my desk. “Are you going to the picnic?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” I gave a casual shrug.

“There's going to be karaoke.” His enthusiasm for one of his favorite pastimes bubbled over in his voice. “Softball, throwing water balloons at the supervisors, not to mention a million other things.

“That’s nice,” I mused, putting the newsletter to the side.

“We could go together.”

My head snapped in his direction. "What?"

I looked up into those happy, dark eyes staring down at me and realized that I had to carefully pick my words carefully or ruin a good friendship. I didn't want to be around the Darcys, especially Corwyn, any more than necessary.

"I appreciate the invitation, Nick, but I don't think I'm going."

"If you're plans change, let me know."

"For sure," I racked my brain for other possibilities. No one came to mind. That’s when I noticed the heavy scent of cinnamon, spice, and smoke filled the air. I sniffed once, then glanced at Nick. “Do you smell that?”

He took the hint well and flowed with the subject change and He inhaled deeply and shook his head, confused. “I don’t smell anything, Wren.”

“It smells like cinnamon and smoke.” Amazed, I looked around the room and saw nothing that was the scent of the strong aroma. “You don’t smell anything?”

When Nick left, I left my desk, following the scent down the corridor as if it beckoned me. I remembered the entry on the website that stated that a Djinn could bend even the most strong-willed person’s resolve. Unless that person was a psychic, a magical practitioner or royally pissed. I knew that my immunity didn't stem purely from Nana Wren's pendant, it came from my heritage and my anger. With that thought, I spun about-face, immediately returning to my desk where I found Corwin Darcy sitting on the edge of it, studying the picture of Jack and me.
“Why aren’t you coming to the company picnic?” His voice, smooth and subdued, compelled me to answer. I also thought that I heard a strong undertone in his voice, something that didn’t quite sound human. I cocked my head to listen to the words, but the resonance flitted away to quickly for me to examine it.

“Nosy much?” I asked. “Why is it that anger nullifies your mental manipulation of others?”

"So, you figured that one out," Corwyn nodded in approval. "I'm impressed."

"Hmm."

"Why aren’t you going to the company picnic?” Corwyn asked again, a chiming resonance lilting through his honey and velvet tenor voice. It was faint, but undeniable, that strange echo required that I answer his question.

“Answer my question and I’ll answer yours. Besides, could you just ask me without trying to infuse your voice with mojo?”

Corwyn’s handsome features froze for a second when the meaning of my words sank into his brain. I studied his face as he comprehended my words, looking for anger or shock. Instead, I saw only a sincere smile tug at his lips and brighten his already angular features. “I’m sorry, Wren. It wasn’t intentional.”

I listened carefully to each word he spoke, listening for the magical beckoning that I had heard in his first two questions. Whether he had removed the magic from his voice or was truly sincere in his statement, I wasn’t sure. My brows furrowed while I studied him looking for any sign of magic afoot. Corwyn wasn’t surrounded by the copper aura that I seen earlier in the week when he had saved my life. His eyes were a deep mossy green today, the greenest I’d ever seen them. He seemed calm and tranquil today compared to days past.

I decided to take a chance. “I’m not going to the company picnic because I have some things I want to get done. I might go if I get everything done in time.”

“What do you want to get done?” Corywn asked, his sweet scent of cinnamon and spice surrounded me with its light, heady aroma. I closed my eyes and shook my head to rid my senses of its side-effects.

“Corwyn, you saved my life.” I held up my hands palms out to stop him from interrupting me. “I’m grateful. I answered your question in good faith. Now, please, answer mine. How is it that anger nixes your vocal mojo?”

Taking my hand in his, he held it to his chest where I felt the strong, steady cadence of his rapidly beating heart beneath his shirt. “The ability stimulates the amygdala of the human brain. When you feel anger, it blocks the effect.”

The Caligula? "The What?"

"One of the pleasure centers of the brain," Corwyn said with a hint of exasperation.

“Thank you, Corwyn.” I gave him a smile, making a mental note to look up the word. “I appreciate your honesty.”

I looked into those green eyes and I knew he had me where I stood. With him just standing there, I wanted to tell him everything and I knew and forget the consequences. I also knew that if he was what I suspected, that I was dealing with a potentially dangerous entity. I knew his family did good
in the community, but what if one of them fed and killed a Human?"

I looked into his green eyes for animosity or evil intent only to find none. Corwyn Darcy gave off a vibe that screamed sincerity and generosity, not clandestine agendas that included hurting innocent people. “Can we start being honest with each other? Please?”

“Yes,” he whispered, leaning forward so that his lips brushed against my hair. “No more secrets.”

“Good.”

“What is this thing that’s happening between us?” Corwyn leaned forward, his warm breath enveloping me in spice and flame.


“Do you know what I’m thinking?” One brow quirked in question.

“No, telepathy isn’t in my skillset,” I countered with a smile. I wanted to see if he were more man or Djinn as I let myself slip somewhat into the pure perfection of his scent.

“Wren, ask me anything,” he glanced down at me with smoldering eyes that brightened somewhat so that they were bright green with flecks of amber dancing around the irises. “I think we could be great friends.”

“Possibly, but honesty is a must. Why is it so important that you and I be friends?

"I haven't had many friends, Wren. You draw me to you. I can’t fight it anymore and I don’t want to try,” his eyes glowed with primal intensity as he spoke each word, his voice blazing with urgency. His eyes lost any hint of green as they to a deep amber. I noticed the scent of cinnamon fading for one that smelled sharper until it stung my nostrils, a scent that I couldn’t identify. “We have a connection. Don’t you feel it?”

I felt something all right that angered me on the surface, thrilled me in the middle, and frightened me underneath it all. Whatever this weird and wonderful chemistry was brewing between us, I knew that my resistance to it was because I was partially angry at Corwyn for digging in my emotional sandbox where my pain lay buried. I also knew that I needed to know more about Corwyn Darcy and his intentions. If I were wrong for mistaking him for one of the Djinn, then that was my blunder. However, if I was right and he was dangerous, I’d never be able to live with myself if I didn’t try to do something about it…him. Now, I looked at him trying to gather the right words to answer his question.

“I feel grateful for you saving my life and that’s all I feel,” I replied. “I think I want to know the hero behind the mask for the man he truly is, glowing or otherwise. If you want to be friends with me, then keep with the honesty because it’s working.”

His eyes gleamed brightly, then darkened to a deep jade. His intensity eased and the heady aroma wafted away into a soft masculine spice that I couldn’t name. “You’re odd, Wren Bryant.”

“Only now did you just figure that out?” I laughed. I watched his eyes fall to the floor, studying the carpet before he looked again at me through thick, dark lashes. I saw a hint of hurt from my sarcasm before his face became an unreadable mask. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, but which one was Corwyn, I wondered. I asked quietly, hopefully. “Friends?”

I watched Corwyn bite his lip and drop his brow so that it rested on our held hands. I couldn’t see his eyes but I thought that he wanted me to say something more. He finally raised his eyes to look
at mine, his expression indecipherable. “One step at a time, Wren.”

He abruptly let loose my hand and left me alone in the office.
Truth Or Dare

Late March went out in a glorious fury of wind and snow, prompting me to cancel the barbeque with Nick, Gretchen and Shannon. Instead of hamburgers and a bonfire, Mother Nature covered Lincoln in record snowfall accompanied by frigid temperatures and icy streets. Refusing to be daunted by bad weather, Nick suggested that we go to a trendy nightclub called Club Andromeda to warm up with a few drinks and some non-stop dancing.

Stepping into the club meant leaving the world behind as I knew it. Loud dance music blasted from several mounted speakers on the walls while neon lights glowing blue and pink pulsated in time with the constant cadence of the beat. Gray paint washed the old brick walls and black lights turned several pictures fluorescent neon. Vivid lime and tangerine leapt out of the graphics and murals painted on the walls, washing the bar in a surrealistic glow. I noticed several glyphs painted on the walls in parallel columns and asked Nick about them, but he claimed not to see anything. I studied them for a moment because something about them appeared eerily familiar, something ancient.

Grabbing a cocktail napkin and a pen from my purse, I scrawled several down in the order they appeared with the intent of deciphering them later that night. Something was working in the back of my mind, but all of the external stimuli distracted me too much to make sense of it. I watched Shannon and Gretchen return from the bar with drinks in hand while Nick found us a table.

I guessed by the bucket of longnecks chilling in ice at the table sitting in front of Gretchen indicated she wasn't our designated driver. Nick ordered a tropical mixed drink while I still tried to decide what I wanted. The bartender, a tall statuesque woman towering over me by nearly a foot, leaned forward on the bar. Dark braids brushed her shoulders. “What can I get for you, honey?”

The voice that came from the bartender's lips wasn't a husky alto but quiet feminine baritone. My mouth opened but, words failed me, leaving me with only the awkward silence caused by astonishment. The bartender was a lovely woman with a prominent Adam's Apple. Nick and the bartender gave each other knowing looks and I felt like the first person to hear the joke but the last one to get the punchline.

"A Roy Rogers, please."

“Ah,” the bartender winked at me, nodding in understanding. Her thick, dark lashes sparkled in the pulsating lights illuminating the bar. Rhinestones adorned her artfully painted eyelids and I admitted to myself in silent envy that she looked better in a dress than I did. I watched her return to the drink bottles mounted on the wall, making my drink with the dexterity of a juggler. Tossing one bottle high into the air, it turned end-over-end several times. She deftly caught it in one hand before pouring the rum into the glass that swiveled on her index finger like a basketball.

“Wow,” I managed to find my voice, commenting to Nick. “What is her name?”

“Oh, that's Ru Le Fleur, she owns the place,” he commented glibly. “When she asks what's your poison, she means it.”

I rummaged through my handbag for a bill to pay for a drink when the bartender held up her hand to stop me. “Your money's no good here, Sweetie.”

“Excuse me? "
Ru's eyes flitted toward the end of the bar where I found Corwyn Darcy holding a drink in mid-air in a silent toast. I gave him a quick nod of thanks before turning back to the bartender. Crooking my finger, I motioned Ru closer, whispering in her ear. "Does he come here often?"

"He needs to come here a lot more often," she smiled.

My brows shot up with surprise to find Corwyn Darcy still watching at me. A bright smile flashed across his lips as he nodded to me in acknowledgment. With drink in hand, he swiftly shortened the long distance between us within few strides. Nick gave me a skeptical glance. "I'll see you later. We'll save you a seat."

"I'll be there shortly," I promised.

I remained where I stood, unable to move or think. Dressed in a white dress shirt that was unbuttoned at the neck enough to show some collar bone some of his neck, he looked sleek and fit. Ru nudged me gently enough to bring me out of my reverie. "Girl, I think that he likes you. Why don't you get over there before he gets away?"

"He reminds me of the common cold," I scoffed, giving her a wry smile. "I'm not sure he's something I want to catch."

"Why is that?" Ru asked.

"You better start channeling your inner Venus, Sugar. Here comes that celestial body into your orbit," she looked past me, nodding in Corwyn's direction. I turned around to see him heading my direction with drink in hand, the ultraviolet lights gave his eyes an eerie emerald glow.

I gulped.

He made his way to the bar stool beside me, his velvet voice too low for me to hear, but I read his lips loud and clear, "Sit with me, Wren."

I decided to sit with him.

"You look lovely," Corwyn's voice was deep, quiet and compelling and the English accent didn't hurt either. I didn't hear the magical resonance in it that I had heard the other day. Corwyn Darcy was becoming my personal genie more ways that one and I wasn't sure if it thrilled or terrified me. Curious and surprised, I decided to take advantage of the opportunity for further observation and investigation.

"Thank you. Fancy meeting you here," I said in a wry voice as I studied him. "Do you like the scenery?"

"I think you're stunning," he murmured, his gaze eyeing me appreciatively.

"Hmm." I silently wondered if the rumors about Corwyn Darcy were true.

"I'm here on business talking to the owner, drumming up donations for the upcoming benefit concert."

I gave him a skeptical glance, saying nothing.


"Here with friends to unwind."
“Are we friends?” he asked.

“You haven't decided that one yet, remember?” I countered, my eyes castigating him.

“Friends have drinks together,” he grinned. “Since the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, I’m going to enjoy the ride, but which one of us is the designated driver?”

Had he been reading my mind? Good intentions? Oh, great. I swallowed a lump that lodged itself in my throat, making it difficult to breathe. This was just too insane for me to handle. I like things I can categorize and control and the situation was fast becoming neither. The music boomed from the speakers, loud and harsh, in my ears while the pulsing lights distracted me with their flickering cadence. The strobe light in the corner seemed to match my pulse as the blood left my head, giving me vertigo. I promptly fell off the bar stool onto the tile floor, landing soundly on my backside.

Corwyn quickly helped me to my feet, taking me over to a booth away from the loudspeakers and the flashing lights. He held up a bill and Ru quickly brought over a tall glass of ice and a pitcher of water. “How much have you had to drink, Wren?”

“Not a drop. I just ordered a Roy Rogers,” I sank into the overstuffed black vinyl booth, leaning against the cool brick wall for support. "Strobe lights and I don't get along well."

“Seizures?” Corwyn asked.

"No, just loss of balance." Corwyn poured me a glass of water. I took it from him and drank in long, slow sips. The cool wetness felt good against my suddenly parched throat with every swallow. The silence loomed between us for several seconds and I continued sipping. His face went from placid to concerned in about three point five seconds while I remained quiet. “I'm not making any sense to you, am I?”

I mentally pleaded the Fifth Amendment. I glanced up at him through my lashes, deciding to play dumb. “Enlighten me, Corwyn.”

“I want to know you better, Wren, if we're going to be friends. When I saw you and your friends walk through the door, I knew it was an opportunity for us to get to know each other outside of work.”

"How often do you actually talk to people from work?” I asked, after swallowing another sip of ice water. “Quite a few co-workers make moon eyes at you and swoon when you walk by them. You never seem to notice.”

“I notice, but I don't let them know,” he admitted. “They see a face and money, but they don’t want to see me.”

“If you think everyone just wants to see what you keep in your wallet, then why are you talking to me?” I asked bluntly.

“I don't impress you,” he explained. “You think I'm an arrogant playboy living a fast life of luxury and money. I vex and perplex you.”

"Pretty much," I agreed. "Anything else?"

“You're not interested in power or wealth, but in a good mystery. You have a curious mind, not leaving something alone until you know everything about it. Only my family knows more about me.”
“Really? I barely know you,” I knew he was handsome, wealthy and charismatic. He never dated and his sexuality often came into question with the women around the water cooler. He was an artist and composer who wrote his own music, possessing a rare gift that allowed him to know another's feelings and to compel individuals to do his bidding. In fact, Tristan and Penelope displayed the same talent, making me wonder if it was a family trait. Most people easily under their spell, myself included. The only thing that gave me an edge was that I knew anger dispelled the effect.

"But, you looked past the money and looked at me, Wren. Not many people take the time to do that with me. You have a way of bringing out my secrets,” Corwyn murmured cryptically as he sipped his drink. “It's lonely to have secrets and no friend with whom to share them. You carry secrets of your own, don't you?"

“No more than the average bear," I gave an innocent shrug. “I'm just your friendly, neighborhood Gal Friday who types seventy words a minute and makes great coffee." 

“Who also makes walking in pumps an art form,” he gave me a hint of a smile. “You draw me to you with your unforeseen questions and challenges. I'm tired of duplicity and of being a saint around you. I admit defeat," he was still smiling as he opened his arms wide in surrender, but there was a solemn note underlying his words. “I am at your mercy. Do with me as you will.”

I marveled that he experienced the same emotions and thoughts about me as I did about him. "Okay, can I have a raise?"

"Minx."

“Don’t blame me if I’m your own private bug zapper and you’re the moth," I scoffed.

“'You're the only one outside of my family who can see anything true about any of us,” Corwyn replied, taking a swallow of whatever his glass held. “I’m not the only one noticing it. How do you do it? Are you a witch?"

"If I told you, will I get Employee of the Month?" I asked with more bravado than I felt.

“You're either all barbed snarkiness or glib sarcasm,” he leaned forward so that his lips were only millimeters from mine. “You are an enigma, Wren, the one with secret depths. You saw the talents I used to save your life when most people would succumb to shock or try to rationalize with some scientific explanation. I hear you sing and it’s unlike anything I’ve heard in dec-" Corwyn stopped in mid-sentence.

"Decades," I finished for him.

"Yes," Corwyn' body posture somewhat relaxed.

“Corwyn,” I started, not sure where or how to begin. Sometimes, the best offense is to let down one's defenses and honesty had worked to my advantage, so far. “Friendship takes time to build and we’ve just met. I’m reserved. I’m not quick to warm up to people.”

“I rarely trust people outside of my family,” he gave me a smile that appeared genuine. “You’re proving to be to be the exception.”

“Great,” I chuckled. “You're paranoid and I'm antisocial. We're off to a great start.”

“Psychosis loves company,” those jade eyes twinkled, amber sparks dancing in their green depths. He held up his glass in a toast. “To the beginning of a beautiful and neurotic friendship.”
I always appreciated a quick mind and subtle wit which Corwyn possessed in abundance. I said nothing but clinked my glass to his in agreement.

“"I keep to myself for a reason," I warned him. "However, you keep following me.""

“"We keep running into each other," he amended as he flashed me a blazing white smile of perfect, straight teeth.

“"It's more than coincidence that you're here tonight," I saw Corwyn stare at me through hooded eyes. Gone was the easy-flowing banter we shared just a moment ago. If I knew more that an outsider should, then, he wasn't interested in, but in what I knew. My inner Venus suddenly got shot out to Alpha Centauri as my feminine pride deflated. I had almost fallen for his ruse, thinking he might be telling the truth.

I felt ten times the fool as my anger grew. He wasn’t interested in me, but how close I was to his secret. He was rich, single and handsome and I was merely the quirky Administrative Assistant that made great coffee.

"Thanks for the water, but I'm fine. You almost had me believing you. Good one." I stood up and turned to leave when Corwyn's took mine. I felt the heat of his skin hot against my palm as he held my hand. A rhythmic current flowed between us and I saw amber and violet sparks dance where our hands connected, while his jade eyes exploded into twin flame.

"Wren, stay."

"I'm not used to people like you taking an interest in people like me," I said honestly. "You're only speaking with me to see how much I know and if I'm going to spill the beans. Don't worry, Hot Stuff, unless you intentionally hurt anyone, your dirty little secret is safe with me."

"You couldn't be more wrong, Wren. I don't have many friends, but I think I have at least one. You." Corwyn stood up, impeccably dressed in his tailored clothing that accentuated every bit of his body. "Unlike you, I don't let logic dictate matters of the heart. I know that letting someone, anyone, in past the walls of a broken heart can be a monumental task. I'm willing to take that chance with you because you're worth the risk."

"Nice line. How long did you practice it in the mirror?" Yes, I thought, poke the fiery Djinn with a stick and see if he barbeques me.

"We're not that different," Corwyn said, taking both my hands in his while his gaze locked onto mine. "You peer past the charade, digging for the ultimate truth that lies beneath. You're unafraid of truth and strive for it with such dedication that others wilt in its presence. We both laugh, grow angry, love, hope and pray. Don't dismiss me because of what you think you've observed, Wren. Look and see me. Reach beyond your fear and your pain. Take the risk of getting to know me as I am with you. What I see behind those large brown eyes makes me want to know all of you."

"Really?" I mused.

"Stubborn and skeptical," he gave shrewd appraisal.

"You're heart is broken, you trust no one, but, yet you remain here with me." Corwyn looked down at entwined fingers. "I intrigue you, Wren Bryant and you fascinate me. Admit it."

"You said it, I didn't," I gave him an innocent smile that I knew didn’t make it to my eyes.

I called upon every bit of anger I possessed to dispel the effect Corwyn had on me. I had never
anticipated that my curiosity and attraction to him would blossom into this monster bigger than me. Nana’s pendant felt warm against my chilled skin causing me to shiver. I hated to admit it, but Corwyn was right. There was something between us.

“Look, Corwyn,” I started, not knowing quite what to say. “When I get too close to people, they get hurt. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Then we have something in common,” he replied softly as the pad of his thumb brushing lightly against the back of my hand. “I never want to hurt you.”

"Corwyn, we both know that it's possible that you could."

"You're the first person in a century that has shown any immunity to my abilities or charms," he countered. "You've even learned how to shield yourself from my abilities in a short amount of time. I think we may have a chance."

I didn’t know how to respond, his masculine scent wafted around me and my dizziness returned. I watched as Corwyn’s jade eyes brighten to blazing emerald with ocher flame flickering at the edges of the irises and I knew that he was either anxious or angry. I was too bedazzled by his voice to discern the difference.

“Wren, what’s wrong?”

"I need fresh air. Now."

"Come with me," Corwyn commanded, wrapping his arm around my shoulders as he led me through the front doors of Club Andromeda. We stood outside on a chilly, spring night. "Breathe."

“Thanks,” I croaked, my voice sounded hoarse to my ears. I realized that I was partially immune to Corwyn’s mental talents, his physical presence was an entirely different matter. It was humbling to realize that I was as vulnerable as any other woman to his allure. There was no comparison. I was outclassed and outmatched. It would never work.

“You're overthinking it, Wren,” he said softly, his deep green eyes never left mine, the scent of smoke wafting around me like heavy perfume. I felt as though I were caught in a swirling eddy of sensation and there was no life preserver in sight. I thought I'd drown if I didn't leave soon.

“Who are you?” I asked bluntly.

“Corwyn David Darcy, Vice-president of Operations of the Archangelus Foundation,” he began.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” I stopped him. “What are you?”

“The one who wants to know you,” his square jaw tensed but his voice sounded rich and smooth to my ears. “I dare you to be completely honest with me.”

“You want to play Truth or Dare? Now? Why, Corwyn?”

He leaned forward on his elbows, resting his chin on his folded hands. “Yes.”

I studied him without looking away I had been wavering the past few days between Casanova and Hellboy and I wasn’t ready to admit aloud what I had learned.

“Share,” his command came out more like a velvet caress.

“I may be crazy, Corwyn, but not stupid.”
“You’re neither insane nor stupid,” he corrected me. “Do you know how much you frustrate me?”

"Me?"

“You search for answers to questions working through your mind and then are too afraid to face the answers. You tell me that you’re going to get to the core of who I am and then you’re too frightened to face the truth,” his voice became unbreakable steel when he spoke the words. “Nothing great is gained without risk. Either take it or leave it alone.”

“I don’t see you offering too many straight answers,” I snapped, not enjoying being on the defensive. “Why don’t you try it once in a while?”

We stared at one another for a moment, my lightheadedness abruptly gone with the onset of my temper. Quiet challenge brewed between us before Corwyn quietly scoffed. His reaction left me bewildered as his derisive huff became a deep chuckle.

“What?” I demanded.

"Passersby think we're lovers having an argument. Most people do whatever I ask without exception and, yet, here you are on the sidewalk challenging me."

"Well, of course, I'm challenging you, Corwyn," I shook my head in disbelief. "I never accept anyone's word at face value."

“You tell me only what you want to share,” he retorted quietly. “Did you mean what you said the other day about wanting to be friends?”

Despite the ire he inspired, I truly wanted to get to know this enigmatic person across from me. Cocky one moment and vulnerable the next, his sudden changes in behavior made it difficult for me to keep up with him. Sure, I was completely bonkers for wanting friendship from a possibly dangerous entity, but the truth stood obviously in front of me as sure as Corwyn did. “Yes.”

I thought my response was too quiet for him to discern but he gave me a nod in response. A wide smile that brightened his face banished the broodiness that had settled on his features. “Then, as my friend, Wren, I want you to do something for me.”

“What?” I asked warily.

“Let me in. Share,” he urged me.

I held up my hands as if to ward him away. “I've been burnt before.”

“Funny you should say that,” Corwyn mused darkly, his eyes gleamed with sparks of tawny flame. He watched me intently. Corwyn's eyes had lost any hint of jade and blazed bright orange. His eyes entreated me, his voice beseeched. “Please?”

“Alien.”

“No,” he smirked.

“Vampire?”

Definitely not, Wren,” he shook his head “I like a good steak well-done. No liquid diet for me.”

"Hmm."
"Not a werewolf?"

He gave me a huge dazzling grin. Damn him. “I’m not that hairy.”

“You should be,” I said gravely. “What if you’re not the dangerous thing that goes bump in the night? What if it’s me?”

“You,” he scoffed. “Wren Bryant?”

“I know and have seen more than most ever will in one lifetime,” I warned him. “I might be your undoing.”

“Not a problem,” he grinned.

“A member of the Sidhe?” I persisted. "Allergic to silver?"

Corwyn held up his wrist to reveal a sterling silver ID. bracelet that bore his name in intricate, scrolling script. “Not a problem.”

“Spring water?” I laughed.

“I’ll never tell,” his eyes never left mine as he took my hand, pressing a light against my fingers. “Maybe the only thing that can hurt me is a Wren.”

“Yes, I’m the bogeywoman that hides under your bed at night ready to pounce,” I chuckled, watching his eyes smolder than burst into full molten lava. At that moment, the truth of my words must have sunk in as his face froze into an expressionless mask revealing no emotion.

“Under my bed,” his voice dropped an octave when his hand lightly brushed a path along my check. “Or in it. Wren, we would set the bedsheets on fire.”

Absolutely,” I said without hesitation. No more games. It was time. "Djinn."

A long pause fell between us, his features froze in a distorted mixture of disbelief and amazement. Corwyn sat there for several seconds, neither moving or breathing.

“Corwyn, say something.”

"Now, you know. Think about the risk, Wren, and if it is worth it to take a risk on a creature like me." Corwyn did an about-face and vanished into to the night. I remained alone on the sidewalk.

I rejoined my friends, saying nothing of the exchange.

“So, where's Hot Stuff?” Shannon asked, returning hot and sweaty from the dance floor.

“He couldn't stay,” I gave her my best smile. “He just wanted to say, 'Hi.'”

“Corwyn Darcy never calls someone over just to say, 'hi,'” she retorted, giving me a skeptical glance. “He is such an elitist.”

"No, he's just guarded,” I chuckled darkly, not wanting to think about it the rest of the night.

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The next day on my desk, Penelope left on my desk a rough draft of the benefit concert invitation that she wanted sent to patrons. I welcomed the work because my mind needed the distraction. I
lost myself in the task until I sensed someone standing in front of my desk. Looking up, I saw Penelope bundled up in her designer wool coat, her leather-clad hands holding the keys to her Mercedes.

“I like your work ethic, Wren, but it’s time to go home,” she glanced at the clock on the wall. “It’s ten after five and if you’re late, you’ll miss your bus.”

“Thanks,” I muttered. I hated being late to work and being distracted. I placed the work aside since I had arrived at a good stopping point and grabbed my coat, scarf, and gloves from the closet next to my desk. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Have a good night,” she said to me over her shoulder.

“You, too!” I promised.

I rushed to lock my desk and catch the elevator before the bus pulled into the main downtown terminal two blocks away. Glancing down at my watch, it read five twenty-five. I inwardly groaned, knowing that the bus came to the nearby bus stop at within three minutes. If I missed the bus, then that meant I had to give Jack a call and he’d have to leave his veterinary practice which was located on the other side of town. The snow was coming down in large, white flakes that clung to the ground.

I scrambled down the hall to the elevator, repeatedly pushing the down button several times and cursing the piece of machinery responsible for hindering my exit. I looked at the stairwell down the hall and considered making a run for it. I might still make the bus if it were running behind due to weather conditions.

“Need a ride?” A rich tenor voice caught my attention. I looked up to see Corwyn standing beside me with a grin on his face.

Our tentative friendship had grown slowly in the past several days enough where I trusted him not to fry me on sight. "Yes, please and thank you."

“I didn’t realize you were bilingual.”

“Excuse me?” I asked, bewildered by his statement. "You have it wrong. I only speak our mother tongue."

“You speak profanity as though it's your first language,” he chuckled.

I gave him a derisive glance. “Not my first language, but it's second nature."

“Yes, it is.”

"Could you be less irritating, please?” I looked at him, watching his green eyes twinkle with mischief. “Now is not the time to make me angry, Corwyn. I’m not pretty when I’m angry.”

“Do you turn green?” he asked lightly.

“I might,” I chuckled after a minute, eyeing him slowly. “Do you?”

"No."

"I can't wrap my mind around being your newest workmance, your newest professional bff?” I said, feeling the impulse of being blunt. "I still wonder if you're gonna have Esteban make me disappear
if I piss you off."

“I can be a bastard, but I'm not an evil bastard,” he said. “Your guesses from last week were amusing, given your condition.”

Relief flowed through me along with adrenaline. At least, I wouldn't be getting a dirt nap for the time being. Still, Corwyn's dry, subtle wit did glorious things for my crankiness. Who knew that his Welsh lilt and British humor were just the balm to soothe my grump mood?

“No,” his eyes darkened. Just then, the elevator door opened. Daring to look deeper, I thought I saw sincerity in Corwyn’s gaze. “Let me be a friend.”

“Fine,” I sighed in mock surrender. We walked in silence until we came to the parking garage. Gallant, as though he was from some chivalrous bygone era, Corywn opened the passenger door for me.

The abrupt drop in temperature had already caused the wet, sticky snow to became a ragged sheet of slick ice that caused me to lose my footing. Two strong arms caught me and held me tight until I regained my balance. I felt Corwyn’s heat permeate his coat and mine until my entire body hummed with the heat flowing between us. Having 116 degree body temperature has it's advantages, I mused while I appreciated my two-legged heater. I watched his eyes, noting that the mossy jade sparked with hints of bright amber. I made a mental note that whenever he felt strong emotion, his eyes changed color. I intended to ask him more about that at some point.

"Have you considered wearing more practical footwear, Wren?” Corwyn asked as he gently set me on my feet and helped my into the Aston Martin. "Pumps like what you're wearing aren't exactly winter weather friendly."

Beside me was a preternatural being with the charisma of a rock star and the looks of a love god chastising me about wearing 4 inch platform pumps during winter. The sheer absurdity of the situation made me do something that I hadn't done in a very long time: I laughed.

Getting into the car, he gave me a look that broke out into a wide smile. "It's good to see you happy, Wren."

The snow came down in a relentless white blanket obscuring my vision and I wondered how many inches the Weather Service had predicted.

“Tell me about your family,” his velvety voice stopped the silence lingering in the car.

“What do you want to know?"

“Let’s start with your mum and dad.”

“Dead and dead,” I offered no further explanation.

A pained looked crossed his face. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“You didn’t know. It’s all right,” I answered.

“What about Jack?” he asked softly, warmth from his voice washing over me like fresh spring rain.

"He's my granddad, but I think of him as my father. He loves animals and owns a veterinary clinic in Havelock. By the way, do you know where I live?”
“No,” Corwyn shrugged. “But, I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

I gave him my address and directions on how to get there. Corwyn nodded in understanding and took the next block to avoid the onslaught of rush-hour traffic. “Jack is like the rest of my family, unpredictable and eccentric. He’s more grounded than most of them, he’s reliable in the fact that he’ll keep his word and doesn’t make mountain out of mole hills.”

“He doesn’t look old enough to be-”

“Everybody says that,” I laughed easily. “He doesn’t look a day over thirty; thirty-five on a bad day.”

“You’re like him,” he mused as he turned up the heat in the car. “Grounded but unpredictable.”

“So, I’ve been told,” I hedged. “Dependable as dirt.”

“What are you?” Corwyn asked, glancing at me through the reflection of the review mirror.

"Dazed and confused on most days,” I gave him my very best disarming smile. "I'm just your cuddly little fuzzball of chaos and mayhem."

"I must admit, Wren, you’re not like any human I’ve ever met,” he moved over into the far right lane, ready to turn onto the long drive that led to the farmhouse on the edge of Havelock. “It’s as if two people live inside you. One is determined, practical and curious. The other is a frightened bird wanting to fly. Which are you?”

“Both and neither,” I evaded the question as best I could considering that I was locked in a very fast sports car with an extremely stunning specimen of male perfection.

“You moved back to Lincoln to face your fears and heal from the death of your fiance, Matthew,” Corwyn's words were a statement instead of question.

"That's part of it," I started. "How much can I trust you?"

"No coercion here, Wren," he held his hand up from the wheel.

"Corwyn Darcy!" I yelled in the small interior of the Astin Martin. "You're driving freaking eighty miles per hour! Get your damned hands back on that wheel now."

"Trust. How’s that going for you?" He asked me, turning to look directly into my eyes.

"Next time, I'll just take the bus." I muttered under my breath. "Ass."

"Do you trust me, Wren?" Corwyn's posh accent heated my blood in all the right places. Then, I made myself remember his reckless driving and how he took a curve at eighty miles per hour and a narrow street.

"With the way you drive, Hell to the no," I said, turning my attention to the traffic streaming past us.

“Trust me, Wren, I want to deserve your trust,” his voice enveloped me in a sensual cocoon. Leaning toward me, his lips brushed against my earlobe as he whispered. “I truly do.”

Tremors traveled along my spinal column. I trembled slightly when his warm lips brushed my skin and the heady scent coming from him threatened to overwhelm my senses. I tried to speak but I found my lips refused to move and my tongue had turned to lead. I decided to indulge my inner
vixen and call his bluff. You see there’s a difference between a predator and a defender. One plunders and destroys while the other protects its territory with whatever means are at its disposal. I turned so that my lips were millimeters away from his, licking them slowly before I leaned forward so that my warm breath mingled with his.

Nana's amulet spit hot sparks against my skin. I figured if a djinn can tease and tempt, then I wanted what Solomonar could do with a little focus to properly put Mr. Darcy in his place.

“Careful, Corwyn. I may be the dangerous one.” I pressed my lips against the shell of his ear. "I'll burn the lust out of you and make this ride look like kiddie entertainment at a carnival. Just imagine what I could do if I were behind the driver's wheel and my hands were on the gearshift," I wondered if my impromptu seduction could get any cornier. I felt my ring warm around my finger and my amulet buzz against my skin. I heard a strange modulation in my voice that sounded as though I had multiple voices speaking with me. Strange.

“Oh, Wren,” I heard his voice catch, his breathing quicken. Now that I had him on the offensive, I wanted him to know what it felt like to be bewildered by another. “I am.

I pressed my momentary advantage so that there was only breath separating us. “You’re not safe around me. Are you sure you really want to go there, Lover?”

“I’ll take that risk,” his breath came out in a husky whisper. "Damn you, woman. How do you do that?”

"Bored yet?” My question came out more a growl than the purr I intended.

"Oh, gods, no,” his answer was almost too low for me to hear. "Only the opposite.”

“Moth to flame, Corwyn, means crispy critter with a side of ketchup,” I abruptly pulled away. "How does it feel to be manipulated by the power of another's voice, Corwyn?”

His smile disappeared and he quickly jerked away from me as if I had burned him. His hands clenched the steering wheel until the knuckles turned white. He looked ahead, his eyes fixed on the road. No hint of green remained in them but they blazed bright ocher. “That was cruel, Wren. Fire burns when you get too close.”

“I'll deal with it,” I reminded him. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you. I just wanted to let you know you're not the only one in the world who play that game.”

I noticed Corwyn's jaw clenched, causing a vein to throb in his neck. His knuckles were white as he tightly grasped the wheel and turned his eyes back to the road. I looked down and saw his dress trousers tenting nicely and I almost chuckled in triumph until I saw him surrounded in an aura of thick red the color of cherry pie. Uh-oh, much with the not good. He was pissed and about to set the car on fire. I said nothing for the next few minutes as we rode in silence.

“Tell me about yourself,” I hated playing games but I needed any protection I had in my arsenal. “You live with your brothers and sisters-in-law?”

Yes,” his response was curt.

“Why?” I pressed. "Aren't you a little old to still be living at home? Do you live in your siblings' basement or something?

“Our family is very close.” Corwyn slowed his speed and kept his eyes on the road. I watch those red sparks pop off his aura and flit through the air like embers. "We keep each other straight.
“What about your parents?” I asked softly, no longer wanting to make him angry, but truly learn more about him.

“We lost them several years ago,” I heard a break in his voice, seeing that he stared ahead at the road. “It was a long time ago. It’s one thing you and I have in common.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I knew that I couldn’t be so cruel as to pry into a part of his heart that he kept so closely guarded. Certain kinds of pain were best kept private. “Family is the greatest treasure a person can have.”

Corwyn looked at me, his eyes suspiciously bright. “I agree.”

“Do you and your family do a lot of things together?” I asked brightly. "Spend a lot of time together, I mean?"

“We do,” he gave me a ghost of a smile and I watch the last of the angry red ember turn tangerine which mean he'd cooled down. “In fact, Liam and I are going to a rock concert in Omaha.”

“Hmm.”

“Wren,” Corwyn pulled into the driveway in front of the farmhouse and I saw Jack looking at us through the front window. “You have a penchant for doing things no mere human can do and finding out things you're better not knowing. Stay out of trouble for me, please.

“What's the fun in that, Hot Stuff?” I picked up my purse, scampering out of the Aston Martin as fast as I could. “Thanks for the ride, Corwyn.”

“Always,” he gave me a quick smile before he drove away, leaving me there in the wet snow.
Bryants are passionate about two things: family and magic, but not always in that order. I find it amazing how much healing occurs when surrounded by the love and support of friends and family. I also found that delving into the magical side of my heritage gave me new insight to real life. Instead of dwelling solely upon the void left in my heart by Matthew's death, I found my love for life invigorated by my particular passion for research.

I look back on that time and recognize how spending simple evenings with Jack helped us both heal from the passing of loved ones. We had shared meals together when I arrived home from work in the evenings but, we were ready to reenter the land of the living. Jack suggested that we go out to eat and I heartily agreed but, we disagreed on the manifestation of that great idea. He wanted pizza, pool and beer while I held a preference for computer trivia games and karaoke. Great minds think alike when stomachs rumble in hunger. The Muses of hunger and entertainment gave us the same thought that we spoke aloud in unison, “The Pizza Pit.”

I enjoy singing karaoke and after a few beers, so does Jack. We decided to build up our appetite before dinner by indulging in bowling for an hour. The athletic gene that graces most of my family skipped me and Jack smartly reminded me as he scored strike after strike while I perfected my gutter ball technique. We decided to throw in bowling for good measure, eventually ending up at our favorite hang-out that is one part bar and grill with karaoke and the other part bowling alley. After our third game, I admitted defeat. Being the loser meant dinner was on me.

We ordered pizza and he started working on a longneck bottle of his favorite beer. I settled for a glass of diet soda and browsed through the karaoke books, my ego still stinging from the sound defeat delivered by Jack. I had reached a point in my research that needed further information from sources to which I had no access, but for which Jack held the proverbial V.I.P. pass. After several beers, Jack's stubborn streak softens to where he can be reasonable, thus making the time at the Pizza Pit an opportune moment to get much needed information.

“Jack, I need to do more research,” I blurted before I had time to properly phrase the question. “Our library doesn't have the information I need.”

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

“I'm not sure,” I mused. “I've exhausted all of the resources I have in Lincoln.”

I watched his thick brows furrow into one of those somber looks he gets when he considers a situation. “It's time we went to Omaha, Rascal.”

“What's in Omaha?” I pressed. I tried to see his expression past the brim of his black Stetson, but dim lighting of the bar hid his face.

“Answers,” he drawled. “You're comin' into your own and it's time you learned a few things no one taught in school.”


“Take your enthusiasm down a notch, why don't you?” Jack replied, absolutely deadpan.

“You can be Yoda and I'll be Luke,” I grinned, giving him two thumbs up.

“You and me? You want to be my apprentice?” he asked, thick black brows rising in surprise. A
slow smile spread across his rugged features as he grappled the alien concept.

"If anyone has their head on straight in this family, it's you. Please, Jack?" I asked hopefully, eagerly anticipating a day of preternatural research with one of the most respected Solomonari in the United States.

I waited patiently as one karaoke singer replaced another before I resumed speaking. The last thing I needed was an eavesdropper overhearing something that wasn't meant for public knowledge. I leaned in closer toward Jack, cupping my hand over one side of my mouth so that he could hear me over the caterwauling of someone slaughtering a song by Maroon 5. I also decided that discretion was the better part of valor.

"You know more about the Darcys than what you're letting on, Jack. I don't understand why you don't tell me what you know."

"It's no my tale to tell, Rascal, but theirs, and I respect their privacy. If they want you to know, they'll tell you. If I gave you the answers, then you'd never learn the lesson. Sometimes, the best way to understand is just to experience it."

"Great, but I need all the help I can get. When I do things magical, things tend to explode."

"Nothing wrong with a little help now and then." Jack pulled back from me with a perplexed expression flashing in his dark eyes as he took a sip of his beer, one black brow arched in question. "What's bringing you back to the fold, Wren? What is it about the Darcys that has you curious?"

"Jack, I attended the Academy for four years and never once did I hear about certain," I sipped my drink searching for the right words. "beings. I am supposed the Sage for Bryant Family and I thought that some beings in mythology were just that: myth. Now, I'm finding they live among us, eat lunch and pay taxes."

"Just remember, kiddo, one's person's myth is another person's next door neighbor," Jack pushed the brim of his hat back with the tip of his longneck. "I'll be honest, no one ever thought that you'd come of age. It still may not happen because you haven't been marked. We usually keep that information away from you because there wasn't a reason at the time to involve you. Technically, you're still considered Reg and there's a lot at risk with these people. Now, that you may be changing, you have to know how it all works so we keep things peaceful."

"I think that's the most I've ever heard you say in one conversation, Jack," I smirked, considering his words. "What do you mean I have to know how it all works to keep things peaceful?"

"you've seen some things happen at the Foundation that very few people see," he motioned the waitress over and ordered another round for us.

"Jack, I think they don't mean any harm, but if they're manipulating innocents for personal gain, I can't stand by and let it happen." I kept my voice low but, Jack caught every word.

"Wren, the further you go in, the harder it'll be to get out," Jack's smile faded from his face. "Are you sure you want to know more? You can walk away from this now and no one will think the less of you for doing it."

"I'm personally invested, Jack. I have to see this out to the end," I said, thinking of one auburn-haired Darcy who made my heart turn inside out.

"'Careful, Wren," he gently warned me. "Have you thought that the Darcys have a right to their privacy?"
"Privacy or power?" I shook my head. "Their right to privacy stops when they may be exploiting humans for their own ends," I countered.

"Solomonari protect, Wren. That's who we are, what we do," Jack leaned forward to let me see the steely gaze he gave me as he pulled another beer from the iced bucket. "Just remember, we're not supposed to be judges and executioners."

"I'm not on a witch hunt," I scoffed. "I'm on a fact-finding mission for now. I'm going to look at the genie inside the proverbial bottle."

"Okay, fine," Jack paused long enough to tip the waitress and pay for the round. "Say for the sake of argument they are, then what?"

"I haven't decided. The jury is still out on that one," I admitted, sipping my diet soda, a twinkling of challenge growing within me. "You volunteer at the Foundation three times a week. Haven't you seen anything unusual?"

"I've seen a lot of things that are unusual. I'm just along for the ride," He gave me a stern look over the top of his longneck bottle. "Don't get too big for your britches. I just don't want Beelzebub or something from Buffy to come looking for you."

"You'd kick it's backside if it did," I chuckled.

"Damn right I would." Jack gave me an intense gaze, pointing the longneck toward me to emphasize his point. "Don't you think you know enough already to know these folks are just trying to help people?"

"Oh, yeah, Jack," I huffed, annoyed that he could so easily side with them. "Yeah, mind control is beneficial in the betterment of mankind. Abso-freakin-lutely."

"You never went past high school at the Academy because when it was thought you were a Reg," Jack started. "Your studies were guided toward less mystical concepts and more mundane ones."

"What? Can't have a Reg spilling the family secrets, now can we?"

"No, it was for your safety," Jack barked. "The less you knew then the safer you were. Now, you seem to be coming into your own and that means we have to give you an accelerated education. So listen up, Rascal, there's a little shop in Omaha called Reflective Realms. It looks like magic shop for New Agers and wannabes, but the lady and her son who own it are friends of mine who know their stuff. Once you're in, you're in for life. Do you still want to move forward on this or go back to life as you know it?"

"I know too much to return to the life I once had," I said. "Matthew's dead and I don't understand entirely why coming into my own is happening now. I'm almost 26, for God's sake! I had dreams and plans of starting my life over on my terms, getting myself together and moving on with my life and then this happens."

"We'll start your training tonight and I'm gonna train you right," Jack vowed. "You're going to be one hell of a Solomonar and God help the fool that crosses your path because that cranky mood your and sassy tongue will cut the poor S.O.B to shreds."

"If nothing else, if you're with me, you'll stop me before I do something stupid. That's what good teachers do."

"I want to know who and what they are," I said. "You already seem to know exactly who they and
what they do, yet, you won't tell me."

"Your powers should have come on a long time ago, Wren," Jack laid a hand on my shoulder. "When they didn't, we all assumed you were just one of the few Bryants who'd turn out to be a regular human. Now, you come home, you're around the Darcys for only a few weeks and you're starting to go gangbusters. That doesn't happen often and it's rare that one of their kind sparks us coming up in one of ours."

"If I find out the Darcys are harmless, I'm going to leave it be and forget about it," I said. "I've given this a lot of thought. If they're as good as you think they are, then I'll be happy and just go on with my life."

"Once you're in, you're in for life and there's no going back," Jack said, his voice low and grim as he spoke. "If you walk this path, then you're in it for life."

"Looking in a book, Jack, isn't going to put me on psychic radar." I said more to assure myself than him that everything was all right.

He gave me an unconvinced look and finally sighed. "Just have to make sure, Rascal. I don’t want you getting into something over your head."

"I can’t swim but, I do a hellacious dog paddle." I gave him a broad grin and two thumbs up. "I’ll be fine, Jack, but I appreciate your help."

"Happy to give it but, I worry. You're like a badger wearing lipstick when you get a lead. You lock onto it and don’t let it go." Jack shook his head. "That is what worries me."

"It must be a family trait." I held up my soda glass and he clinked his longneck bottle against it.

"Always is," he replied before taking a swig.

"Then, it's settled." I felt a surge of elation prompting me to give Jack a light peck on the cheek. "We go tomorrow."

We let the subject drop as the karaoke song ended. I perused the karaoke books and found a couple of songs that looked interesting and we sang a few, but we left early to when the bar became too crowded. Large crowds make me self-conscious and claustrophobic while Jack revels in them. When surrounded by people, whether at a football game or a formal fundraiser, he is confident and comfortable. Me? Just show me to the nearest rock and I'm happy to climb under it.

The next morning, we packed sandwiches and sodas in the cooler, filled the Beast with fuel and started out towards Omaha. The landscape east of Lincoln on Interstate 80 is flat and treeless; the countryside is nothing but cornfields and grazing pastures. The scenery toward the Missouri River changes into rolling hills blanketed by trees covering steep cliffs made thousands of years ago by glaciers. We navigated through the city finally taking a turn off of Dodge Street until we pulled one of Omaha's rougher neighborhoods. Most of the buildings were constructed of aged brick, sporting iron bars over the windows and across the doors. Along the block, I noticed a tattoo parlor, a body-piercing studio and a hair salon while on the other side was a run-down tavern and a used car dealership. Some of the wooden storefronts needed maintenance; the paint peeling away revealed underneath gray, aging lumber. Cars passed us with chrome rims and colorful paint jobs, their speakers blasting loud base tones that rattled their tinted windows. The smell of fresh pizza from a near-by eatery wafted through the vents of Jack’s pickup, making my stomach growl in hungry protest.

He parked the truck neatly in front of a building with a neon sign of a crescent moon with bright
I cast him a wry glance and motioned with my thumb toward the neglected storefront. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Noppe.” He gave me a wry smile, making the ‘p’ burst with a puffing sound. “It’s the real deal.”

“Make sure that you lock the doors,” I said, taking in the forlorn appearance of the neighborhood, rummaging through my purse for coins to feed the parking meter.

I walked across the wide sidewalk to the weatherworn screen door and opened the wooden door behind it, hearing the tinkle of bells as we entered. The pungent scent of incense seared my nostrils with my first breath and I sneezed twice. I silently cursed my allergies as I surveyed the interior of the shop. Looking up, I noticed the antique ornamental tin tiles adorning the high ceiling and ceiling fans twirling rapidly in the air. Tribal music thrummed softly from hidden speakers placed strategically behind display cases exhibiting fantasy figurines of dragons and fairies. The walls were covered with wooden paneling that added to the darkness of the strange store.

I took my time scrutinizing the merchandise, inhaling deeply of the scented candles -my allergies be damned, and examining the bowls of polished gemstones. A few amethysts and quartz crystals caught my interest until I saw their price tags. With that, a low whistle of disbelief escaped me and I turned my attention to the reading and reference section.

I browsed the bookshelves, scanning the volumes that ranged from Voodoo and Santeria to Wicca and U.F.O. phenomena, knowing where to find Jack at the end of my search, given his love for all things extraterrestrial. Off to my right, I saw a couple of small booths separated from the rest of the store by drawn curtains, assuming those areas were for tarot card and psychic readings. I looked around, trying to see beyond the commercialization and the campy set-up, looking for anything in the Reflective Realms that was helpful in my quest for answers.

I heard two voices murmuring behind me as I became lost in my inventory of the store’s merchandise. Peering over the top of the book, I saw Jack talking with a woman who appeared to be in her late forties. Her long black hair was twisted gracefully into an intricate coif at the back of her head, adorned by two antique tortoiseshell combs. Slender silver hoops dangled from her earlobes, emphasizing the length of her elegant, slender neck. Her olive skin appeared smooth and soft, neither affected by time nor too much sunlight. Her dark eyes glimmered with a mischievous gleam and somewhere I knew I had seen those eyes earlier in my life but, I couldn’t remember where or when. I knew that this woman was familiar but the exact connection eluded me.

“Jack, you didn’t tell me you were bringing Wren,” a lilting accent in her voice that I couldn’t quite place prompted a memory to the forefront of my mind. I sifted through places and names, trying to recollect exactly the identity of the woman before me. A name flitted at the corners of my mind as blue, white and red plastic game chips flitted across my memory.

“Selena, It’s good to see you again,” I greeted her warmly when the pieces fell into place.

“I see Jack doesn’t keep you well fed. You’re too thin.”

I scoffed, hiding my reaction behind a fictitious sneeze and muttering something about bovine excrement under my breath. Jack sharply elbowed me in the ribs, casting me a silent glance that warned me to be on my best behavior.

“Feisty as her mother as well, I see.” Selena firmly held my jaw in her hand as she turned my face from side to side, examining me with a discerning eye. “You haven’t seen me with a pastrami sandwich.”

“Now, you’re all grown up and as lovely as your mother.” She held me at arm’s length to scrutinize me from head to foot. “You’re just like Jack described: dark hair and big brown eyes. I see Jack doesn’t feed you enough. You’re too thin.”

I scoffed, hiding my reaction behind a fictitious sneeze and muttering something about bovine excrement under my breath. Jack sharply elbowed me in the ribs, casting me a silent glance that warned me to be on my best behavior. Selena raised one artfully penciled brow in discernment at our not so subtle exchange, her rich alto laughter breaking the tension. I looked her squarely in the eye. “You haven’t seen me with a pastrami sandwich.”

“No, he hasn’t.” I slowly removed her hand from my jaw, holding it firmly in mine. This lady needed intense instruction in respecting personal space. “I do come out of my coffin once in a while.”
“Ah, sharp-tongued.” She wagged one finger at me met by a stern gaze. “Well, I’m going to have a long talk with you grandfather and tell him how to keep you well-fed.”

“Yes, Selena,” I murmured dryly. “Good luck with that.”

“You are definitely Melanie’s daughter.” Her warm, rich voice soothed my slightly ruffled feathers. “Now, we have a chance to get to know each other. What brings you to Reflective Realms, my dear?”

“Research. Jack says that you have some volumes in stock that will give me the information I need.”

“What are you researching?” Selena’s eyes gleamed with fascination.

“Cambions,” I said, waiting for cold discernment ready to freeze me where I stood. None came.

“Que sera sera.” She gave an indifferent shrug, motioning toward the back of the store. “My son is the one who can help you. He’s an expert, but I’ll only let you talk to him on one condition.”

Jack looked at me, perplexed at the statement. Turning back to Selena, I tried keeping my innate snarkiness out of my voice. “What’s the condition?”

“You and Jack have to stay for dinner.”

I gave Jack a wide smile, silently willing him to intervene. Instead, he gave me a crooked grin and shrugged. “It’s a high price, but we’ll pay it. Wren, we’re going to have to tough it out and eat her home cooking.”

She took my hands in hers, examining them for several seconds before looking up at me. “Do you like quesadillas?”

The thought of flour tortillas stuffed with chicken, melted cheese and fresh peppers caused my salivary glands to go into overdrive. Imagining the flavors mingling in my mouth spurred my taste buds to life and my stomach growled with ravenous approval.

“I can change that.” She gave me a wink, making me wonder how I would make it through the evening with this brazen, demanding woman without killing her.

“Wren, I’ll take care of Jack while you go and browse.”

“Whatever you say, Selena.” I learned quickly that once she had mind set on a goal, there was no sidetracking her and it was just better to smile, nod and humor her.

“Logan, come up front. We have an old friend who is in need of your expertise.” Selena's rich, warm voice reverberated off the walls and tin tiled ceiling, filling the store with her presence.

A man strode from the back of the store, carrying several hardbound volumes beneath each arm. As he drew closer I noticed his eyes, pale gray and deep-set, framed by thin gold wire spectacles while lustrous black hair brushed the back of his shoulders, framing his strong jaw and cleft chin. His light caramel skin stood in stark contrast to the white tee shirt and faded jeans that he wore. I noticed that his lean sinewy frame appeared almost too slim but, once he set down both stacks of books on the counter near the cash register, I saw corded muscles and strong thighs in white cotton and blue denim. My heart began a speeding beat.

“Logan,” Selena barely contained her glowing satisfaction when she gestured toward me. “You’re Wren Bryant, aren’t you?”

Logan’s quiet, smooth tenor lacked the trilling and guttural Eastern European accent his mother possessed.

“I watched a prolonged stare pass between mother and son; a silent communication that combined astonishment, wariness and obligation all in one look. I glanced over at Jack, only to find him browsing through a book on alien abduction, seemingly oblivious to the entire silent exchange, except for the wide grin spread across his rugged features. I felt my annoyance grow along with the growing notion that he and Selena conspired to throw me and Logan together in hopes of making a love match.

“You’re Wren Bryant, aren’t you?” Logan’s quiet, smooth tenor lacked the trilling and guttural Eastern European accent his mother possessed.

“Last time I checked my driver’s license,” I quipped glibly.
“Logan Rohan,” his voice was low and full, but resonated where every word was clear. I couldn’t help the upward tugging of my lips when he extended his hand to me, casting a knowing glance toward Jack and Selena, then an apologetic look back to me followed by a small shrug. He knew we had been had by two conspirators, “Jack has told me a lot about you.”

I took Logan's hand in mine, immediately aware of the firm grasp of his handshake and calluses pressed against my palm that indicated he wasn't a stranger to manual labor. I studied him quickly, noting his slender build and work-hewn hands, that this man was physically active in the world around him. His handshake was strong but gentle, revealing he was comfortable in his own skin. Looking down, I saw that his hand still clasped mine and that I hadn't remembered to let go.

Embarrassed by my reaction to his close proximity, I drew my hand back, hoping he hadn't noticed the blush rising in my cheeks.

I cast a scathing glance in Jack’s direction as he whistled tunelessly, continuing to flip through the pages of his book. “Do I get a chance to defend myself?”

Jack raised one sardonic black brow at me as he peered at me over the edge of his book. Giving me a wink and a mock salute, he turned away and focused his attention on Selena. She sauntered over to Jack, wrapped her arm around his and spoke in hushed tones too soft for me to hear what they were saying. Judging by Selena’s animated gestures and Jack's wide smile, I knew they were overtly satisfied with themselves in their conspiracy to throw Logan and me together. Looking back over her shoulder, she gave a wink that I think she meant for Logan but I couldn’t be sure.

I audibly groaned, letting forth an exasperated sigh, wishing that just once I could let forth a fireball on Jack’s backside.

Looking back at Logan, I realized that he been just as blindsided by their ambush as I had been, feeling equal annoyance toward our matchmaking, meddlesome relatives. “They just want to see the people they love happy. Go easy on Jack.”

“Maybe,” I growled, throwing a scathing glance in Jack’s direction. I knew he meant well and was trying to help me just as I was attempting to help him heal. I recognized the gesture what it was: misguided but well intentioned. “So, if you’re specialty is demonology, what is your mother’s?”

“Love potions, charms, and luck spells.” Logan gave a casual shrug, making me notice the breadth of his shoulders. “She’s also is an excellent palmist.”

I felt the silver pendant burn hot against my skin when I brushed my fingertips against it. The amulet had been working overdrive since our arrival to the shop, between it's constant vibration and sparking, as if it were trying to tell me something. Between my thumb and index finger, I held it up for closer examination and found that usually deep violet amethyst glowed bright crimson.

“That’s an interesting amulet.” Logan murmured with interest, leaning forward to study the square pendant I wore around my neck. “What kind of charm is it?”

“Simple protection amulet. Nothing complicated,” I explained. “Jack enchanted it before he gave it as a wedding gift to my grandmother.”

“May I?” Logan motioned toward the charm.

“I don't think that's such a good idea,” I moved away from him, instinctively shielding my charm from his touch. “It barks and occasionally spits fire.”

“If it has a problem with me, it’ll let you know.”

He had a point. So far, the pendant had protected me from fire, electrocution, and being enthralled by unknown entities of dubious origin. The worst that would happen was that he and I might be blown to kingdom come. Reluctantly considering my options, and the fact that Jack trusted Logan and his mother, I reconsidered my answer.

“It's your fingers at risk, not mine. Good luck,” I said, turning toward Logan to allow him access to my favorite jewelry piece. He tentatively reached for the small metal pendant, his pewter eyes narrowing as he studied it, the delicate chain around my neck heated as he slowly moved it between his fingertips. Blue sparks shot out in all directions after a few seconds of his touching the pendant, the power within the blast strong enough to send Logan stumbling backward several feet.

“It carries a heavy charge,” he said as a cascade of dark curls fell over his brow. Running his fingers through his curly hair, he gave me a sheepish grin as he pushed the gold-rimmed spectacles up the bridge of his nose. “It’s like chain mail for witches.”
“I’m not a witch.”
“No, you’re not.” he agreed, taking my hand that I offered to help him to stand. The slightly callused tough of his fingers along my warm skin sent small frissons of awareness along my skin. Logan was deft, quickly on his feet before I had time to reply. He continued to hold my hand, languidly examining my palm, letting his fingers traces paths along the creases in my flesh. “What is your forte? Jack speaks to animals, your aunt talks to ghosts. What do you do?”

I didn’t want to lie but, at the same time, I felt defensive because of the question he asked. He might as well have asked when was the last time I had sex or how much money I made. It was an intrusion of my privacy and I am all about personal boundaries. In fact, I'm my own country with a demilitarized zone. In that moment, I felt no need to tell the truth to such a nosy question but, that nagging irritant that I call a conscience refused to let me lie. I let my mind contemplate the inquisitive question, thinking of the most honest, ambiguous answer I could muster. Yeah, I'd hedge.

“Weirdness magnet.” I smirked. “Enough about me, Logan, tell me about you. Your mom and my grandfather have decided to trap us together, might as well make the best of it.”
“I just returned from an expedition in Iceland.” Logan gave me a grin. “I’m helping Mom out until I return to the University.”
“Are you attending school there?” I asked. Guessing by his appearance, I figured Logan to be around my age but no older than thirty. His face possessed a boyish quality that I found, well, endearing.
“I just accepted a position at the University and I’ll be teaching in the fall.”
“Graduate assistant?” I asked, impressed. My inner green-eyed envy decided to smack me at that moment.
“Uh, no.” Logan looked as if suddenly uncomfortable as he pushed his gold spectacles up the rim of his angular nose. “I’m a professor.”

My eyes became large, wide reflections of my amazement. “As in Dr. Logan Rohan?”
“Yeah.” He gave me a beaming grin but I saw a flush of color was across his russet skin. I knew that while he was taking great enjoyment in my incredulity he was also humble in his accomplishment. “I’m Dr. Rohan.”
“Impressive,” I said. “What department?”
“Anthropology.”

“Nice,” I grudgingly admitted. I wanted to return to graduate school to begin working on my Master's degree in Library Science, a goal that required proper funding and bravery that I didn't yet possess.

I looked for Jack and found that he and Selena had inconveniently vanished on cue, leaving me alone with Logan. For a moment, I found that I was at a loss for words and couldn’t think of anything to say. I returned my attention to Logan and a strange sensation washed over me as I looked at him. A tingling began behind my eyes, an irritating tickle that started in the middle of my forehead. I fought back the desire to sneeze and I turned my head, anticipating sounding like a foghorn. Logan stood before me, his body encircled in twining helix of iridescent blue particles. The sneeze overtook me, forcing my eyes to close as the explosive sensation shot through my nose in a gust of air and sound. Reaching into my purse for a tissue, I opened my eyes to see Logan simply standing before me no longer surrounded blue flecks. I recognized the state of lightheadedness matched what I felt when I met Tristan Darcy and felt again when in Corwyn's presence, prompting me to believe that I had observed a phenomenon not visible to the naked eye. I needed the comfort of camouflage, hiding behind my tissue.

At least this time, disorientation didn't leave me gasping for air or weak in the knees. Instead, it left me with a knowledge that the world I knew had changed and I with it. The best way to describe it would be as if I had been staring at one of those psychological pictures where one picture was hidden inside the other and I had just found the concealed image, giving the picture new perspective and meaning. Jack had told me that Logan and his mother were true practitioners, but I inherently knew that Logan was something beyond mere humanity. Was everyone in on some
secret but me? I had seen magic done; I now saw magic standing in front of me and that changed my perception about everything that I knew about myself. I had always been the challenged member of the Bryant family, the one without the ability to speak with the spooky or have a nifty gift such as the gift of gab with gerbils. I am the one who is sensible, pragmatic, and responsible; not the one who sees auras.

“Whoa,” I muttered in a low voice under my breath.

“Are you all right?” he asked me, taking me by my elbow to the nearest chair where I sank into the comfortable cushions. Logan’s eyes narrowed with concern. “You look like you need to sit down.”

“I’m going to be fine.” I gave him a quick smile. “After all, I’m in the hands of a fine doctor.”

“Ph.D. not M.D.” Logan chuckled wryly. “Can you make it to my office?”

“I’m fine,” I lied brazenly through my teeth. “I just had a moment and now I’m good to go.”

“So, Mom says you need to pick my brain.”

He offered me his arm as we ambled back to his office. “What are you researching?”

“I’m investigating some old notes that I found.” I bit my lip in contemplation, trying to figure out how best to proceed. “I’m rusty on the subject and researching it is not for the faint-hearted.”

“Try me.” He gave me a smile. “I’ve heard people ask about fairly strange things.”

“I’m looking for information on Cambions.”

“I’m rusty on the subject and researching it is not for the faint-hearted.”

“Try me.” He gave me a smile. “I’ve heard people ask about fairly strange things.”

“I’m looking for information on Cambions.” I said in a quiet voice, hoping that I didn’t seem quite as uncertain as I felt.

“Cambion.” Logan answered, no more alarmed than if I had just asked him about the weather. “I hope I can help. What species?”

“Cambion.” I said as casually as I could.

“Half-breeds?” he asked, but I heard the slight catch in his voice, studying his features for any kind of disapproval only to find none. I only found curiosity staring back at me.

“Much with the political incorrectness, but, yeah...” I answered bluntly. “I want to know the their history, their purpose, and how they’re relevant to today’s society.”

“This isn't Sociology 101, Wren.” Logan shook his head in mild disbelief. “I don’t seem quite as uncertain as I felt. ‘A very specific kind of Djinn.’”

“No problem,” Logan answered, no more alarmed than if I had just asked him about the weather. “I hope I can help. What species?” How many kinds were there?

“Cambion.”

I asked, but I heard the slight catch in his voice, studying his features for any kind of disapproval only to find none. I only found curiosity staring back at me.

“Much with the political incorrectness, but, yeah...” I answered bluntly. “I want to know the their history, their purpose, and how they’re relevant to today’s society.”

“This isn't Sociology 101, Wren.” Logan shook his head in mild disbelief. “These creatures aren’t meant to be studied like some aboriginal culture in the middle of Micronesia.”

“Too much of the problem with Solomonari today is they have their craniums inserted so far up their rectums that that they fail to understand that life isn't static. This is the twenty-first century, Logan, and I intend to get a good, solid understanding of Cambions. A little logic and investigation go along way to getting answers to centuries-old questions. So, I'm asking you, Dr. Rohan the anthropologist. Please tell me the real story on Cambions, and don't give me the mystical, esoteric crap crammed down my throat at Scholomance.”

“What did they teach you at your private school in Romania?”

“Very little,” I huffed. “Djinn, at one time, were actually good spirits; benevolent entities that were building dynasties while humans were doing caveman chic and eating wooly mammoths. They were sent by the Power-That-Be to guide us poor little primates toward virtuous, intelligent self-actualization; be all that we can be. They fell in love with their pet humans, married them and spawned Cambions. However, somewhere in the mix, the Djinn didn't like it when we rebelled under their rule and began thinking for ourselves. We fought against them in great wars and it wasn't until the Deluge that we finally had a fighting chance to get out from under their thumbs.”

“I bet you were a teacher's pet.” Logan smirked, leaning against the pop machine, listening to me,
seemingly amused by my particular regurgitation of textbook doctrine. “I was considered a classroom disruption because I dared to ask questions,” I laughed sheepishly, remembering the many times I had been sent to library to shelve books as punishment for my open-mouth-eat-my-shoe disease. “One teacher called me his favorite pain-in-the-arse, but I received the top grade in his class that semester.”

“I can see that.” He nodded appreciatively. “What else?”

“King Solomon asked the Powers for wisdom. He received that along with understanding and control of animals, Djinn, Cambions, spirits and the weather. He was also given a ring called the Seal of Solomon that allowed him to control Djinn as he saw fit. He used it to summon them, enslaving them to build a temple. Near the end of his life, he called his most trusted advisers to him and bestowed his powers upon them before he died. His advisers become followers of his wisdom, eventually, the Solomonari. On the day of his death, the advisers' first act was to kill most of the Djinn and their Cambion children, but to spare a few as a sign of mercy, and to make a treaty with those loyal to them in return for their service. After that, no more story. It just ends.”

“All right, you know more than most,” Logan conceded. “Solomonari suffer from the great guilt, resorting to slavery and genocide, then trying to make up for it with an act of benevolence. “Do you really want to know the rest of the story? It isn't pretty.”

“Yes.” I scarcely dared to breathe.

“Follow me.” He began walking to a door on the other side of the room labeled ‘private.’ “I owe Jack a favor and I’m going to repay it by giving you what you need to know.”

Logan reached for the key ring hanging off his belt loop and deftly unlocked the door. We entered a small office that was spartan with the exception of two bookshelves lined with old volumes, a file cabinet, a small refrigerator, and an antique desk piled haphazardly with various files and papers. He closed the door behind him and sat down at the desk across from me. Logan motioned me to sit in the old leather armchair sitting in front of the desk.

“You're right. Cambions are direct descendants of the Djinn. Djinn were considered below the angels, their grunts and peons. When the angels were cast out of Heaven, many thought they'd cast their lot in with the Fallen and would get a little respect for helping them during the war. That didn't happen. They were abandoned, cast out to fend for themselves and they've carried a grudge against angels for treating them like dirt and . Some Djinn found the loved they craved within the arms of Humanity.”

“And Djinn plus Humanity equals Cambion?” I asked, each piece of the untold tale fell into place, revealing to me a history that had remained unknown to me until that moment.

“Exactly.” Logan confirmed. “The human soul is the most potent source of magic in the universe and that makes humanity so special. Each individual carries a bit of the Divine and that's something that any fallen angel, Djinn or Cambion craves because each spark increases the power of the one who possesses it.”

“So, Cambions are the bastards of heaven that no one talks about.”

“Right again.” He sipped his soda. “There are rumors and legends that state that some Djinn grew to love humans again and returned to their original calling; assisting humans in reaching their ultimate potential. But, they're few and far between. Most Djinn and their offspring see humans as nothing more than a exploitable, disposable resource.”

“It goes back to free will,” I said, trying to wrap my mind around the concept that some Djinn and Cambions loved humanity and sought to bring us out of the cave and into civilization. I did my best to keep from doing a victory dance in the middle of his office. I had learned more from Logan in five minutes than I had in four years at Scholomance. “A Cambion's free will determines whether a Cambion turns out to be Mother Teresa or Vlad the Impaler.”

“Or anything in between. An odd analogy but, essentially correct.” Logan pushed the gold-rimmed spectacles up the bridge of his nose. “The human soul draws them because it's a source of sustenance for their power. Cambions pose a danger to humanity because a human's essence acts both as nourishment and a narcotic. They lack self-control and are lethal to innocents, just like their Djinn parents. Cambions eat and drink just like humans. They feed on the stolen energy from a
human soul.”
“Not all Cambions are like that?” I asked, fascinated by the fact that beings walked among humans, appearing to be like us, yet, never knowing if they were friends or enemies. I contemplated the possibility that Cambions victimized humans, wondering exactly to what extent they did it. I covered my mouth to contain the string of curses that wanted to escape. “Do they blend in well among humans?”
“Most can,” Logan explained. “Human traits dominate the demon genome, allowing most to pass undetected. You may never know you’ve been in the presence of one until it’s too late.”
“How common are they?” The lump in my stomach moved up into my throat, making it difficult to breathe.
“Last known count, a few hundred. Within the past few centuries, their birth rate has dropped off due to the dilution of the bloodline and the incessant infighting among the cadres. Logan gave me a inquiring gaze. “Are you in some kind of trouble? There's been peace between them and Solomonari for a long time.”
“No,” I answered quickly. “Just curious.”
His gray eyes narrowed as he stared mercilessly at me and I knew I was caught. Quickly reviewing the information that I’d learned in the past few day, an inspirational answer came to me, albeit not a completely honest one. “I'm not worried. However, I'm resuming my studies with Jack and I'm reviewing a lot of material. He thought a trip to Omaha would be a great field trip. I'm supplementing the information I found in my family's Key of Solomon.”
If you can't dazzle someone with brilliance, baffle them with babble. Thank-you, Aunt Della. My heart bulged with growing hope when I thought of the Darcy family and their Foundation. I also inwardly breathed a sigh of relief.
“Have you ever seen one?” Logan asked, before turning to the shelf behind him, reaching for one of the dusty tomes on the bookshelf.
“Not to my knowledge,” I parried his question with one of my many evasive answers in my arsenal. Logan's silver eyes gleamed with enthusiastic intensity as he placed the the musty book in front of me on the desk, his fingers skimming quickly through the dusty pages until he stopped and tapped the page, running his finger over several lines of text scrawled at the bottom of an old photograph.
“This is the only known picture taken of Cambions. Look for yourself, you'll see how human they appear.”
I silently read the caption underneath. “The Dresden family from left to right: Tristan, Corwyn, Olivia and Liam. 2nd Row, the Auren Family: Penelope, Esteban and Zenobia.”
“Cambions.” The last name was different but I knew every face in that photograph. It made sense that they changed their names through the years to protect themselves from detection.
“So the legend goes,” Logan repeated my thoughts, and I realized that I had spoken them aloud.
“Wren, why are you researching this now?”
My conscience gave me some leeway this time. “Every member in my family has a specialty. I don't possess any psychic ability but, I still have useful talents such a passion for research and a keen mind for history. I am my family's Sage. I keep and record all the information for my generation in the Key of Solomon. That's what I do. So, I'm here doing research.”
“Then you need to know the rest of the story.” The gravitas in his voice hung heavily between us, matching his grim, stoic expression. “About their father, Julian Darcy Emrys, a pureblood Djinn that was an incubus. His children inherited his particular talents.”
The last sip of diet soda burned my nasal cavity as it spurted out my nose.
“Are you okay?” His eyes tightened with worry.
“Fine,” I gasped, wheezing. “Soda went down the wrong windpipe.”
Logan reached in his back jeans pocket, handing me a blue handkerchief. I blotted up the mess I made; thankful none of the soda had damaged the pages of that priceless book.
My hand started trembling. Not wanting to take the chance of ruining the priceless piece of
information in front me, I placed the can down on Logan’s desk and stared at the confirmation of my suspicions.

I returned my attention to the sepia photograph, those beautiful faces staring back at me across space and time. The anger that had recently brewed in my veins now flowed with the frigidity of ice water. I knew every person in that picture and two of them meant something to me. I had unintentionally stumbled into something beyond my experience, something that went beyond the regular moral parameters so clearly defined by tradition and code. My nice orderly existence had just spiraled downward into a quagmire of chaos. Everything that I had ever thought was myth or simply beyond my understanding crashed together inside my mind as one large mass of pandemonium.

“You mean there’s more?” I asked, wondering what else Logan Rohan was about to drop in my lap. Logan brought the can of orange soda to his lips that gave me a clear view of a sculptured bicep and a small tattoo on his forearm. It was an inconspicuous thing, the intricate detail caught my eye, a drawing of a winged figure holding a sword surrounded by flickering crimson fire. I leaned forward, my hand holding his arm in place while I examined the artwork.

The symbol tickled my memory with a vague recollection that I couldn’t exactly recall. I had seen it before, somewhere long ago, and I closed my eyes to bring the information to the front of my mind. Solomonari have their hallowed animals tattooed on the inside of their wrists when they turn seven. I never had mine done because I was too frightened of needles. I knew Jack’s was a badger and mine was a wren but I had never seen anything like Logan’s tattoo.

“What?” He asked me, giving me a strange expression. “Tell me what you see.”

“Young at heart.”

“You can see it?” He asked carefully, his eyes narrowing a fraction of an inch. “It’s obvious.” I motioned toward Logan’s forearm. “Solomonari don’t wear their totems on their outer forearm.”

“I’m not a Solomonar. I’m Phratry.” The can of orange soda Logan held stopped halfway between sips. “You didn’t know?”

“No, I just assumed you were a Solomonar.” I gave him a helpless shrug.

“Jack told me you’re a Regular without any psychic ability,” Logan said slowly. “Regs aren’t supposed to be able to see it, how can you?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, feeling ashamed of my human heritage for the first time in my life. “It’s rather hard to miss. Maybe there’s a glitch in your glamour.”

“Wren,” Logan’s voice was low to my ears. “I’m not using a glamour. Only preternaturals, practitioner and psychics can see it, not mortals.”

“Probably my pendant,” I supposed, looking down at the charm around my neck. It thrummed excitedly as I felt the smooth metal pass between my fingers. “I’ve been seeing strange things since I started wearing it a few weeks ago. It’s possible that it allows it's wearer some psychic ability.”

“Take it off and see if you can still see my tattoo.”

“Hell, no! Every time one of my family takes off this charm, they end up dead,” I protested. “No thanks. I like being alive.”

My pendant thrummed a sustained tone, sounding similar to when the rim of a crystal goblet is circled. The melodious tone filled my ears, inspiring astonishment, delight and fear at the strange twists this conversation was taking. Since donning the pendant, my calm life had all but disappeared, but in it's place, was an exciting, vibrant unknown teetering on the edge of an adventure; a discovery.

When it thrummed, hummed or sparked, the pendant always drew my attention to some tidbit of information that I needed to know. “Refresh my memory. What is Phratry and what does that have to do with your tattoo?”

“The legends go back thousands of years saying that Phratry are the reincarnated souls of animal familiars that served the Solomonari faithfully. In times past, we were their assistants, we hunted the Djinn that murdered innocent humans and brought them to justice. When the Solomonari chose to liberate the Djinn and their Cambion offspring, the Host decided there needed to be a fail-safe in
case the hornheads ever thought of trying to conquer the human race. If Solomonari failed to bring the Djinn to heal, then we would do it for them.”

“The Host?” I sat down my empty can of soda, wishing that I had another one to quench the dryness parching my throat. I scoffed at his answer. “As in angels?”

“Yes, Wren, angels, and I don't mean the fallen kind. We're talking about the winged messengers from on high.” Logan gave me a stern glance over the gold spectacles. “How can you have seen so much in your life and not believe in angels?”

“Trust me, I'm a believer,” I corrected him. “It's just that there are certain things that explain magic—chemistry, quantum physics, gravity, psychic ability, science.”

“Quit using just your brain and start listening to your soul. Then, it will make more sense.” Logan advised me.

“Angels?” I asked, shaking my head in disbelief. “Really?”

“Angels,” Logan gravely confirmed. “As a reward for loyal service to the Solomonari and the Powers-That-Be, we were allow to return to life as humans. The Host crafted our bodies in their image. In return for hunting the Fallen, Djinn and their progeny, the Host blessed my ancestors with preternatural abilities to help us in our hunt.”

“So, what's your specialty?” I asked, turning his earlier question back on him. “Do you fly? Leap tall buildings in a single bound?”

“Nothing like that. My family comes from Romania, we're the Rom. Our magic is different from yours. Ours doesn't come from just within the mind, it comes from the world around us.” Logan reached over to the refrigerator and pulled out two more cans of soda, grape for him and another diet cola for me. “Thirsty?”

“Yes.” I gratefully took the can from him, pushing open the tab and glad to hear the satisfying metallic pop followed by a fizzing sound as the soda was exposed to air. “The tattoo, that represents who you are?”

“It's a tradition to get one when one of us turns eighteen. It reminds us of the gift we've been given and mission we carry out,” he explained, guzzling his can of soda. “Now, instead of being hunters, we're educators and investigators. We monitor demon and cambion activity, record it and do nothing about it. In fact, the last legion of Phratry disbanded in 1923 because of the steep decline in Demon activity. After the Arcane Accords were signed, it ushered in the end of an era and no longer a need for us other than as a quaint fraternal organization.”

“Arcane Accords?” I asked, not familiar with the phrase. He looked at me, appearing surprised that I didn't understand what he meant. He removed his glasses to clean them with the edge of his shirt, giving me a strange noncommittal ‘hmmm.’

“Only the largest peace pact signed in the last five hundred years in the preternatural community,” Logan explained, examining his lenses until their cleanliness met his satisfaction before putting them on again. “It was decades before I was born, but Mom used to tell me the tale.”

“And you're going to tell me, aren't you?” I conjectured, impressed by Logan's vast knowledge and his willingness to share it.

“Pay attention. There's a quiz at the end of the lecture,” he playfully promised, pushing the gold spectacles up the bridge of his Romanesque nose. “Grandma led some of the Phratry to hunt down a Djinn who violated the original treaty and fed off a human being. We found out he was a pureblood incubus in the world and his children were half-breeds.”

He paused for dramatic effect. “Damn it, Logan. Don't keep me in suspense. What happened next?”

“Mom said that Julian Darcy Emrys agreed to stand trial and face punishment in return for not having his children condemned for his crimes. The old story says that the human killed was his Phratry wife.”

“That next part is legend.” Logan rose up from where he sat, throwing away empty soda can. “Mom told me once that the woman killed was Grandma's sister and that’s what started the blood vendetta. Julian didn't want anymore bloodshed and offered his life as retribution. The surviving members of his Cadre signed the Arcane Accords, agreeing to leave the area for ninety years in
return the Phratry disbanding. Both sides agreed too much innocent life had been lost.”
“What happened next?”
“She and a few others regretted signing the accords, thinking it too risky not to stay active. So, Grandma passed the Phratry traditions down to Mom, and she in turn, to me and my brothers and cousins.”
“Incredible,” I said in a low voice. “I never knew.”
“You never would have, but Jack also told me you have a way of finding out things. When he heard you mention Djinn, he got worried.” He reached for the dusty book, returning it to it's place on the bookshelf. “Selena's convinced that something preternatural is going to happen and it's not too far off. That's why I think she and Jack threw us together, thinking that maybe you're coming into your own.”
“I'm too old. It didn't happen in puberty and I've experienced enough trauma to have my own reality show. It hasn't happened by now, it isn't going to happen at all.” I watched him open the office door for me, waiting until I passed through it.
“So, what's the epilogue?” I asked, curious about the next chapter. “Where are the Cambions now?” I wanted to know if he had any current information on Darcys.
“No one knows.” He smiled. “When they left, the erased all traces of their existence. There have been reported sighting of them in London, New York , and Madrid. Yet, when we tried to tack them, they remained elusive. With their ability to glamour, they're almost impossible to find. When bodies start turning up as piles of ash or an unexplained fire claims too many lives, that's where they usually are.”
“Why did your family let them live if they hated them so much?” I gave into my urge and asked.
“If your grandmother considered them dangerous, why let them go?”
“I wondered about that too.” Logan took my empty can and threw it into the wastebasket beside the desk. “I asked Mom about that. All she would say is that it amazed Grandma to see a Djinn lay down its life for one of it’s own kind. She always considered it a moment a weakness to show them mercy, but she promised to honor the spirit of the Accords. Punish the parent for his crimes and not his children.”
“Could be it because the Cambions were her nieces and nephews?” I asked the white elephant question.
“It's possible.”
I chuckled at the dark irony that Logan and Selena Rohan were cousins of their hated, unwanted relatives, the Darcys. If only he knew but, I wasn't suicidal enough to open up this box of Cracker Jacks to get the proverbial toy explosive. This was a secret that I planned to guard with my life. It was entirely to dangerous to reveal to anyone. If, for any reason, something suspect occurred and if his family knew of the Darcy's proximity, there would be a blood war where innocent humans were the unintended casualties. At that thought, my head grew light and my feet buckled beneath me.
“Wren, are you all right?” Logan asked. “Do you want me to call Jack?”
I held up a hand to stop him. “No, I'm fine. Too much soda and not enough lunch. Don’t call Jack.”
Logan handed me a tissue. “Do you want some crackers or something to settle your stomach?”
“No, thanks,” I reassured him.
Logan helped me to my feet and escorted me back to the front of the store where Selena and Jack were visiting at the front counter. I quickly ducked into the restroom to the left to splash some cold water on my face and make myself presentable. While Jack wasn’t one to loom, I didn’t want him to know what I had just found out. I had promised Corwyn that I would keep his secrets and it was hard to hide things from Jack.
I looked at my ashen reflection in the bathroom mirror staring back at me and I asked my mirror image, “What the hell have I stumbled into?”
I tried to censor my thoughts as afternoon passed into early evening. Selena kept an apartment upstairs above Reflective Realms where she kept Jack busy with chatter while she made quesadillas. By then, my stomach quit churning and I was able to enjoy her delicious cooking. I
chatted with Logan about various subjects ranging from the University Football team to my recent life in Denver. I avoided any direct conversation about my job and found myself changing the subject whenever Jack tried to brag about my new place of employment. All I wanted to do was to return home, hide under the covers and try to make sense of what I had learned.
The Flames Go Higher

6. The Flames Go Higher

After returning from Omaha, I decided to defrag my mind with some much-needed television watching. Downstairs, I grabbed a Blu-ray Disc, choosing to watch one of my favorite TV series about vampire slayers and indulge in a fest of thrills and chills. I needed to free my thoughts from the burden of Corwyn's secret, watching one episode after another until I immersed my consciousness in the teenage angst of high school being hell. It was light entertainment compared to the weekend that I just finished living.

During the course of my vampire marathon, I fell asleep on the sofa. The flickering images of vampires and cemeteries danced across my mind, lingering on the edges of my thoughts. Conscious thoughts led to subconscious dreams; I found myself in a cemetery among dozens of headstones laden with freshly dug graves, a full moon gleaming in the dark sky above me and the scent of freshly broken earth tickling my nostrils. I knew by listening to the traffic, I would find my way to the cemetery entrance and escape this morbid prison meant only for the dead.

I heard Nick, Gretchen, and Jack call my name, but I couldn’t tell from which direction. I looked around frantically, searching for a way out of the graveyard, but with mist rolling in and the shrouding darkness, I was lost. A shimmer of movement flitted on the edges of my peripheral vision, my eyes darted in the direction where it appeared. A young man dressed in a white turtleneck and worn, faded jeans sat atop of a gravestone, waving at me. The mist wafted around his feet and drifted upward, shrouding his translucent form in ribbons of white haze. I recognized that high forehead, summer blue eyes and tussled blonde hair in an instant.

He reached out to me and I saw his lips move, but I couldn't hear anything he said. I knew well the warmth of his embrace that I sorely missed, and I wanted to be back in the comforting strength of his arms. Against my will, my feet refused to move and I remained frozen where I stood.

“Matthew,” I called out to the apparition only a few yards away from me. “Help me! I can't move.” My heart skipped several beats as I tried again to move my feet. I wanted nothing more at that moment than to travel back in time three years, back to the comfort and safety of when he had been alive. It was a bittersweet moment, knowing that we were always together but forever apart, divided by a chasm neither could breach.

“I'm sorry, Wren, I can't,” Matthew's voice sounded distant in the wide expanse of the empty cemetery. “I can't come go to you and it's not your time.”

“I miss you. I love you. Help me,” I said, reaching out to him, but unable to touch him.

A melancholy expression crossed his features, his lips forming a sad smile. All of my grief rushed to the surface, cloaking me in the same bleakness and desolation I experienced the day of his funeral. Matthew turned his head, glanced toward the glowing light behind him, then pointed to the increasing darkness ahead of me. Placing his other hand over his heart, Matt mouthed the words, “I love you.”

I remained transfixed when he began to fade from my sight, bounding off the gravestone and into the light. My feet finally moved, scampering across the few short yards between us until I knelt at his fresh grave. For the first time in my life, I felt truly alone. My fingers dug into the newly turned earth and formed balled fists, pounding relentlessly into the earth until two indentions remained in the soil.

“Damn you, Matthew,” I screamed. “Don’t you leave me. Don’t leave me alone. Life is hard enough without you being here.”

He was gone. I had lost him and I knew why. In my heart, I felt a glimmer of affection for someone else, and for one second, I forgot my grief and let go of Matthew. Nothing held him any longer to me or this world and I knew that released him. I felt alone, ashamed.
I looked around the cemetery, alone with my guilt and fear, deciding my best option was to head in the direction of the city lights beyond the graveyard’s walls. I started toward the cemetery gates when I saw Logan Rohan leaning against the side of an Italian marble mausoleum. He pointed away from the gates and back into the darkness.

“Logan, what are you doing here?” I inquired. His handsome features contorted into a mask of fear as he moved swiftly by me and stood behind me. “What’s going on?”

“Get out of here, Wren!” he bellowed angrily, his hands formed into unyielding fists.

“Come with me,” I tugged on Logan’s arm. “The road is this way. Leave the dead with themselves.”

Logan moved away from me, staring sternly at me, glittering orbs dancing around him as they had the previous day at Reflective Realms.

“Logan!” I called as he stepped back from me. I heard thunder clap in the distance as lightning streaked across the sky in a web of light. The flash revealed metal-tipped wings sprouting from his back and I heard flesh rip as they unfurled several feet in wingspan. His face contorted, changing into inhumane and beatific features, with pointed ears and eyes gleaming with white-hot fire. His skin darkened until it blended in perfectly with the darkness, making me wonder what creature stood before me.

“Wren, this way,” Jack’s worried voice called from a distance. I listened, focusing on it's direction, but unable to pinpoint it. I was alone, lost in a palace of bones with only Djinn and monsters for company.

“Wren” a voice quietly called to me, smooth and rich, deep and full, compelling me to turn in its direction. I saw Corwyn standing atop a grave, his skin molten copper and a circle of flame forming a perfect nimbus above his head. I saw the tombstone in front of him and it read “Wren Bryant, beloved granddaughter, both crazy and stupid.”

“Have faith in me,” the demon pleaded. Walking toward him, I willing entered his embrace of flame and seduction. When he drew me tighter to him, I felt my skin start melting from my bones, my organs liquefying. Dancing embers of ash that had once been my skin flitted away on a current of night wind as the demon held me. Feeling torture and rapture simultaneously as his lips claimed mine, I burned as I sank deeper into the darkness of my grave.

Out of the starless night, a roaring battle cry echoed throughout the emptiness of the cemetery when a winged creature swooped from the sky, angelic and vengeful. I saw talons curved around a sword that shimmered in the moonlight, as if made of water, that sliced through the demon, One precise slash sent the demon’s head rolling into the grave beside me while Shannon, Nick, and Gretchen shoveled dirt on top of me.

My eyes snapped open and I felt beads of perspiration roll down my brow, mingling with the tears burning my cheeks. The bowl of popcorn in my lap scattered all over the sofa. I saw the blank display screen of the Blu-ray Disc’s main menu staring back at me and I realized that it had only been my overactive mind playing a hideous joke on my psyche. I breathed a sigh of relief when I realized it that I was awake and none of it was real.

The next day, Jack asked me if I wanted to join him at Sunday afternoon pool leagues. I declined, telling him I had brought some work home from the office that required my attention. His growing excitement about the upcoming pool tournament made him oblivious to my broody mode, distracting him from asking me any uncomfortable questions about my private time with Logan.

After Jack left, I went to the hayloft ready to hit the books. With the documentation in the Key of Solomon, my Internet findings, and Logan’s information, I knew the truth: the Darcys were cambions. I wanted to know what they had been doing since 1923 and their current intentions. What I planned to do with the information on Monday morning remained a mystery, but I decided to burn that bridge when I came to it. What prompted the Darcy’s return to the area after ninety years, knowing that it might reignite a blood feud between them and the Rohans? Redemption? Revenge?

I took my laptop, placing it alongside several magical texts bookmarked with colored post-it notes.
After arranging my data gathered from Logan, I compared it with information that I already had from Jack’s grimoires and the Internet. Some Solomonari sages spend their entire lives with their noses buried in ancient dusty tomes. Me? Not so much. I google and surf, hanging ten fingers on a keyboard.

I scanned a few more sites online, looking for anything mentioning the Darcys. I found nothing on them except a couple of snippets mentioning various foundations and trusts set up by families with similar names: Dodsens, DeAngelos, Durants. I analyzed the publicity and candid shots taken by photographers and paparazzi, zooming in and magnifying each one, looking for any discerning clues that revealed more information. Their appearances differed from family to family: different races and coloring while always having four males and three females. All shared similar traits such as their surnames started with ‘D’, their charisma and affluence made them the toast of the media. But all of the families shared one disturbing trait: all lost members in tragic accidents stemming from storms or fire.

Given the lucidity of the previous night’s dream, I knew better than to dismiss it as an inconsequential nightmare. A Solomonar knows dreams help acknowledge a situation and solve problems, but can also be a portent, warning the dreamer of imminent peril. To put it nicely, I was in trouble up to my eyeballs. What had started as a naïve curiosity to ascertain Corwyn Darcy’s private life had unearthed a secret that was the life-altering equivalent of a few dozen atom bombs. Solving the mystery surrounding Corwyn Darcy and his family left me with a sense of a hollow victory. I wanted to confront him at work on Monday and demand he admit it but my common sense warred with my instinct. It told me to keep my mouth shut and find another job. Beneath his otherworldly beauty, if I scratched deeply enough, I’d either find a monster or a man and both options were dangerous.

Now that I knew what he was, I wanted to know who he was, but it was suicide to continue. I felt safe in the knowledge that I had kept my research low-key, but Corwyn might not be as forgiving if he knew just how much I had found out about him and his family. If what Logan said was true, and I knew it was, then a cambium might make me painfully disappear. I didn’t relish the thought of being someone’s midnight munchies fix.

Still, Corwyn had saved my life. His brother, Tristan tended young children and Penelope worked with under-privileged kids to raise money for a playground. The dream also told me what I didn’t want to face; even in his arms I’d rather know a moment of happiness and burn rather than be safe all of my life and remain cold. I finally admitted it: I was insane.

Strange. I still felt like me, rational and in control of my thoughts and actions. Yet, an unseen force that I couldn’t fight or name inexplicably drew me toward him. Everything inside of me wanted to hear the warmth in his voice, to see the affection in his eyes and just be lost in it all. All right, I was crazy and I didn’t care, but I was smart enough to keep my mouth shut.

I managed to get some sleep before I heard Jack rustling around in the kitchen the next morning. I called the local information line that said it was sixty-two degrees heading for a high of seventy. As I’ve said, if you don’t like Nebraska weather, wait a day and it will change its mind. I decided not to let the day go to waste, phoning Nick, Gretchen and Shannon to see if they still wanted to barbeque with us. Luck was on my side when they all readily agreed to meet there at two o’clock. I knew they wouldn’t turn down free food.

When I told Jack that my friends and I planned to barbeque, he pulled several pounds of steaks and hamburgers out of the freezer and became king of the grill. Jack was ready to be around other people after several weeks of self-imposed exile, while at the same time showing off his wicked barbequing talents.

“Do you want to go to karaoke after the barbeque?” Nick asked.
“Do you want to go to karaoke after the barbeque?” Nick asked.
“We have to work tomorrow,” I chagrined. “All play and no work makes me dead on my feet.”
“Ah, c’mon, Wren, live a little,” he teased.
“I am living.”
“We could have fun, you and me, belting out duets.”
“And scare away the crowd,” I scoffed.
“You can sing.”
“I also have to work tomorrow,” I reminded him. “Besides, Gretchen and Shannon will make better company. I didn’t sleep so well last night.”
“Karaoke is the cure for everything,” Nick said, wriggling his eyebrows. “Karaoke is like potato chips. You can never stop at just one song.”
“Right,” I drawled slowly. “You just keep believing that.”
“Karaoke is perfect,” Shannon said, as she reached for the first finished hamburger off the grill.
“One of the riverboat casinos in Omaha holds karaoke on Sundays, there's a contest and the prize money is three hundred dollars.”
“Prize money?” Gretchen asked, unceremoniously reaching across the table to stab the next juicy hamburger fresh of the grill. “Sweet! I can think of three hundred reasons to go to Omaha after chow.”
“Yeah,” Nick said slyly, looking my way. “Didn't you say that you were saving up for a car? Contest, prize money, your voice. Hey, it could happen.”
“When manure smells like roses,” I snorted. “I sing, but I'm no pro.”
“You'll never know unless you go,” Shannon pointed the ketchup bottle toward me before returning her aim to her hamburger.
My mind quickly did the math, figuring out what I had in savings and what I still needed to have enough to make a down payment on a car. I quickly changed my mind, deciding karaoke was a great idea, especially with money involved.
“Jack, do you want to go with us?” Shannon asked politely.
“No, you kids go have a good time. I can’t carry a tune in a bucket,” he chuckled.
“C'mon, Jack, it’ll be fun. We can hit the casinos afterward. We’ll be home in time for work,” Gretchen chimed.
“Some of us aren’t twenty-one anymore,” he retorted. “Sorry, maybe next time.”
By six o’clock we had everything cleaned up and dishes washed. Gretchen and Shannon decided to raid my closet to find outfits to wear, turning the upstairs bathroom into a war zone as they battled for space in front of the mirror. We crowded into Nick's yellow Volkswagen bug and were on the road in less than an hour.
Someone repeatedly kept calling my name, prompting me to finally bark in response. “What?”
“Hey, easy, Wren,” Gretchen held up her hands in a defensive gesture. “You were off in your own little world. I wanted to know what’s going on between you and Corwyn Darcy.”
“Nothing is going on,” I replied too quickly to be convincing.
“I don’t buy it,” she challenged. “What the story?”
“He bought me a drink the other night, you were there. End of story,” I shrugged. “Nothing more to it than that.”
Before Gretchen had an opportunity to press further, we pulled into the parking lot of the casino where the karaoke contest was being held. The casino was a large steamboat permanently docked on the Missouri River, trimmed from aft to stern with lights and sporting the large paddle wheel on the side, making me think of all the Westerns I had watched with Jack. Two black smokestacks towered above the horizon, blowing steam into the cool night air. I half-expected Mark Twain to meet us at the entrance.
As we walked up the plank, the greeter at the main entrance checked our drivers’ licenses to make sure we were of age. Sounds of bells and computerized beeps mixed with gambling tokens clinking into plastic cups as people around us collected their winnings. The bright lights of the machines illuminated the casino and the noise of the bustling gamblers filled the riverboat. The karaoke contest didn’t start until nine o’clock in the lounge and I thought I would try my hand at one of the slot machines.
Nick wasn’t interested in gambling and went ahead to save us a table while the Shannon, Gretchen, and I went to the casino. Shannon went straight to the blackjack tables while Gretchen went to play roulette. I found an unoccupied slot machine, inserted some of my tokens and tried my luck. One thing about casinos, they don’t have clocks anywhere on the walls or any windows, causing time to
cease for the unsuspecting gambler. It seemed just a few minutes later when Gretchen was tapping me on the shoulder.

“Come on, Wren. The contest starts in a half hour and we haven’t signed up yet.”

“Let me cash in my winnings and I’ll be right in,” I told her. I took my tokens to the cashier and I came out ahead. I had gambled about twenty dollars and came out with thirty-five, not too bad I figured, considering Lady Luck never liked me much. It was enough to buy me a few rounds of diet soda and to pay Nick some gas money. By the end of the night, I calculated that I’d take home about twenty-five dollars that was going into my car fund. The lounge was dimly lit with large disco ball hanging from the ceiling, illuminating the dance floor in a swirling mass of reflected light. In the corner, the karaoke jockey, aka KJ, had her booth set up with the selection books out on a nearby table. I picked up a contest ticket, browsed through the book and chose to do an upbeat rock tune. I gave my selection to the KJ and joined Nick, Gretchen, and Shannon at our table.

The KJ announced that there were ten contestants. As contestants sang, some sounded like they should be recording artists while others were better suited for the the back alley. As contestant number two took the stage, a woman in her mid-forties who did a great rendition of a classic ballad, my hands turned clammy and my heart fluttered like a bird. My throat turned dry, prompting me to take a compulsive swig of my soda. The KJ announced my name and I took carefully measured steps to the microphone stand. After a few deep breaths, I heard the first strains of the introduction and I started the song softly, gripping the microphone stand for support. The song reached a deafening crescendo and my voice matched the volume with every note I sang. I held out the final note for a few seconds only to find when the song ended, I heard the first whistle followed by a strong burst of applause. My limbs felt like melted jelly as I made my way back to the table.

Nick followed, doing a great rendition of the latest dance song to hit the charts. Gretchen twanged her way through a country tune and Shannon sang an arena rock anthem that had every listener pulling out their lighters and waving them in a sea of miniature flames. The last contestant rapped, inspiring a few of the crowd to dance on the tables.

The KJ resumed regular karaoke after the contest concluded and I watched the judges huddle in a corner table at the back trying to decide who were the winners. Several minutes later, she announced the results. The rapper won first place, Nick took second place, and I placed third. It was seventy-five dollars in prize money that put me that much closer to being free from having to ride the bus to work.

“I can’t find my keys,” Shannon lamented as she rummaged through her purse.

“That’s because you didn’t drive,” Nick held up his drink, then wound his arm around Shannon in a dramatic gesture. He dangled his keys only inches in front of her face. “I did.” When I quickly snatched the keys from his grasp, Nick whined in loud protest. “Hey, give those back!”

“Sorry, friend, but you’re toasted,” I held the keys out of his reach. “Since you drank, I drive.”

“You drank,” Nick pointed an accusing finger.

“I had diet soda. You had rum and diet soda,” I scoffed, ignoring Nick's pout. “Gretchen, how are you doing?”

“Right as rain,” she gave me a thumbs-up sign. I saw one empty beer bottle in front of her and the second one in front of her was still half-full. I knew she had drank responsibly. She pointed her thumb toward Shannon and Nick. “We’ll baby-sit Tweedle Drunk while you go get the car.”

“Not a bad idea,” I agreed.

“Don’t get lost,” Nick advised me.

“I’ll be fine.”

I left the casino lobby, starting toward for the parking lot. It had been a busy night at the casino and the parking lot had been crowded, forcing Nick to park at the far edge near a deserted side entrance. The walk to Nick's car took forever and I wished that he had exercised the option of valet parking. I thought the fresh air would do me good and I certainly wouldn’t hurt from the exercise.
I meandered through the parking lot full of endless rows of vehicles, hoping that I was headed in the right direction. I couldn’t remember in which row Nick had parked and I was still distracted by the fact that I had placed in the contest. For a night, I had found repose from my newest obsession. Yet, I couldn’t shake that same eerie feeling settling over me, identical to the feeling from my nightmare from the previous night. My necklace warmed against my skin.

My choices were limited and my options were few. I silently sent a prayer to the Powers above for guidance but no clear answer came. It didn’t help me much when I saw an Aston Martin parked in a nearby stall and realized that my distraction was short-lived. My choice with what to do about Corwyn’s secret was clear: I stayed at the Archangelus Foundation and kept my mouth shut or I left so I didn’t endanger my family or anyone else. At that moment, I was furious with Corwyn Darcy for taking over my life and myself even more for letting him. I knew it wasn’t true as my conscience screamed at me because I had made the choice to investigate when my instincts had warned me things were better left buried.

I found the row where Nick had parked the conspicuously yellow bug. I noticed several lights in that section of the parking lot weren’t working, leaving the area covered in a blanket of shadow. As I neared the car, I saw a form leaning against the side of the car. Parked next to Nick’s bug was a battered pick-up truck that looked needed a trip through the car wash.

“Hey, lady!” a voice called out to me.

I placed the keys between my fingers so that the ends jutted out like miniature spikes. My other hand automatically grasped the pendant hanging around my neck.

“Hey, I’m talking to you,” he called again, louder this time. I stopped where I stood because he stood between Nick’s car and me.

My heart began beating in perfect synchronicity with my feisty little amulet. “Is there a problem?”

“I’m lost. I need directions,” he stepped toward me, glancing down at my purse and motioned toward it. “I need money for a taxi. Now, how are we going to make this work?”

“Very simple,” I quipped. “You’re going to walk away and pretend we’ve never met.”

“No,” he gave me a cocky grin, taking another step closer. “Give me your purse.”

“Back off!” I blustered, my temper reaching critical mass when he reached for my purse. A blast of violet sparks hissed, shooting out from my pendant and surrounding him in an angry swarm of buzzing, hot flecks.

He let out a curse when they blinded and burned him. I tried to move around him, but he was much faster than I anticipated.

“Wrong move,” his large hand reached for my pendant, ripping it off the chain before hurling it several feet away from me.

My magic was still tragic. Me without my pendant, very bad.

“There are security cameras all over the parking lot.”

“None of them work,” he sneered. “Hand over your purse before I get nasty.”

“Like hell I will,” I muttered through gritted teeth.

He caught me in his grip, managing to get a two-handed hold around my neck. His grip was an iron chain around my windpipe, choking the air from me. I tried to scream but there wasn’t enough air in my throat to let me make noise. Panic rose like bile in my throat and for a second, I froze. Then, survival instinct 101 overrode my common sense. I remembered how to sing and it wasn’t just pretty music. Solar plexus, instep, nose and groin.

I turned into his grip, willing my body to be dead weight as I dropped like a stone toward the ground. The sudden change in balance broke his hold long enough for me to get a gulp of air in my lungs. I used all of my strength to ram my elbow into his diaphragm and heard a gasp of pain as I hit my target. I ran toward a lit section of the parking lot, scooping up my pendant and my purse along the way.

I felt thick arms wrap around my waist, dragging me to the ground in a tackle. My head hit the pavement with the force of it and then my attacker straddled me. I struggled against his hold but a strong blow connected with my jaw that drove my head again into the asphalt. Stars floated above me before I heard a solid click just a few inches away from ear, feeling cool metal against my
forehead. Through cross-eyed vision, I saw the barrel of a firearm staring back at me.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he gave me a cold smile as his finger slowly closed around the trigger. I’ve heard that life flashes before a person’s eyes before death. Whoever said that lied. Everything slowed and froze. I had been stupid. I was going to die because I didn’t give some thug my purse, but damn it! At least, I hadn’t rolled over and died without a fight. I knew that this would shatter Jack and the last thing he needed to deal with was another death of a family member. Crazy and stupid, I saw the words engraved upon my tombstone just as it had been in my dream from the other night. I knew that I had tried my luck too many times in one night and I was going to lose. Now, you see why I rarely gamble.

Bright flames shot up from the asphalt, surrounding us in a blazing ring, catching my mugger's shirtsleeve on fire. He forgot about me as he jumped up, wildly waving his arm to put out the flames. I rolled away from him, trying to avoid him and the fire surrounding us. A lithe form emerged from the shadows, his eyes the same flaming hue as the burning circle trapping me and the mugger. The voice rang with an eerie echo that made my soul shiver and dance for joy at the same time.


The thug turned toward the silhouette, aiming the gun toward him. I watched the figure glow in the darkness, surrounded by fire and smoke. He reached out, his hand full of flame, his ocher eyes filled with fury while the mugger's eye widened in terror. My rescuer took one step forward and hurled a fiery orb in a straight path where it caught the man's hand, causing him to let go of the gun. Through double vision, I watched the frightened man scurry over the side of the fence of the parking lot and into the darkness.

“I need to get back to the casino,” I mumbled when Corwyn knelt beside me, wrapping his arms around my shivering body.

Amazed at what I had just seen, I forgot the agony in my head for a moment. Corwyn’s strong arms scooped me up as if I weighed nothing, cradling me next to his chest. He carefully carried me to his car and put me in the passenger seat, pulling the seat belt across me and clicking it securely before he closed the passenger door. “We need to get you to a hospital.”

“Wrong,” he corrected me as he shifted the car into park. “You were their designated driver and now I’m yours.”

I looked out the passenger window to see Gretchen, Shannon, and Nick waiting for me. Shannon’s eyes widened when she saw Corwyn step out of the car and head toward them. I jammed the pendant into my pants pocket and fought with the seat belt clasp until if came undone, launching out of the passenger seat and stumbling toward them.

“Where were you?” Shannon demanded, her arms crossed and foot tapping. “We’ve been waiting for fifteen minutes.”

“I couldn’t remember where Nick parked,” I hedged. “Luckily, Corwyn found me.”

“Wren, you’re bleeding,” Gretchen stepped forward, eying the gash that was above my left brow. “I tripped in the parking lot,” again, not a complete lie. “It takes a lot of talent to be this clumsy.”

“Gretchen, have you had much to drink tonight?” Corwyn asked her in a smooth, alluring tone. I could see from my friends' bewildered expressions that they had never exposed to his persuasive abilities.

Gretchen stared at him with calf-eyes for several seconds before she found her voice. “Just two.”
“You and Shannon will drive Nick home,” Corwyn’s voice echoed with an inhuman tone that sounded alien to my ears. Entranced by the compelling influence of his voice, Gretchen stared mutely at him, her face blank. “Wren needs immediate medical attention.”

“No problem,” Gretchen gave him a quick nod. She glanced over at me and gave me thumbs up sign. With everything revealed this weekend, I knew that I might never have another opportunity to ask him all the questions bouncing around inside my mind. I tossed Nick’s keys to her and she caught them in mid-air without looking away.

“Will do,” I said over my shoulder. Corwyn gently placed his hand on my arm just above the elbow and guided me back to the car.

“Let’s look at your at your gash,” I felt his gentle touch as he examined the cut above my eye. I let out a stream of expletives that would have made a biker blush. “I’m fine,” I quickly assured him.

“No, you’re not,” he said firmly, gently tilting my head back to better view the cut above my eye.

“The abrasion is superficial and won’t need stitches, but you may have suffered a concussion.”

“Yes, you are a doctor?” I asked through chattering teeth, feeling a chill sink into my bones.

“In another lifetime,” he glanced at me though thick lashes as he took the white handkerchief from his shirt pocket and pressed it against the lesion. “Keep pressure on it. That will stop the bleeding.”

In Corwyn’s car, I felt completely protected and too confused to worry about anything at the moment. I gawked at him, trying to make sense of the bizarre turn of events that had just taken place. I could barely make out the hard contours of his face that were shrouded in darkness and I tried to make myself calm. Once I had myself somewhere between stunned and sane, only then did I notice the lethally furious mask frozen on his features.

“Corwyn?” I asked uncertainly, hoping he wouldn’t turn into a homicidal maniac. He said nothing as he gave me a sideways scathing look.

“What were you thinking?” Corwyn’s voice was dangerously quiet. “You could have been killed. Why didn't you give him your purse?”

“I wasn’t and I'll be damned if that idiot was going to get away my purse. It's Prada.”

“You weren't killed this time,” he gave me a menacing glance.

“Oh, yeah, Corwyn,” I snapped sharply. “I planned the mugging to be the highlight of my evening.”

We rode in silence. I scanned his features as his eyes flamed bright amber, never looking at me as he continued driving. He raced along Omaha’s darkened streets, weaving through late night traffic without thought or reason.

“Wren?” his voice, taut and strained, was full of pain. His eyes didn’t meet my face.

“I almost lost you tonight.”

“I know,” I whispered. “But, I live another day just to annoy you.”

“Don’t ever do anything like that again,” I heard his breath catch. Corwyn turned to look at me, his eyes tawny bright with raw emotion. His hand slammed on the steering wheel, the fury contorting his face into that of a predator.

“Corwyn, calm down,” I said as soothingly as I could. “It’s over and I’m okay. You played Human Torch and he ran away. End of story.”

“I may not always be there to save you, Wren,” his hand reached to tenderly brush against my cheek. “I couldn’t stand the thought of that.”

“It’s over,” I gave into the impulse, turning my face so that my lips grazed his heated palm. The warmth of his skin against me made me forget everything and I knew he felt it too when I saw him shiver.

“I almost lost control tonight, something that hasn’t happened in a long time,” he began. “I wanted to make him burn until nothing remained but his ashes.”

“But you didn’t,” I silently thanked the Powers that he didn’t want to turn that mugger into a human torch.

“This time,” Corwyn’s eyes bore a hole into my soul.
He drove for several blocks until we reached a very modern-looking high-rise. He parked the car in front of the building. Moving with leonine grace, Corwyn made no noise when he exited the car then came around to the passenger side and opened it for me. I struggled with the belt buckle, my numb fingers finally undoing it. On silent cue, a uniformed valet came out to take Corwyn’s keys.

“Good evening, Mr. Darcy,”
“Good evening, Vaughn,” he gave the valet a polite nod. Opening the door, he escorted me up the steps where a doorman tipped his hat to us as he opened the door. Corwyn took me to an elevator and pushed in a series of numbers. The elevator lurched, causing me to lose my footing and slamming into his chest. His arms wrapped around me, steadying me as I wobbled on my feet.

“Where are we going?” I asked, my stomach feeling woozy from the upward motion of the elevator.

“My penthouse,” he answered shortly.

“Let me guess,” I gave him a rueful glance. “Hugh Hefner is your roommate?”

“Hardly,” Corwyn scoffed.

He dug through his pockets until he produced a set of keys. Within seconds, we stepped inside a posh apartment done in stark decor. The carpet was short and white while the furniture was glass and steel. The furniture was mostly black leather and framed Asian art adorned the stark white walls. I sat down on the overstuffed black sofa as Corwyn vanished from view.

A few minutes later, he returned with a bowl of water in his hands, a first-aid kit under one arm, and a washcloth hung over the other.

“You whammied Gretchen with your mojo,” I accused him.

“Yes, I did.”

“You’re not going to deny it?” I asked.

“No,” Corwyn dipped the white washcloth into the water then carefully dabbed the bloody gash above my brow. “There’s nothing wrong with it.”

“Nothing wrong with it?” I heard my voice harden. “Corwyn, you took away her right of choice.”

“No, I stopped her from asking you questions you were in no condition to answer,” he said as he wiped away the dried streaks of blood from my face. “I make suggestions, but if someone is strong-willed, they can resist. She wanted to get your friends home safely so she didn’t disagree with my suggestion.”

“You can’t make someone inflict self-harm or hurt others, can you?”

“If I had to, yes,” he opened up the first aid kit, taking out a tube of ointment. He applied the cream to the cut, the stinging sensation of it against my gash made me wince. Corwyn gently blew on the wound, his warm breath soothing the tingle. He then carefully put a bandage against the cut, gently pressing it with his thumbs so that the adhesive stuck to my skin. “How’s that?”

“Better,” I admitted. “But it hurts like a son-of-a-”

“Shh,” he pressed a finger against my lips. “No cursing.”

“Mmrrph,” I tried to talk, but he gently pinched my lips together.

“Stop talking,” his lips turned upward into the flawless white smile.

“No, I won’t,” I grumbled as he let go of my lips. “Thanks for playing doctor.”

“Anytime,” his green eyes held a tint of amber. “You make an outstanding patient.”

“I’d like to head back to Lincoln, Corwyn,” I said, the events of the evening fatiguing me more than I realized.

“You need sleep,” Corwyn motioned to the spacious penthouse. “I have a spare bedroom. You can rest here and I’ll take you to work in the morning.”

“I have nothing to wear except what I have on.”

“I’ll send out for something and have it brought up,” he gave a dismissive wave of his hand.

“How about this? You take me home and I’ll sleep in my own bed.”
“No,” Corwyn shook his head. “Take me home and I’ll call in sick.” I counter-offered. “I don’t want Jack to worry.” “I’ll call him. He’ll understand.” “He barely knows you.” “He knows well enough that you’re safe with me,” he seemed intent on keeping me in Omaha. Corwyn gazed into my eyes, and I saw that they flickered between mossy green and fiery amber. “I’m not going to ravish you while you sleep.” “Am I safe with you?” I asked bluntly. “After seeing what I’ve seen, how do I know I’m not going to disappear one day?” “Wren Bryant,” Corwyn looked at me with somber eyes. “Your life is worth more than my own, and I give you my word that your safety and your virtue will always be my first priority.” “Damn,” the word slipped from me before I could stop. “Just my luck. Still, if I can’t trust a Boy Scout, who can I trust?” The incredulous look in his eyes told me that my flippant remark unsettled him. A hard look came across his handsome features, his eyes narrowed and his mouth froze into a solid line. “Once you know me, you’ll never have reason to doubt me.” “True. You have saved my life, what, twice now?” I gave him a wary glance. “What’s the catch?” “There is no catch.” “You're not typical.” I replied vaguely. “We both know that.” “Yes, we do,” he agreed. “I know you well enough to know that you will never accept a superficial answer. It's not in your nature to walk away from a challenge.” “You're right,” I looked away, ashamed of the truth. “I usually run.” “Not tonight,” “Temporary insanity,” I huffed. “Don't walk away from this,” Corwyn's words carried an underlying current of urgency that beckoned my gaze back to his. “Take that first step, Wren, share your thoughts with me.” “Not that brave. Open eyes, shut mouth. What I saw never happened.” “Share them with me,” he rose from where he sat and went into one of the bedrooms. Corwyn returned with a dark blue comforter that he tucked in around me. “Tell me your ideas.” “No thanks,” I said, resolute in keeping my mouth shut. “I like staying alive.” “Do you truly think harm will come to you over tonight's events?” The disbelief in Corwyn's voice surprised me. “If I wanted you dead, you would be six feet underground by now.” “Yes, I do. Here is my official thought: I know nothing. I saw nothing.” “What if I wanted you to know?” he asked quietly. “What if I told you that you could share your thoughts with me without repercussion to you or your family? Would you tell me your thoughts?” “No way,” I never took my eyes off Corwyn. “You take me home and I keep my mouth shut. No tales about rings of fire or spontaneous combustion coming from my mouth. In return, I live a nice, quiet life and earn a steady paycheck. Deal?” “You in no condition to bargain, Wren Bryant,” Corwyn said. “I give you my solemn word, no harm will come to you or your family if you share your thoughts about me.” Before I had a chance to answer, I heard a knock at the door. I watched him rise and walk to the front door where he greeted a one of the building staff who handed him a cinnamon roll and a cup of warm milk. “If you're quiet, then you're dangerous. Eat, drink and share. Then, I’ll take you home.” “Promise?” I asked, praying that he was a cambion of his word. “My kind consider it a grievous offense to break one's word, Wren. I've given mine, do I have yours?” A deal with a Cambion was dangerous, but with Corwyn, I was tempted. That is what Cambions do best: tempt people. Eve was bought for an apple and here was Corwyn luring me with a cinnamon a sticky caramel cinnamon roll. “Do I have to sign my name in blood or promise you my firstborn?” I eyed the cinnamon roll, my
stomach growling at me to just say yes. “No!” Corwyn glared at me, obviously offended by my sarcastic question. He shook his head in what appeared to be exasperation. His quiet response unnerved me. “Just your word and your wish is my command.”

I studied him for several seconds, knowing what I did next changed everything. The evidence spoke loudly in my mind; he had twice saved my life. Part of regaining my life was trusting others, having faith in my own decisions. I gave a defeated sigh. “You have my word, Corwyn.”

“Now, eat.” he commanded. “Then, share.”

“God can kick me out of the garden later, I’m starved.” I took the roll between my fingers, tearing it apart before popping a sweet piece into my mouth. I chewed slowly, contemplating my words.

“How did you know where to find me?”

“You sang.”

“You were in the casino?”

“I was nearby. When you sang, your emotions poured out and I knew it was you.”

“You can hear half-way across the city?” I scoffed.

“No,” Corwyn chuckled and looked away as if he were bashful about this wonderful ability he possessed. “I wasn’t that far away.”

“How close were you?”

“Closer that I want to admit, Wren. I overheard Nick telling Tristan about your planned trip to Omaha,” his eyes deepened into a deep jade hue and I knew that he was telling the truth. “I was in the audience.”

“You told me that you couldn’t sense my emotions.”

“I can when you sing,” he reminded me. “Once you sang, I felt what you were feeling. I heard the joy in your voice and it made me smile. I didn’t mean to interrupt your evening, but when I followed you into the parking lot, I knew your fear and pain.”

Corwyn appeared to hesitate, divided by an internal conflict. He stared at me and it seemed as though he were trying to make a choice.

“You secret is safe with me,” I told him softly, my hand framed his strong jaw.

His voice dropped an octave, low and husky. “I know, Wren, but you know how I feel about you. You will be the death of me.”

“Moth to bug zapper,” I quipped, snuggling deeper into the sofa and then finding myself in the crook of Corwyn’s arm. “What a way to go.”

“Do you always have a barbed retort for everything I say?”

“Usually,” I scoffed.

“I called your house because you forgot your phone at work and I wanted to get it back to you. With Nick’s conversation and Jack telling me which casino you were patronizing, I thought that I’d get it back to you.” he confessed, speaking after a long silence, appearing to have made his choice.

“I sat at the back of the nightclub while you sang and your emotions found me. I can sense others’ emotions and I’m used to it. I use that ability to seek out and assist those in need, but I’ve never had to play superhero like I do with you.”

“I’ll put a big red ‘s’ on your chest,” I murmured, inhaling the deep smoky scent of him. “Besides, every Superman needs a Lois Lane.”

“Hmm, a smart woman in over her head?” Corwyn pressed his lips into my hair.

“I don’t need anyone to save me.”

“You did tonight.”

“I was doing all right,” thinking of the amulet in my pocket. “Until that creep decided I was easy pickings.”

“You did well.” Corwyn handed me a napkin, gently pointing at the corner of his mouth. I took the hint, wiping away the icing at the corner of mine.

“Are you an empath?” I asked, looking up at him with searching eyes. I was willing to do anything to distract the fury I saw simmering behind his restraint.

“Yes, Wren,” he murmured softly. “Among other things.”
“You weren’t following me?”
“Only to return your phone to you. Liam and I attended a concert here in Omaha. I came here afterwards to return your phone to you.”
“I remember you telling me about that,” I admitted, drowsiness clouding my thoughts. “Where is Liam?”
“He went home earlier tonight.”
I didn’t want to leave the warm, protective haven of his presence. Corwyn had me right where I wanted to be and I didn’t want to go home. I also knew that I needed to be responsible. I gulped down two swallows of the warm milk and rose to my feet. I already had said too much. “I’m ready to go home, Corwyn.”
“I have no clue how to magically open up and share my thoughts with you.” I said as Corwyn raced along the interstate, taking the curves too sharp and tight for my comfort, making me hope he was good friends with a cute green gecko. “I’m better with questions.”

“Ask away,” he encouraged me, his face unreadable because of the shadows veiling his features. I couldn’t tell if he was resigned or welcoming in his response.

“Have you always had these powers: empathy, pyromancy, the ability to do the whole ‘shock and awe’ trick with electricity?”

“I’m surprised,” Corwyn’s head abruptly turned in my direction. “Those words are only used in magical circles.”

“And we’ll go round and round before we’re done,” I promised.

“I’ll expect no less of you, Wren,” he gave me a knowing gaze. “Yes, empathy is innate. As are the abilities to control fire; pyromancy as you call it, and electricity.”

“Empathy,” I continued, enthusiasm at his admission making me brave. “Can you do it at will?”

“Yes.”

“How?” I asked.

“How does one breathe? It comes naturally,” he paused for a moment, his brows furrowing as if he were deep thought. “How do you identify a scent?”

“I compare it to what I’ve smelled before and identify it. I know the difference between a rose’s fragrance and a skunk’s stink.”

“Exactly, Wren. Each emotion is distinct, each having it’s own color or flavor. Fear has a different flavor than joy or anger.” Corwyn replied.

“Can you only sense one person at a time or more than one?” I asked, fascinated by this casual conversation with a creature that might drag me to hell and call it a first date.

“I can sense one person or several, depending on the complexity of the emotion. Each emotion is like a fingerprint, unique to each person. Let’s use the comparison of my empathy to hearing. Imagine hearing a choir singing and yet, one soloist’s voice rises above the others. I hear the group, but I can focus my attention on anyone in that group if I choose.”

“You told me once that you couldn’t tell what I was feeling,” I was intrigued by that particular exception; it compelled me to ask.

“Except when you sing,” Corwyn glanced sideways at me, his eyes unfathomable. “You keep part of your soul hidden behind sarcasm. Sometimes, Wren, you seem impervious to every ability I have, as if something protects you from empathy or charm. Why?”

“Who knows?” my conscience nagged at me at that moment as I eluded the question. There was no need to tell him of my family’s unique quirks or the unique talisman in my pocket.

“What makes you such a hard nut to crack?” Corwyn looked at me as he passed a semi-truck cruising too slow for his taste. “Sometimes, I can’t sense you at all. When I try, you’re undetectable until you open your mouth and then I can see is you. You’re unique.”

“Unique?” I parroted, never having it termed so politely. Unique in my family meant magically challenged or just plain strange.

“That’s a nice way, Corwyn, of saying I’m odd.”

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“I read people’s emotions like the Sunday paper but you think that I’m calling you odd,” he chuckled. “You are a special person, Wren. Why does that bother you?”

“Are you also a psychiatrist on the side?” I asked.

“No,” he answered, his face an unfathomable mask I couldn’t decipher. “Now, your turn.”

“I plead the fifth,” I held up my hand to stop him. “Talk to my lawyer.”

“Wren, sharing works both ways,” his face softened. “I want to know more about you. I promise that I’ll keep your secrets.”
I've always heard that eyes are the reflect one's soul. I also realized that I wasn't used to being asked questions. I breathed deeply for several seconds, trying to find away around this moment of truth.

"Share, Wren."

"That wasn't part of the deal," I whispered.

"Are you afraid?" Corwyn whispered.

"Yes," I answered.

"You should be. How did you come up with your ideas?"

"Research," I answered, folding my arms and staring out the window. The traffic on the interstate was nothing more than a procession of blurred lights speeding by us in the darkness. "When I first met Tristan, he glowed. I chalked up to nothing more than a trick of the light. When I met you: same thing. Then, you saved my life when the lighting rig fell in the auditorium. The sparks didn’t burn you and the electricity didn’t shock you. It bounced off of you as though an invisible shield surrounded you."

"You saw those things?"

"Corwyn, it was impossible to not see it. It isn't every day that lightning bolts bounce off someone," I admitted. "I decided that I was more curious than afraid, hence, I decided to go digging."

"Did you find treasure?"

"More like trouble," I dared to looked directly at Corwyn. He appeared bewildered by my answer. "You didn't find it, it followed you," he chortled.

"I scoured the Internet and browsed through a few books," I explained cryptically. "I looked for things that matched what I had noticed about you."

Corwyn still seemed baffled.

"I used to be a librarian. Of course, I’m going to know where to look for things," I observed him, waiting for him to burn me to a crisp. Corwyn said nothing as he gave me a curt nod, that unfathomable mask sliding back into place.

I omitted the fact that my family was Solomonari and keeping them out of the picture was my top priority.

I paused, fearing his reaction.

"Continue, Wren," he prompted.

"One theme kept repeating itself all throughout my research: Djinn. More specifically: Cambions," my voice surprising remained steady as I spoke my suspicions aloud for the first time. Corwyn’s hand balled into a tight fist and a low rush of breath escaped him. "You're a Cambion."

"You're right," His voice remained gravely placid. "You knew this so quickly?"

"Not exactly," I crossed my fingers behind my back, hoping that the Powers would forgive me for my blatant lie. "I had help."

I clasped my hand over my mouth, realizing that I had just put Logan in jeopardy. Corwyn remained quiet, his hand clenching the steering wheel so hard that I thought it might break in his grasp.

"Who?" he pressed in a hard voice.

"Not telling," I danced around the question, silently prayed to Powers-That-Be that my faith in Corwyn wasn’t foolish. There was no sense in dragging Logan Rohan into this situation anymore than I already had. "This is between you and me."

Corwyn kept his eyes fixed on the road. I saw the first droplets of blood fall from his hands from where his fingernails had dug into the palm of his closed fist. "I asked questions, but I didn’t name people or places. The expert showed me a book containing a picture of your family taken nearly eighty years ago and it mentioned your father, Julian Darcy Emrys."

Corwyn flinched. "You said that you’d find out my secrets and you kept your promise beyond my expectations, Wren."

I folded my hands in my lap to stop them from trembling. "I told you that I’d find out."

"Now that you know, what will you do?" his words were so soft that I strained to hear him.

"Not a damn thing."

"What? Nothing?" The surprise in Corwyn’s voice compelled me to look at him more than any
mojo he had ever tried working on me. I watched that impenetrable facade crack and for the first
time, I was afraid of the fury that I had witnessed earlier in the evening.
“I told you that I’d keep your secrets, Corwyn. I gave you my word.”

He scoffed. “Doesn’t it terrify you that I’m a Djinn, that I can burn you to ashes with a thought?”
“Technically cambion,” I corrected him. “Your other half is human. Besides, you’ve saved my life
twice now. That contradicts the whole ‘I’m-evil-and-going-to-eat-your-soul-for-dinner’ scenario in
my opinion. Thus, the entire good vs. evil debate is completely skewed at best.”

Corwyn restrained fury mutated into stunned disbelief.

“Those are my ideas,” I finished. “That’s everything I know.”

“You definitely gave me a piece of your mind,” I felt his warm hand cover mine, his eyes
suspiciously bright. “You trust in me is humbling and I’ll guard it with my life.”

“Where does that put us?” I asked. “What happens now?”

“Nothing, Wren, you kept your word and I will keep mine,” Corwyn slowed the car to let another
one pass. “I feel your curiosity, your fear, and also, your honesty. I know you can’t sense mine, but
you’ll find your faith in me isn’t misplaced.”

“I hope so,” I admitted, not wanting to feel the liquid heat of his gaze.

“You’ll know when the time is right.”

“I’m insane,” I drawled, chills dancing along my skin. “Crazy enough to be road-tripping with
someone who can make me a blue plate special.”

“Crazy like a fox,” he amended.

Corwyn’s fingers drew lazy circles on the back of my hand, sending acute frissons of pleasures up
the length of my arm until I shivered. Bringing my hand to his face, his lips brushed lightly along
the back of my hand before letting his lips linger on the heated surface of my palm.

“Wren is an unusual name,” he gave me a smile. “Is it a family name?”

I nodded, welcoming the change of topic from the sensitive to the mundane.

“My grandmother’s name was Wren.”

“What is your middle name?”

“Elizabeth,” I offered, glancing back at him.

“Wren Elizabeth Bryant,” Corwyn’s deep tenor spoke my name like a reverent prayer, an audible
caress that left me breathless. “My beautiful songbird.”

“Wrens are actually pretty plain,” I countered.

“Not to me,” he said slyly. “I think you’re lovely.”

“Jack told me once about why I was named after a bird,” the words came out quiet and husky. I felt
heat rise in my cheeks, hoping that I didn’t sound like a rambling idiot.

“Then, lovely Wren, tell me everything,” Corwyn's eyes were gentle, the smile on his face subtle.

“There’s an ancient tale about how a wren convinced a scorpion to give her a ride across the desert
and managed to keep it from stinging her because of the songs she sang to him.”

I watched Corwyn’s face tighten as I told him the story. When I finished, he gave me a ghost of a
grim smile.

“What else?”

“I’m not afraid to confront any creature that threatens her. She’ll dive-bomb any animal that
invades her territory.”

“That sounds like you,” he murmured, the corners of his lips twitched as though he was trying not
to laugh.

“I still have some more questions.”

“Ask, Wren,” Corwyn's green eyes twinkled when he say my embarrassment.

“Exorcisms? Do they affect you?”

“They only give me headaches,” he smirked at me. “Remember, I’m half-human.”

“Possession?”

“I’d have to be inside you to possess you completely,” he murmured. I blushed.

“Not going there,” I moved on to the next question. “Are your ancestors from Hell?”
“No, Albany, New York.”
“Can you grant wishes?” I asked.
“No, only if I’m blue and my best friend’s name is Aladdin,” Corwyn chuckled.
“So, no living in a lamp?”
“No living in a lamp.”
“Stealing souls?” I pressed.
“I can’t steal your soul, Wren.”
“Can you eat it?”
Silence.
“Corwyn?” I asked again, hearing the catch in my voice.
His continuing silence banished my growing comfort into oblivion.
“Tell me what you know, Wren,” he fixed his gaze on the road. His distress was evident. My first impulse was to take Corwyn’s hand but decided against it, instead folding my hands in my lap. No one can save another from a private hell, I realized. He must be willing to leave it. I thought I saw pain flicker across his face, all I felt was grief in my soul for agony for exposing such a raw nerve.
“Cambions can burn people to ash or leave them as dry husks if they feed too much from a person’s life force. They also can live off food and water,” I said.
“True.”
“Do you feed off people’s souls, Corwyn?” I asked the ultimate question.
“Whoever told you about my kind, my family, told you correctly,” Corwyn said coldly. “We can both.”
“Do you feed off people’s souls?” I dared to repeat the question.
“Not their souls, per se,” he kept his hands firmly on the wheel, his eyes refused to meet mine.
“Cambions gain sustenance from human emotions. They’re considered the crème de la crème of human life force. If we take too much, a human can die from too much ecstasy. That is where the legend originates of Djinn granting wishes.”
“That doesn't sound so bad,” my voice came out little more that a ragged whisper.
“We avoid temptation. When tempted, we go to large events that are filled with emotion: rock concerts, opera, sporting events. We feed off the collective emotions of a crowd without harming an innocent. However, in the past, we've failed. Like now, being this close to you.”
“Tell me how being with me is dangerous,” I challenged Corwyn. “You said that you couldn’t read my emotions. If you can’t read them, then you don't feel hunger pangs, right?”
“You're safest around me when you're angry because it acts a shield against my abilities. Wren, your emotions are wrought with pure sincerity. When you sing, it’s sweet and compelling, I can’t deny the predator inside me. I want to draw everything out of you that you've ever thought or felt and drink it all. All I know right now is that you're being more emotionally honest than you have in a very long time and those emotions are raw and passionate. I'm hungry.”
“Oh,” I said in a small voice.
“Now, you see,” Corwyn said darkly. “Right now, your soul is crying out for a connection. If I succumb to my hunger, I'll kill you because your essence is addictive. Part of me thrives on pure emotion and, consequently, I want to feed.”
“Wonderful,” I muttered, shrinking into the leather seat. “I'm a Happy Meal on legs.”
His eyes blazed hot and scarlet as he glared fiercely at me. “You have no idea, Wren, how much I want you right now.”
I sat there stunned and speechless. If there was one thing I understood, it was feeling anguish ripping away at a person’s soul. I wanted to know more and wearing my emotions like the latest trend didn't contribute to my safety factor. I changed tactics. I realized that I wasn't controlling the situation and that made me angry. I watched Corwyn's intensity lessen as my ire buried the rawness clinging to my soul.
“I’m not done yet,” I said defiantly. “Why do you choose to abstain? What is stopping you now from turning me into a all-you-can-eat buffet?”
“Willpower,” his skin stretched tightly over his knuckles, forcefully clenching the steering wheel.
“The only thing worse than being near you is being without you, Wren.”
“Then tell me how you survive day-to-day, Corwyn,” I challenged him. “You’ve done it before and you’re doing it now. Talk to me.”
“Food and water sustain cambions well enough. The taste of raw emotion is sweeter than manna or ambrosia to us. Which would you rather taste, Wren, Godiva chocolate or stale bread?”
“Point taken. Honestly, get sugar-free. Half of the calories and none of the guilt,” I spat out.

He turned to look at me, his eyes glowing bright crimson so that I couldn’t see his irises. Corwyn laughed darkly at my latest glib remark. “Wren, be careful.”
“Sorry,” I quickly recanted. “Chicken Noodle soup is good for the soul, Corwyn.. I’m just trying to understand. If you hide from it, you give your hunger power. If you face it, you can defeat it. So, start talking.”

“I want to taste all of you,” I abruptly turned towards Corwyn, finding his eyes glowing like hot embers in the darkness. I felt heat rush to my cheeks at his blatantly brazen statement. “Every thought, every memory, every sweet emotion that you’re feeling.”

“How can you be that strong and not lose control?”
“The rock concert took off the edge,” Corwyn stared straight ahead. He looked at me, his eyes gleaming with bright fire in the darkness. “Screaming teenagers let off enough emotion to sate me for a while, But, only just enough. That’s all that’s saving you right now.”
“No, you are. You’re making a choice and standing by it. Give yourself some credit.”
“I’m not half the man you think I am.”
“Well, the half of you that is a man is doing pretty damn well,” I gave him a skeptical glance. “Woman, thy name is Eve,” Corwyn scoffed in the dark.
I didn’t know whether to be touched deeply by the sentiment or completely terrified. A portion of my soul stirred, elated that I wasn’t alone in this affection that I felt, but my survival instinct experienced true terror. Corwyn must have seen the expression on my face because he closed his eyes and took several deep breaths.
I sat still, watching him as he battled his instincts to take a bite out of my soul. I listened intently as his breath came in ragged gasps. Inspiration hit me with the force of a speeding truck as I remembered a song Nana Wren sang to me as a child when I frightened by lightning storms. I let the memory flow through me of how the simple melody soothed my fears and I found myself humming the tune. Serenity filled me, instilling me with courage and faith enough in Corwyn to lay my head on his shoulder. I felt him flinch when I leaned against him, but he slowly relaxed and his breathing became even. Languidness washed over me as my energy streamed from my body into Corwyn. A pleasurable peace built within me as I felt his hunger ebb away, leaving me tired but happy. He stopped the car, pulling it over onto the shoulder before turning his head toward me, planting a kiss on my brow and cupping my face with his left hand. I pulled away, looking into his eyes and seeing that they had cooled from scarlet to tawny amber. I could see his fiery irises dim as his ferocious expression slowly became gentle.
“You are brave, Wren,” his eyes were tender as he focused solely on me. I felt my body tremble from the force of devotion that I saw reflected in their amber depths. “I have never seen anyone do something as selfless and insane as you did just now. How have you managed to survive in this world?”
“Triple A,” I slowly sat upright, pulling away from him. “Corwyn, you feed off emotion like a human needs water. I knew what you needed.”
“Perceptive,” his finger brushed along the contour of my cheek. “Very few people know how to soothe a cambion.”
“I’m a quick learner. Music feeds the savage beast.”
“How do you feel, Sweetling?”
I leaned back in my seat, considering his question. “Exhausted.”
His finger carefully brushed back a stray tendril that fell forward into my face. “Do me a favor,
Wren. Call in sick tomorrow and rest.”
“No!” I exclaimed. “Tonight was frightening, but it’s over. Just because I have a bump on my head doesn’t mean I’m incapacitated. If I can work, then I work. I won’t cop out just because I have an excuse.”
“You’re going to call in sick,” Corwyn said, his eyes started to brighten.
“Like hell,” I spat defiantly. “Some of us have to work for a living.”
“Wren,” Corwyn said my name as though it were a prayer. “Stay home tomorrow. Rest.”
“Corwyn,” I found my tongue stubbornly stuck to the roof of my mouth. “What is easy and what is right aren’t the same thing. If I have a clear opportunity to choose right or wrong, I’m going to choose right as often as I can.”
“You are stubborn.”
“Damn straight,” I smirked, watching his stern gaze try to make me change my mind. “You know, for a cambion, you are horrible at the whole temptation thing.”
“I’m working on it,” I saw one of the corners of his mouth tug upward.
“Try the halo and wings bit,” I said softly, my fingers lightly tracing a path across one chiseled cheekbone. His eyes widened fractionally when my cool fingers brushed against his stubbled jaw, his breath caught just once from my touch. “Just beneath the surface, each of us has a hero or a monster lurking and waiting to get out. What determines what we become are the choices we make. You’ve been polishing that halo very nicely by saving my life twice now. Have faith in yourself as I do in you.”
“You inspire me,” his voice was low and husky to my ears.
“Moth to bug zapper syndrome,” I shrugged, ignoring the ache in my shoulders from my earlier scuffle on the pavement. “It goes both ways.”
Corwyn drove the car back onto the interstate. Through veiled lashes, I looked at him and found his body tensed as if in agony.
“Wren, this can’t go on,” The pain in his voice cut the tension between us. Corwyn didn’t look at me as he accelerated the Aston along a sharp curve on the interstate. His eyes appeared scorching ochre, glinting in the darkness. He spoke so faintly that I strained to hear him clearly. “Stay away from me. Understand that I can kill you.”
“You didn’t just now and you won’t,” I gave him a harsh look. How I wished I could make my eyes gleam to emphasize my point but I’d just have to settle for my spitfire temper to do it for me.
“You gave me your word.”
“Wren,” his voice took on a menacing tone. “I don’t know if I can keep that promise.”
“Yes, you can and you will. Listen to me,” I poked Corwyn angrily in the shoulder. “I’m over twenty-one and I can make my own decisions. Besides, I don’t buy into the whole Byronic slash martyr act. If you wanted to eat me, I’d already be covered in ketchup and served with a side of fries. You saved my life twice, remember? Just a moment ago, you got over your bad-ass self and proved to be a better man that you think you are. Think about that, Corwyn. I know I have and I found out something about us that is special and incredible.”
“What?” Corwyn muttered through clenched teeth.
“I have faith in you,” I said five simple words containing absolute truth.
I failed to notice during the course of the conversation that we had entered into Lincoln and been driving through Havelock. He drove the distance of the long driveway until we sat in front of the farmhouse. I didn’t want this moment to end; I wanted it encapsulated in my memory so that it remained vibrant and eternal.
I slipped out of the trench coat, leaving it on the seat.
“I have a question for you,” Corwyn leaned forward, his warm smoky scent fill my senses.
“Shoot.”
“Why were you doing karaoke in Omaha? There are plenty of places in Lincoln to sing.”
“Prize money,” I shook my purse in midair. “I am transportationally challenged. That money and tonight’s winnings are going towards a down payment on a car.”
He gave me a crooked smile. “Then, I’ll just have to give you a ride to work tomorrow. I’ll be out
in front of your house at eight-thirty in the morning. Don’t be late.”
“Good luck with that one,” I flashed him a smile, relieved that the mood had lightened considerably between us. “It’s a date.”
“Then, I look forward to it. Good night, Wren,” Corwyn escorted me from car to the front door. We were only two breaths away from each other, his lips only a kiss away from mine.
“Good night,” I murmured gently. Smoke and cinnamon lilted around me and his eyes were now deep green. He was serene and calm as he stood there with me under the bright porch light, nothing interrupting the tender moment that I never wanted to end. I fought the longing to lean forward and place my lips against his, but he started down the porch stairs and threw me an intense gaze over his shoulder that made me fight my own private hunger.
“Pleasant dreams.”
“Doubt it,” I muttered under my breath. “They'll have an NC-17 rating.”
“Then, I look forward to the Director's Cut,” Corwyn’s thumb traced my lower lip. He leaned forward, his breath hot against my ear. “The version only meant for us.”
With a look on his face resembling frustration, Corwyn thrust his hands deep into his pockets and abruptly walked to his car. The engine roared to life and he drove quickly out of sight, leaving me along with my blush and lurid thoughts.
I fumbled through my purse until I found my house keys, hurriedly unlocking the front door and dashing inside the house so I didn’t have to watch Corwyn leave. I made my way to my bedroom, completely amazed by the evening’s events. I did away with all ceremony, collapsing into a heap on my bed and pulling the covers up to my chin. I snuggled deeply into the warmth of the flannel blankets and heavy quilts, thankful that sleep would come quickly.
As I drifted between wakefulness and dreams, my thoughts were a jumbled collage swirling around me, making me feel more alive than I had in years. It seemed chaotic and impossible, but things came together as I fitted together the pieces of this fantastic puzzle I had discovered. Life and destiny tend to take me places that I never plan on going and leave me in a stranger place that where I started, that night being no exception. In my mind, that night's events required me to face my inner coward. Corwyn was a cambion whose craving for my life force tempted him beyond imagining. What frightened and elated me most was that Corwyn Darcy slowly and surely possessed my heart without condition, reservation or hesitation. I was in trouble.
I am not a morning person some days. My electronic alarm clock on the other side of my bedroom beeped, my wind-up alarm clock clamored and my mobile's alarm chirped noisily on the top of my dresser. Stumbling from my bed half-groggy and all grumpy, I bumbled around in the darkness until my fingers found the light switch. Intense light left me blind, the noise made me deaf and mostly disoriented.

I went downstairs to the kitchen for some strong black coffee. Jack had already left for work because I found the newspaper half-folded on the kitchen table and dirty dishes in the sink. I wasn’t in the mood for breakfast, deciding to skip it and to get ready for the big day ahead of me. It was hardly seven o’clock in the morning and I had two hours to kill before I met Corwyn.

I entered the shower, turning on the faucet as far on “hot” as it would go. The steam enveloped me in a cloud of mist that gently awakened me, clearing my groggy mind. The jets of hot water pulsed down against my skin, beating streams of warmth into me that seeped through my skin and into my bones. I stepped out and dried off in front of the bathroom mirror. A sheer film of wetness covered the glass, making my reflection blurry. I wiped away the thin layer of condensation, thinking how refreshed and awake I felt.

I brushed my teeth and started styling my hair as I did on every other morning. I began my usual regimen with a small amount of mousse in my palm; ready to spread it through the haystack I called hair. I rubbed it between my palms and began streaking the white foam through my hair when I noticed a bald spot along my hairline just above my right eye. Stunned by the discovery, I leaned closer toward the mirror for a better look. Examining it carefully, I felt relief when I realized that I wasn't losing hair; it was something worse. It was a white streak, small and subtle, but the mark was unmistakable. Approximately one-eighth inch wide and several inches long, a blazing white stripe stood in stark contrast with my dark hair. Uncle Jack, Aunt Della and my brother, Justin, bear the same distinct argent stripe. In early photographs of Mom and Dad, Mom had one that fell softly along her temple.

Dread settled over me, removing any warmth remaining in my body from the hot shower, as I mutely stared at my reflection in the mirror bearing that skunk stripe. I thought that I had been passed over by Mother Nature in favor of a normal life but, as with all things, Father Fubar has an ironic sense of humor. That white band was the same as having a red target painted on my chest. He served me a whole heap of magic and gave me seconds. There are only three chances in a Solomonar’s life when one receives his or her gift. The first chance is at birth and the power manifests shortly thereafter, and the second being the onset of puberty. Both passed by me without any manifestation of ability; thus, my family assumed that I had inherited my father's mortality. I had accepted my life as a Regular without bitterness or complaint, content with my life and the destiny I chose. The third and final opportunity a Solomonari has a chance for a talent to reveal itself is when he or she finds their true destiny. I looked at my reflection, rolling my eyes. “Oh, you have GOT to be kidding me. No freaking way! Now?”

I searched frantically through my memories of recent weeks, trying to pinpoint the exact moment my latent abilities manifested. The first odd experience I remembered occurred when I had met Tristan Darcy. The most powerful vision happened the day the lighting rig had almost fried me had Corwyn Darcy not saved my life. My life had just become complicated.
really twisted sense of humor.
Life gets in my way when I try to plan other things. I had a good life going and the last thing I wanted was magic to make a mess of it. Still, I couldn’t blame anyone else for the choices I had made the past few weeks to investigate Corwyn Darcy. I decided to meet my adversary head on with clarity and resolve, leaving my cowardice behind me.
Yeah, right. I wryly mused, knowing that my newfound knowledge left me trembling and nauseous. Hey, it sounded good to me even if I didn’t believe it. With more boldness that I felt, I went back downstairs and finished getting ready for work because I still had a job to do, a paycheck to earn and a car to buy.
I took extra care in selecting what I wore to work that day because I wanted to appear one hundred percent confident or at least look like it. I decided upon charcoal gray slacks and a dark green sweater that gave me a conservative, professional appearance. Looking at my reflection in the mirror, I turned around a few times to make sure everything was in place. I grabbed my coat from the hat tree by the front door, knowing it was going to be a cold and gloomy day. At exactly eight-thirty, the electronic chimes of the doorbell informed me that my ride had arrived.
Opening the door, Corwyn stood on my front porch and my heart jumped into my throat. “Are you ready?”
“Willing and able,” I gave him a quick nod. I noticed that he carried an umbrella with him, popping it open before we stepped out into the pouring rain. He held it over us, blocking the downpour as we made our way to his car. I noticed he was without a coat and the crisp white shirt he wore emphasized every line of his lithe, lean form.
“ Aren’t you cold?” I asked, making a circular motion toward the dark sky. “The weather isn’t exactly pleasant today.”
“ Heat and cold don’t affect me,” Corwyn replied matter-of-factly, offering me his arm. Escorting me to the passenger side, he opened my door. I slipped inside the sports car, finding that it was already warm.
Once he was inside, I noticed he didn’t head toward the Archangelus Foundation, but took a different route. He didn’t speak as he drove, leaving me feeling awkward about the previous night. I had experienced within the past twenty-four hours a series of events that I knew that had changed my life and I didn’t want it to be all for nothing.
“This isn’t the way to work,” I pointed to the street sign where he should have turned but didn’t. Instead, Corwyn headed for the viaduct that led out to Interstate 80. “Where are we going?”
“I wanted to spend some time alone with you.” he gave me that quirky smile that I loved too much for my own good. Corwyn’s gaze was guarded as he looked at me through hooded eyes. “ Wren, what are you thinking?”
“I’m trying to make sense of last night,” I admitted quietly. “It was bizarre.”
“It was a revelation. Spend the day with me, Wren,” his eyes flared amber for a moment, revealing the emotions growing behind that flawless beam. “Get to know the man behind the beast.”
“We have to get to work,” I said, looking at my watch and noticing it was almost eight o’clock. “We don’t have time.”
“I’m Vice-President of Operations at Archangelus,” Corwyn smirked. “I make the time. I told Penelope that you’ll be with me and that we’ll be late. She didn’t have a problem with it.”
“You didn’t!” I rolled my eyes in disbelief. “Corwyn, that makes me appear unprofessional.”
“You’re with me, Wren,” he quietly assured me. “Penelope appreciates your enthusiasm and devotion to your work. Besides, don’t you want to know more?”
Damn him, he had me. “Yes, but I still have a job to do. Please, take me to work and we can talk later.”
He gave me a solemn nod, keeping his eyes focused solely upon the heavy downpour surrounding us. “Are you always this pragmatic?”
“It’s my nature.”
“You also rush headlong into danger and that worries me,” he added, turning into the parking lot of a favorite local restaurant.
I was a person who just found out within the past hour I had inherited my family’s magical legacy. That was a secret that I wasn’t at liberty to share and I felt guilty for having to keep it from him. “Is that a problem?”

“I don’t see how you can accept it so calmly, Wren. Most people would run away screaming in terror if they knew what you did about me. I wonder how you take it in stride.”

“ Weirdness magnet,” I hedged, taking care not to look him in the eye. I wasn’t going to tell him that my family had been magical practitioners for three thousand years. Compared to that, his heritage seemed nothing out of the ordinary in my world.

“You let me see only what you want me to see.”

“I let you see more than most people,” I countered.

“Most people’s emotions emanate from them like beacons in the dark,” Corwyn ran his fingers though his auburn hair. “When I look at you, I can’t read or feel anything from you until you sing.”

I gave into the impulse that made my fingers twitch with anticipation; I brushed away one errant lock falling over his arched brow. My touch made Corwyn stiffen for a moment then he turned his face toward so his cheek into my palm.

“You revise,” I felt his breath against my heated skin.

“Just on a need-to-know basis. I condense.” I smirked, hastily drawing my hand away from the contact. I didn’t want to admit that Corwyn had turned my efficient, orderly existence into a disorganized, muddled melodrama. “Not everyone needs to know my entire life story.”

“I do,” he murmured softly. “I want to know everything about you.”

“You first.” I didn’t want to sabotage the closeness we had developed over the past few days.

“Ask me anything,” Corwyn’s was quiet and compelling, his eyes dark green as he looked earnestly at me. For the first time since I had known him, I didn’t see fire blazing in his gaze or feel the restrained fervor strong beneath his worldly persona. He remained still and calm as he stared at me, waiting for me to respond. “I want to tell you everything.”

“Is the rest of your family like you?” I forced the words out in a hard rush. “Are they cambions?”

“Yes,” Corwyn’s voice sounded rasping and harsh to my ears. “Half Djinn and half human.”

“Do they have the same abilities you do?” I pressed, both frightened and intrigued by his openness. “Can they sense others’ emotions like you do?”

“Yes,” he gave me a long, steady look that told me that I was asking the wrong questions.

“I see,” I quickly felt contrite for prying. I pursed my lips together, thinking what I wanted to know next. “Are you immortal?”

“We can live for eons,” he smiled.

Damn, I hated it when my research was spot-on. “How old are you?”

“My driver’s license says I’m twenty-seven.”

“I’m guessing that you’re a tad bit older than that,” I gave a nervous laugh.

“You guess right.”

“How old are you really, Corwyn?” I defied my wariness and pushed further.

“I was born June 1st, 1887.”

I mentally did the math and felt my jaw fall slack once I knew the answer. I tried disguising my astonishment with a wry quip. “You’re a Gemini, so am I in the car with you or your evil twin?”

He chuckled, wildly wriggling his eyebrows. “Do you like older men?”

“Depends on how old,” I said cryptically, feigning indifference. “How long is an eon?” I grasped the question out of thin air.

His hand was clenched so tightly around the steering wheel that his knuckles stood out, bare and white, beneath his golden skin. “A long time.”

“How long is a long time?”

“Millennia.”

My lips puckered in to a small ‘oh.” “That long, huh?”

“Maybe I’m growing on you,” Corwyn turned his attention back to the road, quiet, as the grin on those full lips seemed to grow wider because of my answer.
“Like a fungus., I retorted lightly and that inspired a wry chuckle from him.
“That’s one way of putting it.”
“You and your family are half Djinn,” I said, trying to wrap my mind around the strange concept.
“Then why do you go from place to place, starting these huge charities and foundations?”
“We believe that all life is precious, Wren. Our kind has done heinous things to humans for
thousands of years. We wanted to give something back, to make a difference; find redemption if
we could.” Corwyn’s voice dropped an octave, his smile fading. “Our mother, she was mostly
human. She was a compassionate woman who helped anyone in need. She gave our father
everything she had; heart and soul, and he loved her for it. When she died, she made us promise to
forgive him but do what he had done. Her dying wish was to help humanity; not exploit them. After
that, my family started our first charity in 1924 in Boston and we’ve been doing it ever since.”
He glanced at me, his handsome face appearing angelic with every bare emotion he felt playing
across his feature. Corwyn’s deep green eyes quickly changed to stormy blue, gleaming brightly
with unshed tears. I knew in my heart that he was nothing like his father; he was every inch his
mother’s son.
“I’m sorry for your loss,” I whispered softly. “I can tell you loved her very much.”
“When she died, a part of me died with her,” Corwyn blinked a few times then abruptly turned his
concentration toward the road. “Sidetrack me, please.”
“Excuse me?”
Corwyn breathed heavily.
“Just talk about anything else until I get my head together,” he said curtly, closing his eyes while
running his fingers through his thick, wavy reddish-brown hair.
“I have a million questions,” I answered quickly, wanted to give him any relief that would divert
him from the pain. I empathized all too well with the hollow abyss that a heart suffered when a
parent died.
“Yesterday, it was a thousand,” he raised one eyebrow, a crooked grin tugging upward at his the
corners of his mouth.
“Something like that,” he chuckled darkly as he turned right, taking the exit ramp that led us back
into the city. I heard a ring tone I didn’t recognize and saw Corwyn take his flip phone out of his
pocket. “Corwyn here.”
I watched him as he nodded a few times; he glanced over at me as he headed downtown toward the
Archangelus Foundation. I could tell the voice was feminine, but I could only guess at her half of
the conversation. I wondered if it might be an ex-girlfriend, or worse, a current one. A pang of
jealously thumped heavily at my heart with that thought. “We’ll be there in ten minutes.”
He flipped the phone shut.
“Penelope wants to see you in her office when we get there.”
“Oh, great,” I grumbled, my day just went from bad to catastrophic. “This can’t be good.”
“Everything will be fine, Wren. I won’t be far away,” he quickly assured me.
“Easy for you to say!” I scoffed. “You’re my boss’s brother-in-law.”
“You worry too much, trying to always control things,” Corwyn chided me as he pulled into the
company parking lot.
“Do you know what she wants to talk about with me?” I asked fearfully, my mind thinking of every
imaginable worst-case scenario. I gazed at him steadily, searching for any answer that might
prepare me for the interrogation awaiting me in Penelope’s office. His glittering green eyes flamed
amber with comprehension.
“Us,” he answered.
“Us?” I squeaked in a small voice. “There is no ‘us.’” I leaned my perspiring brow against the cool
window of the car. “Please, not now.”
“What are you going to say?”
“I haven’t a clue,” I helplessly shrugged, rubbing my temples with my fingers to rid my head of the
building stress headache throbbing at the front of my skull. “Any suggestions, Hot Stuff?”
“Tell her the truth,” he shrugged, giving me a sinful beam and a flash of perfect white teeth.
“Hey, you’re the one with the inside track with her since she’s your sister-in-law,” I protested sharply. “You have job security, Corwyn, but me? Not so much here. I like this job and I want to keep it. I’d really appreciate some insight from you right about now.”

Corwyn deftly whipped the Aston Martin into his designated parking spot and cut the engine. Once he stepped outside, he popped open the umbrella and walked around to my side of the car, opening my door for me. He contemplated for a while before we began walking toward the front doors of the Foundation.

“Penelope intends to ask you if we’re seeing each other and if we’re serious,” he said, his eyes darkening to deep jade.

I desperately sifted through my memories of orientation, trying to remember whether or not the Archangelus Foundation had a fraternization policy or any stipulation about co-workers dating. Nothing came to mind as the abject panic caused my heart to thump louder than a dozen-person drum line. Technically, even if such policies existed, no rules had been broken. I wasn’t dating Corwyn Darcy; I was just falling for him—hard.

“Then, I’ll tell her the truth,” I kept my face passive. Employees passed us on their way inside the building and opening gawked at the Vice-President standing in the rain with the C.E.O.’s assistant. That was definitely fodder for the daily water cooler gossip but I didn’t care.

“What is the truth, Wren?” His voice was deep, rich and husky as he asked me that question.

“No,” I answered solidly.

In a silent question, one of his russet brows arched. “Are you sure about that?”

“We’re not dating,” I stated firmly but wishing the situation were otherwise. Corwyn tentatively brought my fingers to his lips and gently brushed a kiss against the back of them. My pulse fluttered sporadically, missing several beats consequently from the exceedingly public, exquisitely tender gesture. “After what we shared last night?”

I hastily snatched my hand away from his, shoving it in my coat pocket. “Tending a head wound doesn’t mean true love.”

“True love?” he asked softly, carefully brushing away a damp tendril falling haphazardly over my angrily furrowed brow. “What are you thinking?”

I couldn’t respond to that. I gawked at him, mute and dumbfounded, for what seemed several seconds. “Don’t get yourself worked into a tizzy, Corwyn. It was just a turn of phrase. Let’s not make a thing out of it.”

“Wren,” He spoke my name softly, in a query that brought me out of my shocked stupor. “Don’t you want to see me?”

“No comment,” I whispered, feeling his warm breath against my cheek and finding myself unable to deny the truth I’d known for weeks.

“I’ll stand behind whatever you decide to tell Penelope,” Corwyn ran one finger along my cheek. “If you want me to be a part of your life, you’ll say so.” Corwyn gave me a glance that warmed my rain-chilled skin. I stood there, shaking my head in disbelief at the conversation we had just had, and found I couldn’t say a word because it was completely uncanny and unexpected.

“I’ll see you later,” I gulped, bolting for the elevator to flee from the emotional intensity. As I raced down the corridor at the fastest walk I could muster, I felt several pairs of eyes watching me. So much for being brave.

I quietly walked into Penelope’s office, flustered and agitated at what I was about to face. I felt my ire seething, ready to erupt, at the outrageous stunt that Corwyn had pulled. It was sly, calculating and I wanted to throttle him for sending my methodical life into a downward descent.

“Hey, Wren!” Nick called out cheerfully to me in the corridor as he made his way to Tristan’s office. His greeting pulled me out of my reverie and I saw that he looked a bit paler than usual. He looked like he went to war with a hangover and it was winning. “I see you got home all right.”

“I did,” Remembering that Shakespeare once said that discretion was the better part of valor. In other words, keep my mouth shut and keep my answers simple. “Did you have a good time?”

“Awesome,” He gave me two thumbs up. “Hey, are you still looking for a car?”

“I’m always looking for the perfect ride.”
“I’ve got my eye on this really cool Mustang a buddy wants to sell. I’m looking to sell the Bug,” I looked skyward and thanked the Powers-That-Be at the moment for Nick Cho. He had just given me the first good news that I had heard all day and it wasn’t even ten o’clock. “Interested?”


“Five thousand dollars.”

“I need to crunch some numbers and see what I can afford.”

I’d been saving my paychecks for the last month and my winnings from last night totaled slightly less than half of his asking price. I knew I needed transportation and hoped that maybe Jack might extend to me a low-interest loan. He knew I was good for the money and I would make prompt monthly payments. The Bug was yellow, but it was a solid little car that got great gas mileage.

Tristan Darcy called Nick into his office, asking him to run some paperwork down to the courthouse. I walked into Penelope’s office, finding the door open but her office empty. Thankful for a few minutes reprieve, I made the usual morning coffee she enjoyed so much while I took my usual bottle of diet peach tea from the mini-refrigerator in the kitchen area of the office.

On my desk, I found a handwritten score with a post-it note attached to it. Curious, I thumbed through the music, realizing as I read it that it was a duet. Studying it carefully, I recognized that the piece was written in Corwyn’s handwriting and I smiled. This was the duet that I knew we were going to sing at the benefit concert that wasn’t that far away; just a few days. I flipped backwards to the front page and saw the note scribed in his elegant penmanship. “Angels weep and Djinn rejoice when they hear your soul’s beauty in your voice.”

I put it aside, closing my eyes and trying not to drop the sheet music I held. A rush of an emotion I dared not name swept through me leaving me humbled and elated. It took some of the slicing anxiety away from what Penelope might say to me once she came into the office. I was just glad Corwyn wasn’t telepathic; otherwise my chaotic emotional state would be completely open to him. I valued my dignity and I didn’t like it torn from me.

About ten-thirty, Penelope came back to her office from an off-site client meeting with proposals in hand for me to copy and distribute to the rest of the department heads at the Archangelus Foundation. She greeted me pleasantly without any signs of hostility or anger so I took that as a good sign. I immersed myself in the task at hand until I stapled the last packet together, placing it into a crisp black binder.

“I need to close the door,” she told me.

I studied her face for a second, looking for any sign of disapproval or foreboding. I saw neither in her features and did nothing more than nod.

“Let me just clean up the mess I’ve made and I’ll be right in.”

“Of course, dear,” she agreed.

My palms suddenly decided to turn clammy and my heart pounded in my chest. I picked up all the papers, carefully reading each page number as I sorted them into order. I double-checked my work and hit the pile lightly against my desk to make sure that there were no uneven edges protruding from the pile. Sticking them into the stapler, I gave it a good solid punch, feeling some satisfaction from reorganizing the mess that I had made. Sighing heavily, I placed the packet on my desk and looked at her partially open office door knowing that I couldn’t stall any longer. I straightened my sweater, squared my shoulders and took several deep breaths to get my nervousness under control.

I reached into my drawer and pulled out the employee manual. I quickly scanned the pages under the company policy heading, searching for any rules prohibiting co-worker dating and found nothing. Feeling less nervous, I bookmarked the page with the post-it that Corwyn had left on the sheet music and tucked the manual under my arm as I walked into Penelope’s office.

“Wren, please close the door,” she told me. I studied Penelope where she sat behind her desk.
Wearing a pale coral business suit, classically tailored to fit her slender frame, she looked every bit the consummate professional. The diamond broach on her jacket lapel distracted me from my thoughts for a nanosecond. Her nails were done in a matching polish that completed the look and I felt oddly deficient in my gray slacks and hunter green sweater. I did as she asked and sat down at the seat in front of her desk, gripping the manual in my lap as if it were a life preserver.

“It’s come to my attention that you’ve grown rather close to my brother-in-law,” she began.

“We’re friends,” I replied, thinking it best to keep my answer simple.

“He thinks the world of you,” Penelope gave me a perfect smile, almost as perfect as the string of pearls adorning her slender neck.

“Really?” I asked, feigning slight surprise. “I’m very flattered.”

“He told me today about what happened last night at the casino.” She leaned forward and folded her hands on top of the desk. “He saved your life last night, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he did,” I returned her steady gaze. “He’s going two-for-two so far with that. I’m hoping he won’t have to do it a third time.”

Penelope pressed her lips together in a solid line as though she were in deep thought. Silence floated between us, growing denser by the second, each wondering what next to say.

“Wren, I can see no other way to address this than to be straightforward. Are you and Corwyn dating?”

There was the one hundred thousand dollar question hanging there between us. I pondered my options as I considered how to answer. I saw no reason to tell her of my growing emotions or to give her a play-by-play narration of my association with Corwyn. Then, my rebellious streak kicked in and added strength to my spin and a bit of spark to my tongue.

“No, Penelope,” I gave her a smile as I stabbed my fledgling emotions for Corwyn in the heart. “I am perpetually single.”

Her flawlessly shaped eyebrows rose in surprise at my response. Slowly nodding once, she rose from her seat to pour a cup of coffee from the pot near her desk. “I can appreciate your need for privacy, Wren. I’m sure you’ll understand if I ask that you keep your relationship with Corwyn discreet.”

“That's just it, Penelope,” I answered, giving her a helpless shrug. “There is no relationship except for a professional one.”

“I see,” She let her stern countenance melt away until a wistful look crossed her features. “I want you to know that there isn't a policy here at Archangelous prohibiting dating between colleagues.”

“Frankly, the last thing I'm ready for is any kind of dating. I just want to keep focused on family and friends.” I looked her in the eye, silently daring her to argue with me. Be careful what you wish for, the old saying goes. I got my wish granted in spades.

“You’ve worked here only a short while, but I hope that in time you’ll see me not only as your employer but also as a friend,” Penelope leaned forward, surprising me with her words. “Corwyn usually focuses solely on his work. I've never known him to take interest in anyone else until you came to work for us.”

“I see,” I didn't like where this conversation was heading. I feared Penelope would ask for a big hug. “I just wasn’t expecting this discussion today.”

Wren, you're turning into quite the liar, I thought wryly.

“I know, dear,” she replied soothingly. Her silky voice caused much of my worry to melt away, making me wonder if she shared Corwyn’s persuasive talents. “I’m very fond of you.”

“That's very kind of you, but—” I started.

She held up one manicured hand to stop me mid-sentence. “Let me finish, Wren. My brother-in-law isn’t an easy man to know. I just want you to know that if you ever need to talk that my door is always open to you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” First Selena and Jack, now Penelope. Everyone wanted to hitch me to some man and that was not what I needed. I wanted more time to get my life organized. The air between us was heavy and tense for several seconds. Looking for any excuse to get out of there, I looked for any reason to leave. “Is it all right if I get those packets to the department
heads?”
“Of course, hop to it.”
“Will do.”

I scampered out the door as fast as my legs would let me. Picking up the packets, I made my way to the various offices: dental, optical, pediatric, fund-raising, food distribution. Needing a breather, I decided to take my first break outside where I found Gretchen and Shannon at one of the picnic tables, enjoying the sun that just broke through the heavy cloud cover.

“Hey, woman! How goes it?” Gretchen greeted me.
“It goes crazy,” I replied, slumping down on the bench beside the blonde. I saw Shannon look up from her book, peering at me over the cover of her favorite author’s newest romance. “Wanna ride shotgun in this handbasket? It gets great gas mileage.”

“That bad of a day, huh?” Gretchen gave me a sympathetic smile.
“It's getting there fast,” I admitted.
“What was up with the P.D.A. this morning at the main doors?” she asked.
“P.D.A.?” I asked.
“Public display of affection with the Veep,” she gave me a knowing glance. “I want details.”

Gretchen looked at me in utter amazement. “You and Corwyn Darcy?”
I shrugged. “No details.”
“He kissed your hand this morning in front of God and everybody,” Shannon challenged pointedly. “Tell all.”
“Spill and tell all.”
“There isn’t anything to tell,” I responded, surprised by her sudden interest in my private life.
“Whoa!” Gretchen stopped Shannon before she could continue her inquisition. “Hang on. What went down last night?”
“After you and Nick left, Corwyn checked me out to see if I had a concussion. Then, he brought me home.”
“That's it?” Shannon asked, not believing me. “That's it! I knew he was gay.”
“He's not gay,” I gave her a sardonic glance.
“You say there isn't anything between you two. Then explain whey he was busy making eyes at you this morning. Hard to miss.”
“You saw what you wanted to see.”
“So, have you slept with him yet?” Shannon put down her book and fumbled with her barrette.
“I thumped Shannon solidly in the chest, causing a barrette to fall out of her black hair. “Not that it’s any of your business, but no!”
“When do you think it will happen?” Shannon put down her book and fumbled with her barrette.
“Geez, Shannon!” Gretchen exclaimed. “Could you be any more blunt?”
“Sorry!” she held up her hands defensively. “Girl talk.”
“I gotta know,” Gretchen leaned forward, her eyes twinkling with intent. “What’s he like?”
I felt my cheeks burn. Okay, I wanted to tell someone. “Charming and always a gentleman.”
“Nice,” she drawled the word. “So he's not all about fast cars and flashy cash?”
“No, not at all,” I gave them a smile. “He has substance.”
“Rich, hot and has personality. Damn. You go, girl.”

My flushed cheeks felt a though they caught fire at that moment and I’m not one to blush.

“Rich, hot and has personality. Damn. You go, girl.”
Shannon must have seen my face soften when I thought of green eyes that spoke volumes even when Corwyn didn’t say a word. “You're that into him, aren’t you?”
“I think he's intriguing.” I gave my best evasive answer.
Gretchen immediately saw through it and went for the kill. “How much into him are you?”
“Timber,” I said, slamming my hand on the picnic table to indicate how much I’d grown to care for Corwyn Darcy. I was tired of lying.
“Tired of lying. She’s got it bad. Uh-huh.” Gretchen nodded.

Gretchen held out her her hand, giving her a smug glance. “I was right, Gretch. Pay up.” Gretchen pulled a bill from her pocket, placing it in Shannon’s palm.
“From what I saw this morning, I’d say Hot Stuff does too.” Shannon quickly agreed.
“Liar, you’re scared,” Shannon said. I nodded quickly. She rubbed my shoulder to soothe my seriously fraught nerves. “Wren, it’s going to be okay. I was just razzing you earlier, but I’ve never heard anything bad about him.”
“I have to get back to the office,” I looked at my watch. “My break is over.”
“See you at lunch?”
“Not sure,” I answered over my shoulder. I went back inside the building and found my way back to my desk. I busied myself restocking the office supplies and typing up memos that Penelope had set on my desk for me to complete and sent. I rubbed my temples, trying to make sense of the bizarre, chaotic morning that I had experienced. I needed something to bring me back into sanity, some kind of escape.

“Hello,” a deep voice caught my attention. He leaned against the door frame of the office, arms crossed and a boyish grin on those handsome features.
“Hi,” I put the files away in the file cabinet next to my desk, too panicked to look at him.
“How are you doing?”
“Fine,” I lied.
“Sing to me.”
“What?” I looked at him as if he had just lost his mind.
“Sing to me, Wren.” Corwyn quietly urged me. “Please.”
“No,” I refused. “Got any aspirin?”
“You need to get away from here,” Corwyn's brow furrowed with worry. “You’re tense. Let me take you to lunch.”
I welcomed the escape I so desperately needed. Slinging my purse strap over my shoulder, I slammed shut the file drawer. “You don’t have to ask twice. Get me out of here.”
He gave me a quick nod, gently guiding me by the arm until we were in the employee parking lot. Opening the door for me, I slid into the sleek sports car, fumbling uneasily with the seat belt until I heard a solid metallic click. Sliding in beside me, Corwyn turned the ignition and the car roared to life. He wove effortlessly through lunch-hour traffic until we were on the north side of the city. Taking me to an out-of-the-way Greek cafe, I was thankful to get away from the hustle and bustle of work.

I looked at the menu and I noticed none of the prices were listed. If I had to ask how much an entrée cost, that meant that I couldn’t afford it. The restaurant oozed class and decorum with its Ionian pillars, polished granite floors and a marble fountain as it’s main centerpiece.

Leaning forward, he covered my hand with his. “Order whatever you want. I’m buying.”
“Corwyn, this place is expensive,” I muttered.
“I can afford it and you’re worth it. You survived this morning’s talk with Penelope?” he inquired, not taking his eyes off me.
“Barely,” I admitted. “I’m not used to getting the third degree.”
“She didn’t mean to upset you,” he gave my hand a squeeze that sent delicious thrills through my body. “She just worries about you. Penelope wants to be everybody’s mother.”
“I know she meant well, but it unnerved me,” I admitted. “I also got a barrage of questions from Shannon and Gretchen.”
“I know,” Corwyn nodded.
“I thought you couldn’t read minds.”
“I can’t. Heightened hearing is part of the cambion package,” Corwyn explained.
“Ever thought of working for the C.I.A.? You’d be a natural.” I retorted. “Next time, just ask.”
“You condense on a need-to-know basis, remember?” his voice was husky, laden with emotion. “I want to know everything but you only show me what you want me to see.”
“Now, I remember why I do that. It makes life a lot easier. I’ve been honest with you for the most part,” I felt guilty that I hadn’t told him everything about me, but I had to find the courage first to do that. I wasn’t ready to bare my soul to him just yet and I worried about my family’s safety. “I’m sorry, Corwyn. I’m not an open person that way. Please give me some time.”
“I have time.” He took my fingers and brought his lips to the back of my hand, his full lips teasing my skin with their feathery touch. “I just wish you had enough faith in me to share your heart as much as you do your opinions.”

“Opinions are like elbows,” I quipped. “Everyone has at least one or two.”

“You told Penelope that there isn’t anything between us,” Corwyn started, speaking in a soft tone. “I was ready to give up until I heard your conversation with your friends.”

“Stalker much?” I said darkly, wondering if he would deny the charge.

I noticed that our lips were only inches away from each other and I wanted to simply press mine to his, knowing his taste for the first time. I thought better of the impulse and began to draw away when he caught my face in his hands and held me there. Leaning forward, he pressed his lips to my ear.

“Do you think you’re the only with deepening feelings, Wren? If you do, then you’re wrong.”

“I don’t want to know.”

I felt as though his breath burnt me, as it’s sweet, smoky scent filled my senses. I heard the urgency in his voice that made me tremble in my seat and my heartbeat quicken. He placed my hand over his heart so that it’s steady rhythm vibrated beneath my palm. “Feel what you do to me.”

“Physical reaction, Corwyn,” I countered, pulling away from his inviting touch. Needing cool relief, I reached for my water glass and took several large swallows.

“Not physical, Wren. Mutual.” His voice was a velvet caress that compelled me to look at him. “Emotional. True.”

I dared to look at him and found that his eyes held tenderness like I had never seen. “Infatuation,” I argued. I threw Corwyn a skeptical glance, scoffing at the possibility that he might be feeling something deeper for me than friendship. Yet, in the deepest parts of my heart, I hoped that I was wrong.

“How can you be so sure?” his jade eyes went nova, burning a hole into my soul. His voice was liquid emotion to my senses, gently urging the truth from my troubled mind. I didn’t look away, besieged by a double onslaught of emotional intimacy and physical intensity. I tried to form my thoughts into words, attempting to express the complicated feelings that no single phrase could easily communicate. I saw his brow furrow with exasperation, uneasy tension surrounding him so thickly that I wanted to reach out and see if I could touch it. It shocked me to realize that Corwyn’s heart balanced on every word I spoke. If I said nothing, then it might break and shatter.

“Give me a minute. Let me get my thoughts together,” I urged him. I saw a smile replace the grimace that contorted his striking features. “I’m not comfortable with strong emotions, Corwyn. I’m happy to be absorbed in my work. I’m not accustomed to the kind of attention you’ve given me. I don’t completely understand why you have because we’re so different. Even if you were only human, we’d still live separate lives because you’re part of the ‘have’ crowd and I’m part of the ‘have-not’ scene. You’re sophisticated and wealthy while I’m just odd and definitely lower on the corporate ladder.”

“None of that is important when you find the other half of your soul. If you could only see what I see, Wren,” he sighed, a hint of sadness in his voice. “You walk in a room and heads turn. When you’re around, people pay attention to what you do and say. Believe me, you are not typical. You are extraordinary.”

“You say that now, Corwyn,” I couldn’t dare believe what he was saying. I’d lost my parents and Matthew. I couldn’t risk having my heart shattered a third time. I just wanted to end it here while I still had a chance to put together the pieces of my heart before a man who stole it away from me broke it. “I’m just the challenge you can’t win because I say no. I don’t want to be the next shiny toy that you throw away when I no longer entertain you.”

“I’d rather die than hurt you,” his eyes flamed bright ocher. “Never doubt that my heart belongs to you and I don’t want you to give it back.”

“Two for two,” I quipped lightly.

The server came and took our order. We didn’t speak much during lunch and I contemplated Corwyn’s words.
The benefit concert is this Sunday,” he mentioned casually as the server refilled our drink glasses and cleared away our empty plates.
“I know. I saw the duet that you left on my desk. We need to practice.”
“Agreed,” he gazed at me through hooded eyes, his expression indiscernible.
I grimaced at the thought of not being able to blend in with a choir. I love to sing but the thought of just my voice and one other made me anxious. “I’m nervous.”
“Why?”
“So much to learn in so little time.”
“What are you doing tomorrow night?”
Tomorrow was poker night with Jack and his buddies so the house would be full of people, beer and cigar smoke. The thought of playing server to a bunch of drunk card players didn’t thrill me in the least. “What did you have in mind?”
“The day after tomorrow after work, why don’t you come out to the house? Spend the evening with me. We’ll practice.”
“Not a problem,” I took a sip of my soda, feeling the cool liquid soothe my throat. “Tomorrow is poker night, and one of his friends is trying to set me up with her son. It’s not something I want to go through so practice is a better alternative.”
“Just tell Jack that you’re going on a date with me.”
“Oh, hell no!” I exclaimed. “I do that and he’ll be doing a happy dance on the poker table because I’ve hooked up with a man. No, we keep this just between us.”
“You’ll take on a mugger but you’re petrified of your grandfather’s matchmaking efforts,” he scoffed. “Do other people's opinions or what they think of you bother you that much?”
I remembered well Penelope’s words to me in the office earlier that morning. “Yes.”
“You only let people see what you want them to see,’ Corwyn covered my hand with his. “If nothing else, you’re consistent.”
All eyes were on us when came back to work after lunch and Corwyn made no attempt to hide his interest in me as we entered the building. He opened the door for me, gallantly bowing as he held it, waiting on me to enter. I realized that I no longer kept tangible personal boundaries around me as we walked down the corridor back to the office. He was only a few inches away from me and I decided I didn't mind it.

As we entered Penelope's office, she informed us of a last minute meeting to work out the final details for the benefit concert being held that Sunday. She had one of the other office staff take over directing the choir, insisting that I accompany her to take notes and make final preparations for the event.

With pad and paper in hand, we made our way to the conference room where I saw three empty chairs in a row. I noticed Penelope sat to the left and Corwyn to the right, leaving me the one in the middle so I sat between them. As the department heads bantered back and forth about lighting, pledges and eleventh-hour advertising, I scribbled furiously the meeting’s content in my notepad so I could type it up for a report for Penelope’s files. I was all too aware of Corwyn’s effect me as heat flushed through me in intermittent flashes. Part of me wanted to skip the meeting and find a quiet place to hide for a few decades.

“Focus, Wren.” I muttered under my breath, forcing my mind to concentrate on the meeting and do my job.

I dared to look up from my notepad once, stealing a peak at him. He sat beside me, casually reclining in the chair beside me, taking notes. He glanced back at me through hooded eyes, his eyes sparking with bright amber. A sly grin crossed his features and he gave me a slight nod.

As soon as the meeting ended, I clutched my notepad for dear life and exited the conference room, intent on being good and typing up the report before the end of the day. As others exited, I felt peering eyes upon us and it was all I could do to keep from cringing.

“We survived,” Corwyn said softly, his voice deep, rich and sultry.

“Speak for yourself. I think I was voted off the island,” I said with more resolution than I felt. I walked faster than he did by a few steps, wanting to find some reprieve from the mounting intimacy we shared. It thrilled and overwhelmed me, making it difficult to concentrate. I needed the comfort zone of paperwork and routine to keep me from doing something impulsive.

Sitting at my computer, I lost myself in the rhythm of condensing the meeting notes and making edits to the report.

“What?” startled by the disruption, I snapped to attention to find Nick leaning over my shoulder, reading my report.

“It’s Time to go home, Girl Friday,” Nick quipped, chuckling when I stiffened and nearly rocketed out of my chair. “There is life beyond five o’ clock, you know.”

“True,” I agreed, saving my file and turning off my computer.

“What are you doing tonight?”

“Going home and taking a nice long bath. It’s been quite the day,” I sighed, reaching for my purse and slinging it over my shoulder.

“Do you want to go for a drink after work?”

“No, not tonight,” I gave him a helpless shrug. “Sorry, I have a ton of things waiting for me at home.”

“Like what?”

“Laundry, dinner and some sheet music to study,” I held up Corwyn’s score. “I have to memorize this before Sunday.”
“You’re a workaholic, woman.”
“Much love for the workaholic,” I retorted. “Be nice.”
“No way,” Nick laughed. “Teasing you is too much fun.”
“Careful,” I playfully warned him. “Paybacks are hell and my name is Payback.”
“Yeah, you and what army?”
“According to the commercial, it only takes one.”
His face hardened, a frown wiping the smile away that had brightened his features. “So, what’s up with you and Darcy?”
“Nothing is up me and ‘Darcy’, ” I quipped. “Should there be?”
“I thought you were weren’t ready to get hot and heavy with anybody.”
“I’m not.”
“Didn’t look that way went you entered the building,” Nick replied.
“Look, if you want, ask him out. The worst he’ll say is, ‘no,’ Nick.”
“Darling, if only I could, but that man has only eyes for you,” he made a dramatic gesture before pointing at me. “Heaven help anyone who should get in his way,”
“Funny you should say that,” I muttered.
“He was practically all over you today when you came back from lunch, Wren.” Nick’s mouth was a hard line as a hint of anger laced his words. The phrase ‘green with envy’ came to mind as I realized that Nick Cho resented Corwyn’s interest in me.
“You’re jealous,” I fought the urge to smack the semi-sneer off of his face. I studied Nick; his normally dark eyes spat neon green sparks. My vision blurred for a moment and I rubbed my eyes to get rid of the fuzziness in front of me. Nick’s voice boomed in my ears, the metallic echo pierced my eardrums causing sharp pain to shoot through my inner ear canal.
“Maybe, a little,” Nick measured a small space of air between his thumb and index finger. “But, Baby Doll, you’re still working that farm girl angle, and Corwyn is all city smooth and groove. He’s bad for you.”
“I’m a big girl, Nick. Don’t worry about me.”
“He’s like a pyro and you’re the matches,” he gave me a rueful look as if I had been damned. “I don’t get what you see in him.”
“He knows better than to play with matches,” I quipped with a wink. “Who knows? Maybe my life’s calling is to be a firefighter. Later, Nick.”
I felt his stare heavy on my back as I exited the office and headed for the parking lot. I left as fast as I could put Nick behind me, needing to escape the day’s stress. I debated whether I should walk to the bus stop, call Jack for a ride or see if Corwyn was still in the building. If Nick saw this morning’s ‘P.D.A.” as Gretchen had called it, then how many others in the office had seen it? After today’s talk with Penelope, I feared what her family might think of the situation. How was I supposed to handle this and how would it affect my employment? I worried. No, I strategized on how to contain the collateral damage. Avoidance is a great defense mechanism and I decided I wanted to evade anything that might make my nerves fry any more than they already had. I picked up my pace to make it to the bus stop in time when I saw Corwyn waiting at the front door.
“Gee, Imagine meeting you here,” I wisecracked casually.
“Imagine that,” Corwyn’s eyes smoldered with things unspoken at which I could only guess. “Did you finish your report?”
“Just barely,” I admitted.
“How was the rest of your day?”
“Peachy,” I said as neutrally as my frazzled nerves would allow.
“Liar,” Corwyn chuckled. His eyes left mine, watching Nick intently as he passed us on his way to his car. His watchful eyes changed into a glower as the bright yellow Beetle pulled out of the parking lot.
“Easy, Hot Stuff.” I teased, trying to break the simmering darkness I saw burning in his eyes.
“If he’s giving you trouble, Wren, just say the word,” Corwyn snapped his fingers; a small crimson
flame appeared between his thumb and index finger. “I can make him disappear and make it look like an accident.”

“No worries, Corwyn. I can handle Nick just fine,” I watched the flame he had miraculously produced, seeing no matches or lighter in his hand. A streak of apprehension jolted me out of my jovial mood as I covered my hand with his and yanked it down to his side. “What are you doing? You can’t go around advertising that you’re a walking Zippo.”

“No one can see me do that but you and my family,” Corwyn's eyes were bright and tawny, a boyish grin crossing his features as he blew out the errant flame lighting his index finger. “I don’t want him annoying you.”

“Listening, were you?”

“Enough to know he’s bothering you,” his expression became impossible to read, his voice low in my ears.

“No,” I said firmly. “He’s just worried about me. He’s harmless, Corwyn. Don’t you even think about hurting him or I will personally hunt you down and kick your -”

His eyes abruptly shifted from flame to mossy green, the sparkle in his eyes melted away at my sharp response. “I’d never hurt an innocent, not even one as irritating as Nick Cho.”

I gave him a scathing glance that signaled my doubt in the truth of that statement. I walked away from Corwyn, seething at the fact that he could casually joke about hurting another human being. His remark gave credibility to the concept that it was dangerous just being around him.

In a blur faster than my eyes could track, Corwyn stood beside me. “You are ready to doubt me after I saved your life.”

“And you’re quick to joke about taking one,” I shot. “You just threatened a man's life, Corwyn.”

“I meant it only in jest, Wren” His eyes darkened with growing anger.

“Did you?”

“Yes,” the word came out as a single resigned sigh. “Why must I be drawn to a sharp-tongued shrew who doubts all men and their good intentions?”

“Why am I stalked by a pyrotechnic creature who can turn serial arsonist with the snap of his fingers?”

“Wonderful, I'm obsessed and you're paranoid,” Corwyn threw up his hands in exasperation.

“What a wonderful set of neuroses we make.”

“Are you kidding me?” I scoffed.

“Let me make it up to you. I'll give you a ride home.”

I glowered at the flaming Adonis standing before me, debating if I should ride with him or just take the bus. “The voices in my head are telling me to avoid you.”

“Maybe you should,” Corwyn agreed. “You've always said that you are crazy, but not stupid.”

“Promise me that you'll never hurt an innocent or even mention it around me,” Wren, you have my word,” his eyes filled with ardent intensity that dispelled my fury in an instant. The words lingered in the air, anxious and expectant, as he awaited my answer. Corwyn brought his fingers to my chin as he pressed a gentle kiss to my brow.

“All’s forgiven. I forget sometimes who you are and what you can do. I can't judge you by the same standards as I would a normal man.”

“I don't want your judgment, only your faith and affection,” Corwyn countered.

We rode in his car in silence as I focused my thoughts on anything but the man beside me. “I don’t want you to see me at my worst, Wren. I’m not the same man I once was but I’m not the man yet that I want to be.”

“I’m figuring that out,” I said as neutrally as I could.

“What are you thinking?” Corwyn eyes became narrow slits.

“You really can be dangerous, can’t you?”

“Yes,” he said shortly as we pulled into the long winding driveway that led to the farmhouse.

“Too bad you don’t come with a warning label that says, ‘Corwyn can be hazardous to your health,’” I replied dryly, meeting Corwyn’s stony gaze head-on. “I also need to be honest with you.
I haven’t told you things that you need to know if we’re going to continue our… friendship.”
“I’ve seen your heart and felt your emotions,” he gave me a solemn grin. “I wish you would trust me enough to show me everything.”
“There are things about me that you don’t know that will change everything,” I felt my teeth clench as the butterflies in my stomach turned into stinging hornets. “Trust me.”
“I already do.”
I turned to face him, unclasping my seat belt. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”
I didn’t break my gaze from his green eyes because I didn’t know what to do next if I did. The emotions inside me churned, making my thoughts scatter. I heard a clap of thunder in the distance as a downpour pelted the roof of the Aston Martin. His head tilted to one side, one auburn brow rose in question.

A blinding column of light struck the looming oak tree that graced Jack’s front yard, the strike of the lightning loud enough to make me scream when it’s explosion filled the air around us. A startled yelp filled the car and I realized that it was mine as a heavy tree branch dropped on the hood of the sports car.
Corwyn raised his hand, as if willing the lightning silent. My body trembled from the shock of the noise and I sat there, unable to move or think. Finally, when my mind found it’s way back to calm, I looked at him. “Did you do the…?” I whirled my finger around in a circle. “The lightning thing?”
“That wasn’t me,” he looked at me, surprised as I was by the unexplained bolt that struck so close to it. “I only made it stop.”

We stared at each other, and the quiet between us deepened into an unspoken understanding of trust. The small jolts of energy that had teased me all day exploded between us, neither of us moving until another thunderclap broke our silent spell. I watched Corwyn step out of the car, smoothly heaving the heavy limb to the several feet away from us. I stood in silence as my mind attempted to process the feat of exceptional strength, grasping the concept that Corwyn wasn’t as human as I had naively assumed.
“Only a few minutes ago, you told me that only your family and I can see you manipulate fire?” I knew the time had arrived to breech the sensitive subject that had plagued my conscience all day. “Isn’t that unusual? I mean, you’re able to hide your abilities from the rest of the world. Why is it that I can see them? Haven’t you wondered?”
Corwyn stood rigid as a statue when he heard my question, mindless of the rain drenching him, and his silence confirmed that the same questions had also crossed his mind. An impassive mask hid whatever he was thinking and I couldn’t figure out what he was feeling. A muscle in his jaw twitched, revealing that I had struck a nerve.

“Wren, Jack’s waiting for you,” his voice was ragged, his breathing harsh. “I don’t want to go,” I admitted softly. “How many humans do you know that can see what you do? Doesn’t that bother you?”
His brows furrowed as if he were in deep thought or pain. Ignoring my questions, Corwyn reached between the bucket seats, handing me an umbrella. “Take this, you’ll need it.”

“Don’t dismiss or ignore what I just said, damn it!” I stomped my foot with growing frustration. “I’m not twelve!”

“No, think about it. Now is neither the time nor the place for this discussion,” Corwyn’s voice dropped an octave, the foreboding tone warned me not to press the matter. My instinct demanded that I listened to it. Of course, I didn’t.

“No, think about it. I don't know about you, but we're fire and gasoline when mixed. We fight and bicker, yet, we're drawn to each other. I see things no one should see and it's difficult to resist the pull. Aren't you the least bit curious as to why? I know I am and I want to discover the truth.”
“You're getting drenched,” Corwyn reminded me as we I stood in the rain, yelling at him. “Given your current emotional state, it isn't wise.”

“You think?” I retorted, holding out my hand to catch the rain droplets pelting us. “Let me walk you to the door,” Corwyn opened the umbrella over me as he offered me his arm. Leaning forward, his lips grazed my earlobe and his warm breath tickled my sensitive skin. “Wren, tomorrow: honesty without condition. We’ll talk, I promise.”
“All right,” I gave him a small smile as we walked arm in arm to the porch. We stood on the front porch with rain falling down around us and I didn’t care if I became waterlogged. “I’m holding you to that promise.”

Charged ions energized the wet air swirling around us and I thought that my legs might give way if I continued standing there with Corywn. One of his hands slowly came up to the nape of my neck, holding me gently as his fingers traced a teasing path along the neckline of my sweater. “Good,” I felt pinpricks of heat along my collarbone, finding that my pendant’s amethyst gleamed brightly. Corywn abruptly drew away his hand, shoving it into his slacks pocket as he turned away and strode swiftly back to his car. I fumbled with my keys intent on unlocking the front door, finding great feminine satisfaction in the knowledge that I befuddled Corwyn Darcy as much as he did me. Feeling drained, I decided that a quick nap before the poker game was just the way to recharge my energies.

I set my old alarm clock, kicked off my shoes and took refuse in the comfort of my bed. Closing my eyes, it wasn’t long until I fell into a deep sleep that my tired body needed. Corwyn followed me into my dreams but, without the dread and stress that haunted me all throughout the day. His presence there thrilled me with the same primal arc of energy that had flowed all day between us. The short catnap rejuvenated my body but did nothing for my racing thoughts. I changed out of my slacks and sweater into a comfortable pair of faded blue jeans and a purple tee shirt. I went to the kitchen and started preparing the much-needed power snacks for Jack’s poker buddies. Within a few minutes I had a chip and dip tray adorned with spinach dip and salsa, a bowl of pretzels ready to be served and a Crock-Pot filled with barbequed little smokies ready for hungry stomachs.

“Did Corwyn Darcy bring you home?” Jack asked, reaching across me to grab a handful of tortilla chips.

“The one and only,” I grimaced, playfully slapping his hand as he raided the snacks. “If you eat all the food now, there won’t be any left for the guests.”

“There’s plenty here and you know it,” he chuckled.

He dipped one of the chips into the spinach dip before popping it into his mouth. “What’s going on with you two?”

“I not sure yet, Jack.” I tried putting all of the day’s events into a neat list and came up with nothing. “I’m trying to figure it out.”

“Don’t overthink it,” he replied casually, crunching happily on his handful of chips. “Just don’t limit your options. He’s not the only guy out there, you know.”

“What if I’m making a mistake?” I looked into those wise, dark eyes longing for some answers. “He’s the first man in three years that has made me feel alive. I care about him. Deeply.”

“How does he treat you?” Jack asked neutrally.

“Perfect gentleman,” I answered truthfully. “Hasn’t even tried to cop a feel.”

“Is he gay?” he asked, surprised by my blunt statement. “Or blind?”

“Neither,” I pondered Jack’s statement. “He’s kind and drop dead gorgeous.”

“Yeah, from what I hear at from the girls at work, he’s what they call…a hottie?” Jack posed the question. “Is that what you kids call somebody good-looking these days?”

I gave wry chuckle. “Pretty much. Back in your day it was ‘fox.’”

“Lingo changes, Rascal, hormones don’t.”

“Jack, are we human?” I asked quietly. “Or are Solomonari just creatures that appear that way?”

“That’s an abrupt subject change,” Jack’s thick black brows rose in unison.

“Go with the flow, Jack. Don’t overthink it.”

“What do you think?” he asked, his annoyance obvious.

“I don’t know what to think,” I held my hands out in a helpless gesture. “Truly? Are we human?”

“Wren Elizabeth Bryant, you’re the only one in this family who’s worth her weight in salt and you ask a harebrained question like that.”

“Answer me yes or no,” I stood akimbo in front of him. “Am I human?”

“Stars and garters, Wren.” Jack let forth a heavy sigh. “Lingo changes, Rascal, hormones don’t.”

“Are we human?” I asked quietly. “Or are Solomonari just creatures that appear that way?”

“Go with the flow, Jack. Don’t overthink it.”

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“Answer me yes or no,” I stood akimbo in front of him. “Am I human?”

“Stars and garters, Wren.” Jack let forth a heavy sigh. Laying a large, callused hand gently on my shoulder, he gave a single nod. “Yes and no. Yeah, we have bodies. We’re born. We’re ninety-
eight point six degrees. We come from human stock, but our powers, if you wanna call ‘em that, makes us more than human, but not inhuman. We live a long time and don’t age much. But, yeah, boil it down to the basics and we’re human with bells and whistles. Ninety-eight percent Homo Sapien and two percent of Mother Nature’s can of whoop-ass.”

Jack’s homespun way of putting things made me feel comfortable, no matter how difficult the subject matter. I gave him a bear hug and clung tightly to him, his discomfort with strong emotion be damned. I admired my grandaddy at that moment, wishing I possessed Jack's rugged stoicism and unflappable demeanor. Never before had I felt more elated, frightened and confused in all of my life.

“Go set up the poker table, Jack.” I pointed the clock hanging on the kitchen wall above the stove. “Your guests will be here soon.”

A wayward curl fell into my eyes and I reached up to brush it out of my eyes. As Jack turned to leave, he froze in mid-motion as I grabbed the snack tray. He reached out, pushing back my hair until he exposed my hairline. Leaning forward he studied the white stripe above my right eye.

“Wren, how long have you had this?”

Uh-oh. I scowled at his examination and pulled away from his touch knowing it was Time to come clean. “I found it this morning.”

“Why you didn’t tell me?” Jack pushed back his Stetson, his dark eyes boring into me. I wanted to shrink and hide under the table, but I never listened to my instincts. I pulled the curl to it's full length and let go it it, letting it bounce back into a it's natural coil.

“I planned on telling you,” I retorted. “I needed time to figure this out before I started telling everyone, “hey, I’ve inherited a skunk stripe. I'm special now.’ ”

“Explains a lot,” he muttered, tipping back his black cowboy hat and studied me with those insightful eyes. “All the weird happenings, the strange questions.”

“I know,” I sat down the snack track, turning to Jack. “What do I do?”

“Just like you do anything else, you put one foot in front of the other and just keep going,” he motioned to the upstairs. “I wanna show you something.”

Surprised by his unusually quiet response to my admission, I mutely followed him upstairs until we reached his room. He went to a bookcase, pulling an old shoebox off the top shelf and setting it on the bed. He rummaged through several black and white photographs until he showed me one of a man in military uniform.

“Jack?” I gave the picture back to him. “Don’t do cryptic with me. Say it straight.”

“I had my whole life planned, Wren,” he sighed. “I was a Captain in the Army, a surgeon with a promising career. I was going places. My brothers and sisters already had come into their own and were living the magic life. Me? I had it all planned. Then, boom! I got the white streak and strange things happened around me, top brass started getting suspicious. So, I came back home, went to veterinary school and opened up a practice. I married and had a good life. People started noticing that I didn't age, so I left for a few years and changed my name. I came back when I married Emma and we bought the old farmstead from a couple that had kept it in good shape. This was the house I grew up in.”

“What is your point?” I grew impatient with his cryptic talk.

“Wren. I think your head’s made of wood,” Jack knocked lightly on my skull. “Life’s like poker, Wren. Sometimes the Powers-That-Be deal you a great hand and sometimes you get squat. You work with the hand you’re dealt. Now, you can bluff or you can bet blind. Some folks fold before their hand is over and don’t know if they might have won. What are you going to do, Wren, work with the hand you have or fold and quit?”

“I don’t play poker but I’m not a quitter.”

“That’s my girl,” Jack smiled at me.

you. Take a chance and determine your own course.”
“How do I do that?” I asked softly.
“You were blessed with a gift that can help people,” Jack gently placed his hands on my shoulders.
“That’s what Solomonari do: we help people, protect the innocent and help the helpless. My calling is helping farmers with their spring calves, old ladies with their toy dogs, and kids with their hamsters. It ain’t glamorous, but it makes their lives better.”
“What can I do?” I gestured helplessly.
“What can you do, Rascal?” he asked quietly. “What is your gift?”
“I see things.”
“Past and future?” he probed gently.
I shook my head. “No, I see things as they really are. I see creatures that aren’t human, but try to be. When people are jealous or upset, I see emotions swirling around them like a toxic cloud. I hear and feel things that no one else perceives. I know I’m not crazy, Jack, but this isn't like any ability I've seen. I thought all of our powers were nature-related.”
“They are,” Jack gave a thoughtful nod. “Fancy word for what I do is theriomancer, I talk to animals. Della's a psychomancer who talks to ghosts. Your brother, Justin, he's a meteomancer who controls the weather.”
“No,” he chuckled. “A Seer,”
“I'm not ready.”
“Yes, you are,” he poked me in the chest. “You were ready the moment you said that want ad called to you. It’s in your blood, Wren. Now, you learn to work with it,”
“How? It gives me headaches and blurry vision,” I shook my head.
“First, quit fighting it,” Jack pointed at my pendant. “When it happens, realize what's going on and let it happen. Fighting yourself is what gets you into trouble,”
“I like doing things my way.”
“For all the good it's done you,” he huffed.
“I get it from your side of the family.”
A wide grin spread across his features, deep dimples highlighting his ruggedly handsome features.
“Yup, I reckon that's about right.”
“Second, don’t try to force it, either. Just because you can see what's true doesn't mean you understand what you see. Don't rush to snap decisions, Wren. Be the woman you are and do your research, that's how you'll make the best of your gift.”
A loud knock at the front door interrupted our discussion and it couldn't have happened at a worse time.
Rushing downstairs, I opened it to see Selena and Logan standing on the porch with a covered dish containing pasta salad and another Crock-Pot of something that smelled delicious.
“Selena, Logan! Come on in!” Jack bellowed from the kitchen as soon as he saw them.
Jack when he walked forward and heartily pumped Logan’s hand. I watched the knowing glance pass between he and Selena as he glanced at her over Logan’s shoulder. I motioned Logan over to me and gave him a rueful glance
“In spades,” he smiled and held up a deck of cards.
“Are we just going to stand by and let them do this to us?” I challenged him.
He held up his hands in a defensive gesture, his silver eyes twinkled with merriment. “I’m not complaining.”
“Arrgh,” I growled in frustration as I watched him smirk. I motioned Logan and his mother into the kitchen, pointing to the kitchen counter where they could plug in the Crock-Pot and place the pasta salad. Logan placed the Crock-Pot next to the other one filled with barbeque sauce and little smokies.
“How are you?” his deep voice soothed my edgy nerves.
“Hungry.” I heard my stomach growl.
“How did you research go?” he pushed his gold spectacles up the bridge of his straight, model-
perfect nose.
“I found out what I needed to know,” I dodged the question, not wanting to get specific.
“Selena, I don’t think this is gonna work,” Jack quipped lightly, putting his arm around my shoulders. “Wren’s too smart.”
“She needs a good man in her life,” she shamelessly motioned to Logan and I stifled a chuckle as I watched him cringe. He wasn’t enjoying the intrusive efforts of his mother to play Cupid anymore than I appreciated Jack’s bumbling attempts at matchmaking. “There’s a good single man right in front of her and she doesn’t realize it.”
“She’s got her eyes on someone else,” Jack motioned helplessly.
“Who?” Selena inquired.
I quickly cupped my hand over Jack’s mouth before he could blurt out the answer. “Jack, it’s my business. So, please, for the love of all that’s holy, SHUT UP!”

Within a few minutes, three more of Jack’s friends arrived with sandwiches and a hankering to play some Texas Hold ‘em. I found solace in the kitchen preparing snacks and serving drinks while everyone else decided to entice Lady Luck’s favor. Bringing out some of Jack’s homemade dandelion wine, I made sure that everyone had a full glass of the best wine in Lancaster County. He gave me a quick nod and they continued dealing cards, calling hands and making bets. By the end of the night, dishes littered the poker table and the trail of destruction led into the kitchen, but I was happy that everyone had a good time. I loaded the last of the dirty dishes into the dishwasher and began wiping down the counters when Jack asked me to come join them.
“Sorry, can’t!” I yelled as I pushed the start button and the dishwasher roared to life.
“Need some help?” A deep, low voice cut through the loud churning of the dishwasher. Leaning against the doorway looking fit and dark was Logan Rohan.
“Sure,” I knew the kitchen wasn’t going to protect me for long. I threw a dish towel at him, pointing to the counter cleaner next to the sink. Motioning the length of the counters, I gave him a grin. “Start wiping.”
“Aye-aye, Captain.” Giving me a mock salute, Logan did as I asked. Within the hour, the dishes were done and I dried them rather than wait another hour for them to air dry. I glanced over at Logan who held two pots in each hand, thinking he looked like a lost child. “Wren, where do these go?”
“Put them in the drawer beneath the oven,” I pointed to the rarely used broiler drawer. I busied myself putting away plates and cups when I felt him brush up behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I saw him smiling down at me. “So, who’s the lucky guy?”
“Who?” I asked, trying to reach the top shelf where I normally stored the snack tray.
“The one you’re seeing that you don’t won’t let Jack talk about,” Logan took the snack tray out of my hands, easily placing it on the shelf too high for me to reach. I crossed my fingers behind my back.
“Someone at work.”
“Does he have a name?”
“Corwyn Darcy?”
“Darcy?” I watched his eyebrows nearly fly off his face when he gave me an incredulous glance. “The one and only.”
“That fills in the missing pieces,” Logan replied as he shut the cupboard door. “Now, I know why you were doing all of that research.”
“I know your family doesn’t care the Darcys.”
“That’s an understatement,” he gave me a cryptic look, pushing up the gold spectacles up the straight bridge of his nose.
“Are you going to say anything to Jack?” I found myself asking the question before I had Time to think better of it.
“That’s your job, not mine,” Logan studied me, his silver eyes clouded by unreadable emotion. “You’re a grown woman, you know the risks and you can make your own decisions. Mom and Jack haven’t seen each other for a long time and I don’t want to be the bearer of bad news. She’s had a great time and I’d hate to give her extra worry to carry.”
“Thank you,” I resisted the urge to hug Logan.
“Will you be coming up to the shop again?” Logan asked as he hung the damp dishtowel on the rack by the sink.
“I don’t know,” I evaded. My nerves were still deep-fried from the day’s events and I didn’t want to commit to any action. I just wanted to lay my head down and a soft, comfy pillow.
“Be careful,” Logan’s voice was low and solemn. “There’s a bit of truth in every legend.”

The night wound down and we took a long time in saying our goodbyes. I watched the literal sparks fly when Selena planted a lingering kiss on Jack’s cheek. Red and cherry-hued flashes flitted in the air as her lips brushed against his stubbly cheek. I knew that something was brewing between them and I wondered if their awkward matchmaking attempts were just a ruse to find ways to spend time together.

Logan’s silver eyes held me in their gaze for several seconds before he gave me a hug and a quick peck on the cheek. “Be safe, Wren.”
I couldn’t miss the solemn warning in his gaze. I nodded as I returned his hug. “I will, Logan. No worries.”

I intended on returning to the kitchen to put away the rest of the dishes and silverware when Jack stood in front of me, blocking the doorway. “Wren, hang on a second.”
I wondered how hard it might be for me to barricade myself in the bathroom rather have to deal with Jack. Logan indicated that he wouldn’t mention anything about my findings to him and I wondered if Logan had gone back on his word.

“How are you holding up?”
“I’m fine,” I looked for any excuse to be alone and I pointed past him to the kitchen. “I still have to finish up the cleaning.”
“We can start training right here at home, Wren.” he quickly assured me. “Now, that you have your abilities, you’ll need to learn how to use them. When invisible things realize you can see them, they look back at you. You’re going to have to know how to defend yourself.”

I thought of all that I had witnessed in the last three weeks. At first, I thought I saw what the Darcys did simply because I was a Solomonar. Now, I realized that I specifically saw what the did because of my particular talent. That realization both fascinated and frightened me.

“Agreed.”

“Riding the bus isn’t the best way to get out of a hairy situation, you’re going to need transportation,” Jack rubbed his chin.
“This, I know. I’ve been saving money for a down payment on a car. Nick from work offered to sell me his Volkswagen Beetle for five grand.
“Tin can,” he scoffed. “You wouldn’t mind a used minivan, would you?”
“Minivan?” my ears perked up at the magic word.
“Emma had one that she used to bring home whatever piece of furniture she purchased for the house,” Jack shrugged. “It’s older, but it’s a good, solid vehicle. What have you got in savings?”
“Almost fifteen hundred,” I mused.
“I’ll sell it to you for two grand and you can make payments,” Jack offered. “I know you won’t let me give it to you, but I think Emma would want you to have it.”
“That’s a deal I can accept,” I agreed. “I’ll write you the check, just hand me a pen.”
“Just remember, life goes on, Wren. Just put one foot in front of the other. Life isn’t always magic, just reality.”

“Hearing that coming from you, that’s a first,” I wrapped my arms tightly around my practical, earthy grandfather. “I knew there was a reason I loved you. Thanks, Jack.”

Jack isn’t one to linger and he isn’t comfortable with strong emotions, but I didn’t care at the moment. Slowly, he returned my hug as he cleared his throat. “Anytime.”

He awkwardly cleared his throat before he released me from his bear hug. I stepped back, noticing the pensive expression frozen on his strong features. His jaw was set and his eyes narrowed, his black brows came together, and blue orbs danced around him like fireflies. A buzz tingled along my skin as the dancing spheres flitted between us. I knew blue was the color of the chakra of
thought and intelligence. I truly appreciated the education I had received at Scholomance in that moment. For the first time in my life, I understood what the school taught me wasn’t mumbo jumbo, but concrete information about how to use my newfound abilities. Instinct told me Jack was deep in thought but about what I wasn’t sure.

“What are you thinking, Jack?”

“It’s time I gave you something, Rascal,” he said gruffly, walking over to the bureau that had held the ancient photograph. Rummaging through the drawers, he pulled out a blue velvet ring box and handed it to me.

“What’s this?” I said, taking it from him.

“Open it.”

Confused by his cryptic manner, I cautiously opened the small box. Setting in black satin was a small copper ring inlaid with amethyst on each side and an octagonal star engraved on the metal oval in the center. In the center of the eight-pointed star was a small oval amethyst.

“Is this what I think it is?” I asked, a strange reverence falling over me.

“I had seen the design before, on Della’s right ring finer, on Justin’s middle finger of his left hand. Glancing over, I noticed that Jack wore a similar ring on his index finger. “Is this the Ring of Solomon?”

“One of many,” he replied. “It was your mother’s ring. Tell me what you know, Wren, this is serious. What do you know about it?”

“When Solomon decided to build the temple in 930 B.C., he received a ring that allowed him to command anyone to do his will, talk to animals, control the weather, as well as Djinn and spirits.”

As I spoke the words, everything fell into place. Della spoke to spirits, Jack with animals and Justin controlled the weather. “Your natural ability doesn't come for the ring, does it?”

“It did in the beginning. These days, we're born with most of our powers, but a Solomonari Ring still provides protection from demons, genies and other spirits.”

Cambion, too? I silently wondered.

“Will it hurt them?” I asked in a small voice.

“Not unless you want it to,” Jack assured me. “It also works on Regulars just fine. Once you get used to it, you'll be able to control humans if you need to. But, Wren, messing with free will isn't what we do,”

“I get that,” I assured him. “Unless someone is going to harm an innocent, we leave well-enough alone.”

“Exactly,” he motioned to me. “Put it on, it’s time.”

“Jack, do you believe Cambions are evil?” I angled the ring, watching the light glint off the faceted stones.

“Not sure,” Jack shook his head. “But, if you listened to my half-brother, Garrett. Every one of them ought to be lynched.”

“Let me guess, he was part of the Accords made back in 1923 with the Darcys?” There, it was out. Jack knew. I watched his face go pale beneath his deep tan and his body go rigid.

“You know about that, huh?” he shrugged.

“You know me,” I chuckled darkly. “Badger wearing lipstick. You knew I’d find out.”

“Figured as much,” he sighed. “That’s why I volunteer three times a week at the Foundation. When I found out the Darcys were back in town, I wanted to keep an eye on them without them knowing who I am. All I’ve seen them do is help people. I know Tristan pretty damn well, Wren. I’ve never seen him or his family hurt anyone. So, I guess I’ll just keep an open mind.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” My voice rose in volume, my heart beat hard in my chest as my anger grew.

“Need-to-know basis, Wren.” Jack was silent for a few seconds before he continued. “I never thought you’d come into your own. I gave you your grandmother’s protection amulet, I thought that was the end of it. Then, you showed me that white streak and I knew it was time.”

“They’re not evil,” I swallowed, trying to get rid of the dryness in my throat. “They’re Cambions. They’re half-human.”
“Maybe, maybe not.” Jack shrugged. “But, you've come into your power now, Rascal. They'll figure it out if you stare too long or say the wrong thing.”
Oops, too late.
“You don't mind me seeing a Cambion?”
“As far as I can tell, the Darcys aren't victims of their births; they're masters of their fates. You have a good head on your shoulders, Wren. If Corwyn causes any trouble, I can take care of him easily enough,” he looked away chuckling. “Can’t really preach. My first girlfriend was a fairy,” “Humans can be evil,” I shrugged. “Elizabeth Bathory, Adolph Hitler, my freshman math teacher.” “Just be careful and keep your mouth shut,” Jack advised.
“Are you going to greet with a shotgun the next time you see Corwyn?” I scoffed. “Thought about it,” Jack chuckled and nodded toward the ring. “That ring isn't just protection, Wren. It's your legacy, your birthright. If he sees you with it, he's going to figure things out. His family may have peaceful intentions, but they might have something different to say if they see that on your finger. Get to know him first before you show him your hands.” I stared at the ring, considering my options. “Do I still get to keep my job, pay bills, and deal with normal life?”
“As normal of life as any of us can have.”
I slipped on the ring, deciding that it worked best on my right ring finger. “Does it matter how I wear it?”
“You're a southpaw, Wren. Your receptive hand for you is your right. Go with what feels right.”
“I don’t feel any different.”
“Magic isn’t all about explosions. Ours is subtle,” Jack let out a heavy sigh. “I don’t know how Corwyn or his family feels about our kind. Garrett was involved in the Accords and that was before my time. But, I changed my name to live a peaceful life and that new name provided our family with protection for decades. Some of the those demons who signed the Accords felt they got cheated. If you let him know what you are, he’ll figure out who you and that will expose the whole family. Do you want to risk that?”
“No,” I admitted. Jack was right. There was more at stake than my raging hormones and my rabid curiosity. “Or just keep your mouth shut,” he shrugged. “And be patient. See if he is someone worth knowing.”
“I hate it when you do that, baiting and switching.”
“Lesson the first, Wren: nothing is going to be as it appears. You have to learn to trust your instincts along with your logic,” Jack winked. “I haven't been figured out. Play your cards close, and you won't be either.”
“This is,” I searched for the right word. “intense.”
“And this just upped the ante.”
Blessings and Damnation

10. Blessings and Damnation

My sleep was deep and restful, devoid of dreams or nightmares. My mood perked up immediately when I woke up to bright sunshine streaming through my window. The edgy poker night with Selena and Logan faded from my mind made me decide to follow Jack's advice of 'go-with-the-flow.' I decided to be more accepting of my new abilities, but trust but verify before I drew conclusions and to keep my mouth shut. If demons can master their fates, then I knew I would choose my destiny. Sounded good, anyway.

I made addressing emotional and psychological wounds my first priority. They were old baggage that clouded my perceptions of the world around me. When I had stepped on that bus back in Denver to come home, I honored a self-made promise that reclaiming my life was my key purpose. I walked a precarious line and if I wasn’t careful, I’d end up falling over the edge, losing all that I worked diligently to achieve.

I studied my reflection in the mirror, scrutinizing the white streak that stood in stark contrast to my dark hair. Originally, I viewed it as a bane to my efficient existence. Looking at it through new eyes, I saw it for what it was: something I chose to make an obstacle or an opportunity, depending upon my choice. I don't in predestination or fate, but the power of choice.

For the first time in over three years, my heart was alive again, beating instead of remaining shivered by fear. I understood that life wasn’t lived by isolating my heart, but by denying my what needed done. Still, I didn’t want to make rash choices resulting in pain. I knew I was afraid of failure if I moved beyond my carefully structured habits, but failure began with lack of effort. I missed Matthew; his reassuring embrace, his steady and welcoming presence in my life. I knew that I would always love him and a part of me had died with him, but not all of me. No one could replace my first love but I wanted to know if I could love again. Our love, deep and true, nurtured me when he was alive. However, I was weary of living only on memories. Yet, part of me remained truly frightened of stepping beyond my current life and embracing something and someone different.

I caught myself singing the chorus of Corwyn’s duet while I dressed for work and applied my makeup. I took time choosing what I wanted to wear. I was feeling adventuresome, but still wanted to play it safe. I chose a rose colored sweater that complimented my skin, reflecting a softer side that I didn’t often show to the outside world.

“You’re frisky all of a sudden,” Jack remarked as he poured milk over his cereal. “Sleep well?”

“Definitely. Have you looked outside?” I motioned to the thermometer hanging outside the kitchen window. “It is forty degrees and sunny. We’re going to have a Nebraska heat wave.”

I gobbled down a quick breakfast and grabbed my checkbook. I scribbled the agreed amount upon the check and proudly handed it to Jack. “As promised, twenty-five hundred dollars for one minivan.”

Jack threw me the keys across the table and I caught them in mid-air. I jingled them in my hand, reveling in the sound and knowing that I finally had reliable transportation. I owned my own wheels and I was a very happy woman. Jack left for the vet clinic and I dashed out the front door towards the barn toward my newfound freedom. My day became complex when I found Corwyn Darcy sitting casually in the porch swing.

He grinned widely at me as he swung in the porch swing, making me smile in spite of the previous night's discoveries. He was masculine perfection embodied in one man with taut muscles and a gorgeous smile that caused my heart to skip a beat. Despite last night’s events, today was looking better all the time.

“Good morning, Wren.” his warm tenor melted over me, making my body relax and shiver. The sweet scent that mingled with a hint of smoke wafted around me and heightened my cheerfulness to
near bliss. Honey barbeque sauce came to mind. I took a step back from his enticing scent to regain my composure. Corwyn’s effect inspired my body to respond in ways for which I wasn’t prepared. A chuckle escaped him when my eyes widened at the sensations, seeing other sparks dancing in his jade eyes. He wasn’t the only one with a wicked element as an impish flash crossed my mind.

I started humming a few bars of the duet that he’d written for us to sing at the benefit concert, putting it all of the lust that I had felt over the past several days. I wanted to see what happened when I embraced my new understanding of him; of us. His eyes widened, tawny sparks replacing any hint of jade that I had seen. His fists clasped into tight balls when I heard him gasp for breath. I stepped forward, I let my mind wander into forbidden territory as I let it envision all the things that I longed for in his arms.

“Wren,” he gasped, his breath coming in ragged gasps. His jaw clenched as he took another step away from me. “I don’t know if I can stop.”

“That is what you do to me,” I whispered. “Maybe I don’t want to stop.”

I felt liquid heat course through my veins, warming me to the core. Sweet anticipation built in my chest causing my heart to pound and euphoria to spread through me until my stars sparkled around me. A series of explosions detonated, bliss made my body quaver repeatedly until I staggered forward, my equilibrium gone and only satiated languor remained. I fell to my knees, feeling the violet waves of energy waft over toward Corwyn and surround him in a veil of light. The small amulet around my neck sparked to life, ice cold against my flushed skin. The ring on my right hand pulsed on my finger; its stones shimmered until golden arcs of current swirled around me. Corwyn stumbled backward until he stood at least ten feet from me, dumbfounded by the unprecedented turn of events. I looked at him, his eyes glowing bright orange and his skin gleamed like polished copper. I saw tendrils of red dance around him, reaching out to me as he fought his inner hunger.

I remembered then that my experiment was only meant to test the boundaries of my new powers, not to hurt anyone. I remembered that my Ring of Solomon also possessed what I needed to halt the onslaught.

“Stop,” I commanded the ring and the amulet, forcing my will to diffuse the shield surrounding me. I felt the energy surge, fighting my willpower with an unknown strength. I imagined the energy returning back to me by my command, abating in its power and force.

He sat on the ground, starting at me with wide eyes, his face frozen in a mask of mortification mingled with shock. I looked at him, amazed and dumbstruck by what brainless urges spurred me to do.

“Corwyn, I’m sorry!” I cried out and scrambled to my feet. Rushing over to his side, I helped him to stand. “Are you all right?”

“Wren, don’t ever do that again,” he hissed through clenched teeth. “I could have killed you.”

“I could have killed you,” I retorted.

“You stopped the flow,” he shook his head in disbelief. “How?”

“I am figuring that out as we go,” I muttered, dusting the dried twigs and leaves from my slacks.

“Still want to try and be friends? Maybe, I’m the evil siren waiting to steal your soul.”

We stared at each other for a long moment; an early morning breeze provided the only sound for eternal seconds. Tentatively, he brought his hand to my check and his thumb caressed a sore spot where I knew a bruise was forming. Drawing me to him, he held me close and I felt his sweet, scented breath in my hair as he placed a deliberate kiss to my brow. “Never. I don’t have the strength to stay away from you.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” I whispered into the lapel of his shirt. “Corwyn, you’re supposed to be the one with all the dangerous power, not me.”

“What do you mean?” he pulled away, looking down at me though veiled eyes.

“Didn’t you see?” I stammered, motioned to the surrounding area. “Didn’t you see the energy, the light, any of it?”

“No,” Corwyn shook his head. “I felt your soul touch me and I didn’t have the control to stop from
draining you.”
I realized possessing the power of True Sight allowed me to see the magic at work protecting me and repelling him. He didn’t have the ability to see what I could see. “I felt something push me away from you, something strong stopped me taking your energy.”
“We need to talk. Tonight. No more games. We lay everything out and we make choices.”
“Other than the massive amounts of adrenaline flowing through me, the ecstasy you give a girl is a great way to start the day.”
Corwyn awkwardly cleared his throat. “You liked that, didn’t you?”
“You think?” I purred, watching him shift his weight from one foot to the other. “Are you blushing?”
“Cambions don't blush.”
“Liar,” I cupped his hand in mine, turning my lips inward to brush his palm.
“Wren, I—” Corwyn began, his face grim. I pressed two fingers against his lips. The last thing I wanted was another catastrophe to ruin a wonderful day.
“I have wheels!” I squealed excitedly, holding up the keys and rattling them in my hand.
“Who’s going to protect me from the madcap driver?” he rolled his eyes skyward.
“Me, because I’m not letting you drive,” I gave him a smirk.
Corwyn held up his hand as if to ward off another attack. “Not on your life, Sweetling.”
I stopped breathing when he called me by such an endearment then sputtered for a moment before I regained my composure and gave him a look of mock indignation. “Corwyn, that was harsh.”
He chuckled. “Honesty without condition.”
“Oh, that.”
“I’m driving,” I gave him a defiant look. “You're on your own.”
“Fine,” he sighed in resignation. “You’re driving.”
Corwyn wanted to know more about my family and I found it easy to talk about my Aunt Della and her New Age bookstore. He asked me what I had done while I was in Denver and I explained that I had ran the register, booked clients, ordered inventory and did the bookkeeping. I told him about Nan Wren and how she baked the best butterscotch cookies since Betty Crocker and turned crocheting and knitting into art forms. Hornets danced around in my stomach when I edited out the part that my family was a bunch of spell-slingers and magic users.
He asked about my relationship with Matthew and I found that my words flowed like water from a broken fire hydrant. Corwyn merely listened and I couldn’t stop when I came to the point about the car wreck. I felt my eyes well up with tears when I forced out the truth that I had been driving the night that Matthew died. I admitted that I hadn’t had any romantic interest in anyone until recently.
“What changed?”
“My attitude,” I answered shortly. “How does that emotion taste, Corwyn?”
I looked up to see his eyes a dark ocher, his face pained. “Bittersweet, there is no joy in what I know from your soul about your pain.”
I spent the morning catching up on paperwork and making sure that the choir’s music folders contained the right music. Corwyn dropped by Penelope’s office and asked me to lunch. I told him of a great little delicatessen across from the Sunken Gardens in mid-town Lincoln. A few minutes later with a turkey and tomato panini in one hand and a frozen mocha latte in the other, we strolled past the coy fishponds that adorned the gardens and enjoyed the spring weather.
“Now, it’s my turn to ask the questions,” I said, not enjoying the brain freeze that too much iced latte gave me.
“Ask me anything.”
“Penelope seems encouraging of our…” I found it hard to say ‘relationship.’
Corwyn took my discomfort in stride. “She approves of you.”
“What about the rest of your clan?”
Shoving his hands in his pockets, Corwyn’s eyes clouded over so that all I could see was a haze.
“Surprised to say the least.”
I stalled for time, trying to figure out what to say next when my sip of my latte turned into a loud slurp. I gave him a sheepish grin. “Tastier than I thought.”

“Hmmm,”

“Why are they surprised?” I blurted out the question.

“You’re human.”

I nearly choked on my latte. To hide my shock at how easily he was fooled, I gave him a sly grin.

“What? Do they want you to date a Martian?”

“No,” Corwyn laughed. I loved how the late winter sun brought out the golden strands within his coppery hair. “They've always assumed that I would take interest in one of my kind.”

“Are there many of your kind?”

“The world is getting smaller all the time. There aren't that many of us left,” he admitted.

We returned to work in plenty of time for me to finish making a few calls to potential patrons known to be solid contributors to the Archangelus Foundation. Corwyn met me at two-thirty for my afternoon break and we decided to spend it in the courtyard behind the main building. Sitting on the bench, I noticed his family sitting together at an umbrella table across the court staring at us. I saw them talking but when we sat down, they eyes all turned in our direction. Zenobia was surrounded by a mustard-colored cloud that hung around her, the heavy scent of sulfur hung around her. The pixie sitting beside her peaked around her shoulder, grinning at me. I noticed the smell of orange blossoms followed by small explosions of orange and pink. I couldn't tell for sure, but I thought that might be curiosity. I needed a color chart.

“Zoe doesn’t think I’m good enough for you,” I commented. “I can feel it.”

Corwyn playfully pulled on one of my ringlets. “She can’t fathom why I’m drawn to you.”

“I’m trying to figure that out for myself,” I admitted. “Come on, Corwyn, haven't you asked yourself that question? We argue and clash, yet, here we are. Why?”

Corwyn’s green eyes widened in disbelief. “If only you could see what I see, Wren. You’re unexpected. You’re openness and kindness humble me and just when I think I’ve figured you out, you do or say something that leaves me bewildered. You have fiery passion and you're curious about the world.”

“You also thought I was paranoid,” I said deadpan.

“You think I'm obsessive,” he countered.

“I,” carefully considered my words. “could be wrong.”

I suddenly felt as I was on display in a fishbowl, available for everyone to see without any privacy. I grimaced at the thought of being under so much scrutiny.

“The only way I bewilder you is when I say no.”

“Only partially, Wren,” Corwyn's warm fingertips danced a light trail across the back of my hand.

“You don’t know the effect you have on me.”

“Oh, yes I do.”

I glanced over to where the Darcys sat, feeling their translucent eyes scrutinizing me. I saw Zenobia, the titian-haired amazon, glower in my direction. I remembered Logan telling me that cambions possessed the ability to make humans spontaneously combust and I thought that I’d go up in flames from her hateful gaze. The amulet beneath my sweater pulsed against the hollow of my throat and the ring in my pocket longed to explode in a burst of energy. They wanted Zenobia and I said, “No.”

“No, what?” Corwyn asked, not understanding my sudden outburst.

I wanted to crawl under the table and escape the heat of her glare until I heard a growl next to me. I watched Corwyn’s jade eyes blaze emerald first then fire red as he placed his hand protectively over mine. Zenobia pulled out a nail file and focused on perfecting her already flawless nails. Looking at the nail file, I wanted to heat it up until it melted her perfect manicure. Unfortunately, the powers of my supernatural designer jewelry didn't work that way.

“Bitchy much?” I nodded in his sister-in-law’s direction. “Get that girl a Midol.”

“Yes,” his eyes fell away from mine, stifling his laugh behind a bad cough.
“Don’t worry, Hot Stuff,” I reassured him. “I can handle anything she throws my way.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a flash of light. When I turned, I noticed his other sister, Cordelia, no longer sat at the table with the rest of the Darcys. I turned to Corwyn with the intent of saying something and found her sitting beside me.

I yelped and she cringed at the shrillness of my frightened shriek. My pendant sparked, sending violet flashes of fire falling onto the white concrete patio table where we sat.

“Hey, big brother.” she cheerfully greeted him and then placed her arm around me. “Don’t you think it’s time we were introduced?”

I studied the cheerful, bubbly waif sitting beside me. She was a stark contrast to his warrior sister-in-law, Zenobia. The woman beside me wore her hair in short platinum curls that glinted silver in the rain. Instinct told me that color was natural and she had never been close to a bottle of hair dye. While Zenobia appeared to be an armor-plated ice queen, Cordelia was slender and petite with an athletic build and fluidity that reminded me of a fairy straight out of Peter Pan.

“Wren, this is my twin sister, Cordelia. Cordy for short.”

I studied the two siblings in comparison and they couldn’t have been more different. Corwyn hair tawny hair glinted gold in the the rain while hers sparkled with a near-white radiance. His deep-set eyes were deep jade while Cordelia’s were crystalline blue.

“Hello, Wren.” her eyes twinkled with merriment and her enthusiasm laced her words. “It’s about time we met.”

Stunned by the unprecedented display of friendliness, my social graces decided to desert me. Left with the choice either gaping at the fair-haired pixie sitting beside me or appearing rude, I grabbed for the first words that came to mind.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Cordelia.”

She gave me a playful pout, shaking one finger back and forth as a warning sign. “Loosen up, Wren. Say it. ‘Cordy.’

I gave Corwyn a look that silent said, 'your sister is wonky.' He said nothing, merely shaking his head and returning my look with a smile that silently answered, 'humor her.'

“Cordy.”

“See, that wasn't so bad, was it?”

Corwyn glanced at his watch. “It’s time to get back to work, Wren.”

“We’ll have a chance to talk later, Wren, I promise,” Cordelia gave me a dazzling smile, the one identifiable trait she shared with Corwyn. With that, she rose from my side and flitted back to her family across the courtyard.

“Five o’clock won’t be here quick enough for me,” I lamented as I walked with Corwyn back to my office.

“I’ll be at your door waiting,” Corwyn leaned toward me, inhaling my scent. His fingers absentmindedly stroked my hair as he pressed his brow to mine. “Five o’clock will be here soon enough, Sweetling.”

I returned to my desk, intent on finishing whatever assignment Penelope had placed there for me to do. I knew it was futile to deny that my focus was on Corwyn and not completely on my job. We both understood that we couldn’t continue to walk the thin wire we did with one another regarding our status. It was time to choose. I realized that my heart had decided for me long before I was ready to admit it. I remembered what he had said to me, “the only thing worse than being near you is being without you.” I knew it was mutual. To be without Corwyn Darcy meant being without a part of my heart. When we weren't fighting, I found him to be engaging and intelligent. He was a gentleman who believed in treating everyone well. He was a tortured soul because of his dark past and he deeply loved his family. Classic tragic hero meets rich playboy. Oh, vey! Did I know how to pick them or what?

I inwardly groaned.

Five o’clock finally arrived, prompting me to jaunt down the hallway to the elevator. I crossed the parking lot, secretly wishing that my power was teleportation rather than True Sight, hoping that I was the first to make it to the van. I wanted a few minutes to collect my thoughts, to figure out how I was going to tell him, “Hey, my ancestors enslaved yours thousands of years ago to build
Solomon’s temple?” How did one bring that up in polite conversation? Lady Luck was fickle because leaning against the side of the minivan waiting for me was Corwyn. All the apprehension churned in my stomach when I looked at him, angst causing my heat to beat a cadence louder than a jungle drum. My breath came in rapid, shallow pants as my recent anxieties became tangible and real to me.

“Good afternoon,” his velvety voice greeted me. Wrapping his arms around me, he planted a lingering kiss on my brow. It was warm and gentle, marking me with his affection. I couldn’t help but smile.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I murmured, wishing that I knew a solution for my dilemma. I knew I wouldn’t feel comfortable spending the evening at Corwyn’s home with all of the things that needed to be said. I needed this conversation to be on my terms and on my turf. Corwyn must have seen the worry shadow my features because his hand reached out to gently lift my chin so our gazes met. That impish grin melted away into a solemn demeanor when he pulled me into his arms, holding me within the strong protection of his embrace. I wasn’t accustomed to such public, let alone intimate emotion, but at that moment I didn’t care if we made the front page of the local paper. It simply felt good as Corwyn tucked my head under his chin, tenderly holding me to him.

“What’s wrong, Wren?” I heard his quiet concern add an edge to his voice.

“Can we change our plans tonight?” I asked. “I’m not ready to go to your home yet and I’d rather if you came to mine. Please.”

“Won’t it be a little crowded?”

“Jack and Selena have some event going on,” I replied. “I think they’re going to one of the local poker tournaments so we’ll have the entire house to ourselves.”

“You wish is my command, Milady Wren,” Corwyn bowed gallantly before he walked around to the driver’s side, opening the door for me. “Lead on.”

Navigating through mid-town rush-hour traffic with Corwyn beside me made it difficult to keep my mind focused on the bumper-to-bumper congestion. Weaving in and out of cars, I managed to get off the main arterial road and turned eastbound on Adams Street before heading northbound on Touzalin Avenue. “Wren, what’s bothering you? You’re completely closed to me.”

“Nada,” I said with more cheerfulness that I felt, my lips locked into a tight artificial smile. “I just want us to spend some time alone without any interruptions. After I received the evil eye today from your sister-in-law, Zenobia, I realized I’m not ready for any large social gathering.”

“She is irrelevant to your existence,” he quipped lightly, giving me a crooked smile that tugged at my heartstrings. I lost myself in the rapid onslaught of thoughts, trying to figure out what the hell I was doing. I knew that telling Corwyn about me put much at risk, yet knowing what he had shared with me and at what risk he did so, how could I not give him the same honesty without condition?

“What is on your mind?” he probed gently, pulling me from my pensive reverie.

“When I figure that out, I’ll let you know,” I replied honestly.

“Will Jack mind if you have me out to your house?” Corwyn asked cautiously.

“He doesn’t have a problem with it.”

“Does he know we’re seeing each other, Wren?” Corwyn’s pointed question refused to give me any more evasion room.

“We’re getting to know each other, Corwyn. Big difference. Yes, he has a clue,” I edited my response. I turned onto the long drive that led up to the acreage, deciding to keep my mouth shut until exactly how to phrase what I needed to tell Corwyn. “I want to show you something special.”

“What?” he gave me a boyish grin.

“The garden,” I answered as we pulled up beside his Aston Martin. I saw Jack sitting out on the porch swing, his legs propped on the porch rail, sipping a glass of sweet tea. I waved at him and he gave me a single nod from beneath his Stetson. I also noticed a polished white oak staff leaning against the side of the house, realizing Jack had lowered the protection glyphs to allow Corwyn on the property. Seeing me, he tapped his hand where he wore his ring and I nodded in response,
waving to him to hide the ring. “Corwyn, honesty without condition. Remember?”
“I remember.”
I watched removed his windbreaker and saw that he wore a light green dress shirt. He rolled up the sleeves and I gawked. The shirt fit him perfectly and it’s expensive tailoring accentuated the broad shoulders and lean lines of his form. I knew that what I was about to tell him might destroy the small bit of happiness I had found these past few weeks, but better to know now than to cry later, I thought.
He studied me, puzzled by my unspoken anguish. Always the gentleman, Corwyn was beside me in an instant with his arm around me. “Wren, what is it?”
“Walk with me.”
We walked around the side of the house to a portion of the acreage setting between the house and the barn. I took Corwyn by the hand, saying nothing as I led him through the white trellis that led to the garden. The garden is beautiful place with its colorful display of hydrangea, peonies, roses and hyacinth. Old bricks recovered by from the deserted brick factory in Lincoln framed newly planted pink and white tulips.
This garden sat atop a convergence of ley lines that met concentrically beneath the white marble fountain. This was a sacred, natural place where ancient magic enriched the soil and flowed through the water. The fountain marked a holy well rivaling that of Glastonbury with its purity and potency. Some family members thought water from a holy well from our ancestral lands in Wales had crossed the Atlantic and had been poured into some natural springs on the property. I knew that wasn't how it worked. Something wild, weird or wondrous must charge the area, infusing it with magic before either the soil of the water contains magic.
What we Solomonari call 'holy water' isn't what you find in a church blessed by clergy. A primordial magic and goodness permeates it, charging every molecule with energy and light. Its water was powerful, containing mystical properties that not even my family completely understands. We are the holy well's protectors and guardians, keeping it safe from those who want to exploit it for their own uses. If Corwyn meant me harm or had clandestine motives, all would be revealed within the garden.
Leading Corwyn along the brick path, I pointed out the sundial that Jack had put in the garden last summer. I pointed to the trees that surrounded the garden, telling him about when Nana Wren had planted them when they had first moved to the acreage. I led him past a white Italian statue of St. David toward the back of the garden. There was a bench in the gazebo where I sat down, patting the seat for Corwyn to sit beside me.
I looked into those deep jade eyes and I knew the moment of truth had arrived. I closed my eyes, trying to gather the courage for what I was about to do. I opened them to find him staring intently at me, measuring me with curious eyes. I saw tangerine flecks dancing against deep green, a hint of a smile tugging at his lips.
“Wren, it’s driving me insane that I can’t tell what you’re feeling. There’s something about you, surrounding you, which makes it impossible for me to know what’s going on inside your head. What’s wrong?”
“Do you remember when I told you once that maybe you aren’t the dangerous thing that goes bump in the night, that instead it might be me?” I asked.
He exhaled deeply, “I remember.”
“I see you glow and use fire. I’m somewhat immune to your charming abilities and I can block your empathy. Haven’t you wondered why?” The words came out in a slow flow, but Corwyn heard every one.
“I have,” he admitted.
“Well, I have gifts,” I began.
“Are you a witch?” Corwyn asked softly, gently smoothing back an errant tress of my hair. “It’s not unheard of for witches to consort with cambions. It would explain much.”
“No, not a witch. My abilities fall into the more psychic realm,” I explained. “They’re hereditary.”
“You’re psychic?”
“I'm a Solomonar,” I blurted. There, I said it. The truth was bare and naked in front of him. I wondered if I had condemned us to an end before having a chance to begin.

“No, you're not,” Corwyn shook his head in denial.

“Yeah, I am. Complete with skunk stripe,” I held up my dark curls to reveal the white streak I had worked so hard to conceal. I reached into my jeans pocket and found the hidden piece of jewelry. “And a super-duper decoder ring!”

Corwyn stared at me for several seconds in stunned silence.

“Please, say something!”

“I wasn't expecting that,” he shook his head in disbelief.

“Tell me about it,” I ran my fingers through my curls, stressed by the exchange. “Do you hate me? Are we done?”

“You and I aren't responsible for the sins of our ancestors, Wren.”

“How is that possible? How can you not?”

“Our peoples made peace nearly a hundred years ago. The time for animosity is past,” Corwyn pursed his full lips in contemplation. “Thousands of years ago, your ancestors advised a powerful king. They controlled the weather, spoke with the dead and the animals.”

“All true,” I couldn't deny it.

“Is your grandfather one?” Corwyn asked.

“Yes,” I dared answer.

“Jack Bryant is a good man. I’ve seen him help others at the Foundation, giving free care to pets for people who can't pay. I’ve seen him volunteer with the local animal adoption programs. He knows about my family?”

“He does.”

“Why hasn't he said or done anything?” Corwyn asked.

“He thinks you've done a lot of good in the community and hasn't seen anything suspicious. He said that he is still keeping an eye on your family.”

“What do you think? Are we evil demons bent on destroying the human race?”

“I think your family bends ethics to their liking. I've seen you glamour and entrance people at the Foundation. Your sister-in-law and you have both tried using your charm on me.” I spoke frankly.

“You've saved my life twice.”

“We value human life and want to make amends however we can for the transgressions of our kind.”

“Jack knows this and so do I.”

“Where does this leave us, then?” Corwyn asked, looking at me through hooded eyes. “Our species have been enemies for centuries and now, you and I are developing a bond neither anticipated.”

“Does that frighten you?” I found the courage to look into his disbelieving eyes. I held up my right hand so that my signet ring was a few inches away from his gaze. “This is who and what I am and what happened this morning proved it.”

“No,” his ocher gaze met mine. “It doesn’t frighten me. You intrigue me and delight me as none have before you. I find myself feeling free when I am around you.”

“It frightens me,” I ran my fingers through my hair. “I didn't ask for this to happen. I wanted to reclaim my life and give it structure to get rid my inner demons. I don't want to have to deal with real ones but I am attracted to one against my better judgement. I don't want these abilities that have invaded my life. Why now?”

“My family believes that we command our fates, not the other way around. Does it matter why?”

“Yes, there is always cause and effect, choice and consequence. There is always a reason for everything, intentioned or not. It is my nature to question everything, Corwyn, and I question this growing 'thing' between us.”

“Sweeting, sometimes the universe grants us unexpected gifts,” his green eyes gleamed gold around the irises as his finger traced my lower lip. “I think you're one.”

“Funny, that's how the Trojans felt about a certain horse from the Greeks and look what happened.” I quipped. “In fairy tales, there’s Beauty and the Beast. You’re supposed to be the one
who’s lethal. It’s not supposed to go both ways. What are we supposed to do? Kill each other?” I remained still, watching a thousand thoughts dance across his eyes. I watched his dusty bronze skin break free of its human facade, flecks flying away until only glowing copper remained. I had only seen hints of his cambion heritage, but now he sat behind appearing inhumanly alien to me. I felt my own power rise, a field of energy surrounded me, crackling and arcing. I looked down to see my hands engulfed in a lavender light that brightened as Corwyn moved toward me, knowing my ring projected the protective energy surrounding my body.

“Love, Wren.” he answered, tentatively reaching out to touch me my cheek. “We love.”

With speed coursing though my body, I moved away from his touch. “Don’t touch me! I could kill you.”

“Hold still,” his breath smelled of cinnamon, smoke and spice. “Honesty without hesitation or condition, remember?”

“I remember,” I forgot to breathe.

“Do you have faith in me?”

The man in front of me had threatened to burn of my friends to a crisp and used his abilities on others to interfere with free will when it was convenient. He also saved lives, including mine, several times over on a regular basis. My head screamed, “Run!” My heart screamed, “Just kiss him, you fool.” My gut? “Keep it together. He is a man of his word. Trust in yourself, Wren.”

For the first time, I listened to my instinct.

My heart wrenched in pain as he reached out to touch me. His metallic copper fingers, in sharp contrast with the pale violet hue surrounding me, reached for my hand. I watched his face grimace in pain but I also noticed that the light dimmed as he drew closer to me. I wanted him to touch me, to hold me, to tell me everything would be all right. Sparks danced as his hand touched the psychic barrier. Corwyn held fast and I willed the energy to part. I closed my eyes, concentrating on that one small seed of trust he had planted in my my soul. I felt a light touch on the back of my hand.

“You won't hurt me,” Corwyn said with a smile. I studied him, finally free of his human disguise. His glimmering skin and glowing eyes held me mesmerized, his voice sounded was liquid velvet as he quieted my fears. “And I vow never to hurt you. I promise you.”

I looked at his flaming hand and then at his blazing eyes, full of fire that I couldn’t see their pupils, unrepentant and unapologetic. A slow smile crept across my lips as I slowly entwined my fingers with his.

“There are no guarantees, Corwyn,” I began. The torture of this bittersweet moment tore at my soul, rending my heart into pieces.

“Believe,” he drew his hand away as if I had burnt him. His voice rang with an echo that I knew hinted to the power he possessed. “I am here of my own free will, Wren. We’re dangerous to each other. Your kind and mine have been enemies for centuries. I’d rather die tomorrow than to spend another century without you.”

“Star-crossed lovers don't fare well in fairy tales,” I looked at him.

“We chart our own course. Love is the strongest emotion in the universe,” he told me.

“Speak for yourself,” I countered. “Who said anything about love?”

“Always the skeptic,” Corwyn brought the back of my hand to his lips. A hot flash danced along my skin, turning into a need that I hadn't felt for a very long time. “Innovative thinking can create new solutions, Wren. We will find a way. I almost killed you today, but now, this moment gives me hope.”

“No strings and no worries,” I took Corwyn’s hands in mine, wishing that damn protective shield to vanish. “You didn’t take anything from me, I gave it to you.”

“Wren, Sweeting.” The glow in his eyes subsided, the copper sheen dulled until his skin appeared human and mundane. “It’s been nothing but agony since that night. To know, that if I ever lost control….that you could die because I took too much, to never hear you give me another tongue lashing.” Corwyn looked at me through thick lashes, his eyes full of torment and anguish. “You are my redemption, my personal angel. You are my completion. Without you, I’m just a shell.”

I gasped at Corwyn’s powerful words. I thought the balance of power always tipped in his direction
until that moment. Then, I smiled because I realized that it wasn't who held the most power, it was about partnership; giving and receiving. Now, he was pronouncing his deepest feelings for me and I knew I felt the same. “Fate has a strange sense of humor.”

“An angel and a demon matched, what will the universe think of next?” he laughed darkly. “Not an angel,” I made a circular motion over my head. “No halo. And this isn't love. I'm getting to know you.”

“And I’m a demon who is your willing slave. My whole existence now means something because of you.”

“Don’t say that,” I whispered. “I’m just me.”

“You are everything to me.”

I lost track of time as we sat in silence in the gazebo, the gentle spring breeze gently blowing across us. Still glowing, I carefully laid my head against his chest and Corwyn wrapped his arm around me. I felt my energy seep into him, making his eyes turn bright amber. Then, a strange sensation came over me when I felt something wash over me, infusing me with an essence of him I felt something snap awake within, something came alive. I expected to feel weakened and drained as I had the other night in his car when he drew from me. However, I felt that this time I was the one being imbued.

Corwyn looked down at me, his eyes widened. “Your eyes.”

“What?” I asked, seeing the look of concern on his face.

“They're glowing.”

“I don’t glow,” I argued. “Solomonari never glow.”

“You do,” he chuckled. “How do you feel?”

“I think a part of your soul is with me.”

“Unlike our full-blooded relatives, we cambions can give as well as take, if we take the time to master the skill,” he murmured softly, planting a lingering kiss on my brow. “I want to give you all of me.”

“Are you sure it isn’t some crazy compulsion because of what I am?”

“I drew you into me at the same time, Sweetling,” he replied, as he inhaled deeply.

“No pain?” I asked anxiously.

“Some,” he admitted, planting a peck on my forehead. “It was delicious.”

“Tempting?”

“Yes, but not impossible.”

“It's invigorating.” I conceded, noticing that I felt empowered and refreshed rather than drained, as I had been this morning.

“I’m not completely human, Wren, but you make me feel like a man.”

“Is that our solution, fusing our souls?” I asked.

“It is a challenge,” he admitted.

“What if you give too much, what if I'm not careful?”

“Then, we burn,” he brought his hand beneath my chin, raising it so that I had to meet his gaze, intent and searching. “Any regrets?”

“None so far,” I wanted to put any fears he had to rest. “We still have to be careful.”

“His voice was solemn. “I still don’t know how much self-control I have with you.”

“Just remember, I can kick your ass,” I countered.

“Tempting?”

“I know.” Corwyn’s eyes matched the smile on his lips. “Fate has a strange sense of humor, damming and blessing us in the same moment.”

I wonder who was in more danger or more dangerous in the garden that night. Corwyn was a cambion possessing an element within him; both frightening and exhilarating, which hungered for my essence. I was a Solomonar who held the power within my grasp to kill him if I chose. When an unstoppable force meets an unmovable object, what happens?
“Tell me what it was like for you,” he smiled at me, taking my hand in mine. “Being different. Being normal compared to the rest of the screwballs in my family?” I shook my head at the barrage of memories. “Do you really want to know? “Yes, I do,” Corwyn brought his hand to mine, lightly brushing his warm lips against my knuckles. “Tell me.”

I sighed, trying to keep my concentration focused on the road ahead. I glanced over at Corwyn, seeing only an openness that I craved, and that gave me courage. I reached into the compartment above me and pulled out my sunglasses. Putting them on, I felt somehow safer, less vulnerable. “Most of my family doesn't have an ounce of common sense,” I snorted. “Except for Jack. He is the only one who isn't into fairy dust and magic wands, thinking it can solve the world's problems. He, at least, is partially grounded in the real world and understands that reality doesn't revolve around hocus pocus. He's sensible.”

“Your family frustrates you,” Corwyn surmised. “Gee, you think?” I rolled my eyes. “Aunt Della is too busy chasing ghosts and my brother is all his political and eco-activism: saving the world, ending war, et cetera. They follow unrealistic notions without having thought about the consequences.”

“No, you can't save those who don't think they're in trouble. I pull their backsides out of the proverbial fire and in six months they're back in it. Della keeps thinking that her visions of the dead are going to pay the rent and keep the cupboards stocked.”

“Do they?” Corwyn's interest perked at the mention of my Aunt's visions. “Once she starting charging fee instead of accepting goodwill offerings,” I sighed. “She expanded her store to include various other venues and it is finally turning a small profit. Della is doing well with it.”

“And the other members?” he encouraged me to continue. “My brother, Justin, is an an environmental activist and environmentalist,” Fond memories filled my mind of my little brother. “Eternal student, surfer dude and extreme chick magnet. He cares about the world and tries to save it through protests and sit-ins.”

“Have you had to bail him out of trouble?”

“More than once, I've drained my bank account bailing him out of jail after he has been arrested for protesting and civil disobedience,” I scoffed. “He's a New Age hippie who thinks that love will solve everything.”

“Your family makes you unhappy,” Corwyn said, his tone neutral. “You feel as though they've let you down.”

“At one time, I would have agreed with you. However, I am proud of my family for each following their passions. They irritate me when they do it without an ounce of common sense or a plan in mind.” Wren admitted. “In a way, I envy them.”

“Why?” he probed gently. “Freedom,” I conceded. “I envy their carefree lives and how they seem to evade consequences of harebrained choices. They get to play while I have to be responsible. I wish I had a tenth of their freedom, their joy. They get to be eternal children and I end up being the eternal parent.”

“Still, you love them.”

“They mean everything to me,” I replied. “They've been my bedrock these past few years. I've been in emotional denial for three years and they've seen me through the worst of it. Aunt Della asked me to work at her New Age store in Denver about six months ago and being around her is like being injected with pure bliss. I started to heal and that gave me the courage to come home and
“reclaim my life on my terms.”
“What do they think of you?”
“Depends on who you ask and on what day,” I scoffed. “To put it nicely, my family thinks I’m uptight and conservative without any imagination.”
“Is it true?” Corwyn teased.
“I am registered Republican,” I answered deadpan. “I have always been the odd one in a bunch of oddballs,” It hurt to admit what I already knew, but with Corwyn, it was bearable.
“They always treated you differently?”
“Not really. Jack encouraged me to develop my gifts: organization, an eye for detail, even my music. I used those gifts to organize things, keep records and become a walking archive of knowledge. That’s what I do to contribute.”
“Not so different that what you do at the foundation,” he mused.
“When I was born, there weren’t any signs that I possessed gifts like the rest of my family,” I began. “No white streak, no fascinating powers. By the time I was thirteen, I wasn’t calling storms or talking to plants. No imaginary friends. I was hopelessly normal.”
I glanced over at Corwyn, seeing the sun refract off the golden highlights in his red and gold hair. His face lacked any shock or disdain, so I continued. “When puberty hit and still normal, Jack thought it would be good for me to follow family tradition. He shipped my off to school in Transylvania.”
Corwyn's golden brows rose in surprise. “For real? Transylvania?”
I nodded. “Honest and for true?”
“Meet any vampires?” he quipped.
“Yes,” I smiled. “One was one of my professors.”
“Does all of you family possess gifts?” Corwyn asked.
I bit my lip, not sure if it was appropriate to share much with Corwyn. It was one thing to tell him my life story, but it was entirely another to reveal my family's secrets. I decided my that some things were left better unsaid.
“We all have gifts,” I began. “You know how it is, Corwyn, you’re a cambion. If anyone knows our dirty laundry, it would be you and yours.”
“It isn't as though I've sat down to dinner and hand an intimate heart-to-heart chat with one, except for you.” he amended.
“Well, I can tell you a few things. Some of work magic, some of don't. Our powers are inherent and no two are exactly the same. Our abilities connect us to the planet, to nature, to life all around us. That’s what makes us different from the other spell-slingers and psychics in the world.”
“What about you, Wren?” He asked softly. “What can you see?”
I have True Sight,” I began. “I see the hidden, the invisible, the disguised; magical and mundane. It also affects my other senses such as hearing and scent. I wouldn't be surprised if it influences taste and touch. I can tell when magic or an ability is being used by someone.
“For instance, my empathy?” he asked, fascinated by my revelation.
“Yes, I can hear it in your voice and see the auras of others who are affected by it,” I told him. “In other words, I see when you dazzle other with brilliance and baffle them with bullsh-.”
“Wren!”
“Truth hurts, huh?” I winked. “Another nifty quirk of True Sight is Camouflage. The reason you can’t always see my emotions or detect me is because I can hide in plain sight.”
“Did you tell Jack about me?”
“Yes,” I pulled into an empty parking space and turned off the engine, putting the keys in my purse. “He already knew about you.”
“What does he think?”
“He is watching you. He also wants to give you a fair shake.”
“He doubts us,” the sadness in his eyes spoke to me of a man who knew a century’s worth of persecution. That, or he was concerned that someone already knew about his family's heritage.
“Given the history that our families share, that isn't unrealistic.” I interjected quickly, defending...
Jack. “He wants to make sure that no accidents happen. As long as people don’t start catching on fire, he’s fine with the Darcys. He also knows the good your family has done.”

Corwyn’s long legs stretched with predatory grace as he exited the minivan, came around to the other side to open my door for me. Exiting the van, he offered me his arm and I took it. As we passed through people heading inside the Foundation, heads turned in our direction. Embarrassment washed through me and I felt very much like a goldfish in a large bowel, exposed for all to see.

“Great,” I muttered. “We’re fodder for water cooler gossip.”

“You have got to see this,” I heard Gretchen whisper as she tugged on Nick’s shoulder. Our eyes met briefly and she flashed me two thumbs up and I gave her a quick wink. Buzzing spheres of jealousy darted around Nick as Corwyn and I strolled past him.

“People staring,” I told him.

Corwyn protectively wrapped his arm around me. “Let them. You're in the big leagues now” “I want to hide in the dug-out,” I wisecracked.

I glanced over to see Zenobia and Liam stop in mid-conversation as we entered the main lobby. Her eyes crackled with unspoken scorn while Liam wore a look of unadulterated astonishment. I wondered silently what hell Corwyn would have to pay when he faced his family later today. Penelope put me in charge of the final inspection of the auditorium. The fire inspector checked things over and found everything to his satisfaction. I was responsible for making sure the risers were hauled to the City Auditorium and in charge of the dress rehearsal that before the evening concert. The kids performed the music flawlessly under Penelope’s expert direction. Corwyn remained with the tenor section, keeping some of the more rambunctious boys in line while I worked with the sopranos. It came time for us to work on the duet and I pulled the score from my briefcase, nervous because it was the first time we had sang it together.

The accompanist played the opening measures and the music filled the auditorium. Corwyn’s rich tenor sang the opening lines and then I joined in on the harmony, trying to control the volume of my voice. When ribbons of scarlet electricity wafted from him filling the space around us, I noticed that violet ribbons of energy around me reaching for him. Our energies flitted and darted around one another, sometimes warring and other times, entwining intricately with one another. His green eyes locked with mine as we sang, a rush of energy building within me threatened to explode. All I felt poured into every note as the currents and ribbons combined into a psychic storm that arced around us.

I looked into his eyes and found them bright with emotion while I felt a single liquid warmth trickle down my cheek. The world vanished, leaving only us in the auditorium as he reached up with his hand, using his thumb to wipe away the salty moisture. A hush fell over the auditorium and we remained in our own private haven until the roar of applause broke the poignant silence. Stunned back to reality, the world crashed in around me as the kids hooted and hollered their approval of the performance. The scrutiny combined with the powerful emotions was too much for me. I wanted to run and hide as I always had, but two strong hands gently stopped me.

“Wren, look at me!” Corwyn spoke with quiet urgency. “You don't have to be afraid of your emotions.”

“I'm sorry, I can't deal with this,” I gasped as panic pounded in my chest. “I have to go!”

“You're having an anxiety attack,” Corwyn whispered in my ear. “Let me ease you, Sweetling.”

“It's too much,” Not knowing what to request of Corwyn. I fought the urge to run. I felt dozens of eyes on my back and I needed a private moment to collect my composure.

“Will you let me help in my way?” he asked. I looked into those deep green eyes, seeing only worry. “Let me do what I do best.”

If he could calm my churning stomach and help me breathe again, I was more than willing. I couldn't stop trembling long enough to form a coherent answer. All I could do was look into those beautiful green eyes and whisper, “Please.”

A wash of heat spread out from the back of my neck and coursed along my tense shoulders, as if
someone was kneading knots from my muscles. I fought the urge to moan my approval of the tinges that flowed out from my back and along the rest of my skin. I wondered if my emotional turmoil might prove more than what Corwyn could handle, but his emotion-soothing psychic touch drew the panic from me. I never looked away from his eyes as they brightened from green to red and back to tangerine. I learned in that moment that when his eyes glowed amber or bright ochre, that he was in control of his abilities and hungers. In that moment, I began to believe.

“Breathe, Sweetling,” Corwyn said in a quiet, commanding voice. His voice washed over me, the scents of cinnamon and smoke wafted around me. “Let the panic leave you.”

The anxiousness melted from my being, leaving me calm and relaxed. I closed my eyes, feeling a sense of serenity that usually eluded me. My breathing became steady and my body temperature quit coming in flashes of hot and cold. I looked at Corwyn’s features, his lips nearly caressing mine. He gave me a sinful grin as he inhaled deeply of my scent, as if sampling a fine delicacy.

“Let all be well within your soul, Wren.”

“Thank you,” my lips barely managed to form the words. “What did the others see?”

“Only you and I standing here for a few seconds, perfectly still and nothing more,” Corwyn’s eyes never left mine.

At the end of the day, a blur sped past me and behind my desk. I turned to find Corwyn leaning back carelessly in my chair, one leg swung casually over the chair arm as he spun to face me. I was infuriated the he’d so nonchalantly display his inhuman abilities in front of everyone. It also gave me an opportunity to shamelessly ogle him in all his masculine glory. I may be uptight, but I am a typical woman when I have sinful temptation sitting at my desk.

“Hey, could you take it down a notch?” I asked sharply.

“Gossiping coworkers aren’t what I’m comfortable with today.”

“Tonight, you’re coming with me out to the house,” Corwyn gave me a crooked smile. I looked down at the haphazard pile of papers that his speedy burst of energy had blown all over my desk. Leaning over, with pace that defied convention, his hands blurred as he straightened the pile and set them neatly on the edge of my desk.

“No, I’m not.” I yanked the next pile of papers out of his hands, setting them on the desk where I wanted them.

“You’ll change your mind,” Corwyn disappeared from my chair in a flash of fire and light, only a second standing only inches behind me with his breath only inches away from the nape of my neck.

“I’ll convince you.”

“Wait. Hold on a minute!” I raised my hands to stop him from any more displays of inhuman ability. “I have a say in all of this.”

He pondered my words for a second. “Yes, you do.”

“You? Me? Your family?” I cringed at the thought of more scrutiny, more disapproval. “Are you insane? After today’s meltdown, that isn’t exactly wise. I need time to recover and besides, I’m already on Zenobia’s hit list.”

He scoffed. “Wren, you worry too much. Penelope adores you and Tristan hired you on the spot. Don’t worry about Zoe; she’ll be on her best behavior.”

“I’m all about the self-preservation instinct,” I retorted sarcastically. “I’m crazy, not stupid.”

“Just let loose that barbed tongue of yours and they’ll all behave,” Corwyn chuckled.

“Gee, take much glee at my discomfort. Well, guess what, Hot Stuff?” I grabbed my purse and slung it over my shoulder before I picked up my briefcase. “Maybe, I’m not ready to be in a social setting with you family.”

“Is there anything that I can do to change your mind?” Corwyn looked at me, subtly moving closer so that his smoky cinnamon scent wrecked havoc with my senses. I planted my hands firmly on his chest and pushed him back one full foot.

“Quit trying to play me and just respect my answer of ‘not ready yet.’”

I watched several emotions register on Corwyn’s face: disbelief, annoyance, amusement. He let forth a heavy sigh which I interpreted as resignation and relief flooded through me. I felt warm
metal pulse against my skin as my pendant throbbed and I marveled at the waves of crimson and gold swirling in Corwyn's aura. desire vs. nobility. The nobility won.

“Jack wants to meet you.”

“I have no problem with that,” Corwyn rose to his feet, grabbing my cardigan hanging over the back of my chair and then carefully wrapping it around my shoulders.

“You don’t?” I choked on the words. Damn it, Jack was right. I had no talent for bluffing.

“Not at all,” he gave me an easy smile. “He knows we're getting to know each other. I will offer you a deal?”

“Do I look like a game show?”

“Hear me out, Wren,” Corwyn held up his hands to quiet my protest. “Come with me tonight and meet my family on a personal level. No tricks, no magic. Only food and fun. I, in turn, will do the same for you when you ask and bear the brunt of Jack's third degree.”

There was no lyrical chiming in his voice or strange reverberation in his words. No euphoria or excitement accompanied his request as I considered it. Corwyn was only asking with using his abilities.

“Will I be safe?” I asked skeptically. “Is Zenobia going to be lying in wait ready to chop off my head?”

“I personally guarantee your safety,” Corwyn's eyes were the deepest green I had ever seen them.

“Promise?”

“You have my solemn word,” Corwyn's stare never wavered.

“Pick me up at six?”

“It’s a date,” he planted a lingering peck on my brow. I will see you later, Beautiful.”

With another flash of fire and smoke, he disappeared.

Corwyn rode home with Zenobia and Liam while I drove home alone. I quickly shed the rose-colored sweater that I found so appropriate earlier in the day. Going through the rack of clothes in my closet, I narrowed down my selection to a little black dress, a pair of charcoal work slacks that I might wear to church and my favorite pair of jeans.

I nixed the idea of overdressing for the occasion, deciding that I’d feel most comfortable in a pair of jeans. Digging through my drawers until I had mountains of clothing piled on my bed, I picked out my favorite purple shirt. I also picked it because it had a high neckline perfect for hiding my pendant.

No way was I leaving home without it.

I straightened my hair with a flat iron until the last of the flyaways were tamed, hiding my annoying white streak by strategically tucking it under a matching purple band. Silver hoops completed the look. When I heard a knock at the front door, I rushed down the stairs, only to find Jack at the bottom of the stairwell ready to greet me.

“Gonna go to the poker tournament with us tonight, Rascal?” Jack asked casually.

“No,” I had forgotten that he’d scheduled another poker night, hoping to repeat his streak of good luck from the other night. “I have plans.”

“Plans?” his thick brows rose up in surprise as one finger tipped up the rim of his black cowboy hat to get a better look at me. A wide grin came across his rugged features. “You mean a date?”

“Not a date,” I firmly corrected him. “I have an outing. When I said nothing more, he motioned in a beckoning motion. “With?”

“With Corwyn,” I answered, daring to look him straight in the eye. “He’s probably on the front porch right now waiting for me to let him in.”

“Corwyn, huh?” I couldn’t register the look on his face as one of surprise or disapproval.

“Yes,” I answered. “I thought you were okay with him.”

“I said I’d keep an open mind,” he reminded me, his voice grave. “The jury is still out.”

“You seemed fine with the idea the other night,” I reminded him.

“In theory,” Jack went over to the poker table and placed a deck of cards beside the multicolored poker chips. “I thought you were gonna take time to get over Matthew.”

“Three years is long enough to get over him,” I answered shortly. “You wanted to meet him and he is out there waiting. Changing your mind?”
Jack cracked his knuckles loudly then motioned to the door. “Bring it on.”
“Behave yourself,” I warned him. “Or I will kick-”
Jack held up his hand to stop my rant as his other other crossed his heart and held up two fingers.
“Scout’s honor. Best behavior.”
I saw Corwyn standing on the porch holding my favorite flowers in his hands, a pot of purple hyacinths. I flashed him a warm smile and took them from him, inhaling their sweet floral scent. I led him into the kitchen and placed them on the windowsill so that they would receive plenty of sunlight. I impulsively planted a quick peck on his cheek. “Thank you. They’re beautiful.”
He beamed.
We walked into the living room where Jack was busy adding the final touches to the poker table.
“Jack, you know Corwyn.”
Corwyn walked forward, extending his hand.
“Dr. Bryant, it’s a pleasure.”
“So what are you gonna do tonight?”
“We’re going to my sister’s for a family get-together,” Corwyn gave him a smile. “Barbeque.”
Jack’s face paled fifty shades of white.
Before he had a chance to reply, another knock on the door interrupted the conversation. Breathing a sigh of relief, I walked over and opened it to find Selena and Logan on the front porch with three other people. Before I could say a word, they walked into the house and we all stood in the foyer. Selena and Corwyn’s eyes met and it wasn’t easy to miss the enmity between them.
“Jack?” Selena asked in a wary tone, never taking her eyes from Corwyn. “Is everything all right? What is he doing here?”
Jack held up his hand to calm her down. “Leave it alone, Selena.”
I watched the unspoken hostility course between Selena and Corwyn. Her dark eyes flashed unnaturally pale blue and Corwyn’s blazed scarlet as a blue halo immediately surrounded her and Logan which I recognized as a protection field. Corwyn remained still as they glowered at one another when I stepped protectively in between them. Jack put his hand Selena's arm, guiding her toward the poker table. “I want another chance to beat you at Texas Hold ‘em. Save that energy for the game.”
As they walked away from us, Selena tossed me a heated gaze over her shoulder. “You don’t know what you’re dealing with, Wren.”
“Your death wish,” she muttered. “I can't believe you would bring that creature into your home. If you only knew what his kind have done-”
“What I do and who I see are not your business,” I growled angrily loud enough for her to hear.
“Last time I checked, this was Jack's house and not yours.”
I tried pulling Corwyn toward the door, but he refused to budge. His hands were two balls of tight steel. I tugged again at his arm, my voice harsh. “Come on, Corwyn. Let’s go.”
“Fine,” he said curtly through clenched teeth as we exited. I looked over my shoulder at Logan who stood in the middle of it all with an expression of astonishment on his face. I cast him an apologetic glance.
“Sorry.”
He remained stupefied as Corwyn and I left.
Once we were on the front porch, Selena rushed out the front door. “You have your baubles on?”
“Yes, Jack.”
“Don’t take them off,” he advised me coolly. “Be careful. You know, you could take the new fire extinguisher that I bought-”
“It’s only a barbeque, Jack.”
“I don’t want you you ending up as the main course,” he tweaked my nose. “Be careful, Rascal.”
“Don’t worry, Dr. Bryant. She is only having dinner with my family,” Corwyn said.
“If she’s the main course, it’s your head,” he gave a meaningful nod and then turned, going back into the house.
I realized as he sped along interstate 80 eastbound that I had never thought about where Corwyn called home. We traveled until we came close to the Missouri River just outside of Omaha and I
thought how dangerously close his family lived near Phratry territory. He turned off at one of the exits and headed south for a while. I also noticed that we entered what appeared to be the closest thing to Nebraska having a forest. Nebraska is known mostly for corn and cattle, but the landscape near Omaha is laden with trees and steep sugar dirt bluffs left behind by ancient glaciers.

The house we came upon towered over the landscape, the complete opposite of Jack’s Victorian farmhouse. Corywn’s home was sleek, streamlined and modern with sharp angles and the steeply arched roof. The great window took up most of the front of the lightly hued brick house and I guessed the perfectly manicured lawn was close to being half the size of a football field. Solar panels were on the backside of the house as we pulled in behind it and I noticed two Omaha Public Power District white windmills looming a quarter of a mile away on the horizon.

“You family is environmentally conscious,” I blathered. “Much with the green.”

“What do you think?” he asked. I thought a heard an anxious note in his voice.

“It’s very modern.”

He planted a quick peck on my brow. “Relax, Wren.”

“Do I, at least, get a blindfold, a cigarette, maybe a last request?” I joked, those annoying hornets decided to start buzzing my stomach.

“My family has a no smoking policy,” he chuckled. “they also practice fire safety. No setting mortals on fire.”

“Oh, joy.” I mumbled. I flipped down the vanity mirror from the sun visor and inspected my makeup. I didn’t want to go inside looking like Dr. Frankenfurter from the Rocky Horror Picture Show.

“That makes me feel so much better.”

“You are beautiful when you’re anxious.”

Along with the great window, two seven feet tall white doors took up most of the front of the house. We entered into the foyer where I half-expected the Darcys to be waiting, ready to pounce on me. The colors of the house were deep and rich, reds and golds accented by warm tones of terra cotta and earthy green. I gawked at the beauty of his home and wondered what it must be like to live in a house so grand compared to the hundred-year-old farmhouse I called home.

“I’m impressed,” I looked at the vaulted ceilings and the massive chandelier hanging over my head, classic and modern with it’s burnished nickel finish and its dangling crystal ornaments. Knowing my luck, I figured it might drop on me the moment I walked underneath it. That thought inspired an undignified snort from me that caused Corwyn to raise one brow in silent question.

“Were you assuming that it would be all hellfire, brimstone and pitchforks?”

“Pitchforks are more barnyard fabulous,” I motioned the large reception area around us. “Hellfire, maybe. This is so modern and elegant.”

The first to greet us was Penelope and that put me more at ease. I was accustomed to seeing her wear expensive tailored business suits and she surprised me by wearing faded jeans and a lacy white blouse. Her golden brown hair was free of its usual chignon, falling freely around her shoulders. To her right was Tristan whom I had met only briefly during my job interview. The midnight blue shirt he wore complimented his argent-blonde hair and tan skin.

I felt my ring pulsate on my hand, prompting me to quickly shove my hand into the pocket of my jeans. I slipped off the ring, storing it deep in the pocket’s lining. Penelope stepped forward first with arms outstretched and enveloped me into a warm hug that caught me off-guard. His warmth was genuine, melting my nervous resistance and I couldn’t resist the urge to return the affectionate greeting. After letting me go, Tristan extended his hand and I took it, shaking it firmly once.

“Wren, dear, it’s so good to have you here. Welcome.”

“Thank you.”

“Dear,” Penelope stepped forward to hug me. “You’re at your home away from home. You’re off the clock, so all me Pell. Everyone else does.”

Her lilting hint of Southern drawl lulled me into relaxation. I heard a hint of echo in her voice, realizing she was using her charm to ease my apprehension. I gave a wary look to Corwyn and then back to Penelope.

“Pell, she knows,” he said quietly. “You don’t have to do that with her.”
“I’m sorry, Corwyn.” Liquid crystal eyes turned back to me. “I meant no harm by it. I just wanted you to be more comfortable.”

The ringing resonance in her voice vanished, but it still sounded smooth and kind to my ears.

“Thank you. I appreciate the thought.”

Tristan gave me a dazzling smile and motioned for us to sit on the large, overstuffed leather sofa. Following his cue, I did so and silently prayed that Corwyn wouldn’t leave my side. I settled into the welcoming softness of the sofa when a hint of smoke lilted through the air and caught my attention. Next came a bolt of light and Cordelia was suddenly sitting beside me. I let out an expletive and jumped to my feet. Corwyn snickered and gently pulled me back to sit beside him. “I, uh, didn’t tell her everything we can do.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Wren.” Cordy trilled. “Didn’t you know we teleport?”

“Teleport?” I said in a small voice. I fought the instinctive urge to slip the ring back on my hand. “As in ‘beam me up, Scotty,’ teleport? That’s the flashy thing you do that makes you faster than a speeding bullet? Oh, lovely.”

If Penelope and Tristan appeared warm previously, now they laughed at my wry commentary. Tristan's rich chuckle filled the room. “I’ve never heard it worded quite that way.”

“I’ll take you for a ride if you like,” Cordelia eagerly volunteered, her enthusiasm almost persuaded me. My stomach lurched as I felt the amulet beneath my sweater turn ice cold against my skin.

An awkward silence fell over us and then a man with strawberry blonde hair, the color of pale ginger, entered the room. He was tall and lithe, with piercing eyes the color of emeralds, far brighter in color than the cool deep jade of Corwyn’s. Towering over me at six feet plus some inches, he possessed a predatory elegance that made me think that of a jaguar on the prowl. While Corwyn was charismatic and charming, the man next to him was enigmatic, brooding and intense. I felt his feral aura make my ring vibrate strongly in my pocket. I didn’t need to start glowing like a light bulb in the midst of unsuspecting cambions.

“Wren, this is Esteban.” Corwyn motioned toward the his brother-in-law. I cast Corwyn a wary glance and I stuck my hand in my pocket. Something about his brother-in-law set me on edge as I reached for my ring. Corwyn’s hand deftly covered mine and he shook his head once.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Wren.” I saw the smile on his face, but in fact, he looked constipated. I studied him, trying purposely for the first time to read his aura. He was surrounded in a faint copper light with violet flecks dancing around him like falling snow. He possessed some kind of gift beyond the norm for cambions, but I couldn’t discern it. I felt a presence in my mind that gave me the eerie feeling that I was not alone in my thoughts. I felt as though I was being hunted.

Instinctively, my glow went nova and I found myself surrounded in a protective corona of violet light. One word rang clearly in my mind: Telepath. I quickly imagined myself as becoming an inconspicuous piece of furniture, blending in with the surroundings. Esteban's eyes went blank for a few seconds as I put distance between us, moving closer to Corwyn. He glanced around the room for a few seconds until his gaze found me in Corwyn's arms.

“I matched his gaze, ready for any other psychic invasion he might try. In Solomonari culture, it is considered the worst kind of violation to use ones abilities upon an unknowing, non-consenting subject. Anger replaced my bashfulness as I narrowed into a sharp point directed right at him. The presence in my mind withdrew as quickly as it had entered and I watched Esteban's piercing green eyes widen in surprise. A perplexed expression crossed his features.

“She is talented.” he said, sounding amazed at the revelation. “Good instincts.”


“Thanks,” my reply came out curt. I hoped that he hadn’t figured out my true nature. I watched the others look at each other in confusion, not understanding what had transpired between us. I didn’t want to deceive anyone but I wasn’t ready to declare to the world, “Hey, I’m a Solomonar!” I also fought the urge to call him a son of a something and tell him exactly what I thought of his damned mind invasion. With that thought, Esteban chuckled.
“Brother, she’s feisty.”
“She’s being nice,” Corwyn’s voice held a hint of a growl. “Let it go.”
“Don’t worry, Wren,” I felt Cordelia’s warm hand gently patting my back. “He’s harmless.
Bull! No, he’s not. I never took my eyes off Esteban. “Wonderful,” I looked around, noticing that Zenobia and Liam were conspicuously absent. Then, I smelled the delicious scent of barbeque coming through one of the open kitchen windows.
“Dinner’s on!” A deep, booming voice filled the house. A massive form popped into the room from nowhere, only inches away from me. Instead of swearing, I just gritted my teeth. The man with dark hair and enthusiastic manner towered over the rest of the family and I recognized Liam Darcy. He gave me a playful punch in the arm that sent my flying backward into Corywn’s waiting arms. “Hey, how’s it goin’?”
“I’m fine, thanks.” I gave him a waxen smile, still recovering from the sheer force of his good-humored blow.
“I hear you like barbeque.”
“Much love for the barbeque!” Liam’s big grin took away the edge and I forgot to be on my guard.
“What’s cooking?”
“Liam’s finger-lickin’ barbeque chicken, baby.” He waved a spatula toward the window.
“Hungry?”
My stomach growled loudly in reply. “Always.”
“That’s what I like to hear,” he cuffed me lightly on the chin. “I hope my little brother helped you work up an appetite.”
Oh, joy! I inwardly grimaced. Liam Darcy was an alpha male that roared in dominance when placed in front of the grill. I also figured his was an insatiable teaser that tormented his family on occasion with his ribbing. It was just my luck that he eyed me as his next victim.
“Well, come on, people!” Liam’s voice boomed in my ears. “The food’s getting cold.”
If you want to know what people are really like, invite them to a barbeque. The Darcys eagerly helped themselves to Liam’s fried chicken, baked potatoes, and grilled vegetables. Not one speck of barbeque sauce was smeared on their skin and not one drop marred their clothing. My stomach growled in ravenous anticipation as I picked up a paper plate and helped myself to the delicious smelling food that awaited my appetite.
Afterward, being a good guest, I assisted in the clean up, still keeping my eyes open for Zenobia. He absence signaled exactly how she felt about me and I was relieved that I didn’t have to deal with another emotionally charged situation. In spite of myself, I began to relax and enjoy the evening with Corwyn’s family. Once everything had been cleaned and put away, Liam suggested to everyone that they bring me in on a family jam session.
I looked at Corwyn, my eyes wide with horror, when Liam made his proposal. Corwyn only recently had developed a modicum of control around me when I sang but it was still a precarious thing for me to open my mouth. Penelope had never been affected by my singing and I instinctively knew that she had the most fortitude out of all the members of their clan, but that didn’t stop my instincts from going into survival mode. However, I saw an antique upright grand piano sitting in the living room.
“I’ll just sit this one out,” I hedged, not wanting to be a main course on anyone’s menu.
“You’re safe here, dear,” Penelope warmly reassured me as we walked into the large den that contained a trap set, several guitars both electric and acoustic, and a few wind instruments. “This is your home away from home now.”
“Pell, I don’t think Wren’s ready for a full-blown ensemble,” Corwyn came to my rescue. “I’m going to give her the grand tour instead.”
I glanced over at Esteban and thought I saw him breath a visible sigh of relief. Corwyn gave me a tour of the family manor and I must admit that I felt as thought I had stepped into the lives of the rich and infamous. The grounds that surrounded the contemporary mansion bore classic elements that blended well with the chrome, the glass and rich warm tones. He took me along the incline along the north side of their property line that led to a large orchard of apple
and berry trees. To the west, the sun sank slowly behind the bluff, painting the sky in a blended mosaic of coral and blue. The spring breeze gently rustled through the branches, making the spring blossoms shiver above it. Sweet floral scents of apple blossoms mingled with that of freshly cut grass and approaching rain, infusing my senses when the southern breeze lightly swirled around us. In the distance, I heard the chirping of songbirds as they ready for their night’s sleep and I smiled. I wanted to solidify this moment in time, framing it forever, vibrant and tangible, in my memory. I inhaled deeply of the fresh floral bouquet of nature’s beauty, embossing my mind with every element of this perfect point in my life. Corwyn fingers entwined with mine as we strolled along the worn, winding path weaving through the orchard. The heat of his touch against my skin caused my skin to flush and stirred my heart to a quickened tempo. Yet, I also felt a tranquil quietude that felt well in my soul as we silently made our way through the orchard.

He told me how his father, Julian, had planted the orchard in the early 1900s, bringing unexpected means of income to the family. Owning property all over the country, they used it to plant orchards and vineyards and made their money in a variety of corporate and agricultural venues. Corwyn took me to the east end of the orchard, pointing to a line of hearty, mature trees, varying in size and species. I counted them in succession, finding eight in all. I pressed my hand against the weathered bark, letting my fingers trace a path along one particular tree at the right end of the line. Studying it more closely, I saw it’s branches reach up and umbrella slightly outward, recognizing it to be a hazel tree. I found it to be appropriate and befitting Corwyn Darcy. Jack schooled me well in the ways of magic and I remembered well the story of the hazelnut tree.

“This one is yours,” I said, playing my other hand on the bark. “This tree is you.”
“What do you mean?” he asked looking confused by the statement I had made.
“In Solomonar tradition, everyone has a specific tree, animal and mineral to represent them. This one is yours.”
“I don’t understand.”
“Let me throw you some of my mojo and you can tell me how close I am after I’m done,” I gave him a small smile. “The hazelnut tree personifies wisdom and it was an offense punishable by death in ancient times to chop one down. It enhances magical ability to its caretakers and gives knowledge to those who eat the nuts. It symbolizes those in the world who are insightful, expressive and creative. How close am I?”

Corwyn didn’t respond and I wondered if I might have come to close to his inner self. Most people saw his beauty, but he wasn’t accustomed to someone taking the time to look at him as an individual. His jade eyes widened noticeably as he considered my words. I thought I saw him swallow. “Very.”
“I told you I was good,” I smirked, my inner vixen feeling self-satisfied.
“Your gift is strong, Wren.” he said quietly, looking down at the ground. “And it’s growing.”
“I think being around you makes it manifest,” I impulsively admitted. Thinking of Corwyn and his nature, a ghostly smile appeared on my lips as I thought of his vivacious and questioning mind. Artistic and intelligent, he defied convention with his optimistic and romantic approach to life. “I’ve never felt more in tune with my gifts than when I’m around you.”

Corwyn brought my hand to his lips, pressing his balmy lips against my already-heated skin. “Julian planted a tree for each of us to symbolize and celebrate our family, knowing intuitively which tree suited each of us. He would bring me and my siblings out here during the early fall to harvest the fruit to take to the market. Those times with my father were some of the best times in my life.”
“And your mother?” I dared to ask. “What was her name?”
“Lydia.”
“She was human?” I asked warily, referencing on the comment he had made to me in the car earlier. I crossed my fingers and hoped he would elaborate.
“Mostly,” Corwyn murmured in a low voice, his jade eyes focused on the darkening horizon.
“Like you, she was a persistent and intelligent woman. When she and Julian met, they hated each other. Yet, the more time they spent together, the deeper they fell in love. It upset the peace between us and another family when they married and it started a feud.”

“What family?” I could resist the urge to ask, but a part of me thought I already knew the answer. “The Rohans.” Corwyn turned to look at me, glittering jade locked onto clear topaz.

“Oh,” that definitely explained Selena's less-than-welcoming-I-want-to-kill-you animosity.

“I didn't know that your family knew them so well,” Corwyn said calmly, but I noticed his eyes narrowed somewhat, his lips pressed together. “They're Phratry.”

“Yes, they are,” I admitted, remembering honesty without condition.

“We made peace with them,” Corwyn gave a bitter laugh; the darkness in his voice matched the shadows obscuring his eyes. “Look what good that did us.”

My mind reeled at the information that Corwyn had revealed, assessing the ramifications. He and his family merely thought of themselves in terms of the father’s bloodline: demonic and monstrous. I started to see why they battled that part of their natures that made them dangerous. These incredible, compassionate individuals had both eternal damnation and everlasting grace surging through their lineage. I saw that which was hidden and I immediately understood that this comprehension came from True Sight. Now, I understood why the Phratry had sought Julian Darcy’s death but had left the children unharmed. Hadn’t Logan told me that Phratry punish the criminal, but not the criminal’s children?

“From the moment I was born,” Corwyn continued. “I knew the emotions of everyone I met, evil and good alike. My conscience didn’t grant me the luxury of being ignorant of the people that fed my hunger. One day, I looked in the mirror, full of self-righteous pride and instead saw only a fiend staring back at me. I remembered Mother’s final wish before she died and I promised that I would do everything to change my ways.”

I longed to reach out to touch him, offer him comfort when I saw his eyes mist over as he spoke of his mother. I thought that it was better to let him continue uninterrupted.

“I loved my father, Wren, but I am my mother’s son.” Corwyn turned to me, letting his tapered finger run along the rough grooves of the bark. “She loved with everything she had in her and believed it was possible for everyone to find the other half of their soul. When I heard you sing, I knew that person was you.”

We walked back to the house in silence, simply holding hands. I became aware of the subtle current flowing between us, knowing that a bond was forming that defied words. I realized that we were an enigma in the preternatural word. We should be mortal enemies but we were learning about each other, aware of the other’s true nature. Still, for all of the peculiarity of the situation, it felt natural. Perhaps the universe was displaying her strange sense of humor as much her ability to allow hope to occur in the strangest places.
Trial By Fire

12. Trial by Fire

We entered the back of the house through the patio door that went into the kitchen so we could avoid his exuberant family still gathered in the den making music. He brought a finger to his lips, signaling me to remain quiet before swiftly wrapping his arms around me and pulling me into his strong embrace.

“Buckle up,” Corwyn gave me a mischievous grin and a wink the left me wondering what was going through his mind.

The kitchen vanished from view; brilliant light enveloped us from all sides leaving me blind and disoriented. I thought I felt a low current course through my body before my body began to break down at the subatomic level. I was everywhere and nowhere for a split second, caught between existence and void before I found that my limbs had feeling and my stomach had leap into my throat. The scent of smoke and lightning overpowered my senses as the light dimmed around us.

Corwyn slowly released me, steadying me when I staggered because my equilibrium remained off-balance from the sudden shift through the space-time continuum. It was nothing like what I had seen in science-fiction movies or read about in books. Teleportation scatters your particles in all different directions. Your body changes into energy, moving through a dimension neither corporeal nor ethereal. There’s no sound and no passage of time, no scent or physical sensation of any kind. For a few seconds, I ceased to exist.

I exploded into a chain of expletives as I stumbled over to his bed to regain my bearings. I sank into his large king-sized bed, letting the comfort of the plush bedspread cushion my fall. “Next time you decide to move through the multiverse, Corwyn, give me better warning.”

“I had the feeling you would say no,” he chuckled darkly. “A lot of people feel nausea their first time, but it gets easier with practice.”

“I don’t like having my atoms scrambled and reassembled,” I grumbled. After a few minutes of lying still, I felt calm enough to take in my surroundings. To the west were two large dormer windows that let in the last golden lights of sunset. In front of the windows stood an easel holding a large canvas that sported a half-done portrait done in oils. Creamy vanilla walls complimented the honey oak hardwood floor of the large room. Against the east wall, I saw a desk framed on either side by towering bookcases brimming with books.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Welcome to my inner sanctum,” he motioned the room around him. “When I need inspiration, I come here.”

To the south, I saw several electric and acoustic guitars hanging on the wall and just in front of them was a baby grand piano. To the north, I saw a doorway leading to another room that looked as though it contained a kitchenette. I drank in the ambiance of his private chamber, understanding that he painted, composed and wrote to fulfill his need for emotional satisfaction rather than feeding off the energy of others.

Testing my quivering body, still in shock from the abrupt teleportation Corwyn inflicted upon me, I slowly rose to a sitting position. Trusting my dinner not to be recycled, I unhurriedly rose to my feet to survey the number of portraits hanging on the walls. I recognized various style from eras in history; cubism, Dadaism, surrealism. I knew that Corwyn Darcy was an exceptionally talented individual.

I walked over to the easel, studying the large canvas painting. In the center was a woman with peaches and cream skin floating against a vanilla sky. Dark hair fell straight across her cheek, her brown eyes looking skyward. Rose and lavender mist circled her while a silver nimbus crowned her head. Given the angle of her body, she appeared to be falling from the sky all the while she looked upward, at the same time as crimson fire flickered from the bottom of the painting waiting
to engulf her. Now, it was my turn to gawk at the portrait when I saw a single white lock tucked behind her ear.

"Is that me?" my voice came out little more that a hushed whisper. "You knew?"

"I had my suspicions," Corwyn’s smooth voice came from behind me; his warm sweet breath tickled my ear. "I call it ‘In Search of Fire.’ When I heard you sing that first day, I felt your love and your pain wrap it around you, threatening to crush your heart. You’re song was defiant and you refused to let your wounded spirit be broken. You inspired me to pick up my brush and paint this. I came alive again that day when I heard you."

I pointed to the emerald flames beneath the woman. "In search of fire? You?"

"When I heard you sing, I knew that no one had ever reached me as you had. It was bittersweet. It was acid and wine all at one flowing over me. You kept after me, wanting answers. You went looking for fire without fear."

I considered Corwyn’s words and felt my body tremble partially with fear, but mostly with unexpected yearning. The sudden burst of emotion detonating inside me was too much for me to bear, too intense for me to acknowledge, so I looked for a quick change of subject. Chill the raging hormones, Wren.

“Did you paint all of these?” I asked, motioning to the paintings adorning the walls of his studio and happy for a bona fide distraction.

“Yes,”

“You have incredible talent,” I said in quiet awe of the talent I saw hanging on the walls. "Thank you," I looked at Corwyn and he looked at me, his expression indiscernible. Was he actually embarrassed by the compliment? Mr. Hot Stuff was self-conscious about his paintings. Sky blue flecks danced around him revealing his humbleness regarding his gift.

I knew it was alien for Corwyn to feel shy about anything. I studied the different signatures on each portrait; some of the names were straight out of my college art appreciation textbooks. I let my fingers reach forward, lightly brushing along the flowing script that comprised one name. I remembered, as a child, being at an art show at the University with Nana Wren and meeting the artist.

The painter had been tall with long flowing hair with jade eyes that flashed passionately when he spoke about his work. A gasp escaped me, my hand coming to my mouth in utter shock when I realized how many identities Corwyn Darcy had assumed in the past century: doctor, artist, musician and painter. We had one of his paintings in our home above the fireplace mantle that Nana had bought at the art show that day. I studied the signature that read, “Cortez DeAngelo.” The fluid letters matched the writing on the post-it note that I had found attached to the sheet music that Corwyn had left for me on my desk.

This was another way his family maintained their vast wealth, by selling Corwyn’s paintings, drawings, and through the publishing of his music. I remembered how large Cortez DeAngelo had been in the 1990’s before his untimely death in a house fire in 1995. It all came together in a perfectly flowing mosaic of logic and intuition.

“You were Cortez DeAngelo.” I whispered. “Cornelius Dante the playwright, Cory Darren the reclusive songwriter. The first died in a plane wreck in 1973 and Darren died in a car wreck in 1986. In all of those accidents, the remains were burnt beyond recognition and the bodies never found.”

“How do you do that?” Corwyn’s green eyes narrowed in fascination as he stepped toward me.

“Wren, you’re eyes have that eerie lilac gleam in them. True Sight?”

“I wasn’t casting any spell, I promise.” My stomach churned as his words rang with truth. “It was simple logic, Corwyn, and not that difficult to figure out. You use the same initials with every identity but you never bothered to alter your handwriting. We have one of Cortez’s, no scratch that. We have one of your paintings hanging above the fireplace mantle in our house.”

His eyes grew wide but a wide grin spread across his face as he shook his head in amazement.

“What’s wrong?” I asked softly.

“I’m humbled,” he murmured, shoving his hands into his pockets as he often did when he was
embarrassed. “I didn’t know it would be like this, Wren, wanting to share everything with you. I can't hide anything from you. I don't have to. You don’t know what that means to me. I no longer have to hide who I am and what I do. It's liberating. I can say that I've tasted freedom.”

I walked forward, gently framing his face between my hands until his gaze met mine. I noticed light blue and green orbs darting around him, hiding behind him. Humility and peace. Flashes of rose orbited around the tiny orbs as they scurried for cover, revealing his caution about the depth of his emotion for me. I finally knew that his emotions for me were genuine and growing. I looked into those deep green eyes, losing myself in their depths. The tiny orbs increased in size as they circled us, flitting and buzzing around us in a halo of light and emotion. “What are you feeling now, Corwyn?”

“Joy.” his lips whispered only millimeters away from mine. “So much joy because of you. And fear.”

“Fear?”

“You have the power to break my heart,” Corwyn whispered. “I never thought I would find anyone like you.”

“Right back at you,” I turned toward him, his deep green eyes faintly glowing with amber coronas surrounding his irises. Usually, they sparked before they flared bright orange before turning burning red. Now, they seemed only to simmer with restrained energy and emotion.

I reached into my pocket and dug out the copper signet ring, setting it on the edge of the easel. Then, I reached to the clasp at the back of my neck and unfastened my necklace, setting it beside it.

I inhaled deeply of his scent, smoke and cinnamon with a hint of musk that signaled his physical desire. I stepped forward until our bodies were only an inch apart, letting my finger trace the full curve of his bottom lip.

For the first time in his life, Corwyn Darcy was the prey while for the first time in mine, I felt truly empowered.

“I want to test a theory,” I let my fingers entwine with the russet curls at the name of his neck. Hesitantly, I drew his head to mine. I felt his hands settle at my waist, his eyes wide both with disbelief and desire. Standing on my tiptoes, I brought his head to mine slowly so he could move away if he chose. “Close your eyes and stay just like that.”

I felt his body still as I leaned closer to him. Hearing Corwyn’s breath catch and my heart pound, I tentatively brought his lips to mine. Mine lingered over his for seconds before I pressed a gentle kiss against his mouth. Bliss swelled within me when our lips met for the first time. I brushed my lips against his and I heard his sudden intake of breath.

I gasped, my lips parting and then the passion flared. He kissed me with a newfound enthusiasm that swept me away with its intensity. I heard a soft moan, realizing that I was the one who made it. Melting into him, I returned the kiss and a growl of satisfaction erupted within Corwyn. He tasted as good as he smelled: spicy, sweet and hot.

Scooping me into his arms, he laid me down on his bed and I felt his weight settle on me. One hand moved from my waist until he caught my thigh, halfway settling between my thighs. Caught in the moment, I pressed against the solid wall of heat and flame and returned his kiss with equal ardor, drawing him to me as tightly as my strength allowed. I heard a masculine growl escape him as the kiss deepened.

Behind closed eyelids, I saw Corwyn’s soul go supernova, exploding into a kaleidoscope of color and light. The scent of smoke grew thicker as the kiss continued and his hands roamed freely over my arms, my waist and hips. Heat coiled tightly inside me until I felt hungry flames lick my body from the inside as yearning imploded into fusion. My body trembled in his embrace as his shook with restraint; tremors racked us as the tight coil sprang and released a wealth of energy.

A sudden heat engulfed me followed immediately by exhaustion and dizziness. I opened my eyes to find us surrounded by a circle of flame. I also felt that same protective coil that I had felt from him the other night in the car.

“No!” I heard him roar as he rolled away from me.

I rolled off the bed, hitting the ground with a solid thud. I had been burnt once and didn't want to
repeat the experience. I grabbed a blanket that hung over a chair, beating it repeatedly against the burning sheets to put out the fire. Corwyn merely held out his hand, and the flames shrank until they vanished.

“Show-off,” I muttered, thankful that he had the ability to control fire. I made a mental note to self. Ring and necklace on meant I was safe, ring and necklace off meant I was barbeque worthy. I felt humiliated at my own recklessness. I knew better, but I thought that I had control of the situation. I had fallen under the curse of the Bryant Clan: acting without an ounce of common sense or a plan in mind. I was a true Bryant after all, I mused at the irony. The truth hit me upside my head with a harsh brick: kissing Corwyn could kill me.

Opening my eyes, I scrambled to sit upright and found Corwyn on the other side of the room. His eyes burned brilliant red flame, his skin was bright copper and his scent carried the strong scent of smoke. His anger danced around him in an orbit of sharp, red shards and they swirled around me. Quickly, I grabbed my ring and necklace from the easel, turning around to quickly put them on.

“Wow, I haven't had one of those in a while,” I quipped, trying to bring some levity to the situation. “Is this the part where I ask if it was good for you, too, and light up a cigarette?”

“What were you thinking?” Corwyn snarled while his eyes gleamed ruby hot. “I nearly killed you.”

“I wanted to see if we could be together,” I answered. “You didn't kill me. Besides, you weren't exactly beating me off with a stick there, Casanova.”

“True,” his eyes appeared tortured in their anguish. “I barely had the willpower to stop.”

“I wished you hadn’t, Corwyn.” I longed to close the space between us and give him absolution from his private torture. “You were giving me your energy, not just taking mine. It was … incredible.”

“I’d rather die than hurt you,” he kept his distance from me. I watched his skin dim from fiery copper until it again appeared flesh-toned.

“Well, take out life insurance.” I quipped. “I’m not leaving you anytime soon.”

“I’ll put you six feet under if you stay. This ends tonight.”

“Sorry,” I shook my head. “Ain’t gonna happen. Decision made. Solomonari live a damned long time and we don’t die easily.”

“Selena Rohan was right. You have a death wish,” he exhaled heavily. I moved toward him, but he held a hand for me to stop. “This isn't possible, Wren. I'm taking you home. Listen to Selena and stay away from me.”

“Wrong,” I defiantly rose from the floor, walking over to him until I stood only inches away. “I have a life wish. I want to live mine to the fullest and you make me feel more alive than I’ve felt in a long time.”

“I’ll make you burn,” he groaned, twisting away from me. “Please, Wren! Don't do this.”

We will figure a way around this,” I promised, gently pressing my lips to his a second time. “Your parents found a way and so will we.”

“My mother wasn't completely human, Wren.” Corwyn stepped out from beneath my arm and a few feet away from me.

“And I am not your typical human,” I countered. “I am a Solomonar. I have a tenacious will and a way of finding out things. We're getting to know each other and we can find a solution. Do you care enough to try or am I only a challenge to amuse you?”

“I want to try more than anything,” Corwyn’s eyes darkened to deep emerald. “But not enough to risk your life.”

“Think outside the matchbox,” I whispered fervently. “If there’s a love then there’s a way. Have faith.”

“I will be the death of you, Wren,” his voice caught, sounding ragged and husky. “Is this love?”

“Slip of the tongue,” I digressed. “It's the emotion that will not be named.”

I pressed my lips to his and he froze. I did nothing more than let mine linger over his, neither moving nor breathing. Corwyn’s body went rigid as I let my lips cover his, heat flaring along his skin that permeated through my blouse. I slowly counted to ten before I slowly withdrew from the chaste kiss. Moving back, I heard his harsh breathing but his eyes weren’t hot lava, but light jade.
“See?” I said hopefully. “You didn’t kill me or drain me or set off any smoke detectors that time. It just takes patience, practice and a bit of control on both our parts.”
“I don’t know who is more insane,” he muttered. “you for trying to make love to a demon or me for letting you.”
“It beats never knowing,” I gave a shaky laugh. “Faith, Corwyn. In yourself and in me.”
Someone cleared their throat and we both turned in the direction of the sound to find Cordelia studying the ceiling. She acted as if there was nothing unusual about us being so close. Strolling gracefully toward us, she jumped onto the still-smoking bed and sat there in a lotus position, watching us with curious eyes. Poking his head around the corner, Esteban’s eyes were wide with astonishment as he locked eyes with Corwyn. I pondered the possibility that he was reading Corwyn’s scattered thoughts at that moment.
We had been caught red-handed in a compromising moment like two high schoolers out past curfew. Looking at Corwyn’s mortified expression; I knew my instincts were dead-on.
“You’re alive!” Esteban gasped in disbelief or relief, I couldn’t tell which.
“Well, yeah,” I said, giving a casual shrug. “We didn’t even set off the sprinkler system.”
Esteban’s jaw went slack as he gawked at me, too stunned by my flippant remark to respond. I heard Corwyn scoff at my remark and follow it with a sardonic chuckle. I looked over at Cordy, wondering what her reaction might be and found that she simply beamed.
“Pell made cheesecake,” she broke the tenseness with her enthusiasm.
“Cheesecake?” I needed a good dose of sugar to replete my lost energy.
“Vanilla and from scratch.”
“Oh! Much love for the vanilla,” I piped, happy for the change of subject.
“Well, you’d better hurry downstairs before it’s all gone” she told me. “Liam’s been eying it since you left.”
“As if he didn’t eat enough already,” Esteban said absolutely poker-faced. The Jaguar had dry wit.
Cordelia offered me her hand. “Would you like a ride?”
I quickly held up my hand and stepped away. “No, thank you. I’ll walk.”
“Suit yourself. I’ll save you a piece.” Another burst of light filled the room followed by the faint scent of smoke and she was gone.
Walking down the stairs, I weighed my options. I decided that I needed to take a breather from the stress and made a hasty detour for the bathroom. Locking the door behind me, I turned on the cold water and splashed the droplets on my face. I stared at my reflection in the mirror and found dilated eyes staring back at me. My face appeared pale except for my flushed cheeks and slightly swollen lips. My lipstick was smeared and my eye makeup smudged. Yeah, I definitely looked a mess.
“What do you do now, Wren?” I gestured helplessly at my reflection. “Bare all in reality show style or keep your mouth shut?”
The longer that I kept my true nature a secret meant the more likely it evolved into deception and that bothered me. Yet, telling them the truth meant putting all of my faith in people I barely knew. I logically examined every aspect of the situation, taking into account my family and Selena’s vehement reaction to seeing Corwyn in 3-D. If she decided to start a vendetta, the feud between the Darcys and the Rohans resumed. It would be Phratry vs. Cambions and I knew how it had turned out the last time. Everyone lost a loved one and no one won a damn thing.
How would this affect Jack and what side would he take? He wasn’t exactly fond of the idea of me dating outside my species even though he had admitted respecting the Darcys, especially Tristan. I carefully considered all of these factors and realized the Darcys had been amazingly open with me about who they were and what they believed.
Angst. I hated it. Strong emotions are not good for me because they’re more than I can handle. Pride demanded that I be brave and tell the Darcys the truth while wisdom shrieked at me to keep quiet. Like death and taxes, my body decided to rebel against my internal duress and promptly a hot taste filled my mouth.
I became best friends with their porcelain, environmentally friendly, water-saving toilet. I knew I
wouldn’t want any cheesecake anytime soon.
I heard a quiet rapping on the door. Still on my knees in front of the toilet, my body froze at the
fear of having been discovered missing.
“Wren, are you all right?” A concerned Southern drawlilted toward my ringing ears.
I cleared my burning throat. “Fine, Penelope. Just had to freshen up a bit.”
“Wren,” I heard that determined note in her voice that reminded me of velvet rapped around steel
will. “You don’t sound well.”
“I’m fine,” I said more sharply than I intended. “I’ll be down.”
“We’ll be waiting.”
I fanned my heated face and downed some cool water, not pretending to be civilized as I turned on
the cold water and drank it by cupping my hands together. I needed to know what I was going to do
by the time I rejoined them and I didn’t have a clue. I looked at my reflection and when I thought I
looked respectable, I unlocked the door and made my way downstairs.
Corwyn met me at the bottom of the stairs; worry shining in those green eyes. No red fire or amber
sparks flew, they were simply deep jade. I looked up at him, lost in the moment of realizing that
Fate hadn’t just led us here. Her kinder sister, Destiny, allowed us the choice we had made to
come to this point. I wanted him to realized that I had come to this moment without regret.
“I’m too full for cheesecake,” I fibbed, hoping he couldn’t read my tense emotions. I knew I had to
tell his family the truth because they risked everything by bringing me into their home. “Let’s
practice that duet that we’re singing on Sunday night.”
Corwyn beamed at me as he entwined his fingers in mine and led me to the den. I saw his entire
family, including, Zenobia, putting away their instruments when we entered. I watched Corwyn let
go of my hand and walk to the wall where several guitars hung on the wall. He chose a twelve-
string round back guitar and motioned for me to go to the cherry wood baby grand piano. He
glanced briefly at Penelope and she nodded in understanding, reaching into the piano bench and
pulling out familiar sheet music.
I sat down at the piano, hoping that I could sight-read the score clearly written on the pages before
me. Penelope sat on my right of the piano bench. “You need a page turner.”
“Oh, yeah.” I sighed, willing the hornets in my stomach to behave. I didn’t have the courage to tell
the Darcys my private truth, but with Corwyn there in the room, he gave me the inspiration to show
them.
He slung the guitar strap over his shoulder and I plunked out several notes, E, A, D, and G so he
could tune the strings. He began strumming chords and I looked at him, trying to get a feel for the
tempo. I glanced at the sheet music and began playing the music in front of me. Hearing his rich
tenor fill the room, I heard a distinct echo in his voice as he watched me. This time, I let his
empathic calm wash over me, steadying my nerves and settling my stomach. No one had ever read
me so well.
I came in on harmony, one eye on Corwyn and the other on the words in front of me. His honey-
smooth voice filled the room and the perfect pitch of my harmonies blended together as we sang
our way through the bridge and the chorus. Abounding affection flowed from him in ribbons of
lime and cerise. The green ribbons came from both of us meaning that we what was between us
grew stronger by the day, a bond increasing in its devotion and loyalty. The rose tones represented
the happiness, laughter and joy we both felt toward each other. Even though I hadn’t spoken the
three words aloud to him, I knew what my heart felt for him, especially in that moment.
I saw golden strands reach out to me as he gave me a portion of his soul to heal and calm me. In
return, the lavender filaments flowing from me streamed easily toward him. Our souls touched,
neither taking nor stealing, both willingly offered everything within as a gift to the other. I felt a
slight drain pulling at me simultaneously as some spontaneous energy filled me. As we came to
the end of the ballad, the final chords hovered in the air followed by a reverent silence. I kept
silent, not wanting to break the mood.
Penelope laid a hand on my shoulder, bringing me out of my reverie with Corwyn. “Honey, that
was beautiful. You two complement each other perfectly.”
“Did anyone happen to notice what was happening?” Zenobia interjected curtly. “He was draining her dry or did you all miss the burning bed?”

“Yet, here she is five minutes later, alive and well, holding her own.” Esteban commented, perplexed by the anomaly of my survival. “You are a talented lady and there’s more to you than you reveal. How did you survive my brother-in-law?”

I took a deep breath to control the annoyance creeping into my thoughts as I felt him scan my mind for answers. My necklace vibrated and hummed beneath my sweater as I formed a mental picture of a white glowing net surrounding me, blocking his telepathic incursion. I raised one brow in sardonic question. Will you stop with the frontal lobe assault already? I get it! You want to know! The pushing at my temples abruptly stopped as several pairs of eyes stared at me. An awkward stillness filled the den for a moment as the gravity of the words hung between us.

An amber halo of smoke and fire extended from her body as she glowered at me. “How can you make believe having her here isn’t risky for us?”

“Open ears and shut mouth. I don’t tell other people’s secrets.”

“Everyone knows.” Penelope put her arm around my waist, giving me a quick squeeze.

“Listen to me. I wanted to tell you the truth and you asked. So, don’t bitch.”

“About four years,” he answered with a smile.

“What do you know about him?” I asked her.

“I don’t pay attention to Zoe. I never do,” Corwyn’s hands rested protectively on my shoulders.

“She’s more to us than you think,” I almost looked forward to dropping a large Solomonari bomb on her. I took off my headband, shaking my hair loose, letting my white streak show. “A lot more, Zoe.”

“About four years,” he answered with a smile.

“What do you know about him?” I asked her.

“He volunteers there several times a week for the food distribution program,” Zoe started. “He looks at clients pets for free. He’s a good man.”

Corwyn, you brought a damned slaver into our house!?” Zoe bellowed. “How could you?” I hadn’t expected the vehemency of her response. I finished her sentence with great satisfaction, my inner vixen smirking at her excited reaction. “Listen to me. I wanted to tell you the truth and you asked. So, don’t bitch.”

“Corwyn, you let your hormones get in the way of our safety.” Zenobia hissed, glowing at him.

“She’ll kill us all if you don’t kill her first.”

“Zoe, that’s enough.” Penelope’s stern voice cut through her sister-in-law’s tirade. Turning to me, Penelope gave me an understanding look. “If Wren meant us harm, she would have done something already.

“‘You’re crazy if you believe that! I’m done here!’” Zenobia flicked her red hair, matching the
glowing embers in her eyes. “Tell me when she's gone.”
An argent flash of light filled the room followed by the heavy scent of smoke. I turned to the others, staring at me as thought I had grown a third eye. I felt ashamed for having lost my temper with Zoe and knew I needed to make amends for it.
“Everyone, thank you for your kind hospitality,” I began. “I am truly sorry for any offense I’ve given tonight to any of you and I apologize for my behavior. I ask for your forgiveness for the pain I’ve caused you. I’ll leave now.”
“Corwyn, I'll see you outside.” Silence filled the room. I knew that was my signal to leave. I turned to go when a voice boomed behind me with loud laughter.
“Wow, you really stuck it to Zoe. Damn, girl! You are bad-ass.”
“He?” I said, stupefied by the strange response. I turned to see Liam wearing a broad grin on his boyish features. I expected consternation, even condemnation. The last thing I expected was someone's amusement.
“Liam, it's not funny,” I said in a quiet voice. “Not at all.”
“We know it’s not,” Tristan stepped forward, laying a comforting hand on my shoulder. “We’ve known for some time about the truth about Jack. We just didn't know that you were one as well. Given that your father was mortal, we thought you were as well.”
“Jack isn't my dad,” I started.
“Jack is your grandfather,” Tristan finished for me. “We know.”
“Do you know the truth about my family?”
“Penelope and I both do,” Tristan said solemnly. “But, not everyone here knows it all. It's best to keep it that way.”
Penelope closed the baby grand and walked over to her husband. “It's all right, Wren. Zoe has a penchant for the dramatic. Once she calms down, she will be fine.”
“Has my family ever hurt you in any way?” I pressed, sensing something sinister behind the whole turn of events.
“Jack has never hurt our family,” Tristan shook his head.
“Penelope, please believe me,” I started, not knowing how to continue. “Jack isn’t thrilled about this either. It frightens the hell out of me. I would never hurt you and neither would any of my family.”
“We know that,” Tristan reassured me, looking at his wife with love shining in his eyes. “You definitely take after Jack.”
“Thank you,” I felt like hornets in my stomach were behind my eyes. The stinging tears that threatened to spill over were more than I could bear. I didn’t want to get weepy in front of Corwyn’s family the first time I formally met them. The stress was too much for me to process and I felt my emotions shutting down. “I think I should go home now.”
“You’re always welcome here, dear,” Penelope’s voice lilted with an enchanting resonance that immediately calmed my nerves, but I shook it off. “You'll be back.”
“I won’t cause any problems for you family,” I said in a tight voice. “I won't bring any difficulty for your family. You’ll find my resignation on your desk in the morning.”
“Well, I just won't accept it,” Penelope shook her head. “So, put that thought out of your head right now, Sugar.”
“I have to go, Penelope,” the strong emotions threatened to overwhelm me. I am a creature of pride, refusing to let anyone see me cry. “Good night.”
I rushed out the door and headed for the road. I didn't want to deal with Corwyn or his family; my temper had gotten the better of me and the night ended up a disaster. I grabbed my purse from Corwyn's car and willed myself to blend into the night surrounding me. I quickly search my list of contacts for the one person who would give me a ride without a lecture and judgment. Logan Rohan came to the top of the list.
I felt a warm hand close of mine, closing my phone. “Sweetling, forget about Zoe,” Corwyn whispered fiercely. I fought the urge to turn into his embrace and bury my head in his shoulder. His warm breath blew over me as he pressed a kiss against my hair. “It took a lot of courage for you to
come clean with my family tonight.”
“Corwyn, please...” I didn't know how to continue.
“We know you and Jack weren’t the ones who tried to kill us ninety years ago,” Corwyn reminded me. “It was the Phratry.”
He brought his fingers beneath my chin, gently moving my gaze upward to meet his. “Let’s get you home. We have a big night tomorrow.”
“No, we don't.” I corrected him. “This was a disaster and it's over. Just take me home and forget this ever happened.”
“You're going to run away and hide as you always have?” the anger in his voice made me cringe.
“Yes, I am.” I gave my best petulant reply. “After all, it's what I do best.”
“Stop it!” Corwyn commanded me. “You're better than this.”
“Not so much,” I scoffed. “If you're not going to let me call for a ride, then please take me home.”
Seeing that I gave no quarter, he surrendered. He gave me one curt nod. “Fine.”
I walked to his car, letting myself in before he could open the door for me. I wasn't up for the gentlemanly pageantry and just wanted out of there. Corwyn said nothing as he entered from the driver's side. We sat there in silence for less than a second when a blinding flash of light caught my eye on my side of the sports car.
Cordelia leaned through the window, holding a piece of cheesecake wrapped in plastic wrap.
“Penelope said we couldn't let you leave without one piece.”
I didn’t know whether to start crying or laugh at it all. Too stunned to say a word, it on took the cheesecake and gave her a confused look. Flashing me a perfect smile, she gave my hand a quick squeeze. “We can't wait for you to come back.” With that and another barrage of light and smoke, she was gone.
Hex, Drums and Rock n' Roll

The next afternoon, warm April sunshine streamed through the kitchen window, the spring breeze carried in the scent blooming flowers that Jack and I had planted in the front yard. While Corwyn and I hadn’t made formal plans, I had a feeling that we’d be spending several hours together prior to the evening’s benefit concert. A smile crossed my face as I made myself ready, thoughts of the upcoming concert filling my mind.

I couldn’t wait to see forty teenagers up on the risers sing their hearts out to an audience ready to help make a difference and donate money for playground equipment. That day was the day when every practice made a difference and maybe transformed some child’s life for the better. I remembered with pride how the group started as a bunch of undisciplined kids and, with Penelope's guidance, had transformed into a choir of accomplished singers. This dedication manifested when they decided upon a name to call their choir, In Choir. Complete with a logo designed by one of the gifted graffiti artists, they embraced their new identity with fondness than no one had expected. I knew this would debut performance signaled a great future for this group and I was amazed to by the realization that by being their accompanist, that I had contributed to something other than myself.

Everything from the beginning of March until now had culminated into this evening. Penelope had reformatted the annual concert to include several well-known city musicians and one well-known national act, the band Penumbra, from Seattle. Since the Foundation had made the announcement of their inclusion, the concert had sold out and had received local, regional and national publicity. Given the amount of attention both in print online, donations and interest in the choir and the Foundation had rocketed beyond all expectations. I admit, I had permanently borrowed a few of the programs printed for the concert's patrons to keep as personal souvenirs. Once downstairs, I saw a note in Jack’s block letter script held by a magnet to the refrigerator. Pulling it off, I quickly scanned the note and found that he had been called to help with Mrs. Bertrand’s poodle. I hoped that he’d be able to be back in time to attend the concert with me later that night. I looked at the antique answering machine and saw that we had a new message. Pressing the button, a familiar voice cheerfully greeted me.

“Hey, Jack! This is Della. I’ve got great news! Justin and Garrett arrived late last night and we’ll be flying out of Denver about eleven our time. We’ll be arrive about three o’clock your time in plenty of time for Wren’s concert. You haven’t told her we’re coming, have you? I want it to be a surprise. Anyway, give me a call on my cell phone. You have the number. Bye!”

I looked at the large grandfather clock against the opposite wall, noting that it was past three o’clock. Grabbing my cell phone in a panic I called Jack, wondering if he was already on his way to the airport to pick up the rest of our family. I cursed the gremlins in my cell phone when it lost its signal, turning the air blue with a string of expletives. Seizing my keys off the kitchen counter, I raced out the front door. Relief washed through me when I heard my cell phone ring and eagerly flipped it open to hear Jack’s deep, rugged voice greeted me on the other end of line.

“Jack!” I exclaimed. “I just heard the message on the machine. Where are you? Are you on your way to the airport?”

“Sorry, Wren.” I heard the disappointment in his voice. “The clan wanted to surprise you. Anyway, I’m still at the clinic. Can you pick the brood at the airport?”

“I’m on it,” I quickly assured him. “No worries. Will you be able to make the concert tonight?”

“Wild horses couldn’t keep me away, Rascal. I won’t miss it. Promise.”

“I’ll grab the family at the airport and get them to the auditorium,” I promised. “And I’ll see you there.”

“Count on it,” Then the line went dead.
Walking out to the garage, the faint fragrance of cinnamon and smoke wafting through the air signaled Corwyn was nearby and I smiled. I looked over my shoulder to see the sleek blue Aston Martin parked in the driveway, causing my heart to drum a few beats faster. I made an abrupt about-face and started toward him, wishing that I had the ability to teleport just so I could see him just a few seconds sooner.

I watched an explosion of light burst inside the car and then found him standing beside me. He held in his hands a bouquet of sterling roses, pale lavender in hue, tied together with a purple ribbon. I looked blankly down at the spray and then back at him, then again at the fragrant flowers he held. Shaking my head in confusion, I stared back at him. “What did I do to deserve these?”

“Simply by being you,” he gave me a crooked grin as he headed toward the house. “We need to put these in water.”

“Hey, wait a minute.” I caught Corwyn by the arm. “I don’t have a lot of time. I just found out all of my family is at the airport waiting for a ride. They've flown in for the concert and I don’t want to leave them waiting. That wouldn't leave me in their favor.”

“Agreed.” A bright flash left me blind, accompanied by a hint of cinnamon. I saw through the open kitchen window Corwyn rummaging around in the kitchen until he found a vase that I knew was stored in one of the cupboards. A few minutes later, another flash of light occurred and I found him standing beside me. “How many?”

“How many what?” I asked, puzzled by his odd question.

“How many of your family is waiting for you?”

“Jack’s brother Garrett, my Aunt Della and my brother Justin,” I explained. “I’d like you to meet them.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” His eyes gleamed with sunset hues.

Great! I inwardly groaned, realizing I had a potential disaster on my hands. I hadn’t factored the rest of my family’s reaction to Corwyn. Uncle Garrett had heroically negotiated the Accords between the Phratry and Cambions, but that didn’t mean that he might not harbor animosity toward the Darcys.


I figured I had two options. First, I could ask Corwyn to accompany me, throw the whole lot of them together and possibly initiate a chain reaction that would start World War III. Secondly, I considered reverting to instinct and being a coward. Corwyn didn’t have to accompany me to pick up the familial units, but that only delayed the inevitable nuclear explosion of tempers. Finally, I looked back to tried and true patterns that had worked for me in the past. We were all adults and maybe I just worried too much “what-if” scenarios that might not happen at all.

“I’m considering options,” I replied honestly, silently frustrated at my lack of decisiveness. “I’m processing everything right now.”

“Talk to me. What’s wrong?”

“Sweetling,” Corwyn murmured, his silken voice filled with a compelling resonance I recognized. I knew that he meant only to soothe me and reverted to the only way he knew to bring me comfort. I realized that he, too, was unaccustomed to working without his psychic gift and meant no harm. I gave him a free pass on this one, considering the more important matters at hand. The soothing note in the endearment did nothing to hide his underlying concern. “You look worried.”

“Right now, Corwyn, I want to hide under my rock and stay there;” I admitted, wiping my clammy palms on the sides of my trousers.

I took several deep breaths, looking for the newfound courage about our relationship that inconveniently vanished when I needed it most. I closed my eyes, concentrating on that strange tingle I always felt when my True Sight activated, hoping for some solution to magically appear. Nada. My talent didn’t work that way and I knew it. The best I that I received was a curt realization that no mystical cure-all existed to make my worries disappear. I was going to just have to handle this problem the regular way: head-on.

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“I’m considering options,” I replied honestly, silently frustrated at my lack of decisiveness. “I’m processing everything right now.”

I looked at possible options and outcomes, relying on my logic and common sense rather that
throwing caution to the wind. After the previous evening, I wasn't doing anything without a plan. Corwyn gave me one nod and stepped back a few feet to allow me the space he knew I needed. This wasn't merely a Cambion / Solomonari issue, but also an issue of two family with history reuniting after decades of cautious animosity between each other. The Phratry had made the agreement with the Cambions and the Darcys had acted as mediators. That was all. Tonight was more about a young woman introducing her new man to her family and hoping they would grant his acceptance. I realized, magic was secondary in this situation and if anyone gave me any trouble, I'd kick their... well, you get the idea. I loved this wonderful, fantastic man and if anyone had a problem with it, then they could f-

“Wren?” His voice was low and insistent, dragging me out of my inner soliloquy. “You’re coming with me,” I stated, settling up on the best option. “My family is going to meet you.”

“Are you sure?” Corwyn looked at me carefully, measuring me through veiled eyes. His face was a mask of neutrality, making it impossible for me to know what was going on inside his mind. “Well, you already know my Great-uncle Garrett,” I mused, thinking of the photograph that I had seen in Logan’s book just a few days prior taken at the time the Accords had been signed. “Are you two on bad terms?”

“Not exactly,” his lips pressed into a hard line. “He negotiated with the Phratry for your family’s safety, right?” I asked trying to piece the mysterious puzzles together. “So, what is his problem?”

“It’s... complicated.” Corwyn paused. His gaze darkened to topaz. My eyes darted to meet the dark gaze staring at me. Was he hedging? I considered that possibility for a moment, wondering what other mysterious secrets this man and my family knew that I didn't. Well, I never was one for secrets. I was more for blowing the doors wide open and bring with me a hurricane of fresh air. I was tired of subterfuge, secrecy and clandestine bull that hovered over our families like a looming storm cloud. Enough.

“Figures.” I scoffed, snorting my response. “But, you are not your father. I’ll be honest; I don’t know the entire story. Your father drained your mother dry until she was dead, but has anyone bothered to ask under what circumstance? She had four children with Julian before she became a charcoal briquette, so that means they figured out how to be together without setting the bedsheets or each other on fire. There is more to this tale than some incubus getting it on with a Phratry and losing it in the middle of hot and heavy sex.”

“Wren, you don’t know anything!” His eyes gleamed red and I knew that I had touched on something dark and poignant. I also realized that making light of his mother’s passing was major taboo. “You don’t know how delicate this situation is for all of us, even you.”

Open mouth and insert foot.

“I’m sorry, Corwyn, I was beyond harsh. It’s been nearly ninety years since those Accords were signed and I don’t have much love for subterfuge. It’s time to get this out in the open because if you love me, then this is what we both have to face. My family is going to have to deal with the fact that I’ve fallen in love with a Cambion. Ergo, you’re coming with me to pick up my family and we’re going to clear the air.”

I felt my temper rise with each word and by the time I was done, I felt a stoked mass of energy swirling inside me, a blast of force needing immediate release. Heat seared the backs of my eyelids as my anger crescendoed, an explosion occurring inside my chest. I felt that sensation close to vomiting as all the pent-up emotion flowed from my temples down my arms and into my sweaty palms as my frustration spilled forth with my last words. My mouth tasted of metal and salt as I expelled the sickening substance from my body. It poured from my my mouth and eyes, engulfing my vision in a field of glowing blue-white light. My palms stung as though I had hit stony ground and skinned them.

I stood dumbstruck as the silvery light exploded everywhere, the blast detonating without control, hurling Corwyn back several yards and setting off the the car alarm in his Aston Martin. I stood there in shock, staring at the scorch marks around me and only the annoying honking of the alarm
brought me back to reality. I scanned the scene and Corwyn was conspicuously absent from my line-of-sight.

“Corwyn?” I called out, frantically looking around to see him. Oh, God! What had I done? Breaths turned into seconds and then stretched into eternity without him beside me. I felt that same acidic sensation begin welling within me as my fear grew. Where was Corwyn? I felt it building again ready to burst when I felt a familiar hand on my shoulder.

“Wren, listen to my voice,” the haunting echo heavy in his voice. “For all that's holy, listen to me now and let me wash over you.”

I gave in to his empathic gift, letting cascade over me like a hot shower soothing aching muscles. I felt the ball of pure emotion escape me, a blue of liquid energy burst in mid-air and Corwyn raised his hand. He silently directed the sphere several yards away from us and let it blow up above us. The deafening crack of thunder that followed left my ears ringing and my heart pounding in my chest.

“How the death of us both if you’re not careful,” Corwyn growled. “I know you're frustrated and upset, but letting your emotion get the better of you is dangerous for all around you, especially humans.”

“I don’t call lightning, that’s just an old legend about Solomonari. Controlling the weather is Justin's Department. Me? I just see things and my inner voices sing back-up harmony at karaoke.”

“You called it in a fit of anger like a petulant child throws a tantrum. If you do that around humans, you'll kill them. It happened the first day when you sang with the kids and was caught in the emotions you felt.”

I remembered that day well when the cable broke above us, almost electrocuting some of the choir. How he had rushed to my rescue, shielding me from the current. Mortified, I realized that he had been protecting innocent humans from my irrepressible outburst, saving their lives. Shame ran through me and I wanted to hide from the rest of the world.

“You’re too young to have proper control of it. You're not going to put yourself at risk and I'll not be the cause of your suffering.”

“You didn’t do anything, I did.” I argued. “You saved all those people that day, didn't you? From me?”

His heated crimson gaze locked with mine, but Corwyn remained silent. I felt the energy simmering in me, building again with each revelation prompting shame, anger and sadness. I watched the energy around him shimmer as though he were a mirage in the middle of the desert and I knew that he was using his charm on me for all's worth.

“Wren” he held me close, crooning my name like a lullaby. “Listen to my voice and let me ease you. Don’t resist or deny the ebb of your ire. Let it go.”

“I’m dangerous,” I nearly sobbed into his chest. “I’m as bad as—”

“You're young,” he corrected, soothingly stroking my hair. “Cambions can control their urges and so can you, Sweetling. Have faith in yourself and in me. I will show you and you will learn, I promise.”

“What about my family?” I asked.

“Well,” Corwyn pressed a tender kiss to my brow. “I don't know how this works in Solomonari families, but I know that in mine we have 'the talk.’”

“Like the birds and the bees?” I looked up at him. “Are you kidding me?”

He returned my gaze without saying a word.

“What?” I said, uncomfortable with his silence. I felt his psychic balm bring down my heightened emotions to normal levels. With his ability to emphatically enhance or diminish emotion, he kept me from blowing out half of Lincoln's power grid. I looked up at him and saw his eyes were bright crimson as he absorbed the electricity and emotion that I had generated. He closed his eyes and
shivered in my arms as if overtaken by an unseen force controlling his body. Slowly opening his eyes, I saw they had returned to a deep green hue and I breathed easier.

“When one of my kind reaches sexual maturity, we consume the essence of all those within our reach. It takes discipline and practice to control that side of our nature. I can only guess that it is the same for your kind, letting your emotion get the best of you when you're coming of age.”

“If you mean puberty,” I gave him a skeptical glance. “I went through that when I was a teenager, right down to the hormonal swings and the acne.”

“That is your physical maturation, but now you're dealing with a magical one and that is different,” Corwyn took my hands in his, planting a kiss on the back of each one. “Your emotions and your abilities are interconnected and you must learn how not to let them control you. Suppressing them will only increase their potency and their unpredictability. Harnessing them will give you power and control over them.”

“Oh.” What else could I say? It made sense that I was experiencing preternatural puberty. Did that mean that I was going to experience all of the extremes of growing up all over again? I could definitely do without the acne. Then, it came to me; an epiphany.

“Well, you absorb all of it and that's part of your diet, right? Human emotion? If you're around me, then I don't have to work turning family, friends and loved ones into crispy critters.”

“Crudely put, but, essentially correct,” he chuckled at my unorthodox analogy.

“How do you achieve your control?”

“That,” Corwyn bit his lip as his cheekbones became tinged with a blush. “is best left for another conversation.”

“Multiple sex partners?” I teased.

“I'd have committed murder several times over if that was the case,” he murmured.

“I've never, um,”

My jaw dropped several inches at what he had bashfully admitted. My Corwyn was still a virgin. In order to achieve control, the secret didn't lie with controlling his need for others' emotions, but was rooted within controlling his own passions. What he felt determined his appetite, not what others emitted. So, if he had an itch to scratch, did he do it on his own time?

I giggled at the thought. It also aroused me in ways I hadn't felt since Matthew. I looked at him with a knowing glance as my eyes trailed from his down to other parts of his anatomy. Corwyn cleared his throat, obviously embarrassed that by this new revelation. He felt vulnerable, I felt ashamed and together we helped one another.

“I want them to know exactly who I'm, “ I searched for the right word. “Dating.”

Corwyn’s green eyes flared amber for a moment before returning to their jade hue. He covered my
lips for the next several breaths in loving kisses which caused me to tingle. “You are too daring for your own good, Lois Lane.”

“Well, I hope your undershirt has a large “S” emblazoned on it.”

“No quite,” he chuckled darkly.

“I have no doubts,” I said quietly, staring intently at him. Our eyes locked for a moment, no words came from either of us, but nothing else need be said when the unspoken was understood. While I often flipped back and forth between certainty and doubt regarding our relationship, Corwyn remained steadfastly secure in the conviction of our bond. I knew in time, I would be where he was now and then we would go forward together. However, I wasn’t there yet and I tend to like taking detours and scenic routes.

A few minutes later, Corwyn sat in the passenger side of the minivan while I navigated through Sunday traffic along Cornhusker Highway to the airport. It was a pleasant day for Lincoln, a warm sixty-five degrees. I had all of the windows rolled down and my CD player cranked louder than usual playing my favorite music.

We made it to the terminal by four-thirty. I found Garrett, Della, and Justin waiting patiently in the restaurant at the airport. Corwyn held my clammy hand in his, giving me a reassuring squeeze as we approached them. He pressed a kiss to me throbbing temple. “Easy, Wren. I’m here with you.”

“I’m sorry about everything earlier,” I said softly as we entered the airport terminal.

“Shhh, Wren. You’ll gain control with time.” He stopped in mid-stride several yards away from my relatives. “I thoroughly enjoyed myself.”

“You orgasmed,” I said bluntly. “Right now, I need some serious backbone. Oh, well. If I can’t dazzle them with brilliance, I’ll baffle them with bullsh-”

“Wren!” A feminine voice declared my name with a shot of joy.

A tall slender woman with a black curly mane of black hair flowing behind her rushed forward to tightly wrap me in a bear hug.

“Aunt Della,” I exclaimed as she squeezed the air out of my lungs. “I’ve missed you!”

She took a step back to scrutinize me from head to toe. Pursing her lips in contemplation, she surveyed the picture I presented. Nodding slowly, she turned to Justin. “Your aura has really changed, Wren. It is full of all sorts of colors I’ve never seen on you.”

“Gee, Aunt Della, why don’t you tell everybody what you really think?” I quipped dryly.

“I always do,” she smirked proudly.

Behind her, I saw a young man that stood 6’1” with a slight physique twined in lean muscle. Thick locks of unkempt black tresses and soulful deep-set eyes framed by bold brows complimented his masculine jaw line and symmetrical cheekbones. Damn, I envied Justin because he had inherited Mom’s gorgeousness and was a dead ringer for one of my favorite movie stars. Unlike the rest of my family, his eyes flashed between aqua and turquoise while the rest of us had to be happy with brown. I think Mother Nature favored the males in our family.

“Little Sis!” Justin stepped forward with arms outstretched. I rushed forward to greet my older brother who picked me up effortlessly and whirled me around as though I were a small child before setting me back on my feet.

“Justin, it’s good to see you too!” I said happily, all of my previous anxiety forgotten. “How was your flight?”


“ Stellar,” I snorted. “Much love for the B movie.”

Stepping toward me was a tall man with long straight black hair that fell to the middle of his back. Dark, deep-set eyes stared right through me and I thought that maybe I was invisible. I felt like a five-year-old child staring at the stern, intimidating man towering over me at 6’4.” Looking past me, I watched my Great-uncle Garrett tip back his black cowboy hat to scowl at Corwyn standing behind me.

“Wren,” he said stonily, nodding towards Corwyn. “Why is he here?”

“He’s here because I invited him.”

“Do you know who he is?”
“Corwyn David Darcy, born 1887 to Julian and Lydia Darcy. Half incubus and half human,” I turned to him and wrapped my arm in his. “Controls fire and electricity, possesses heightened abilities and senses. He also teleports, charms and influences people at will. If he’s not careful during sex, someone goes ‘poof.’ He’s a talented composer, musician, and artist. Yeah, I know the score, Garrett.”

“What is he talking about, Wrennie?” Justin’s deep voice asked softly.
I cast a silent look at Cowryn then back to my brother. An unspoken realization coursed between us: either Justin didn't know about our family history or he didn't realize whom I'd brought to meet the family. Oh, this was getting stranger by the minute.

“Everyone, I’d like to meet my boyfriend, Corwyn Darcy, the Cambion,” I gazed at him.

“Wren,” Della hissed, clamping her hand over my mouth. “Keep your voice down!”

Justin’s draw dropped, Corwyn’s eyes widened and Garrett stood there looking as if the turquoise and deer bone choker he wore was about to strangle him. He studied me through guarded eyes and then let his gaze fall on Corwyn. Raising one black brow in silent question, he stared at him for a moment as the silence hung in the air. Corwyn looked at me, smiled and gave one nod.

Nothing was said but I thought I saw Garrett’s stony expression soften a little.

“I think we understand each other,” his voice was deep and solemn.

“Yes, we do.” Corwyn answered gravely. “I’d never do anything to hurt her.”

“I’ll be watching you” The low menacing tone in Garrett’s voice hinted of ominous consequence. Garrett pointed to his own dark eyes then toward Corwyn.

“That was a long time ago, Garrett.” Corwyn growled, his voice almost too low for me to hear.

“The feud is over.”

Della gave me a questioning look while Justin tensed, expecting an escalation of the unexplained conflict. They looked at me and all I could do was shake my head in bewilderment and give them a helpless shrug.

“I’ll help you with your luggage,” Corwyn offered to Della.

“Dude, wait up!” Justin said enthusiastically as he fell into easy stride alongside him toward the baggage area. I looked at my older brother, surfer dude with his carefree attitude, and noticed the graceful swirls of green and rose flowing around him. I knew he had no problems with Corwyn or what he was.

We met them a few minutes later in the loading lane in front of the terminal. The guys loaded up the luggage and we piled into the minivan. I watched Corwyn and Justin in the rearview mirror engage in easy conversation and I felt relief course through me while Della sat alone in the middle and Uncle Garrett rode shotgun beside me.

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“You’re wearing your mother’s ring.”

“Yes, I am,” I didn’t know how else to answer.

“When?”

I knew he meant when I came into my abilities. “About six weeks ago. The streak showed up three days ago, give or take a day.”

“Hmm,” he said. “What is your talent?”

“True Sight and camouflage.” I stated simply as I turned onto the exit that led to Cornhusker Highway.

“Not very powerful,” Garrett grudgingly nodded his head. “but a good combination.”

“Pretty much.” I kept my eyes on the road.

“Will you be returning to Scholomance to continue your studies?” Garrett asked.

“No,” I said. “Home schooling. Jack can teach me what I need to know.”

“You need to go through the Rite of Initiation.”

“Not until I’m ready.” I finished quickly for Garrett. “Maybe never. I don't need magic to live my life. I have skills and education enough to get through just fine.”

“You are also the family Sage and it is your obligation to contribute to the betterment of your clan and your people.”
“I’ve made my contribution by scanning every sacred document and digitalizing every piece of our family's library so that it can be accessed by all. I’ve done my part before I even morphed into the mighty Magic Ranger, Garrett.” I huffed. “Go online and set up an account like everyone else. It's all there online ready for you to use.”

“Your disregard of tradition will endanger us,” he grumbled.

“Or it will save our ways for future generations to appreciate.” I countered.

“How much does he know?” Garrett nodded towards the back of the van in Corwyn’s direction.

“Some,” A small smile tugged at my lips. He wasn't the only one who spoke Cryptic as a language. “He was there when it started. I wasn’t born yesterday and I hit puberty a long time ago, so I’m guessing true love.”

“You guess?” Dark eyes widened fractionally at my off-hand observation.

We rode the rest of the way home in silence while Della and Justin actively engaged Corwyn in conversation. I didn’t hear any echoing timbre in his voice so I knew it was natural charm winning them over and for that I was grateful. I made a mental note to get Garrett alone and get the real scoop from him regarding what happened between Julian and Lydia Darcy, but now was not the time.

We went out to the neighborhood restaurant for a quick meal, compliments of Uncle Garrett, before picking up Jack at the veterinary clinic. Let me tell you, nothing is more unnerving than being trapped in a minivan with four spell slingers with itchy, magical trigger fingers aimed at a half-demon riding in the backseat. I mentally did a happy dance when we pulled into the back of the City Auditorium and no one had killed each other. Mission accomplished.

I parted from the group, stealing away to stand along on the vast stage. The stage had been graced by such iconic performers as Elvis Presley and Bob Dylan and that immediately humbled me. I felt my nerves quiver from the thought that I would be singing on the same stage later that night for an audience of thousands. Exhilaration and stage fright battled inside me as I stood in aw of the vastness of the concert hall’s size and seating capacity.

“Don’t worry, Sweetling.” Corwyn's rich tenor voice purred in my ear. “You’ll be fine.”

“Speak for yourself, Hot Stuff.” I jeered nervously. “You’re the rock star, not me.”

“Where did your bravery go? You were amazing in the minivan.” Corwyn pulled me so that my back was pressed against his chest, his warm breath tickling my ear.

“My get-up-and-go got up and went,” I retorted. “It kept on going and I want to go with it.”

“Just relax, Wren.” He crooned as his hands gently caressed the tense muscles in my neck and shoulders. I heard the faint echo of charm in his voice, enticing me to calmness. “Listen to my voice and let the anxiety flow out of you. Everything will be fine.”

My head lulled forward as his hands gently kneaded the stress the stress from my muscles, making the tight knots vanish. “Easier said than done, Corwyn.”

“I love it when you throw me a challenge,” he murmured as his thumbs massaged the nape of my neck. “It appears I’m going to have to change your mind.”

Not giving me a chance to answer, Corwyn pulled me from the side of the stage and led me to a dressing room off to the side. He closed the door and locked it before backing me up against a cool brick wall.

“Change my mind?” I asked sardonically. My voice sounded husky to me as I tried to muster some resistance. To be honest, I didn’t feel like resisting. I surrendered.

“I think so,” his gaze pierced through my feisty pretense, but there was mirth in his voice. He put his hands on either side of me so that there was no room for me to flee, leaving me pinned between him and the solid wall behind me. He moved in closer, with only breath between us.

“Give it your best shot, Hot Stuff. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

“Wren, you really shouldn’t have said that,” he purred as the heat of his body decimated the final shreds of defiance. “What are you afraid of?”

“Crowds,” I started listing every phobia that bound me in a tidy package. “Much with the terror from stage fright. Just let me hide here and I’ll be fine.”

Corwyn did nothing to disguise the smirk that tugged at his lips. He leaned forward, brushing his
lips against my temple, seducing me with his voice. “Are you sure about that?” Corwyn's lips moved to my cheek, brushing a trail of kisses along my tingling flesh.

“You know it.” I retorted. “Crowds make me nervous.”

His fingers flitted lightly along the flushed skin of my neck until his hands framed my face. Corwyn stepped so one leg stood between mine and I felt heat press against my thigh. “Positive?” “Yes,” I whispered, trying to think of some zinging insult and finding my heart fluttering instead from his touch. “I tend to fall off things like risers and stages.”

He lips brushed against mine. “Wren, you know I will always be there to catch you.” “Doubtful,” I rued, moving instinctively against him because I wanted more heat. My knees felt about ready to buckle.

He nuzzled a languid trail of kisses down my neck as he moved closer, forcing my feet further apart so that he stood between them.

“I’d let you tumble on top of me,” Corwyn’s lips scarcely grazed against my quavering lips. Not allowing me to reply, he pressed his entire body against me, taking my mouth in a deep kiss. His tongue flitted teasingly against mine, making my breath came out in ragged huffs. Grabbing two handfuls of his white shirt, I pulled him to me and returned the kiss with feverish need. I went from scared field mouse to hungry lioness in zero point five seconds.

A low growl escaped me, prompting Corwyn to pull me up from the floor and use his strength to pin me against the wall. There was no gentleness in the action, only desire and hunger, when his hands brought my legs to his waist and I instinctively wrapped them around him, wanting to feel every inch of him against me. I was happily pinned between his body and the wall and the phrase ‘rock and a hard place’ took on a brand new meaning.

Groaning against my mouth, he moved against me until I felt his unyielding strength cradle me against him. Rather than pulling away from the potentially lethal kiss, he rocked against me and buried his face in the curve of my neck. I cradled him close to me as I held him fast between my thighs. I felt his teeth gently sink into the tender flesh of my neck as he moved against me repeatedly, setting me alight with every motion.

My head fell back against the wall as my eyes rolled inside my head, his movements making me come undone at my core. I looked at him and saw his eyes blaze with crimson fire. I pulled him against me so that every inch of our bodies fit into each other. His next words came out in a primal growl. “My sweet Wren.”

I cried out his name as energy coiled within me that I had felt earlier that day, but this time it tasted of cinnamon and sweetness and it was pleasure, not pain. His eyes opened and they burned fiery and hot and I knew that he felt the same same sensation I did at that moment. Once our eyes locked, neither of us looked away as the as the current arcing between us exploded in a collision of need and release. Bliss claimed us both as a primal scream from Corwyn mingled with my ragged gasps.

“Unholy Hell, Wren!” Corwyn swore, as I slumped against the wall as he stared wide-eyed at me, his breath ragged. “I’ll be the death of you yet.”

“Flame resistant, remember?” I cracked wryly as I smugly reminded him by holding up my hand and flashing my signet ring. “Trust me, right now I’m anything but a pile of ashes.”

“How did it protect you?” He asked, running his fingers through his mane of auburn waves. “It should have stopped me…us…from…”

“I don’t see you as a threat. Ergo, it didn’t either.” I guessed. “Maybe, because you can absorb the excess I give off, it's more than what you can handle. The lightning and the emotion are still unstable. We have to be careful or we can kill each other. Who knows? Maybe the ring was protecting you.”

We slumped against the wall, sitting beside one another in silence while basking in the afterglow of our mutual supernova. We said nothing as we nuzzled one another with kisses. He rested against me as I pressed a kiss to his brow, gently weaving my fingers through his hair. “I can never get carried away with you.”
“We’re getting better at this in case you haven’t noticed,” I reminded him. “Do I look like a crispy critter to you? Your parents figured things out and so will we. Are you going to quit on me now?”
“Never. How can I?” Corwyn asked darkly, watching me with eyes that had seen too much heartache and anguish. “My heart is yours. You are its mistress and I am your servant.”
“Don’t ever say that!” I scowled at him. “Consider it a fair exchange because you already have mine.”

His jade eyes brightened again as he took my hand in his and brought it to his lips, brushing a tender kiss against my knuckles. “You are insane to love me.”
“I’m crazy, not stupid.” I amended. “And your point is?”
“You are crazy. Daring, trusting, irresistible as you are.” Corwyn held my hands in his. “What if some day I can’t stop myself from hurting you when I’m near you? My very existence puts you in harm’s way. I can’t control my desire for you and part of me doesn’t mind.”

I placed two fingers over his mouth. “Then, I’ll just power bolt you across the room.”
He took my hand, turning his lips in toward my palm, and placed a lingering kiss against my skin. He whispered roughly. “I’m a selfish bastard for what I’m doing, but I don’t want to stop.”
“Keep being selfish,” I murmured, placing my hand against his heart.
“I wanted to shout from the rooftops tonight when you told Zoe how you felt about me,” he said with quiet awe, bending forward to softly brush his lips against mine. “I didn’t want to wait another minute without letting you know that you are esteemed in equal regard.”
“Like I said, that’s a great return on an investment,” I blushed. “You speak as though you’re stuck in 1900.”
“I am find with how I speak and you’ll have to learn to live with it,” Corywn rose to his feet. “I’m looking forward to that challenge,” I smirked. “One day, you’ll be speaking slang.”
“Never.” Corwyn helped me to my feet. I stood on my tiptoes and pressed my lips softly to his. He stiffened for a moment but his arms found their way around my waist.
I forced my feet to walk away from him and unlock the dressing room door. “We have a rehearsal to finish. We’d better join the others before they file a missing persons report.”
“Yes, milady.”

I was glad that I had worn a tank top underneath my shirt or I would have been in dire straits considering the blouse I had worn lay in tattered ruins on the dressing room floor.

We returned to the stage where the others waited for us. He led me to where they stood and I looked out into the darkness of the auditorium. Strange as it seemed, I truly felt relaxed when I realized that stage fright was nothing compared to what had just happened.

I watched the band Penumbra make their way toward their instruments that the stagehands had set up for them. Esteban and Cordelia stood in front of the stage several yards away at the mixing board as they ran a sound check. The band played a few of their songs as the sound technicians tuned their instruments and did mike checks. After they finished, the stagehands moved the risers into place where In Choir would sing their set. Tristan and Liam rolled the baby grand to the side of the stage and then set up two microphones; one for me and the other for Corwyn.
The choir lined up in on both sides, criss-crossing in an x as they went to the risers. Dressed in black tee shirts with the neon logo on the front, they looked like a musical group worthy of attention. The light technician dimmed the lights and black light flooded the stage, showing off the neon colors purposely worn in their belts, bandanas and shoelaces. I took my place at the piano while Corwyn picked up his twelve-string guitar and Penelope stood off to the side directing the choir. They went through a few songs of their set and they sang in perfect timing, the harmonies rose to the rafters and filled the auditorium. Joy overwhelmed me, taking the form of unshed tears.

When the choir finished their rehearsal, Penelope came to us. I noticed the concerned glance on her face as she looked at us and I wondered if she had an inkling of what had occurred in the dressing room. The others took no notice of us as they helped with the final arrangements before the evening’s performance.
“Is everything all right, Corwyn?” Penelope asked softly, quiet enough that no one else heard hear.
“Wren suffered a case of stage fright,” Corwyn gave her a meaningful glance.
Another look of worry crossed Penelope’s features. “Are you going to be okay, dear?”
“I’m just fine.” I assured her, not being able to hold the grin I wore.
“You two both look you had a great time in the dressing room,” Liam snickered. “Undressed rehearsal?” he held up my tattered shirt, twirling it on one finger.
I heard Corwyn growl and saw him glower at his older brother. Corwyn stepped toward him as a snarl erupted from him and Liam took a step back, holding his hands up in a defensive gesture.
“Hey, man, sorry. I was just giving you a bad time.”
“Show Wren some respect,” Corwyn hissed at him with teeth bared.
“Sorry, Bro!” Liam said. He looked at Zoe. “Damn, he is uptight.”
“Corwyn, enough.” Tristan said gently, laying a calming hand on his shoulder. “Liam understands.”
We decided it was time to begin getting ready for that evening’s concert. Cordelia shared a dressing room with me and insisted on doing my makeup, hair and wardrobe. I knew she had a natural eye for fashion and was savvy about the latest trends in hair and make-up. She became a blur, flitting around the small room with inhuman speed, as she moved several trunks into place.
“Where did those come from?” I asked, not remembering seeing the trunks.
Then again, I’d been too engaged with Corwyn practicing relaxation techniques to overcome stage fright.
“I popped these in earlier today,” she trilled lightly as she led me to a chair that sat in front of a large mirror framed by large bulbous lights. “Now, hush and let me work my magic.”
She straightened my hair with a flat iron in record time but it came out a bit frizzy. Cordy pursed her lips together as she studied my reflection in the mirror, obviously displeased with the end result. Hey eyes widened in what appeared to be an epiphany and held her hands apart.
I watched tiny arcs of electricity spark between them as rubbed them together and held them over my head. I shrank away from her as flocks of electricity danced around my hair.
“What are you doing?” I asked, my voice spiked nearly an octave.
“Getting rid of the static electricity, Wren.” She answered easily.
The sparks vanished with a crackling poof and the frizzy ends gently fell into sleek submission as she slid her hands over my hair. “Being a Cambion has its perks.”
“No more static electricity,” Cordy smiled. Within minutes, she had my face painted and my body dressed. “Well, what do you think?”
I stared at the woman looking back at me in the mirror. My hair was glossy and straight; not one hair stood on end. My eyes were lined in smoky black liner and accented with shades of plum. I had to admit, Cordelia made me look like a rock star straight out of a movie.
“Nice,” I drawled, impressed with her natural talent.
“I know,” she grinned. “My turn.”
In less than three minutes, she turned herself from tomboy to diva with her hands becoming a haze as she applied her makeup. She had flawless platinum curls crowning her head and her dress fit her like a second skin. The noise of heavy footsteps and the excited chatter of teenagers filled the area backstage. Within a few minutes, I heard the choir rehearsing their songs and knew that tonight’s show would nothing like what I had ever seen.
The show started at seven o’clock. Nicholas was the host and went through protocol of thanking local contributors, sponsors, and the people who made the show possible. Several acts from the Lincoln and Omaha area performed, giving the audience a show of local talent that kept them entertained for over an hour. I watched Penelope efficiently organizing the students in long lines just off stage and getting them ready.
They marched on stage and took their place on the risers. The red velvet curtains parted and loud applause erupted from the crowd when then the first strains of music came over the speakers. The kids, bright and enthusiastic, sang their songs with ease while they entertained the audience. My heart swelled three times its normal size inside my chest, ready to burst from the joy I felt as those kids put on a phenomenal performance.
When the curtains closed, the stagehands hurriedly tore down the risers and then began setting up instruments for the final performance. When they set up the drum cage at the back of the stage, I gave a Corwyn a bemused look. He gave me a crooked smile and an innocent shrug. We were up just in a few minutes.

“You can do this, Wren.” Penelope wrapped her arm around mine as she kept pace with me. A small smile crossed her full lips matching the glee glimmering in her eyes. “You will knock their socks off.”

“Not a problem,” I lied through my teeth. “Always aim to please.”

Cordy lilted easily to join Penelope just off stage and peeked around the curtain. On the other side of the red velvet curtain, I heard the crowd come to life, their collective roar deafening me. Cordy nodded to one of the stagehands to draw open the curtain. The red velvet curtains drew back and the spotlight settled on us. Corwyn still held his twelve-string while Liam sat casually at the baby grand piano. I heard the first strains of our song and then I began to sing.

Liam sat at the white baby grand, his fingers agilely playing arpeggios and scales up and down the ivory and ebony keys. Corwyn took his favorite twelve-string guitar from it’s stand and slung the strap over his shoulder, looking every inch the rock star in his white unbuttoned shirt that revealed the sculptured planes of his broad chest and flat, defined stomach. The black leather pants he wore molded to his muscular thighs. He was terrifying and exquisite in his beauty, more angel than man. Fierce and majestic, I forgot my name as I watched him mesmerize the crowd with his presence.

We all felt as though he held the hammer of the gods in his hands with every note he played. Immediately my eyes shifted involuntarily to True Sight, taking in the ribbons of psychic energy coming from the crowd. The montage of different emotions drifted toward the stage in a colorful stream of cerise, emerald, sapphire and gold. It floated onto the stage, enveloping us in folds of bliss, desire, and anticipation tasting sweet, spicy, and tart on my tongue. Foreign to me, I’d never tasted emotions before that moment as I had food and I found the experience exhilarating. I realized that True Sight affected all of my senses but most noticeably my senses of smell, taste and sight. I was absorbed in the overwhelming passions when I knew I had to reign in my abilities, to gain control so the sensations didn’t consume me. I wanted to lose my mind in the ecstatic mind trip of soul and emotion that the crowd freely fed to the Darcys. I now understood how habitual this exchange could be for them and why they held so many concerts. It was their private addiction. I was amazed even more when I realized that I was witnessing it not only through my own senses, but also through Corwyn’s.

I fought against the caress of the psionic arms pulling me into my own sensual paradise. My ring vibrated rapidly on my finger, shielding me in a protective aura of violet light. The tentacles of heightened emotions pounded against my psychic armor, trying to entangle me in euphoria. They bounced against my buffer, rebounding back toward the audience. I had never felt or seen anything as irresistible as this in all of my life.

I glanced discreetly as we finished the song, the ripples and ribbons of energy entwining and then seeping into them. The bright blue, green and yellow stage lights couldn’t hide their glowing red eyes or their gleaming copper skin. They inhaled in the flow of emotion, drinking it in as a thirsty man does after finding water in the middle of the desert. Now, I understood the danger they posed were it not for their self-imposed restraint.

“Now you see why we needed you here, dear.” Penelope’s voice gently rang in my earpiece. I didn’t look at her, but I nodded. It frightened me that I would see my perfectly composed employer wild and unrestrained, caught in the rapture of the enthralling riptide. All I could do was mutely nod in acknowledgment. I faltered, casting a nervous look in her direction and then over at Corwyn as he moved closer to the front of the stage.

“Don’t worry. Corwyn has excellent self-control,” her voice reassured me through my earpiece. He sang a solo portion of the duet and several women in the audience squealed when directed his song to them.

Finally, we finished and the lights dimmed. The audience broke out in wild applause as the curtains
drew shut, his eyes burning wild as we made our way offstage. As I crossed the stage, I walked across Zenobia’s path and saw the scalding glower she gave me. I looked away, not wanting to see the contempt in her eyes.
Tristan laid a gentle hand on her shoulder as I passed and I thought I heard him whisper to her, “Down, girl.”
I swallowed the large lump in my throat as Corwyn start singing and then I followed. Penumbra took the stage and the audience erupted into one strident roar. I noticed the tentacles of energy transformed into throbbing arcs of crimson and lime as they sang, flickers of light pulsed as the audience lost themselves in the music. Frenzied passion filled the air, coursing through the vast performance hall. Corwyn’s eyes brightened and my protective aura wrapped around me as he consumed each delicious emotion.
As the song built to a poignant climax, the guitarist made his guitar weep a haunting guitar solo that left me breathless. Everything became too intense: the lights, the sound, and the emotion. It was too magnificent for me because the emotions were stronger than what my ring could bear. I ran from the side of the stage as if on fire and back to the dressing room, keeping a safe distance away from the swell of the sensations and the hunger of those around me.
It took me several minutes to regain my composure and several of the Darcys went passed me, calling my name, as if I weren’t there. I watched the monitors as the cameras panned the audience as the people sat lost in the euphoria of Penumbra's cult of personality. I saw my family sitting in audience, shielded from the flow of empathic dynamic occurring between the cambions and humans. Maintaining their subtle, but impenetrable shield around them, they remained immune from the effects of the emotional exchange. It was impossible to miss Garrett’s arctic intensity as he watched the energy flow. I didn’t blame him. Had I known three months ago that demons truly existed to live off the energies imparted by hopes, dreams and fears, I knew I would have shared his views that these were dangerous creatures not to be trusted. Part of me knew they Darcys were predators denying an important component of their nature when they chose to feed upon large groups rather than individuals.
However, The Powers-That-Be graced me with the Gift of True Sight that affected not only what I could see but also hear, smell, taste and touch. I didn’t know how to convey to Garrett and the others the compassion and love I had witnessed these past few weeks. I scanned the audience completely absorbed in the rush and the elation of the music. The emotions coming from Corwyn’s family were too magnificent and overwhelming for the human psyche to bear. It was like comparing a flame to a supernova in its breath, heat and intensity. The slow smolder heating my core pulled me deeper into the swirling firestorm that threatened to incinerate me. And you know what? I wanted it. When I experienced the fervor, I felt alive.
Lessons Learned

The rest of the evening sped by me with blurred intensity as patrons made their contributions to the Archangelus Foundation. I quietly moved away from the stage into the shadows so that I could catch my breath and observe the commotion without being caught up in it. I needed time away from my family, the Darcys and all of the chaos ensuing backstage. Hiding behind some of the folds of the red velvet curtains, I stole away without anyone’s notice.

I have several flaws and I embrace gladly embrace them. I change my mind more often than I change my socks, occasionally I fall prey to foot-in-mouth disease and have a temper that flares up more often that a bad case of acne. I solve everyone else’s problems, but don’t do well when confronted with mine, preferring to hide behind logic. I admit that I am multilingual, being fluent in profanity and irony. This time was no exception; I reverted to my comfortable safety mechanisms, choosing to hide rather than participate in the gala happening all around me.

From behind the curtains and some speakers, I watched the Darcys shake hands with the other performers while meeting and greeting with the paparazzi on the red carpet. Reporters with cameras and microphones surrounded them in a media feeding frenzy that made sharks look like vegetarians. I watched rational individuals transform into squealing fanatics seeking the attention of rock stars and celebrities. That was when I decided to be much with the lurking and stay in the shadows.

I closed my eyes, envisioning my presence unseen and unheard by the throng of people bustling around me. I looked down at my hands, seeing them glow with a faint violet light for a few seconds before vanishing. Instinctively, I knew I accomplished something essential to my development as a Solomonar; I had activated my Camouflage at will.

I decided that I needed to leave and promised the Powers-That-Be to make groveling apologies the next day to the appropriate parties.

Penelope gave an exclusive interview to a newspaper reporter while Corwyn remained surrounded by a gaggle of female admirers. (I felt more than a little jealous.) I saw Esteban stand on the periphery of the activity, scanning the scene while remaining apart of it. His observant green eyes swept over the area, locking onto mine where I stood. One russet brow quirked in puzzlement before a slow smile replaced it. He gave one nod in my direction before continuing his cursory scan of the din going on around us.

He prowled around the edge of the crowd, people unconsciously hurried to get out of his way, until he stood a few feet away with only the velvet curtain separating us. He seemed to be stalking prey, prowling as a jaguar does on a hunt, and I noted that no one took notice of him. He watched him lean back toward me, turning slightly in my direction. He stared right at me for a few seconds, those crazy, expressive eyes locked with mine before he returned his half-interested attention toward the happenings backstage.

Had to get away for a while?
He remained still; neither moving nor speaking but I clearly heard his voice. I thought I made a mistake assuming that he was talking to me. After all, I knew he couldn't see me, right?
Yes, Wren. Those wild, feral eyes looked at me. I’m talking to you.
I saw his profile clearly, realizing his lips hadn’t moved. He casually conversed with a patron about landing Penumbra to perform at the benefit and I made plans to slink away, leaving him with the gushing admirer.

Not so fast, Darlin’," Esteban's hand grasped my arm and prevented my escape. Where do you thing you’re going?
Let me go!
Easy now, no one even knows you're here except me. Those expressive eyes looked at me, smoldering one thousand shades of green. Little brother-in-law would be very upset if I let you
He doesn't even know I'm gone, I countered. I glanced over at the gaggle of females surrounding him.

He isn't looking for you, Wren, he's feeling you out and he's upset. Right now, he can't find you and he's worried about you. You're off his empathic radar.

How did you find me, Esteban? I asked.

Telepath, remember?

So much for retreating to my quiet, happy place in private.

“You scare the hell out of me.” I mumbled grumpily aloud, annoyed that I couldn’t just make a quiet escape out one of the side doors.

He looked ahead, but nodded. Good. That means your instincts are primed for survival. No one can see you right now, Wren.

“And you can?” I asked aloud.

Not with my eyes, Esteban confirmed, tapping his finger to his temple.

No, just me. Corwyn could track you if he locked onto your emotions, but there’s too much dynamic around us to make you an easy find. With extensive training, you could hide in a room full of cambions undetected. I admit that I’m impressed.

You pretty well versed on the whole ‘gift’ thing, aren’t you? I couldn’t resist asking.

How many?

More than a few.

So, how does telepathy work? Do you just think about it and it happens or do you have to concentrate?

Yes and yes. It’s no different than learning a language, Wren. Study, practice, and application are the keys.

Any advice for the novice?

Try applying your abilities in new ways every day; first with yourself and then with others. Push beyond what’s safe until you reached your limits and then go beyond them. Work on your protective shields, Wren.

I felt the emotions, tasted them like they were different flavors, I thought to Esteban. I thought that was exclusively a Cambion gift.

Unless you’re psychically connected to one. Esteban stepped back and whispered so only I could hear. “You and my brother-in-law share a mental bond that is young and powerful. It lets you see what he sees and feel what he feels.”

It was too much for me, I admitted. I can’t deal with it.

I agree. You were caught up in the thrall and almost burned. Hiding won’t save you from a bomb blast if you’re standing at ground zero.

Aren’t you just the harmless, cuddly fuzzball of encouragement? I peaked around the curtain to give him a derisive stare. Nonetheless, excitement coursed through my veins as I realized that Esteban showed me more in one conversation that I had learned in my four years at Scholomance.

Lesson the first, Wren. Keep your mind quiet and stay where you are. Don’t move or speak. We have company.

Why? Who? I asked, confused by Esteban’s strange statement. His abrupt switch from wry to wary slapped my inner vixen into quick awareness. I heard the sternness in his command, knowing better that to disobey. He gave me a curt nod and returned to the rest of his family in the middle of the media frenzy. I watched their heads suddenly turn in his direction as something passed between them. I couldn’t hear him inside my head any longer but I caught the distinct impression that something was wrong.

Still, I’d never been one to take orders well. Did you know that my curiosity usually overrides my common sense? I am a flawed creature to the core.
I moved from behind the curtain, edging through the crowd to where the Darcys stood and hoped to get an earful of the breaking news. Standing behind Penelope and next to Cordelia, I stood quietly and listened to their conversation.

“Esteban,” Penelope’s question was calm. “What is going on?”

“They fed from the strong emotions coming from the audience. They were going to return to their hotel but the taste in the air made them want to stay,” Esteban nodded in the direction away from us as several pairs of eyes followed suit.

“Who?” I asked aloud. No one heard me but him and he answered.

“Two incubi and two succubae,” he replied grimly. “Penumbra. They caught a strong whiff of unusual emotion coming from the stage. It was a delicacy for them and they want another taste.”

“Wren,” Corwyn let out my name followed by a curse then scanned the area. “Where is she? Do you know where she is?”

“She’s safe.” Esteban stared slowly, staring at him intently.

“You don’t know that.” Corwyn barked at his brother-in-law in a low, harsh voice.

“Yes, I do.” Esteban gave him a knowing smile as he tapped his temple. “She’s a smart woman. She can stay out of trouble.”

“That isn’t Wren's strong point,” Corwyn's eyes scanned the scene. “Penumbra will want her blood if they find out her origins. We have to get her out of here.”

“Too late for that,” Esteban laid a hand on Corwyn’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, she’s well hidden.”

“We have to get her family out of here,” Corwyn said quietly.

“Jack and his family are in no danger. They're powerful enough they can handle any demons that cross their path,” Tristan replied calmly. “Wren is the only one at risk because she’s still young and learning. If Esteban says she’s safe, then we can trust that.”

“How can you be so sure?” I heard the urgency in Corwyn’s voice as his jade eyes began to smolder, reminding me of amber embers in a growing fire. I wanted to reach out to him, touch him, and let him know that I was right by him and safe but, I remembered the first lesson that Esteban taught me: Keep your mind quiet and stay where you are. Don’t move and don’t speak.

“They’re curious,” Esteban shrugged. “The emotional harvest from the concert was enough to take the edge off their hunger. Remember, their kind get bored easily. Once they're distracted, they'll move on.”

What's going to their 'oh shiny moment' to make them forget me?

Be quiet. He gave me a menacing look that effectively silenced me. The mental picture of being burned until I was nothing but ash was enough to make me fall into line with his command. Esteban appeared unaffected by the walking doom coming their way, but the crowd quickly scattered like a frightened heard of cattle before a bad thunderstorm. I experienced a slow freezing sensation that numbed my skin. I knew Corwyn felt the same approaching dread because his eyes became molten copper and his golden aura exploded with fiery spikes that made step back a few feet. My pendant throbbed against my skin so much the silver chain shivered against my skin.

I felt the tangible dread hovering in the air; the people around us knew on a subconscious level that something terrifying was coming their way.

The Darcys changed the subject, talking among themselves about the projected amount raised by the night’s charity performance, as if nothing unusual was happening. I felt like a mouse in an open field in full view of eagles searching for prey and marveled how they managed to remain calm in the face of peril.

The demons merged slowly from the wings to center stage and I recognized them as several members of the band. The first one was a male, muscular with ice blue eyes and pale hair cropped close to his head. Towering over the group, he reminded me of a Viking stepping straight out of a history book. One male who flanked him to the left had straight black hair cut that he wore short, his bangs framing his dark eyes and slightly upswept brows. What surprised me was how inhuman he appeared with his coppery complexion and pointed ears, reminding me of the devils I’d read about in folktales as a child. The woman flanking the Viking on the right had platinum hair and quicksilver eyes while the other woman at the rear of the group was a buxom brunette with eyes
that glittered like rubies.
The quartet gathered in a tight formation with the Viking taking point as they continued toward the Darcys. I noticed a shimmer surrounding them and my eyes tingled for a moment when I tried to see them with my mind rather than my eyes. What I saw frightened me, sending currents of panic sweeping through me. Looking at them with my True Sight, each member of the group possessed crimson skin and a flaming aura that was a perfect replication of my recent nightmare.
I couldn’t help but compare this cadre of predators with the Darcys with their wild clothing and their primal demeanor, prowling as if hunting unsuspecting prey. Like the Darcys, they possessed that inexplicable charisma coupled with a flamboyant style that made them appear to me far beyond human. Esteban glanced quickly in my direction when fear swelled in my throat.

Easy for you to think.
The Viking wore a tan suede vest and golden arm rings around his bulging biceps, his strapping thighs hugged by faded denim. The raven-haired incubus wore a simple white shirt that stood in stark contrast against his faint crimson complexion and black pants, making me wonder if that was Satan looked like if he ever decided to leather pants. The pixieish blonde wore a flowing dress reminiscent of hippie tie-dye from Woodstock while the Dominatrix in the back was dressed from head to toe in a skin-tight black leather cat suit that revealed ample cleavage.
Their keen eyes carefully discerned the more sophisticated, elegant carriage of Penelope with Liam and Esteban on each side of her, and strode warily ahead to greet them. Without any words exchanged, the cadre’s posture took on a nonchalant demeanor. The blaze surrounding them became little more than flickering flames. I guessed that their fiery auras lessened when any perceived threat vanished. Now, I saw why that this group didn't need bodyguard detail.
Lessons the second.
Esteban nodded at my lesson well-learned.
The Viking was an inhumanly exquisite specimen of male perfection who exuded raw sensuality, towering over everyone else in both groups. With a broad chest and strapping muscles, he looked as though he could punch someone through a brick wall using only his little finger. I watched Esteban bristle as the Viking moved to the center of both groups.
The black-haired demon standing next him remained silent, studying the group with watchful eyes. It didn’t take me long to realize he was the brain of the motley group. The Fairy appeared lost her in her private world as she gazed in wonder at the stage around her while the Dominatrix appeared uninterested in the encounter. If I'd every seen a group of more mismatched rebels, this cadre was it.

The Viking stepped forward, bowing slightly to Penelope before taking her hand and kissing it when she offered it to him.

“We are honored to be part of this benefit,” his deep baritone voice echoed with a slight resonance that I immediately recognized. That damned Viking was trying to mojo Penelope. Good luck with that one, Nimrod. He handed Penelope a plain white envelope “Please accept this small token of goodwill and put it toward the Foundation's project for the children.”

“Thank you, Tyr.” Penelope drawled. She nodded toward the other male. “We are appreciative of your generosity. I see that Johann, Celeste and Fiona have accompanied you on tour.”

“We are always looking for the new and exciting,” Celeste answer in her wispy sing-song voice. “The crowds have left and we are alone. Let’s play together as we did in better times,” Tyr murmured smoothly. “It has been a long time since we have made music together.”

“I think that is a wonderful idea, but you should come back to the house,” Penelope shook her head regretfully. “We would be honored if you would accept our hospitality.”

“We’re only here for a few days,” A rueful expression crossed Tyr’s angular features as he glanced past Penelope. “We are still hungry for more dinner.”

I watched him glance at some of the groupies being held back by the velvet rope and the security detail and thought I saw him lick his lips in anticipation. I glanced in the same direction, recognizing several faces of fellow co-workers. Seeing Gretchen and Shannon in the throng...
waiting to get autographs brought me back to reality. This band of demons was dangerous and I refused to let my friends and innocents become their midnight snacks. Try Perkins or Village Inn. I scoffed angrily, not caring much for the bunch of interlopers. My anger grew by the moment and I felt that familiar ball of energy well up within me.

“Tyr,” Penelope began, the sweet trill in her voice echoing with the same ringing sweetness used by the Viking. “We don’t hurt those around us because we’re bound by the Accords. We’ve lived here in peace for several years and we like it that way. While you’re in town, please don’t find your pleasures here.”

“Is that a demand?” Tyr’s blonde brow arched with incredulity. By his response, I understood he thought her request to be, at the very least, rude.

“No, not at all,” she quietly reassured him, beguiling him with her Southern charm. “Why don’t you stay with us for a few days? We have more than enough options available to satiate all of your appetites.”

I didn’t even want to contemplate the double entendre of that statement.

“I’m getting bored, Tyr.” Fiona complained as she languidly stretched, her black catsuit rippling with the motion. “Let’s go.”

For the first time, I concentrated on the blonde Adonis standing so close, closing my eyes and trying to get a fix on him. My ring thrummed hard and fast against my skin as I focused my attention on him. I listened beyond the slick words and the exotic Welsh accent. Beneath the layers of charm and civility of his voice, a menacing tone resounded. I heard what normal humans couldn’t hear, the cunning and deception hidden behind his words. There was something more than just polite conversation going on, but I wasn’t a telepath. I couldn’t pinpoint his motives or his true desires.

Ask him what he’s really doing here, I mentally demanded of Esteban. There is another reason why he is here and it isn’t just for tonight’s performance.

Wren, be quiet! Esteban growled in my mind. The growl came out as a true sound causing everyone to look at him.

Just do it! He’s not being honest. He’s lying like a Persian rug.

“Esteban, are you all right?” Cordelia wrapped her delicate hand tighter around his forearm.

“Fine, Cordy.” he gave an easy laugh and relaxed visibly. “I was wondering if you might let us in on the real reason you’re here. Lincoln isn’t Vegas.”

“Perceptive as always,” Tyr chuckled darkly. “You’re good. No, you’re right. We’re here for other reasons.”

“Care to share?” Corwyn asked tensely. I felt the heat of growing anger rising from it as it came off of him in vivid sparks. I slipped my hand in his, hoping that he’d calm down if he knew I was safe. My fingers entwined with his and Corwyn imperceptibly froze in place. I watched his cast a quick glance at Esteban and heard him cough discreetly what I thought was a ‘yes.’

I felt Corwyn’s fingers tighten in mine then give mine a reassuring squeeze. Then my ring began glowing bright violet. I saw him flinch and I bit my lip to stem the stream of profanity that I want to spit. I looked down at the ring and mentally commanded it.

Not now, damn it. STOP.

The violet sparks quickly subdued to a faint glimmer. Lesson the third.

“I have some things I need to do before we leave, but it would be great if you stayed a few days with us.” Corwyn’s rich tenor rang with the heavy echo I knew that meant that he was charming the socks of anyone within hearing range.

“Tyr,” Fiona moved forward, her painted ruby lips crinkled into a perfect pout as she whispered lightly into his ear. I watched her snuggle up against him a way that wasn’t exactly normal for a sibling to do. I shuddered as the thoughts that ran through my head made me silently scream, ‘eww.’ “Please, let’s go. This is so boring.”

“No, I think we should accept Penelope’s hospitality,” his brow furrowed in contemplation. “I think they need to know our true reason for being here.”

“Going on?” Penelope echoed the question. “What do you mean?”
He looked around to find the stage empty of humans leaving only the group of demons standing in a circle talking. “Other cadres report that the Phratry have mobilized in the past week, reforming their groups. We’ve come here to see if it were true. Reports tell us that the Rohan clan is reassembling en masse and we want to make sure that you’re safe.”

“We honor the tenets of the Accords made with the Phratry,” Tristan explained. “We stay on our side of the line and they’ve caused us no trouble.”

“How can you be so calm, nephew?” Fiona’s ruby lips drew back into a snarl. “They are the ones that murdered Julian, our brother and your father! How can you just calmly accept what they’ve done? We’ve waited a long time to even the score and give them a taste of justice. You know that.”

“That was settled decades ago,” Tristan said calmly.

She sneered. “Ninety years is the blink of an eye in the life an immortal. We’ve been biding our time and now the moment has arrived. The entire Bryant clan along with Garrett was here tonight in the audience listening to our performance. He agreed to Julian’s execution, ordered it! Blood for blood, Tristan. That is our way. While they’re off-guard, we can take out the entire brood and get the justice Julian’s death deserves.”

Several things happened at once. My concentration faltered as rage filled me, making shake with fury. A violet light surrounded me as my ring vibrated heavily against my skin. Corwyn felt the shock as it sent him several feet forward, staggering into Tyr’s arms.

“I watched the Darcy clan quickly circle around me, their peaceful golden aura flaming to life, several pairs of eyes blazed with such intensity that I thought it would burn me alive if I stared at them too long. Fiona was looking straight at me. She saw me then hissed. Crap!”

“Fiona, enough.” Tyr held the Dominatrix by the arm, restraining her from lunging toward them. He nodded briefly in my direction. “Tell me, Tristan. Who is she?”

I saw him nod in my direction and all eyes fell on me. I realized that when my concentration broke, my Camouflage failed.

“A friend of the family,” Penelope’s answered calmly. Tyr studied me intently for a moment before his eyes widened. Fiona wasn’t looking me in the eye, but almost through me as though I was a piece of furniture. I watched her eyes focus, then narrow as her full lips pulled back from a beautiful smile into a hideous sneer.

“She is one of the Solomonari.” Fiona hissed as she tried to pounce at me. Only the steel strength of Tyr’s hold kept her from getting to me. “Let me have her.”

I jerked with all my strength to break free of Corwyn’s hold, striding to the small space between the two groups until I stood nose to nose with the leather-clad succubus. “You want it? Just try it.”

Tristan quickly clasped a hand over my mouth while Liam and Esteban stepped forward to grab me by each arm. “I’m sorry, Fiona.” Tristan firmly replied. “She is under our protection.”

“You’re protecting her?” Incredulity twisted her gothic features into a horrible mask of indignation. “You betray your own kind by being friends with that murderous bitch? You lie in bed with our slavers and pretend to be their equals. They will use you for their own ends and then discard you. They killed one of us and you give her protection?”

I bit Tristan’s hand so that he yanked it away. “You just threatened to kill my family, Fiona. You want a feud with real power? Bring it on. I’ll bury you six feet deep and send you back to Hell where you belong.”

“Ladies, please relax.” Johann stepped between us, speaking for the first time. His dark eyes looked at me, sparking with anger, yet, I sensed some restraint in him not possessed by the others. “Fiona, spoke out of turn, Ms. Bryant. Cadre Emrys bears no ill will to your family or anyone in the city. We apologize for Fiona’s outburst and will ensure she takes no action against you or any of your relatives. If we leave, will this be suitable?”

I paid attention to his voice and heard no echo or resonance in it other than the soothing baritone timbre. I studied him with my True Sight and found that the fire surrounding him was no more than a faint glow. I noticed faint sparks of gold among the flames and recognized them as fragments that
held the same color as the copper auras that Corwyn and his family emitted. My eyes widened perceptively as my jaw fell slack. “You’re not like them.” “It’s a matter of perspective, Ms. Bryant.” he answered, bowing his head in acknowledgment. I saw no smoldering rage or cunning ruthlessness in his dark eyes. Is he on the level? I glanced at Esteban. I can only read his thoughts, Wren. You can read his soul. What does your Sight tell you? Tense silence loomed between the two groups for what seemed an eternity. How I answered determined what would come next. If what I read was true, then Johann had no desire for war and spoke only the truth. Eyes from both groups looked intently at me, waiting for my answer. I took a deep breath, wondering what Garrett or Jack would do if they were here. My eyes looked on Tristan; his gaze was calm but expectant. “Just go, Johann.” I finally answered. “Take your cadre with you. I have no beef with any of you, even Fiona, if you leave now.” “Not all of us want war,” he said. “I learned something new,” I admitted, never taking my eyes off Fiona. I offered my hand to him. “Truce?” “Truce,” Johann nodded slowly, cautiously taking mine in his. “I see that we have different perspectives on the matter. I would love hear yours.” My True Sight never lied. I leaned forward and whispered into the demon's, no, Johann's ear, “You have a lot of good inside you. I see it.” “Again, merely perspective.” Johann flashed a faint smile. “And you, Ms. Bryant, are going to be a catalyst for much in the future. Be wise, learn well and we all may survive that which is coming.” “What do you mean?” I asked, but he had already pulled away and moved toward the rest of the band. “We will stay with you for a time,” Tyr ignored us, addressing only Tristan. Looking over at Fiona, his eyes blazed in such a way that she slunk several steps away from him. “We will honor the Accords while we are here, and no harm will come by us to any in the Bryant family.” “What about the rest of the population of Lincoln?” I interjected. Fiona hissed in amazement while Celeste merely smiled. Tyr looked down at me as he studied me, but remained motionless. “You’re very fierce for one so young, Ms. Bryant. You’re also very sensible. Intriguing. I give you my word of honor that no harm will come to any being while we are in Lincoln.” Tristan glanced at me. “It will be all right, Wren.” I scoffed. Tyr looked at me as one might when humoring a small child. I wanted the satisfaction of wiping that smug grin off his handsome, arrogant face. I fought the urge to kick him where it counted, wondering if a demon's male anatomy was similar to that of human's. If I did, I'd make my first kick count. “Follow us. Since it’s been awhile since you’ve been in the area, we’ll travel the old fashioned way,” Penelope gave a friendly smile to Tyr and his group. “We have a limousine waiting for us outside. Esteban and Cordelia, go with Corwyn and Wren. Help them finish cleaning up backstage.” That was the 'oh shiny' moment of distraction. I watched the trio nod in understanding as they led the quartet away from us. Corwyn stood on one side of me with his arm firmly around my waist while Cordelia flanked us on the left and Esteban on the right. Once the rest of the Darcys left, my body began trembling and my stomach heaved. Cold chills spread throughout my body as the dark reality of what had just occurred sank into my brain, prompting me to the nearest trashcan where I vomited. I had encountered four powerful demons and I had dared not only speak to them, but with an authority I knew I didn’t possess. What had I been thinking? I knew exactly what I had been thinking; I had just become a full-fledged Bryant in every sense of the word. Most Bryants are boisterous and passionate by nature about two things: magic and family. To me, they are insane about the first while I completely agreed with them about the second. Now, I understood at that
moment what it meant to be a Bryant; to defend, to protect, and to serve. I would fight with my last breath to protect my Corwyn’s family and mine. I had no qualms about using whatever methods necessary to make sure they all remained safe. I also knew I had to remain calm, stay humble or I would be the demons’ first casualty.

“Wren?” Corwyn’s voice was rough and harsh. I felt somewhere that someone was shaking me to bring me back to reality. His eyes burned red, not a trace of jade in them. “Wren, are you all right? Let’s get you home.”

“No argument here,” I agreed. “I’m tired.” I started walking toward my dressing room to gather my things. A flash of light appeared in front of me and Esteban blocked my way. He wore a regretful look on his features, a sad smile tugged at his lips.

“Sorry, we can’t let you do that,” he said. “We can’t take the chance of you being hurt or killed.”

“Tyr and Johann gave their word.”

“You are so naïve,” Esteban shook his head. “You heard Fiona, she wants Garrett’s blood. If she can’t have his, she’ll take yours until she can get to him. I read her thoughts and she wants all of you dead. She intends to dump Tyr and Johann the first chance she gets then come after you to get her revenge.”

“Let her try,” I argued as I tried to move past him. Deftly, Esteban blocked every move I made. Damn. I forgot he was a telepath and I didn’t have the skill to effectively counter his reading of my thoughts. But, he was a cambion that fed off emotion and something told me that I needed a diversion to keep him entertained. If I had learned anything tonight, it was that demons were easily distracted. I dropped my shoulders and sighed. “You’re right. Why start a war?”

“Now, you’re being rational,” Corwyn stated. “That is the woman I love.”

“I need to use the bathroom and get my purse,” I stated firmly.

“Cordelia, go with her.” Corwyn ordered.

“I’m a big girl, Corwyn. I can use the bathroom by myself.” I argued.

“Corwyn, I’ll go with her.” The lively sprite danced around me. She gave me a smile. I sighed. “I’m cool with that.”

“Fine, but be quick.” Corwyn and Esteban followed us. They followed us to the dressing room. I gathered up my purse and went to the bathroom while Cordelia waited outside the door. I knew I only had a few seconds and prayed that her hearing wasn’t as astute as the others. I began humming lightly to myself. I quickly flushed the toilet and turned on the faucets, hoping the sound would muffle my actions. I scanned the walls and there were no windows. I quickly grabbed my cell phone and dialed Della’s number.

“Hello?” her voice answered.

“Della, I don’t have much time. Please, just listen to me. Tyr, Fiona, Celeste and Johann are back in town and they’re coming after Garrett,” I whispered hurriedly into the phone. “Fiona is out for blood. Keep Garrett safe.”

“What’s going on?” I heard her voice drop a note at the other side of the line.

“I don’t have time to explain. The Darcys are getting me out of here because I pissed off Fiona,” I whispered. “They’re taking me somewhere safe but I don’t know where. What am I going to do?”

“Don’t worry,” her voice soothed my panic from the other side of the line. “We’ll find you. We always do.”

“What do I do?” I muttered into the phone.

“We’re coming for you,” I heard a screech of tires in the background. “Garrett is already on his way.”

The smell of smoke and cinnamon began filling the bathroom. I snapped the phone shut and shoved it in my back pocket of my leather pants, quickly putting my hands under the water.

“You know I hate it when you beam in like that,” I retorted sharply. “I just wanted a little privacy.”

“Who were you talking to?” She asked.

“Myself. I’m trying to calm myself down,” I began humming, putting as much fright into my song
as I could muster. “I don't want to lose the rest of my dinner.”

“I saw her tremble for a moment, her eyes closing as she lost herself in the wafting emotion coming from my song. She shook her head firmly and gave me a stern look. “Don’t sing, Wren. For God’s sake, it’s too much.”

“Sorry. Let’s get out of here,” I was glad that my diversion worked. I couldn’t believe that the Darcys were so easily distracted, but I was thankful for it. If my emotions were as fierce as Corwyn and Tyr had said, then they must be a powerful temptation even to one as self-controlled as Cordelia.

I stepped outside to find Esteban and Corwyn waiting for us. Corwyn protectively wrapped his arms tightly around me, capturing my lips in a lingering kiss. Taken aback by the tender display of emotion, my arms slipped around his neck and my fingers entwined in his wavy auburn mane. I felt a familiar tingle dance along my skin followed by vertigo as the auditorium faded from view.

Brilliant light surrounded us until we were engulfed and became a part of it. Numbness conquered my limbs as my body teleported out of existence and several choice expletives escaped my lips but were lost in mid-transit.

There was no room for Cordelia and Esteban in the Aston Martin as I got in the passenger side. Corwyn turned the ignition, making the sleek sports car’s engine come alive with a growl, fishtailing backward in a tight three point turn before speeding toward “O” Street. Within minutes, we were nearing the turn-off to my house. Corwyn didn’t even blink when he sped past it.

“Home is that way,” I pointed back over my shoulder. “You missed the turn.”

“We’re not going to your house,” he informed me. “I’m getting you out of Lincoln when the Emrys cadre is in town. It will be for only a few days.”

“And heading eastbound toward Omaha where you live and the Cadre is setting up camp?” I asked sarcastically. “Not the smartest direction to be heading, Corwyn.”

“You have Phratry friends in Omaha, don’t you?” he glanced at me with narrowed eyes.

“They’re not even ready to handle something of this magnitude,” I retorted over the roar of the engine. “Take me home. That’s the safest place for me.”

“That’s the first place Fiona will look, Wren.” His voice was satin wrapped around steel will.

“Turn around and go back to the acreage,” I demanded. “I want to go home.”

He glowered at me then pressed the accelerator to the floor.

“Corwyn, get a grip.” I tried to say calmly in spite of the anger bubbling inside me. “Home is ground zero for Fiona. She won’t stand a chance on my home turf.”

“No, Wren.” He pounded his fist against the steering while darting rapidly between speeding cars on the Interstate. “She is a pureblood succubus. Do you not realize that? Imagine what I or Esteban can do then multiply that power times ten.”

“And there are four Solomonari on hallowed ground waiting for me to come home.” I all but snarled out of pure frustration. “The acreage sits on top of a seven point ley line convergence which has more power than Sedona, Salem, and Glastonbury combined. If Sunnydale existed, Jack’s acreage would make that hole in the ground look like an amusement park.”

“Wren, this is important.” Corwyn's voice revealed his urgency. “I felt her bloodlust, her fury, her consuming need for revenge. Esteban heard it in her thoughts. Finding you, killing you is the only thing on her mind. You met her threat in front of the others, making her lose face. She won’t rest until you and your family is dead.”

“Then, we take the fight to where my family has the home court advantage.” I said grimly. “We have something so precious, so rare that it will kill a Succubus.”

“What?” he asked skeptically.

“Pull over right now and listen to me for five minutes, Corwyn, and I’ll tell you everything,” I urged him. “If you don’t agree with me when I’m done, then you can take me anywhere you want go.”

C’mon, Uncle Garrett. Where are you?

“I’ll drive. You talk.”

“We have a holy well,” I replied. “In addition of being on top of a mystical ley line convergence,
there are several underground springs on the acreage that has phenomenal abilities to heal diseases, injuries and to also kill demons.”

“Holy water,” he scoffed, his laugh almost bordering on hysteria. “Holy water doesn’t hurt us.”

“If you’re talking about the kind blessed by clergy, no. What powers that kind of holy water is faith. But the kind bubbling up in my backyard is undiluted, primordial magic that predates the beginning of time.”

“You’re putting your faith in superstition.”

I held up my hand and flashed my ring. “Demons? Angels? Solomonari? They all exist and I’d put money on Bigfoot, too. I’m down with the superstition, Corwyn. I am superstition walking here.”

“Without that ring you’re helpless against her,” his voice was low and urgent. “It's too soon, you're not ready.”

“How did they execute Julian Darcy ninety years ago?” I pressed. “You’re immune to fire and control electricity. What dozes fire and sends electricity out of control? Water. Why do you folks hate the rain so much? It took me awhile to figure that one out. The rain reveals your true nature: the coppery skin, the glowing eyes, all of it. Am I wrong?”

“No,” his face was unreadable but I saw the muscle twitching in jaw.

“The safest place within a hundred miles of Fiona is the acreage.”

Corwyn brought his hand to his hair, running his finger through wavy locks.

“Please, Corwyn.” I quietly begged. Pride be damned, I’d beg if that was what it took to keep him and our families safe.

I watched the speedometer decelerate from one hundred ten down to ninety-five. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw the flaming nimbus of fire blazing around him dampen down to a small inferno.

“Someone will be with you at all times. You are not to leave the acreage without one of my family or yours escorting you. We’ll guard the perimeters of the acreage and no more arguments.”

A snarl filled the air above us a dark blurry mass landed in between us in the two-seat coupe.

Corwyn swerved immediately to the right, eyes blazing when he saw a large black panther sitting next to us.

“Hi, Uncle Garrett.” I greeted him excitedly, wrapping my arms around the seemingly ferocious feline. “Late much?”

He growled.

The next thing I knew, three lights surrounded us and I recognized them as three Harley-Davidson motorcycles that Jack kept in the barn for when family visited. Justin took point in front of us, waving as he passed us while Della flanked us on the left and Jack followed in the rear. I quickly filled Garrett in on what we had decided and he shook his massive head in agreement.

He eyes glinted like molten lava as he glowered at me. “How did they know where to find us?”

I held up my cell phone. “Your family has a telepath. I have a Tell-a-Della.”

“Wren, I swear you’ll be the death of me.”

“Turn around and let’s get home,” I urged him. I turned the monstrous cat squeezed tightly between us. “Are the glyphs and wards activated?”

Garrett’s whiskers tickled my cheek when he nodded.

“Good.”
When we arrived back at the acreage, Justin and Garrett scouted the perimeters to make certain the protection glyphs were activated. Corwyn stopped at the mailbox at the edge of the driveway, parked the car and gave me a soulful look as he came around to open my door for me. “Go on, Wren, I’ll keep watch here.”

“I want you with me. Please don’t leave,” Panic added an urgent edge to my voice. My fingers clamped onto his forearm, all of their strength making my hands into iron vice-grips to keep him at my side. I might as well have been tugging on a wall of concrete for all the good it did me because his inhuman strength let him easily break free of my hold.

“Sweetling, I can’t go beyond the glyphs. They ward against my kind,” Corwyn reached out his hand toward the mailbox when scarlet sparks erupted where his hand made contact with an invisible wall. I let the True Sight flow through me and saw a barrier of energy rippled like water. Expanding rings of blue and white reached out in every direction, pushing Corwyn back several inches.

“No, this isn’t right!” I sputtered angrily. “I’ll talk to Jack and have him deactivate the glyphs for a minute so you can be inside with us.”

“Wren, if he weakens the wall then that gives Fiona opportunity to sneak past the defenses,” he shook his head, sadness staring back at me in his ancient eyes. Turning to me, his jade eyes brimmed with brightness as he framed my face gently in his hands. “Go inside. I’d rather spend the rest of my life without you knowing you’re safe than another moment knowing you might be dead because of my selfishness.”

“Argh!” I screamed in frustration, stomping my foot like a four-year-old denied her shiny toy. “Damn you, Corwyn Darcy. Don’t you dare get Byronic on me! That is pure and utter crap. If you’re staying outside, then, dammit, so am I.”

“Wren,” Corwyn’s eyes blazed crimson, his words thick with resonance and command. “You will stay inside the glyphs and the barn where you will be safe.”

I felt power rise in me I didn’t know I possessed: defiance, anger, and pure willpower. A coolness, nearly arctic, flowed through my body as I boldly stared at Corwyn. I saw the lilac aura brighten around my hands as my ring vibrated intensely on my finger.

“No,” I said. A large hand came to rest on my shoulder. My body trembled with fury and frustration that I turned, ready to attack anyone who dared touch me at that moment. Beneath the black cowboy hat, I saw Jack’s dark eyes look down at me with unspoken understanding. He looked at my hand, drawn in a fist and ready to release the restrained energy thrumming through my entire body. His other callused hand lightly covered my balled fist, lightly pushing it down to my side. “Easy, Rascal. You don’t need to be calling lightning right now. Those fiends will get their up-n’-comings’.”

I looked first at Corwyn, mortified at the thought that I could have hurt him and back to Jack, ashamed that I would have attacked him. I am used to being in control of every aspect of my life and for the first time in my life since Matthew’s death, I felt truly powerless.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, turning away from the two most important men in my life, not wanting them to see me weak. “I’m so sorry.” Corwyn’s strong arms embraced me within a second, letting his aroma of cinnamon and smoke envelop me in a soothing cloud that calmed my raging emotions. He pressed butterfly kisses to my brow as he ran his fingers through my hair, whispering soothing words of love and hope. I gave into the echo of his rich tenor, losing my mind in the deep timbre meant to calm my frantic feelings. After a few minutes in his arms, I took several deep breaths and stepped away from his embrace.
“I’m all right now. I’ve got it together,” I told the two worried men standing on each side of me. Jack stepped out, smoothly walking to Corwyn’s side. He laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“You’re welcome here. Come on in and sit a spell.”

“Jack?” My gaze switched from Corwyn to my grandfather. “Won’t that weaken the glyphs?” Corwyn’s face remained stoic, his guarded expression indecipherable.

“We have the right to refuse service to anyone,” he tipped his hat. “Wren likes you, so I figure that gets you a get-in-free V.I.P. pass.”

“Thank you,” Corwyn replied solemnly. Taking his hand in mine, he brought it to his lips, brushing a light kiss over my knuckles. Closing his eyes, he brought his brow to rest against mine. “When all of this is finished, I promise I will never let anyone ever hurt you again. You are my everything.”

“Right back at you,” I murmured into his shoulder, not wanting him to see my tears fall. Now was not the time for me to lose my spine.

As we walked toward the barn, I saw Della leaving the house with blankets and pillows. She stopped mid-step, letting her eyes slowly travel Corwyn’s entire body. “Okay, Handsome, make yourself useful. You and Wren go inside the farmhouse and get all the food you can handle. Everything else we need is already in the barn.”

He snapped quickly to attention, giving my aunt a sharp salute and a big grin. “Yes, Ma’am.” She turned and winked at me. “I see you already have him well-trained.”

“Della!” I exclaimed, mortified by the suggestive remark she made.

“He has to be if he wants to fit in with this family,” I watched the warmth flow between her and Corwyn. She genuinely liked him and I couldn’t miss the affectionate meaning of her teasing. Well, now if Uncle Garrett would just get his head out of his-

“Wren, let’s go.” Corwyn urged me, interrupting my mental tirade. It didn’t take us long to get several boxes loaded with canned goods. The barn held everything else we needed: Jack’s camping supplies, a portable stove for cooking and drinking water from the well. When we finally were inside the barn, I saw that Jack already had sleeping bags laid out along with those mesh chairs that you can take camping. He was treating the whole situation more like a tailgate party at a football game than a siege.

“Della, why are bringing in so many supplies?” I asked. “I understand that Fiona is a pure-blood succubus, but I heard the Darcys say at the benefit that our family is more than strong enough to take on the whole bunch. Can’t we blow her up or douse her in holy water?”

“If we could catch her, then yes.” she sighed. “Wren, she could summon her minions, enough to total a small army. If she does that, we don’t have a chance.”

“Couldn't she have done that already?”

“From what Corwyn told me while we were bringing in supplies, even Tyr doesn't want to deal with that kind of upset. Their kind have a very strict hierarchy bordering on nobility and he doesn't want to deal with the anger of those higher on the ladder than him. According to the Accords, the demons don't try to get retribution on us and we Solomonari don't enslave them. We aren't as powerful as we were thousands of years ago. Times have changed and numbers have shifted. They outnumber our kind four to one.”

“Why hasn't she done it sooner?”

“I have no clue, Wren.” Della shrugged. “Maybe she didn't have enough power until now or enough reason. You seriously pissed her off.”

“I guess I’m a Bryant after all, aren’t I?” I asked.

“To the core, Wren.” My Aunt smiled. “Welcome to our world.”

As we made our way along the long corridor of stables, I noticed they were empty. I met up with Jack. “Where are the horses?”

“I told them to go over to the north 40.” Garrett was his grumpy, curmudgeonly self while Jack finished setting up sleeping bags, a card
table, camp stove and a cooler full of beer while Della started cooking dinner over the camp stove. I shook my head in exasperation at the sheer naivete of my relatives being casual about the fact that a demon and her minions were going to attack within the next twenty-four hours. Exasperated, I went upstairs to the hayloft, using my key to unlock what I affectionately call the magic room. My laptop was still up there from the last time I had done research, so I turned it on and began scouring through all of my research notes looking for any hint or idea that would give me, us, an edge on Fiona. I wrote down everything I knew about her, looking for any weakness that I could use to stop her. I knew she teleported and there was no way to stop her save for the protection glyphs. Emotions were candy to her. She manipulated fire and electricity like any other demon and she could summon demonic minions at will.

I heard a gentle knock on the door behind me that nearly made me jump out of my skin. Looking over my shoulder, I saw Corwyn standing outside the door staring at me with concern. “May I come in?”

“Come in,” I held out my hand to him in open invitation. “Welcome to the Situation Room or the Panic Room, depending on the day.”

He chuckled and came to my side. Looking around, he studied the hand carved shelves laden with ancient tomes, scrolls and various spell components. “Ground Zero?”

“This is our family’s version of NORAD,” I motioned around the room. “Anything and everything magical is right here.”

“Why here and not the house?” Corwyn asked, scanning the walls lined with books and jars containing things he couldn’t identify.

“Who would think to look in the hayloft?” I scoffed. “The attic in the house is just too obvious.”

“I’m honored that you trust me enough to allow me to be here,” he said quietly. “I never thought that I would be standing in a room with this or that our people would have something in common other than animosity.”

“Corwyn, there is goodness in you.” I had said that to demons twice in one night. Like his uncle, he possessed a morality that some in his family lacked. That factoid left me humbled at my own prejudices and gave me a hint of inspiration. “I can't think of anyone that I want beside me more than you.”

He walked over to the table in the middle of the room where the massive leather-bound tome set with pages open. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Yes,” I said proudly, reverently. “That is the Key of Solomon.”

“I’ve never been more proud of you than I am at this moment,” Corwyn brushed away the white streak that fell errantly over my eyes.

“How was Julian executed?” I asked.

Corwyn’s strong jaw hardened into granite and his eyes closed when he heard my question. “Your great-grandfather and his brother brought Julian inside this barn, held him down while Garrett decapitated him with a scythe.”

“Because Julian let them?”

“He loved his family more than his life,” I heard the catch in Corwyn’s voice. “The agreement was that if he surrendered willingly then his children would be spared.”

“Decapitation kills,” I searched through my scattered thoughts for the term Johann used to describe their kind. “Is that the only way to kill your kind?”

“No,” Corwyn’s eyes left mine, choosing instead to study the wooden floor beneath our feet. “Holy water.”

“I knew it!” I hollered in triumph.

“Well, your research makes you the resident demonic expert in your family and now you know our secret,” Corwyn looked at me with pleading eyes. “Your family possesses the one thing that can destroy us.”

I quickly returned to my laptop and went to my favorite search engine, typing in the words 'holy water' and 'demons.' Scanning entry after entry, I found very little except articles from role-playing games and how many points it deducted from a demon's total score. I called in Justin, Esteban and
Jack and told them about my idea. 
“You’re crazy,” Justin shook his head. 
“We are sitting on top of our best weapon,” I countered. “We let her in, minions and all!” 
“You're crazy!” Justin shook his head in disbelief. “No demon ever set foot until you brought one here.”

“Not true,” I countered, giving a cryptic look to Jack. “It's time to finish was started almost a hundred years ago. We bring down the barn with her in it. If Fiona summons an army, then that is the best way to destroy her minions. If distracted, she won't be able to focus well. We also need a big distraction to keep her from concentrating too much on her attack.”

Corwyn's voice was low and hard to my ears. “Fiona won’t lay done her life so easily. It’s difficult to get hold of someone who can teleport.”

“Difficult, but not impossible.” I stared at my ring. The ‘a-ha’ moment rolled through my mind far quicker than I could put it into words. “Solomonari can enslave demons, bind them.”

“No,” he growled with disapproval. I knew Corwyn didn’t like where my voice was going. “That goes against the treaty, Wren.”

“And Fiona will already have done that by coming onto Bryant land and declaring war on my family. So, she can go merrily to hell for all I care.”

“It’s not a simple wave of the hand and then it’s done. She isn’t going to just stand still while your family recites the incantation. Someone or something is going to have to keep her busy. That will be me.”

“No, much with the bad!” I heard the edge of anger taint my voice. “I’m the one she wants so I’m going to be the diversion.”

“Don’t be arrogant,” Corwyn bellowed. “You’re young and barely in control of your powers. Plus, yours are receptive, not projective. What would you protect yourself, Wren? True Sight her to death?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, not having wanting to admit that I lacked a strategy for that possibility. “I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“Exactly,” he agreed. “You think you can save the world when you can’t even save yourself. Let your family take on Fiona. They know what to do.”

Before my mind formulated a plan, Corwyn’s cell phone rang, he flipped it open and answered tersely. “What?”

Immediate silence followed as he listened to the person on the other end of the line before roughly snapped his cell phone shut. “Damn it. It’s already started.”

“What?” I asked quietly.

“She’s eluded Tyr and Johann. Fiona is coming.”

“Why don’t they help us?” I scoffed.

“They’re not going to violate the Accords for what amounts in their eyes as little more than a cat fight.”

I heard a wind roar outside the barn followed by the deafening crash of lightning against the lightning rods on the roof. The temperature grew incredibly hot as a gust of wind tore through the room, blowing papers and knocking The Tome of Solomon onto the floor. “Where did that come from?”

We looked at one another in complete bewilderment.

“Wren, you need to come downstairs,” I heard Della’s urgent command from the bottom of the hayloft stairs. “Hurry.”

“What?” I asked impatiently, furious at the interruption.

“Why?” I cried impatiently, furious at the interruption.

“Someone wants to talk to you.”

“Who?”

“Julian Darcy.”

“Impossible,” Corwyn countered. “It’s a trick.”

“He was killed in the barn and she knows that,” Della said. If he can pop up, then I know the shields aren't holding.”
“What does he want?”
“How do we find out?” Corwyn asked.
“We ask him,” Della answered.
“Like he is going to volunteer that information to us,” I scoffed.
“He would to me,” Corwyn answered. “I am his son.”
“Could it be a trick or some kind of illusion to play with our minds?”
“Maybe, but I know my father when I feel him. He wasn’t a vengeful man.”
“You place a lot of faith in a dead demon,” Della shook her head.
“He was a demon with a man within in him, Della, not the other way around. He had a soul,” Corwyn said. He took my hand and light surrounded us.
“No, I want to walk,” I jerked my hand free. “I don’t want atoms scattered.’
He sighed in exasperation, letting out a groan. “Why do you have to be so difficult?”
“Because it’s part of my charm,” I winked. “Come on.”
A minute later, Corwyn and I stood beside Della at the north end of the barn near an old rusted cattle tank that Jack used to water the horses. It was about twelve feet in diameter with large patches of brown corroding much of its surface. I felt a gust of wind blow around me; heavy with the scent of spice and smoke. Looking around, I saw nothing. I refocused my concentration, willing my eyes to see the unseen.
Nada.
Zip.
Nothing.
True Sight didn’t allow me to see the dead. Yet, in my altered state, I saw the dark red ripples of outrage and fury fill the area. Currents of anguish and loss hit me so hard that I found remaining upright strenuous, draining my body of strength where I stood.
“Where is he?” I asked Della.
“Don’t you see him? He’s standing right in front of you,” she motioned to the empty space.
“I feel terror and anguish but I don’t see anyone,” Corwyn said.
“What you feel is the psychic imprint of where he died,” she explained, carefully eying Corwyn. I turned to see his hands clench into fists, tight so that two streaks of crimson streamed over his knuckles.
“How can I see him again?” Corwyn asked, his voice caught in his throat.
“Take my hand,” she said as she held it out to him. She held out the other to me. “You also, Wren.” I gave Corwyn a wary glance and nodded. I took hold of Della's hand, her skin felt chilled against my clammy palms as she tightly entwined our fingers. Hesitantly, I looked at her hands gleaming with lavender light that matched the glowing radiance in her eyes. Della’s wild, dark curls flew out behind her; her skin shimmered with an otherworldly aura that sent tremors through my bones. I remained still, but the world of the living raced past us until we were in a narrow, winding tunnel of wind and darkness. A scream of terror, loud and shrill escaped through my lips but the roaring winds swirling around it drowned out the sound so that I was left alone in the tunnel with only my panic and confusion. I closed my eyes, attempting to block out the flashing images that were too fractured for my paralyzed mind to process.
The madness racing by us abruptly came to a jarring halt, slamming me into an invisible wall that sent shock waves of pain through my entire body. Falling to my knees, I fell on my side and feebly rolled onto my back, too overwhelmed by extreme changes in gravity and perception to maintain my balance. With my eyes still closed, my ears noticed only the echoes of water dripping onto metal. Plink. Plink. Plink. It was a monotonous sound, irritating my already rattled senses, which threatened to pull me down into the madness I had just witnessed.
I rested on my back for several minutes, trying to catch back my stolen breath into my lungs. Slowly, my body began to feel again as sensation other than pain returned to my arms and legs. The churning queasiness in my stomach settled and I didn’t feel like I had just stepped of the world’s fastest roller coaster. I inhaled deeply, not quite trusting enough anything around me to open my eyes. I smelled the dank and the wet along with the curious hint of cinnamon and smoke. It was an odd sensation, aromas that didn’t mix well together filling my senses simultaneously.
“Della?” I called out, my voice quiet and meek.
“Not Della,” A deep, calming and very masculine voice answered. Without opening my eyes, I
concentrated upon the voice and sounds behind the words. The voice was deep and rich with a hint of lilt that hinted at exotic origin.

“Ow,” I moaned softly, my head still throbbing after being catapulted into a wall of solid whatever it was.

“Let me help you,” the deep voice again addressed me. I listened to the inflection. I went through my memories, vaguely recognizing the cadent inflection. It rolled through my thoughts and was gentle to my ears as I searched through my childhood memories to find the voice. It didn’t quite match, but the brogue did. It was a transatlantic accent from one of the movie stars that my father admired when he was alive, the strange blend of American and English accents melding into a strange hybrid that made words flow melodically. The accent in the dank darkness matched my memory down to the last trilling ‘r.’

“Ow,” I muttered again.

“Open your eyes,” The resonant voice quietly compelled me with implied command. “Slowly.” The echo, the persuasive measure in his voice, was impossible to miss. I knew attempted charming when I heard it and whoever was speaking to me was attempting to sway me to do his will. My eyes snapped open and stared upward to find a tall, lanky man hovering over me with his hand extended. I shook my head, scoffing that even in the world of the dead that people didn’t understand that it didn’t work with me.

“Turn off the mojo, please.” I brought my hands to my ears. “It gives me a headache.”

“Forgive me,” the figure bowed his head in apology. “I forget that it is unneeded with you.” I cautiously took hold of his large hand that effortlessly pulling me to my feet as if I weighed no more than a piece of paper. I wavered slightly, staggering to the right when two long arms deftly caught and steadied me until I was able to stand alone. I focused my eyes on him until my vision cleared, taking the chance to carefully study him.

The man before me stood six-one or six-two, appearing tall and sinewy and as if he hadn’t had a good meal for a long time. His face was strikingly handsome with his high forehead, prominent cheekbones and strong jaw. What caught my attention were his deep-set cobalt eyes. They were a strange shade of blue-green seen only in a twilight sky, and they twinkled with unconcealed amusement. He starched white shirt and the classic cut black vest complimented the loose wool trousers he wore. The clothing certainly was from an era long before I was born. There was no way I could miss the striking resemblance. He had Tristan’s eyes, Corwyn’s bone structure with Cordelia’s slender build. What threw me for a loop was the striking likeness he bore to Johann.

“Julian Darcy?”

He bowed slightly, a hint of manners from a bygone era. “At your service.”

“Della said you wanted to talk to me,” I eyed him warily, not sure of what to make of the dead incubus standing in front of me looking as though he just stepped out of a black and white movie from classic Hollywood cinema.

“Indeed,” he chuckled darkly. “I’ve been trying to do so all of your life. Since you were a little girl playing in your grandfather’s barn, I’ve seen you focus your mind on magic in ways that no one has tried. Only now, after you've done something foolish, am I able to get through to you. You are a typical Bryant in need of saving from one’s self.”

I looked again into those deep blue eyes, serene and gentle, and found nothing terrifying within them. The photograph that I’d seen in Omaha of him didn’t do the man justice when compared to seeing him in person or, in ghost, in this case. A warm ease quietly flowed through me, waves of blue that felt like warm water washed away the aches in my mind and body.

“Guilty as charged,” I admitted sheepishly. “I’m not exactly sure what is going to happen.”

“You’re terrified of what that means for you and your family,” Julian spoke my secret thoughts aloud.

“Comes with the territory.” I shrugged, then made a whirling motion in midair with my index finger. “The dark is hard on my eyes. Are you able to flick some flame and make with the light?”

“Ahn, of course.” he nodded in understanding. With a dismissive gesture of his hand, the darkness
around still remained, but the immediate surrounding glowed. I felt as though I were in a darkroom staring at negatives. I looked upward, seeing the familiar rafters above me. To my left was one of the stables, and to the right was the watering tank we used to water the horses. The silhouettes blurred somewhat around the edges when I tried to focus on my vision.

“Quit trying to use your eyes, Wren.” he gently chided me. “Use your Sight.”

“I’m trying,” I growled in frustration. “Della sees dead people, not me.”

“Welcome to my world,” Julian motioned to the darkness surrounding us.

“Della said that you wanted to talk to me,” I pressed. “What do you want?”

“Yes,” he nodded grimly. “We’ve much to discuss.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. First, where are we?” I asked, amazed by the strange, cold place where we stood.

“We’re in the barn,” Julian sat down on the edge of the tank, patting the edge beside side him.

“And not in the barn. We’re in that place that exists between life and death; the place where spirits dwell who remain earthbound.”

“I never knew that demons had souls,” I confessed. “Loving one is definitely an eye-opener.”

“Men turn into fiends as demons can became humane. It isn't such a stretch of the imagination. The same can be said for loving a Solomonar or one of the Phratry. Actually, we're not the demons mentioned in religion or myth. That was a human connotation assigned to us.” A hint of a smile tugged at his lips.

“Still, you are dealing the situation with unexpected grace. For all of your fright, you’re handling the circumstances better than expected.”

“I’m still getting used to it,” I shrugged. I grew up with my uncle changing into a panther right in front of me. It wasn’t uncommon for Della to talk with some wandering spirit that decided to shack up in our house while she helped cross over to the afterlife. Justin used to make tornadoes dance in our pasture for fun when we was bored. So, yeah, I’m pretty much accustomed to the whole ‘supernatural-uncanny-holy crap’ kind of thing going on around me.

Time limited us. The longer that I stayed in the Shade Realm, the more difficult it would be for me to return to ye old mortal coil a.k.a. my physical body.

“I’ve hung out with Della enough to know the basics,” I sat down beside him. “Julian, You were executed for killing your wife. What do you want? Revenge?”

“No,” his voice sounded ancient in its sorrow. I had heard that same tone in Corwyn’s voice at least once. “I want the truth to come to light, justice against those who murdered me and final rest.”

“What about Garret for cutting off your head?” I gave the ghost a hard stare.

“He will know justice in due time, but not by my hand,” he replied cryptically. “I am weary and I want to move on, but I can’t as long as my wife’s murderer still runs free.”

“I didn’t think you killed your wife.”

“Of course I didn't kill my wife!” Julian’s eyes widened with genuine surprise. “And what makes you think that?”

I pointed at him. “Incubus, right?”

“Yes,” he drawled slowly as if intrigued.

“You and Lydia had four children over how many years?”

“We were married for over a century. Tristan was born in 1790, Liam in 1830 and the twins, Corwyn and Cordelia in 1887.”

“Exactly!” I felt excitement growing as I found new energy. “An incubus usually drains their victims to the point of death during sex and yet you two shagged for over a century without setting the bed on fire.”

“Shagged?” Julian looked puzzled by my slang reference.


“Never fire, at least, not literally.” he chuckled. “However, you are correct in your assumption.”

“It implies that you were careful during sex or she had some kind of immunity to your powers. I have some immunity to Corwyn.” I admitted. “Ergo, there’s no way you killed your wife. Besides, she was Phratry, right?”

“How do you know that?” Julian’s cobalt gaze narrowed, staring hard at me.

“Corwyn told me.” I explained as the words rushed out of me. “I know you loved her.”
“More than my own life,” his words were a ragged whisper.
“How did she have immunity to your powers?” I asked. “How were you two able to make love without killing her?”

“Practice,” he answered. “Patience and persistence. We used multiple magic items to ensure her protection, removing one at a time over the years until we no longer needed them. There was no guarantee, Wren, you understand. We thought it was possible because our peoples were so close to one another in origin.”

“Angels and demons?”

“Again, an analogy that humans assigned to us to explain our existence.”
“But do the Solomonari know that?” I asked, my mind seeing it all as a jigsaw puzzle where the pieces started to fit together to make a picture.

“I don’t know,” he sighed. Julian rose to his feet and walked over to me, his long legs covering the distance in only two strides. “You are the first to pose that question.”

“Okay,” I tried to fit the pieces of the puzzle together to make sense of what was real. “Back to the important stuff. If you didn’t kill her then someone else did. Question, was she a dry husk or a pile of ashes when you found her?”

“A pile of ashes,” Julian murmured softly.

“Any suspects?”

“A few,” he rose to his feet, his brow furrowed with concentration.

“When she was…” I didn’t want to bludgeon Julian over the head with painful memories but I needed what he knew to fill in the pieces of a puzzle that didn’t look right. “When she was murdered, how much time had passed after the Accords were signed?”

“Only a few months,” Julian answered, slowly stroking his beard in contemplation. “She was working with Bianca Rohan and Garrett at the time resolving the final agreements.”

“Bianca Rohan?” The last name immediately caught my attention. “I know some Rohans who are Phratry, but I don’t recognize Bianca’s name. Who is or was she?”

“Bianca was Lydia’s sister,” Julian explained.

I remembered the day in Omaha when I had visited with Logan about his family’s heritage and their involvement in Julian’s execution. Bits and pieces of information flooded my thoughts that back then didn’t seem relevant but what Logan had told me now made perfect sense. “Grandma led some of the Phratry to hunt them down after one of theirs went rogue and killed a human being….”

“Meaning Lydia was the one who called the shots for the Darcys.”

“Ishrudden when the pieces fell into place. Bianca Rohan was Elena’s mother.”

“Indeed,” he nodded.

“How did Bianca and Fiona get along?”

“Not at all. They hated each other and Fiona detested Lydia.”

“Why?”

“Our kind our matriarchal.”

“We rule the roost,” I nodded in understanding.

“Yes, it’s our way. The eldest female, blood or not, is the one who has final say over all decisions in a cadre.”

“Meaning Lydia was the one who called the shots for the Darcys.”

“Again, correct.”

“Which meant Fiona was displaced,” I began seeing where this led.

“Lydia demanded that neither Fiona nor Tyr have any contact with our children,” he sighed. “I wanted peace more than family, therefore, I agreed. Fiona abhorred the fact that I had diluted pure bloodlines with Phratry blood and never forgave Lydia for her decision or her sister for agreeing with her.”

“Racial prejudice, barred from family, deposed from power by someone she considered an outsider,” I spoke the facts aloud as the picture came together in a very ugly mosaic. “Okay, who stood with the most to gain from the Accords?”
“The Phratry,” his harsh response laden with anger sent out fiery red flares of rage from the blazing aura surrounding him. “They ended up with most of our old territory and a good portion of our property. We agreed to stay out of the designated territories deemed off-limits in return for the Phratry’s dissolution of their ranks in the region. We agreed not to feed of humans in return for their guarantee not to hunt us.”

“Motive.” I said bleakly. “With Lydia dead, Fiona regained matriarchal status and got serious revenge against Bianca and you all in one fell swoop.”

“Fiona is a cold-hearted bitch, but she was with me that night. She didn’t leave my sight long enough to commit the murder.”

“Then, she had an accomplice.” I saw the blazing aura spark, flashes of black orbs circled around Julian. His sorrow mutated into murderous rage that stole the breath from my lungs, replacing it with terror. “What about Johann?”

“Johann is my twin and we share a telepathic bond, knowing each other’s thoughts. He also wanted peace and brokered the original agreement until a final accord was agreed upon.” Julian shook his head in denial.

“Tyr.” I sighed. “He and Fiona are closer than the average brother and sister from what I can tell. Is that typical for your kind?”

“Gods, no!” Julian bellowed, his large hands tightened into balled fists. “But for those two, they’re perverse enough to indulge in depravities of that nature.”

“Where were you when all of this happened?”

“Fiona, Johann and I were at a baseball game and the children were with us. Lydia chose to remain at home because she was expecting our fifth child and wasn’t feeling well. When we arrived home, we found the house in flames. It took no time to put out the flames with more than a thought but by then it was too late.” Julian shook his head and buried his face in his hands. He slumped to the ground and I felt helpless as I watched his shoulders tremble with the hoarse sobs torn from his chest.

I felt helpless as I watched the tormented wraith weep, his anguish swirled around him in deep waves of white and blue. All I could do was watch as his soul poured out the sadness that plagued him. I sat down beside him at a loss at what do. I wrapped my arm around him and rocked him and the only thing I could say to him was “I’m so sorry.”

After what seemed hours, Julian stared at me with hollow eyes. “I want justice.”

“She’s going to kill my family, starting with me and then Garrett.” I said quietly.

“I know.”

“Were there other incubi in the area? Could it have been anyone else?”

“No, only Johann and Tyr. Tyr supposedly was in Council Bluffs attending an opera.” He explained.

“What amount of distance can an Incubus cover in a teleport?”

“Depending on the age, hundreds of miles.” Julian slowly closed his eyes, as if to block out the harsh reality of the hideous montage the facts presented.

“Tyr.” I spit the name as though it were a curse. “It was Tyr.”

“You can’t be sure of that,” Julian seethed.

“Oh, yes I am.” I scoffed in disgust. “Fiona was hanging all over him earlier tonight like a picture on a wall. If he can teleport up to hundreds of miles, then he popped in, set the place ablaze, and popped back out before anyone at that opera knew he was gone.”

“Fiona is twisted and vindictive but she holds traditional views about family. She can cause any pain she wants to family without guilt, but neither Heaven nor Hell will stop her from an outsider doing harm to one of us. My execution wasn’t something she anticipated, let alone one of the mediators sanctioning.”

“The rest of my family is too powerful to kill as long as they present a united front. Garrett is over a hundred years old and he’s just hitting his prime,” I mused. “I’m the youngster that’s the weakest and she wants blood for blood.”

“That explains much,” Julian’s eyes flickered like blue embers. “Given your penchant for
"Yeah, I mouthed off when I should have just kept quiet," I grudgingly admitted. "Not one of my more stellar moments."

"You are in grave danger, Wren." He told me frankly. "Fiona’s powers are strong and she is relentless when driven by revenge. Your family will be lucky to see morning."

"Love your optimism, Jules." I quipped. "How do I beat her?"

"You can’t." He rose to his feet and offered me his hand. "But, we can."

"Explain," I cocked one brow in question. He was charming as he was dead. I saw where the Darcy charm originated.

"I offer you a solution, my young Solomonar, with your permission." He gave me a wicked grin that matched the cold twinkle of calculation in his eyes. "You have talent, but it is raw and lacks focus. I have great power but no means of interacting in the corporeal world. Therefore, I suggest an alliance. Allow me to indwell within you for a brief time, meshing our minds and spirits into one powerful gestalt. I possess the knowledge and experience to destroy her while you possess the means for me to do so. In return, when this is done, you and your family will prevail and I will attain final rest."

"You’re not talking a telepathic gestalt, Julian." I immediately froze at what he truly meant. "You mean possession."

"As I’ve heard you say many times, Wren, ‘I’m crazy, not stupid.’ There’s a difference between indwelling and possession. Indwelling allows me to occupy your body with your knowledge and consent while possession is my habitation of it against your will."

"No, it’s too dangerous." I stepped away, wrapping my arms around my waist to keep it from churning any more than it already did.

"I’m not convinced of it entirely myself, but Della says that it you would be ‘channeling’ me. She says you’ve seen her do this many times."

More than once in Della’s New Age store in Denver, I watched her channel wandering spirits wishing to pass on messages to the living or settle unfinished business before crossing over into the light. It was one thing to see it done and an entirely different matter to be the channerler. I wasn't exactly thrilled at that moment.

"She said that she could act as the conduit between us so neither of us loses our minds or individual identities," Julian laid a soothing hand on my shoulder. "If I indwell within your body along with your soul, then I can manifest my abilities in the corporeal world which will provide you the means to stop her. Together, with your natural talents and my abilities, we can bring about the justice that was meant for Fiona ninety years ago."

"I don’t know," I had to admit, his idea was the one thing that sounded like we might have a chance of winning against her. Still, the thought of letting a spirit run around with control of my body, and a demon to boot, left me cold. "That means I get to play bait."

"You were planning to do that anyway but hadn’t figured that part out yet," Julian wryly reminded me of my recent conversation with Corwyn. "You were contemplating that option even before our talk. Your diversion will buy the time needed for your family to act and stop her before she hurts another innocent being. With me along with you, you’re chances of survival increase exponentially."

"Dammit, Jules." I scowled at the handsome ghost staring back at me. "I’m a seer, not a ghost whisperer."

If Fiona was as ruthless as I imagined, that meant anyone who sided with my family was in danger, including all of the people whom I’d grown to love: Penelope, Tristan, and Cordelia. Even Zenobia might be a target but that didn’t bother me that much. I heard Julian chuckle at my dark humor as he read my thoughts, but then a graver image filled them. Corwyn was in the barn with my family and eventually Fiona would kill him for helping them and loving me. There was only one choice and I made it but I was frightened because I didn’t want to die.

"Wren, remember you are Solomonar." Julian told me calmly. "You berate yourself constantly for
lack of courage and will. You possess gifts now that allow you certain advantages that you
previously didn’t have. I’ve read your thoughts and tonight you hid from very powerful beings
until you lost control of your emotions.”
“How could you know that?”
“I’m dead, not deaf.” Julian tapped one ear. Gee, where had I seen that gesture? “I’ve heard you
many times as a child come inside the barn to confess your trials and tribulations to the horses
while you fed them. Besides, you’ve dwelt on tonight’s events enough for me to know what
happened.”
I studied Julian for a long, endless moment. Corwyn had told me about his father; the kind, gentle
eudemon who taught his family to respect humanity rather than exploit it. Here before me stood
the ghost of that man…demon…someone, saddened and angered by his wife’s murder and his
useless death. Fiona meant to destroy me and my family and that was something that I refused to
allow.
“Find the fire within you to fight the evil that threatens your family and mine. Corwyn is here with
you in this barn, Wren. If she attempts to kill you, he’ll die defending you.”
I sighed heavily. Julian possessed a keen mind and flawless logic. “Point taken.”
“You found the fire to return here to face your inner demons and the fire to love my son. Now, find
the fire to fight for whom you love and for what you believe.”
I wanted to be brave enough to pull my life together and now I had a reason to do it but the
obstacles overwhelmed me. I wondered what Garrett’s reaction would be when he found about the
perilous plan being hatched. You know what? I really didn’t give a damn what he thought. He’d
learn to deal with it.
“You’ve got yourself a willing body,” I held out my hand. “Now, let’s talk indwelling.”
“Now, that’s the woman who loves my son.”
I’ll never forget the memory of Della acting as a channeling medium, infusing Julian’s spirit with my body and mind. It isn’t how you see it in the movies when the ethereal ghost superimposes itself over the living person and gently sinks into the body. I fought and clawed to free my mind of the negative black and white images surrounding me, running for a door full of light and color that became more distant with each passing second.

“She’s fighting it,” I heard a far-away voice echo in my ears, distorted to the point that I barely understood the words. I attuned my hearing on it until I recognized that it was Della.

“We’re going about this the wrong way,” A much deeper voice replied. Turning in its direction, I saw him standing next to Della while looking at me, holding hands while I tried running toward the door. The fractured images of the corporeal world flashed in split-second pictures past my mind’s eye, spliced in between frames of the negative world surrounding me. “Don’t force it, Della. Let Wren come to us.”

Julian, handsome and debonair as Cary Grant, held out his hand to me. “Not possession, Wren, but indwelling. Join us. Della is here to show you the way. We will be one mind, one soul, and one body. Trust me.”

I trusted Julian Darcy with life and my soul. Those cobalt eyes held the same serene honesty that I had seen in his son, Corwyn. I believed and I allowed it.

Instead of the handsome, raven-haired man standing beside my aunt, a giant with flowing black hair and crimson skin loomed over her. A scream filled the vast emptiness surrounding us when I saw that the creature next to her was the perfect likeness of the fiend that I had seen in my dream not so long ago. It hadn't been a nightmare, but a premonition, and I half-expected to find myself trying to claw my way out of a freshly-dug grave. Pure fright pumped through my veins and another scream escaped me when I looked at them.

“Wren, it’s still me. I’m still Julian.” He crooned, extending his hand toward me. “You’re seeing my soul, but not my essence. Find the fire to fight for what you believe and for whom you love. Remember Corwyn. You are Solomonar. Protect those who need you most.”

My feet were held in place by invisible lead weights but my will propelled me forward one step at a time until I stood only a short distance from them. Della looked wild and unearthly, her eyes gleaming with a preternatural glow that illuminated them in a violet aura. My hand noticeably trembled when I took hold of hers first and then Julian’s. I watched as the burning aura that surrounded him entwined my arm, creeping toward my shoulders and around my body until my vision swam with red fire. I closed my eyes, praying for it all soon to be done.

I clung to my memories of Corwyn: the first day I had seen him standing on the risers in the auditorium, the look in his eyes when he shielded me from the falling lighting rig, the day he gave me a ride home in the rain, the night in the garden when I dared to kiss him, the first time when we sang together. Those memories mingled with thoughts that weren’t mine, memories of him from another time. I saw him working in the orchard as a young man picking apples with his family, the day he helped his father and mother plant the nine trees that were out of place in the fruit orchard, the day he looked into his father’s eyes with sadness and fury before he saw him dragged into the barn to be killed.

The door to the living world was far below us now, a distant pinpoint of light in the eternal darkness around us. The reversed black and white realm that surrounded us began spiraling in a counterclockwise motion; each rotation faster than the previous until it became a murky blur of gray. Recollections and thoughts not my own mingled with my fear, letting me taste fury on my tongue and feel anger surge through me both inhuman and unnatural. Warm lips touched my clammy brow as strong arms pulled me to the demon’s side. I heard Julian’s voice mingle with
mine while Della’s echoed in the background. “Remember Corwyn. Find the fire within you, Wren Bryant.”

The spiraling vortex abruptly stopped and the roaring in my ears ceased. I felt the cool hardwood floor of the Magic Room steady and heard beneath me. Della knelt over me, her dark eyes wide with frantic worry. “Are you all right?”

I slowly stood up and had the eerie feeling that I wasn’t alone. I felt as though Julian were on my mind, but not invading it, as if I were thinking of an old friend that I hadn’t seen in a long time. My body felt strong and power pulsed through me. Della’s voice still rang with a distant echo that let me know that I wasn’t quite back in the corporeal world, but I was anchored enough to know that I wasn’t trapped between dimensions.

I remembered seeing Corwyn once produce flame between his fingers by simply willing it and a slow smile spread across my lips. I held up my fingers in front of me as if I were going to snap them, a surge of heat pulsed beneath the skin of my fingertips. Imagining my fingers being flint and steel, I snapped them. A single spark danced in the air, giving me the inspiration to give it another try. I concentrated on the feel of fire, warm to the touch, and on it’s appearance, red and flickering. I snapped my fingers again; an inch tall flame danced on the tip of my thumb. It didn’t burn as I thought it would; it tickled.

“Oh, yeah, Baby!” I drawled, my voice sounded normal to my ears. “We’re fine.”

“We?” Della asked slowly.

“Much with the happy,” I grinned, ecstatic at how easy it was to shape the fire to my will. “Julian is alive and in living color inside my head.”

We don’t have time for parlor tricks, A stern voice censured me within my thoughts. This is not the time for flaunting your newfangled talents, Wren.

“Sorry,” I grimaced aloud, putting out the small flame.

“Why are you apologizing?” Della asked, shaking her head in confusion.

“Julian thinks I’m showing off.”

I knew you’re showing off.

I knew what I wanted to try next and I heard a severe disapproval bellow inside my mind. Wren, no! Don’t you dare-

I closed my hand, smothering the little fireball I held. Grabbing Della’s hand, I gave her a quick wink.

“Trust me?”

“Yes,” She drawled uncertainly. “Wren, what are you doing?”

“We are going for a ride. Time to fly.” I gave her a mischievous grin as I imagined blinding light surrounding us, our bodies growing lighter until they were weightless. I focused all of my concentration upon the horse stable on the first floor at the north end of the barn. Instinct told me that was safest because I didn’t want to teleport where someone was standing. Instead of numbness, a tingling sensation coursed through my body followed by a flash a light. I felt a warmth flow through me as Della’s cry of surprise was cut off mid-squeal and then nothing. The next thing I knew, we stood in the middle of the stable and the fresh scent of manure surrounded us.

Della looked down and I stifled a giggle when I realized that she was standing in the middle of a fresh pile of horse dung. She scowled at me as she jerked her hand out of mine. “You have horrible aim, you know that?”

“Sorry,” I answered contritely, but elated that I successfully completed teleportation without my stomach lurching into my mouth.

DON’T EVER DO THAT AGAIN, YOU FOOLISH GIRL! YOU COULD HAVE TELEPORTED INTO A WALL OR ANOTHER PERSON AND KILLED YOURSELF AND YOUR AUNT.

Immediately sharp pain shot through my temples, effectively displaying Julian’s displeasure. I brought my hand to my forehead, stumbling against the stable door. “Okay, I get it. No more beaming across the universe.”

My powers in your hands are meant to be tools and not toys. You’re a woman at war, not a child at play.
“I heard that,” Della stared at me wide-eyed. “Julian isn’t happy with you.”
“Thank you for stating the obvious,” I groaned.
“Wren?” I heard Corwyn’s voice call to me as he opened the stable door. Staring at both of us, his brow furrowed. “How did you get in the stable? I didn’t see you come down the stairs.
“You don’t want to know. Trust me.”
Tell him. Julian demanded and sent me a minor throb to compel me.
“Can I speak to you privately for a moment?” I asked softly, motioning him into the stable. “Come here.”
Della looked down at her hiking boots in disgust. “Ugh. I need to clean these off.
I’m going to give you guys a moment.”
“Thank you.” I nodded gratefully as she closed the stable door.
I scratched my head, trying to tell my boyfriend about the unexpected turn of events.
“Well?” Corwyn asked, frantic with worry.
“Teleported.”
“I, uh, well, um…” I stammered.
“You what?” he hissed. “That’s impossible.”
“I sort of made a deal with your father. He’s….here,” I tapped my temple. “With me.”
“Both of you are in the same body?” Corwyn’s perfect, strong jaw fell slack.
“Well, yes.” I carefully stepped around the pile of horse manure. “He can help us.”
“Wren, possession of another’s mind is forbidden in the Accords.”
Corwyn grabbed me by my upper arms and shook me. “What were you thinking?”
Possession might be, but I’m a willing participant. He’s indwelling at my invitation. I’m not going Exorcist or Amityville Horror on you, Corwyn. He possesses so much power that I didn’t even think possible. I can teleport because I wanted it. I can form fireballs in my hands just by thinking about it. I feel stronger than Hercules right now and it’s fantastic. Is this what it’s like for you?”
“This is your plan to save your family?” His voice was quiet and grim to my ears. “By giving up your will? Do you want to be a demon?”
“Whatever it takes, Corwyn.” I replied coolly, stung by his condemnation.
I want to speak to my son, Wren.
Tell me what you want me to say, Julian. I answered in my thoughts.
Please, let me speak to him directly.
How? Did my being in control have an on/off switch?
Let me have control. Look at me.
I closed my eyes and I saw Julian standing beside me: healthy, alive and full of color. He stood behind me and to my right, his hands gently on my shoulders. Understanding, I placed his hand in mind, letting him step forward. I peeked around his arm to watch what happened next.
The room rippled around us, waves of energy filled the small stable. Ribbons of fire entwined with violet strands and now I was the one watching, slightly weightless and definitely not in control. It felt as though someone were lifting my arm while it hung limply and I watched my hand fall softly to Corwyn’s shoulder. Then, I realized I stood about three feet away from him and I saw Julian’s cobalt eyes stare into the jade green eyes of his son.
“Father, is it really you?” Corwyn gasped in awe.
“Yes,” I heard Julian’s deep voice catch and then they quickly embraced. “It has been too long, Son. Listen to me because we don’t have much time. I am proud of you and the man you’ve become. I’m sorry that I couldn’t be there to be the father you needed when times were at their worst. Please tell the others that I miss them and that I love them beyond all else.”
“I will,” Corwyn nodded. “How could you do this to her?”
“I made the suggestion and she accepted, “ Julian said quietly. “She loves our family as her own, and she is willing to fight for what she loves. She knows the risks.”
“This isn’t what I wanted for her,” Corwyn started, but his father stopped him.
“Wren and I don’t have much time before the indwelling fades. Attune your mind to ours and wait for our signal. Call the family and tell them to come but don’t tell Wren’s family of our agreement. They wouldn’t understand.”
“I agree.”
“She has the weakest defenses and is the one person here whom I can inhabit without immediate resistance or repercussion. I assure you, Corwyn, that she is a willing participant to this indwelling and I mean her no harm.” He motioned to the others beyond the door. “Now, go. We have work to do. Tell the Bryants to lower the glyphs and inform them that your brothers and sisters are en route.”
“I’ll do it now.”
Dizziness caught me off-guard as the stable spun around me. I staggered a few feet and I clutched my stomach, leaving the remains of my breakfast on the hay-covered floor. I stumbled out of the stable and several pairs of eyes stared at me.
“Rascal, what are you doing down here? I thought you were doing research.” Jack peered questioningly at me from beneath his cowboy hat.
“There's been a change of plans,” I explained.
“Corwyn wants us to lower the glyphs,” he muttered. “Not the smartest idea.”
“Perfectly smart idea,” I argued. “Let her come. Corwyn’s family is on their way and they’re going to provide back up. I’m going upstairs to get things ready.”
No teleporting. Julian commanded me.
No teleporting. I don’t think my stomach could take it a second time. I reassured him as my stomach started churning from the delayed side-effects of my wham-bam traipsing across the universe.
Once I returned to the magic room, I forced my mind to focus on what to do next regarding Fiona. No options were left except the one: to confront her one-on-one to provide time for the Darcys and the Bryants the best chance of victory. I hoped that with Julian’s powers combined with mine that we possessed enough firepower to take her down without my death being the end result. If she did kill me, I hoped that my death would sate her desire for revenge against my family. There was no room for negotiation, no bargains to be made with Fiona. I had enough firepower, thanks to Julian, to hold her off long enough for both of our families to destroy her.
I forced the sadness filling me back into that small space of my mind where it couldn’t touch me, focusing my thoughts on my primary objective: be the bait that catches the fish.
Julian’s thoughts melded with my True Sight into a narrow beam of consciousness, scanning the countryside for any sign of her. I knew that Esteban would be telepathically scouting the area for me once Corwyn informed him of the change in plans. Given Stephan’s extensive mind-reading ability, he’d figure out my plan and inform the others immediately. I refused to accept that I wouldn’t see Corwyn again. I clung to the belief that Julian and I would provide Fiona a fine distraction until the cavalry arrived. Julian’s mind echoed the heartache I felt as we forced the pain away and forged ahead with the plan. Regret clung to my heart, like thorns to tender flesh, that I couldn’t tell everyone that I loved them.
I grabbed a pen and a blank sheet of paper and sat at the table, staring at the empty white page. Tell him what is in your heart, Wren. Don’t fail as I failed to do. Let him know the love you hold for him. Julian’s gentle voice urged me.
Corwyn, I started the letter. As my tears flowed so did the words from my heart to pen to page. I love you and I apologize for dragging you into this mess. I can’t let Fiona hurt either of our families when I have the ability to stop her. Julian isn’t an idiot and he has provided me with the best opportunity of stopping Fiona dead in her tracks...
Don’t blame him, it was as much my idea as it was his and I agreed to it. Tell Penelope thank you for everything and please tell Esteban I learned his lessons well.
If Fiona wins, just let it go. You’ll do more here by staying with our families and everyone working together as a team to take her down. I don’t want anyone hurt because of one psychotic succubus with a hard-on for revenge. You once said that you loved me more than your own life. If you do, prove it now. Live. Live for me because I ask it of you. Remember that I love you.
Yours always,
Wren.
I folded the note and scribbled his name on the front, slipping it onto the card table where I knew he’d easily spot it. He and Jack were talking as I willed my body to be invisible to them and slipping past them unnoticed. I made it out of the barn without difficulty and I saw the glyphs were down as requested.

I needed to get Fiona’s attention. Closing my eyes, I let my mind’s eye take over. I felt a presence a few miles north of me, enraged and sinister. It was Julian who pinpointed her location with the strange link that he shared with the rest of his family.

Rather than attempting teleportation, I ran. The incubus’s strength flowed through my limbs and I ran faster than the approaching storm. The skies darkened overhead, thunder crashing in the distance that signaled her impending arrival.

I considered what might have been had Fiona not entered my life as she had. Corwyn and I would have dated, and then eventually married. I knew that. Yes, a brouhaha would have erupted between the Solomonari, the Sabin and the Phratry but we would have worked through it. We would have loved fiercely and spent the rest of our lives making each day better than the last.

Might have. Could have. Would have. Not now.

I stood in the middle of a field belonging to one of Jack’s neighbors; the young corn plants grew only a few inches above the ground. I don’t know if I had Fiona’s attention but I knew one surefire way of getting it. I focused my mind on the swirling storm clouds above me, feeling the electricity coursing through them. Fiona controlled electricity and rode the lightning while I possessed the ability to call it to me.

Three thousand years of ingrained instinct guided my actions as I opened my mouth and sang to the skies. I beckoned nature’s energies to coalesce to my will, calling the lightning to me and daring the psycho bitch to come with it. A streak of pure white electricity shot from the sky, burning into the ground only a few yards in front of me.

“Hello, Wren.” A husky feminine voice greeted me. “I have to admit, calling out to me is very brave. You’re as foolish as the rest of your family.”


“Yes, I did,” I lied.

I watched Fiona flow like liquid latex over skin as she hovered a few inches above the ground as she moved toward me. How could she look that good in black leather? Life just wasn’t fair.

“Do you really think that you can save your pathetic family by meeting me out here?” She purred.

“Once I’m done with you, your Uncle Garrett-”

“That’s Great-Uncle Garrett,” I rudely interrupted her. “Get it right, at least.”

“I really don’t like your cheeky attitude, Solomonar. I’m going to enjoy every luscious moment of watching you burn,” She hissed.

“Didn’t you know? I’m fire-resistant!” I said with more bravado than I felt. Stall her. Don’t provoke her unnecessarily. Julian’s calm voice warned me.

“You truly believe that you’re invincible, don’t you?” Her crimson eyes flared with amazement.

“You truly think that you can beat me? I’ll grant you this much, I admire your bravery, misplaced as it is. I must admit, I find it refreshing.”

“Then you and I have something in common, Fiona.” I agreed, hearing Julian’s thoughts urging me to appeal one last time to any sense of family she had remaining within her. “I know you love your family as well. Julian wouldn’t want you to do this. He wanted it to end ninety years ago.”

“My brother was a martyr and a fool.”

So much for that bright idea, Jules. Not so much with the persuasiveness. Hey, it was worth a shot.

“I just want to know one thing,” I pressed my luck. “I know you didn’t kill Lydia. Was it Tyr?”

“Oh, yes!” Fiona’s laughter rang like wind chimes, melodic and cadent. “Tyr wanted to have a little fun with Lydia first before he drained her. However, he didn’t know that she was invulnerable to his particular brand of charm. He was stronger, of course, and had his way with her. She fought like a hellcat, he said, and he loved every minute of it. When he was done with her after she lay broken and bleeding in her bed, he set it afire and watched her burn.”
“Dear God,” I whispered Julian’s question that haunted my thoughts. The mental imagery that invaded my mind made bile rise in my throat. His anger and mine united as it coalesced into unyielding wrath with Fiona’s admission.

“That what she said toward the end according to Tyr. We all know that God isn’t ever in Nebraska except during football season...” Fiona slowly walked toward me. “Too bad for her.”

“Doesn’t that sicken you?” I asked as I gawked at her.

“No, I was jealous.” Fiona replied in a sing-song voice.

“Of Lydia?” I couldn’t believe that Fiona desired to be someone’s victim.

“No, of course not. I was jealous of Tyr because I didn’t get to watch.” She growled.

“You are one sick, twisted bitch!” I bellowed.

“Why, thank you,” she gave me an artificial smile that turned my stomach. “I like to think so. When I’m done here, I plan on having some fun with your family and then I’ll move on to your precious lover, Corwyn. That wretched family of his won’t even know what happened because it will all look like a natural disaster. Then, I’ll kill them one by one.”

“Johann will know,” I challenged to buy time. “He is Julian’s twin and he’ll want justice.”

“Johann is going to take the blame,” Fiona scoffed. “He just doesn’t know it yet.”

Fiona held up her hand, a blazing orb formed in her palm. She drew her arm back as though she was ready to throw a curveball across home plate. “Enough chit-chat, Wren. Let’s get started.” The fireball flew from her hand, straight and true, across the cornfield straight toward me. Her perfectly painted lips turned into a smirk as she watched the sphere burn a path in my direction. Julian forced his presence in front of me and I watched, astonished, as my hand came up and caught the fiery globe and closed around it, smothering it.

“How can you do that? You can’t control fire!” She screeched.

“I can,” Julian’s voice rang loud across the field as it came from my body.

“No!” She hissed in amazement when she heard the deep resonating baritone replace my alto voice. I watched only a few feet away as his dynamic form towered over hers.

“Impossible. You’re dead!” She stared at him/me, her eyes burning crimson with shock as her body began to tremble with rage. A shrill screech cut through the air when she charged faster than I could track with my human eyes, her body tacking mine into the turned earth of the field. Stunned by the force of the blow, I felt a sharp pain in my ribs and knew some were broken from the impact. We rolled around in the soil, hissing and cursing like two women in a bar fight, with fists flying and hair pulling. I felt her hands wrap around my throat, tightening in a vice grip that cut off the air from my lungs. All went black and my last thought was, “I’m dead.”

I awoke to find Fiona standing over me, placing one heel on my chest and stomping down. The sharp stiletto of her boot pierced through my skin, past my ribcage, and into my lung. Screaming in pain, I also thought, she should have killed me immediately when she had the chance. A burning pain filled my chest and I tried to scream, but nothing came out of me except a gurgle and a hiss of escaping air. I fought to breathe and instantly knew that Fiona had punctured my lung. I thought that I had more firepower, more strength to fight her, but I had overestimated Julian’s power and my own. A dark thought entered my head as I envisioned my gravestone’s epitaph, ‘She was both crazy and stupid.’ I couldn’t think because the pain clouded my mind as I reached for her ankle, praying that my ring’s protection was enough to stall her for just another moment or two.

I grinned with satisfaction as the violet glow of my ring shot up her leather-clad calf, forming a chain that wrapped around her body and retrained her arms. I heard Fiona’s shriek of fury as my ring bound her to me, weakening her body so that she fell to the ground beside me. I willed the last of my life force into that ring and I felt Julian focus his will into that narrow band of strength, solidifying the hold the ring had on Fiona.

I suddenly felt cold and my focus snapped when I became too weak to control the ring’s power. A triumphant snarl came from Fiona’s ruby lips as she broke free of my hold, her face hovered only inches above mine. Searing pain scalded my skin as she grabbed my arm; flames burnt through my jacket and seared my skin. With my last bit of strength, I struggled to escape her grasp but it was
too late.
“It’s a pity that Garrett and you’re family can’t be here to take part in the festivities,” Fiona gloated as the flames burned away my clothing and licked at my skin. I watched her dark eyes gleam with amusement as the flames consumed me.
I screamed as the agony engulfed my entire body. Anything was better than this hell I felt melting away the flesh from my bones. Even Corwyn’s face vanished from my mind as the searing pain overwhelmed every inch of my body. The blackness started to surround me and I knew it brought release from agony. I felt cool water being poured over me, extinguishing the fire that burned my skin. I also felt Julian’s presence leave me at that moment and I knew that I was alone.
Corwyn launched his lithe body in mid-air towards Fiona and they rolled head over heels in the growth of the spring corn. I watched Corwyn’s skin gleam copper and Fiona’s blood red nails extend into long talons. It was Cambion against Succubus, a duel to the death that left no room for mercy or compassion.
She sat atop Corwyn not far from me, straddling him as she raked her pointed claws deeply across his cheek. I saw five jagged wounds appear across his cheek. He glared at her with wild eyes full of fury and hatred and I found it hard to believe him capable of such rage.
“She is worth everything to me,” he growled at Fiona threw clenched teeth as he hurled her across the field. Scrambling to his feet, he scooped me into his arms and looked down at me with pained eyes. “Forgive me, Sweetling.”
I felt a familiar numbness tingle through my limbs but it abruptly stopped when Fiona teleported behind Corwyn, propelling us both into a nearby portion of irrigation pipe watering the cornfield. The blinding flash of light followed and we landed squarely in the middle of the barn, just to the north of the water tank. I flew out of Corwyn’s arms and against some of the metal rails of the holding pen that fenced off the north portion of the barn from the rest of the cattle lot.
Like raging bulls, Fiona and Corwyn charged one another with teeth bared and talons extended, striking each other with a furious exchange of blocks and blows fast than my eyes could follow. The pain in my chest worsened and I found it harder to catch my breath. I slumped against the wooden beam against me, falling into a heap on the ground. Sticky, wet warmth made my shirt stick to my skin and I brought my hand to it. Pressing it there for a second, I held it out in front of me.
In a detached portion of my mind, I realized that it was blood from where Fiona’s stiletto had impaled me.
Della knelt at my side, lifting me up while Jack came in with a first aid kit. “Wren, sweetie, it’s gonna be okay. Just lie still and Jack will patch you up.”
I couldn’t talk but I nodded to let her know I understood. My head lulled back to where I saw Garrett and Justin chanting in an ancient tongue that I didn’t quite understand, while Stephan and Liam teleported in front of them. They advanced on Fiona as she tried to teleport, but Della waved her hands and the invisible glyphs on the walls of the barn glowed fiercely once reactivated them. Fiona found that she was trapped inside a protective circle of magic with several unforgiving Solomonari and a few incensed Cambions. Vertigo played with my senses, making it difficult to focus, but I couldn’t help but smile.
Tristan stepped between Corwyn and Fiona, blocking his brother’s charge. “Corwyn. Stop. It’s done. Let it go.” I saw Tristan’s eyes glance over to me. “Go to Wren and do what you must.”
“Turn on the water!” I heard Jack bellow over his shoulder. “Fill up the tank.”
Fiona howled and hissed like a trapped animal as I watched Cordelia appear from nowhere, cross the pen to the faucet and turn it on. Water poured from it and the rushing sound filled the barn as it rushed into the tank. I watched Garrett and Justin finish their incantation, their rings glowing with a violet light that snaked its way around Fiona’s struggling body.
I heard a loud splash and felt droplets of cool water spray my face and arms. I fought the darkness that wanted to claim me, watching wafts of smoke rise from the water tank.
I hovered weightlessly in the darkness, hearing the sweetest voice in the world echo in my ears.
The familiar tenor filled my heart with its angelic tone before it transformed into a rumbling, feral howl laden with wrath. I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and glanced over my shoulder to find Julian standing next to me. His handsome face was a mask of grim satisfaction as he stared back at me. “Justice has been served.”

“Yay for team ’us.!” I said halfheartedly. “Where did Esteban and Liam go with Fiona?”

“Swimming,” he gave me a wicked smile that told me everything I didn’t want to know.

I shuddered at the thought. I returned my attention to Corwyn, longing to wipe away the tears streaming freely down his face. I was far from ready to leave behind my life and a chance of loving Corwyn. The weight of my eyelids became too heavy for me to keep them open and the coldness seeping into bones lulled me to sleep. I needed to rest for just a little while. Everything would like better once I slept.

I don’t know if seconds or minutes passed, but I was far from asleep. Instead, I felt buoyant and carefree with every worry gone. It wasn’t an epiphany of joy but a sad realization. Even though we won, we lost.

I became a passive observer watching Corwyn through the din of the netherworld as he knelt beside me, begging me to come back to him. If I could have, I would have been back in my body in an instant.

“Don’t leave me, Wren!” Corwyn urgently commanded me; his broken sobs slashed my soul and my heart, his anguish becoming my own.

“Wren, please! Wren, listen to me, Sweetling, stay with me.” he pleaded with my still form.

I wanted to let him know I was fine and that I loved him, but there was no way of communicating that to him.

“Tristan!” Corwyn bellowed, agony in his ragged voice. “Wren, Wren, no, oh please, God, no!” My heart broke into a thousand pieces ten times over with every ragged sob that came from him. He was the other half of my soul and to hear Corwyn weep tore me apart. I reached out to him, to hold him close to me and let him know that I wasn’t in pain, but my arms past through him and the empty air of the night. I did the only thing I knew to do; I sang the song he wrote for us. Corwyn’s head snapped up, desperately looking around, and I knew that he had heard me. I put all of my love into each note and let the silver flecks drift around him like newly fallen snow.

“Wren!” Corwyn rocked me back and forth, holding me close to him. “She has a punctured lung and broken ribs.” I saw Tristan kneel down beside Corwyn, his fingers lightly applying pressure over my ribs. “She also has second and third degree burns over most of her body.”

“Do something,” Corwyn snarled at his brother.

I watched Tristan place his hand above my nose to feel for any breathing and then he pressed his fingers to the pulse points at my neck.

“I’m sorry. She’s gone.”

A roar of fury tore from Corwyn at the news. It became harder to stay near to Corwyn and Tristan. To my left, I saw a golden form hovering, expectant and waiting. Turning to look at it, it became clearer as it drew closer to me. When it was only a few feet from me, I recognized those summer blue eyes and silky blonde hair.

“Matthew?” I gasped, so happy to see him.

“Yeah, Wren. It’s me.” Matt gave me a lopsided grin. He reached out his hand to me and I took it in mine, holding it for the first time in three and a half years. “I’ve missed you, Wren.”

“And I’ve missed you,” tears welled in my eyes. “It’s been so hard with you gone.”

“We don’t have to be apart anymore,” he pointed to the oval light several yards behind him. Three more silhouettes hovered behind him, just out of focus so I couldn’t quite tell who they were. I looked at Matthew, confused. “Who are they?”

The shimmering figures came into clear view once they were behind Matthew. My heart leaped with bittersweet joy when I saw my mother, father and Nana Wren. I raced into their arms and we joined in a group embrace that seemed to never end. “Mom, Dad, Nana, I’ve missed you so much. Are you really here?”
“We’re really here, Wren.” Mom smooth back that white streak that fell in my eye. “You’re a Solomonar.”

“Yeah, very recent development,” I blew the errant streak out of my eye. “If you’re here that really means I’m dead, doesn’t it.”

“Yes, it does.” Dad murmured softly. “It’s time to come home with us.”

“Home as in where?”

Dad looked over his shoulder into the light. “Heaven, Nirvana, Summerland, the light, whatever you want to call it.”

“Am I dreaming?” I asked, looking down at Corwyn and Tristan working frantically over my body.

“Do I have to go?”

“You can choose,” Nana explained. “But, your soul and Julian's were linked at the time of your death. He can't cross over unless you do.”

“Julian,” I gave him a questioningly look, seeing him as a man rather than a demon. His handsome features were a mix of joy and sadness. “What happens to you now?”

“I’ve found justice and I have peace,” he wiped that falling piece of hair out of my eyes. “What about you? You've only found love and purpose in your life? Are you so quick to give that all up?”

I glanced over at my body, “I'm dead, Jules. I don't think I get much of a choice.”

“You do,” he corrected me.

“And you?”

“What will be will be,” he said cryptically.

I looked at my family, each in turn, studying their faces and vowing to burn them into my memory. Mom stood next to me with long, thick black curls and a white streak pinned back from her eyes. Dad's blue eyes and café au lait skin became a portrait that I ingrained into my mind. I turned to Matt, my wonderful golden Matt, and I let him go. Too much time had passed and no longer clung to the love we once shared. I finally healed and was ready to live rather than spend the rest of my life in a grave with the past as its headstone. I studied Julian, his expression a neutral mask with hints of anxiety. “I choose life.”

“Take the last of her emotion into you and then meld with her,” I thought I felt someone clutch my wrist. No one was grasping it but I saw Tristan taking my body's wrist in his hand to feel for a pulse. “Her pulse is faint, but she’s still alive.”

“Tristan, I don’t think I can,” I heard the anguish in his horse voice.

“I can’t help her here. We won’t get to a hospital in time. You have to choose. Either let her go or bring her back. Only you have the ability with the love you share to bring her back to life.”

“Screw the martyrdom!” I yelled at Corywn.

How one confronts death reflects how one lived life. Once I make up my mind, I’m stubborn. For all of my indecision, I made the decision in that second to fight for my life. I had been afraid to live and to die. Now I burned to live and I wasn’t ready to go without a fight.

I looked at Matthew, the man I first loved. I stared into the expectant, hopeful faces of my parents and grandmother and then I gazed at my soul mate below me, torn between keeping me alive or truly killing me by draining dry the last of my life force. Matt’s face went tight with anticipation, then pain flickered in his blue eyes.

“You love him, don’t you?” he asked sadly.

“With all of my heart.” I looked down at Corwyn who held my body so gently in his arms. “A part of me will always love you.”

“I tried to warn you that night in your dream,” he lamented. “But he has you and you want to be there.”

“Yes, I do.” I felt the joy escape me. “I love you all but I’m not ready to leave him. He needs me as much as I need him. I have a life to live and I actually got it back. I’m not ready to give that up.”

“We understand,” Mom nodded, looking at Dad. “When you love someone that much, it’s hard to leave them behind.”

Corwyn’s face became taut as he held me close to him, and then lowered his lips to mine. I saw his eyes blaze with crimson fire as his voice filled the air with absolute command.
“Wren Elizabeth Bryant, I love you and if you leave me, then I’ll follow you into whatever afterlife you want. But, you will come back to me and you will live.” I watched his lips lower to mine and I felt heat brush against my mouth.

My limbs felt heavier, unseen gravity pulling me towards my still body. I looked at Matthew, my parents and Nana until their clear features became golden and blurred. Their voices became distant as I heard them tell me that they loved me. I watched them float toward the corridor of light behind them, enter it and vanish as the light disappeared along with them.

Warm heat seeped into my heavy, cold body as the burning in my chest exploded into agony. I felt the last bit of life ebb from me along with the searing pain in my punctured lung and experienced a hint of something familiar that bordered on euphoria. A familiar coil tightened within me as Corwyn deepened his kiss, willing my still body back to life.

Time froze as I felt Corwyn’s lips kiss my eyes, my cheeks and my brow, all while he murmured words of love and devotion in a reverent whisper. I felt my energy seeping into him because his eyes flamed amber but I felt something flowing into me, an essence, masculine and primal. It was love, passion, desire, and hope mingled into a kiss too powerful for words and a devotion that defied human understanding.

Corwyn held me tightly against the solid wall of his chest, hearing a sob when I found it impossible to respond. In the darkness, his heart broke and his soul went supernova, detonating into blinding array of pure emotion. The scent of smoke grew sharper as the kiss continued and his hands gripped me tightly. Bliss spiraled inside me until I felt feeling return to my heavy limbs and my desire to live collide with Corwyn’s abiding love. His body trembled as he held me, shivers caught us as the tight coil sprang and banished the cumbersome darkness that held me captive.

A current of current surged through my body, causing it to convulse repeatedly. I felt the jolt of electricity shock me and I yelled from the pain of being electrocuted. I felt unseen chains wrap around me as the energy surged from Corwyn into my body and though my soul. Jolting pain ran through me making me remember what it felt like to be alive. I preferred being dead if it meant the pain stopped. Who said death was painless? Yeah, right.

A sudden eddy engulfed me as I felt my soul slam back into my body. I wrapped my arms around Corwyn and returned the kiss with abandon. My tongue danced with his as I told him with my kiss how much I loved him. I heard a relieved sigh come from my soul mate, prompting me to reach upward to wipe away the silver streams streaking down his cheeks.

“Corwyn, I have a heartbeat,” Tristan’s soft voice cut through the tense silence and I felt cool metal of his stethoscope against my skin. Then, he carefully ran his fingers along my ribs. “How do you feel, Wren?”

“Like I’ve been run over by a MAC truck,” I wheezed. “Not so much with the death. It really isn’t my thing.” He pulled back my blouse to examine my wound. “You’re not completely healed but you’re safe. Corwyn, you did it.”

“My Superman,” I muttered as I slumped into Corwyn’s embrace. “I can’t wait to see your electric bill.”

“My Lois Lane, always getting into trouble,” he pressed a kiss to my brow.

“Much with the cheesy,” Exhaustion invaded my body and I wanted just to close my eyes, but was too afraid that the eternal darkness might come back for round two. “Don’t leave me.”

“Never,” Corwyn fervently vowed. He carefully lifted me, cradling me tenderly in his powerful embrace.

“No teleporting, please.” I mumbled as I struggled to keep my eyes open.

“No teleporting, I promise.” Corwyn pressed his forehead to mine. “Whatever you want, you need only ask, Sweetling. Now rest.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice.
I’ll never forget the memory of Della acting as a channeling medium, infusing Julian’s spirit with my body and mind. It isn’t how you see it in the movies when the ethereal ghost superimposes itself over the living person and gently sinks into the body. I fought and clawed to free my mind of the negative black and white images surrounding me, running for a door full of light and color that became more distant with each passing second.

“She’s fighting it,” I heard a far-away voice echo in my ears, distorted to the point that I barely understood the words. I attuned my hearing on it until I recognized that it was Della.

“We’re going about this the wrong way,” A much deeper voice replied. Turning in its direction, I saw him standing next to Della while looking at me, holding hands while I tried running toward the door. The fractured images of the corporeal world flashed in split-second pictures past my mind’s eye, spliced in between frames of the negative world surrounding me. “Don’t force it, Della. Let Wren come to us.”

Julian, handsome and debonair as Cary Grant, held out his hand to me. “Not possession, Wren, but indwelling. Join us. Della is here to show you the way. We will be one mind, one soul, and one body. Trust me.”

I trusted Julian Darcy with life and my soul. Those cobalt eyes held the same serene honesty that I had seen in his son, Corwyn. I believed and I allowed it. Instead of the handsome, raven-haired man standing beside my aunt, a giant with flowing black hair and crimson skin loomed over her. A scream filled the vast emptiness surrounding us when I saw that the creature next to her was the perfect likeness of the fiend that I had seen in my dream not so long ago. It hadn’t been a nightmare, but a premonition, and I half-expected to find myself trying to claw my way out of a freshly-dug grave. Pure fright pumped through my veins and another scream escaped me when I looked at them.

“Wren, it’s still me. I’m still Julian.” He crooned, extending his hand toward me. “You’re seeing my soul, but not my essence. Find the fire to fight for what you believe and for whom you love. Remember Corwyn. You are Solomonar. Protect those who need you most.”

My feet were held in place by invisible lead weights but my will propelled me forward one step at a time until I stood only a short distance from them. Della looked wild and unearthly, her eyes gleaming with a preternatural glow that illuminated them in a violet aura. My hand noticeably trembled when I took hold of hers first and then Julian’s. I watched as the burning aura that surrounded him entwined my arm, creeping toward my shoulders and around my body until my vision swam with red fire. I closed my eyes, praying for it all soon to be done.

I clung to my memories of Corwyn: the first day I had seen him standing on the risers in the auditorium, the look in his eyes when he shielded me from the falling lighting rig, the day he gave me a ride home in the rain, the night in the garden when I dared to kiss him, the first time when we sang together. Those memories mingled with thoughts that weren’t mine, memories of him from another time. I saw him working in the orchard as a young man picking apples with his family, the day he helped his father and mother plant the nine trees that were out of place in the fruit orchard, the day he looked into his father’s eyes with sadness and fury before he saw him dragged into the barn to be killed.

The door to the living world was far below us now, a distant pinpoint of light in the eternal darkness around us. The reversed black and white realm that surrounded us began spiraling in a counterclockwise motion; each rotation faster than the previous until it became a murky blur of gray. Recollections and thoughts not my own mingled with my fear, letting me taste fury on my tongue and feel anger surge through me both inhuman and unnatural. Warm lips touched my clammy brow as strong arms pulled me to the demon’s side. I heard Julian’s voice mingle with
mine while Della’s echoed in the background. “Remember Corwyn. Find the fire within you, Wren Bryant.”
The spiraling vortex abruptly stopped and the roaring in my ears ceased. I felt the cool hardwood floor of the Magic Room steady and heard beneath me. Della knelt over me, her dark eyes wide with frantic worry. “Are you all right?”
I slowly stood up and had the eerie feeling that I wasn’t alone. I felt as though Julian were on my mind, but not invading it, as if I were thinking of an old friend that I hadn’t seen in a long time. My body felt strong and power pulsed through me. Della’s voice still rang with a distant echo that let me know that I wasn’t quite back in the corporeal world, but I was anchored enough to know that I wasn’t trapped between dimensions.
I remembered seeing Corwyn once produce flame between his fingers by simply willing it and a slow smile spread across my lips. I held up my fingers in front of me as if I were going to snap them, a surge of heat pulsed beneath the skin of my fingertips. Imagining my fingers being flint and steel, I snapped them. A single spark danced in the air, giving me the inspiration to give it another try. I concentrated on the feel of fire, warm to the touch, and on it’s appearance, red and flickering. I snapped my fingers again; an inch tall flame danced on the tip of my thumb. It didn’t burn as I thought it would; it tickled.
“Oh, yeah, Baby!” I drawled, my voice sounded normal to my ears. “We’re fine.”
“We?” Della asked slowly.
“Much with the happy,” I grinned, ecstatic at how easy it was to shape the fire to my will. “Julian is alive and in living color inside my head.”
We don’t have time for parlor tricks, A stern voice censured me within my thoughts. This is not the time for flaunting your newfangled talents, Wren.
“Sorry,” I grimaced aloud, putting out the small flame.
“Why are you apologizing?” Della asked, shaking her head in confusion.
“Julian thinks I’m showing off.”
I knew you’re showing off.
I knew what I wanted to try next and I heard a severe disapproval bellow inside my mind.
“Wren, no!”
I closed my hand, smothering the little fireball I held. Grabbing Della’s hand, I gave her a quick wink.
“Trust me?”
“Yes,” She drawled uncertainly. “Wren, what are you doing?”
“We are going for a ride. Time to fly.” I gave her a mischievous grin as I imagined blinding light surrounding us, our bodies growing lighter until they were weightless. I focused all of my concentration upon the horse stable on the first floor at the north end of the barn. Instinct told me that was safest because I didn’t want to teleport where someone was standing. Instead of numbness, a tingling sensation coursed through my body followed by a flash a light. I felt a warmth flow through me as Della’s cry of surprise was cut off mid-squeal and then nothing. The next thing I knew, we stood in the middle of the stable and the fresh scent of manure surrounded us.
Della looked down and I stifled a giggle when I realized that she was standing in the middle of a fresh pile of horse dung. She scowled at me as she jerked her hand out of mine. “You have horrible aim, you know that?”
“Sorry,” I answered contritely, but elated that I successfully completed teleportation without my stomach lurching into my mouth.
DON’T EVER DO THAT AGAIN, YOU FOOLISH GIRL! YOU COULD HAVE TELEPORTED INTO A WALL OR ANOTHER PERSON AND KILLED YOURSELF AND YOUR AUNT.
Immediately sharp pain shot through my temples, effectively displaying Julian’s displeasure. I brought my hand to my forehead, stumbling against the stable door. “Okay, I get it. No more beaming across the universe.”
My powers in your hands are meant to be tools and not toys. You’re a woman at war, not a child at play.
“I heard that,” Della stared at me wide-eyed. “Julian isn’t happy with you.”

“You don’t want to know. Trust me.”

Tell him. Julian demanded and sent me a minor throb to compel me.

“Can I speak to you privately for a moment?” I asked softly, motioning him into the stable. “Come here.”

Della looked down at her hiking boots in disgust. “Ugh. I need to clean these off. I’m going to give you guys a moment.”

“Thank you,” I nodded gratefully as she closed the stable door. I scratched my head, trying to tell my boyfriend about the unexpected turn of events.

“Tell him,” Julian demanded and sent me a minor throb to compel me.

“Thank you.” I nodded gratefully as she closed the stable door. I scratched my head, trying to tell my boyfriend about the unexpected turn of events.

“Well?” He asked, frantic with worry.


“Both of you are in the same body?” Corwyn's perfect, strong jaw fell slack.

“Corwyn, possession of another’s mind is forbidden in the Accords.” Corwyn grabbed me by my upper arms and shook me. “What were you thinking?”

“Possession might be, but I’m a willing participant. He’s indwelling at my invitation. I’m not going Exorcist or Amityville Horror on you, Corwyn. He possesses so much power that I didn’t even think possible. I can teleport because I wanted it. I can form fireballs in my hands just by thinking about it. I feel stronger than Hercules right now and it’s fantastic. Is this what it’s like for you?”

“This is your plan to save your family?” His voice was quiet and grim to my ears. “By giving up your will? Do you want to be a demon?”

“Whatever it takes, Corwyn.” I replied coolly, stung by his condemnation.

Tell me what you want me to say, Julian. I answered in my thoughts.

Please, let me speak to him directly.

How? Did my being in control have an on/off switch?

Let me have control. Look at me.

I closed my eyes and I saw Julian standing beside me: healthy, alive and full of color. He stood behind me and to my right, his hands gently on my shoulders. Understanding, I placed his hand in mind, letting him step forward. I peeked around his arm to watch what happened next.

The room rippled around us, waves of energy filled the small stable. Ribbons of fire entwined with violet strands and now I was the one watching, slightly weightless and definitely not in control. It felt as though someone were lifting my arm while it hung limply and I watched my hand fall softly to Corwyn’s shoulder. Then, I realized I stood about three feet away from him and I saw Julian’s cobalt eyes stare into the jade green eyes of his son.

“Father, is it really you?” Corwyn gasped in awe.

“Yes,” I heard Julian’s deep voice catch and then they quickly embraced. “It has been too long, Son. Listen to me because we don’t have much time. I am proud of you and the man you’ve become. I’m sorry that I couldn’t be there to be the father you needed when times were at their worst. Please tell the others that I miss them and that I love them beyond all else.”

“I will,” Corwyn nodded. “How could you do this to her?”

“I made the suggestion and she accepted, “ Julian said quietly. “She loves our family as her own, and she is willing to fight for what she loves. She knows the risks.”

“This isn’t what I wanted for her,” Corwyn started, but his father stopped him.

“Wren and I don’t have much time before the indwelling fades. Attune your mind to ours and wait for our signal. Call the family and tell them to come but don’t tell Wren’s family of our agreement. They wouldn’t understand.”
“I agree.”
“She has the weakest defenses and is the one person here whom I can inhabit without immediate
resistance or repercussion. I assure you, Corwyn, that she is a willing participant to this indwelling
and I mean her no harm.” He motioned to the others beyond the door. “Now, go. We have work to
do. Tell the Bryants to lower the glyphs and inform them that your brothers and sisters are en
route.”
“I’ll do it now.”
Dizziness caught me off-guard as the stable spun around me. I staggered a few feet and I clutched
my stomach, leaving the remains of my breakfast on the hay-covered floor.
I stumbled out of the stable and several pairs of eyes stared at me.
“Rascal, what are you doing down here? I thought you were doing research.” Jack peered
questioningly at me from beneath his cowboy hat.
“There's been a change of plans,” I explained.
“Corwyn wants us to lower the glyphs,” he muttered. “Not the smartest idea.”
“Perfectly smart idea,” I argued. “Let her come. Corwyn’s family is on their way and they’re going
to provide back up. I’m going upstairs to get things ready.”
No teleporting. Julian commanded me.
No teleporting. I don’t think my stomach could take it a second time. I reassured him as my
stomach started churning from the delayed side-effects of my wham-bam traipsing across the
universe.
Once I returned to the magic room, I forced my mind to focus on what to do next regarding Fiona.
No options were left except the one: to confront her one-on-one to provide time for the Darcys and
the Bryants the best chance of victory. I hoped that with Julian’s powers combined with mine that
we possessed enough firepower to take her down without my death being the end result. If she did
kill me, I hoped that my death would sate her desire for revenge against my family. There was no
room for negotiation, no bargains to be made with Fiona. I had enough firepower, thanks to Julian,
to hold her off long enough for both of our families to destroy her.
I forced the sadness filling me back into that small space of my mind where it couldn’t touch me,
focusing my thoughts on my primary objective: be the bait that catches the fish.
Julian’s thoughts melded with my True Sight into a narrow beam of consciousness, scanning the
countryside for any sign of her. I knew that Esteban would be telepathically scouting the area for
me once Corwyn informed him of the change in plans. Given Stephan’s extensive mind-reading
ability, he’d figure out my plan and inform the others immediately.
I refused to accept that I wouldn’t see Corwyn again. I clung to the belief that Julian and I would
provide Fiona a fine distraction until the cavalry arrived. Julian’s mind echoed the heartache I felt
as we forced the pain away and forged ahead with the plan. Regret clung to my heart, like thorns to
tender flesh, that I couldn’t tell everyone that I loved them.
I grabbed a pen and a blank sheet of paper and sat at the table, staring at the empty white page.
Tell him what is in your heart, Wren. Don’t fail as I failed to do. Let him know the love you hold
for him. Julian’s gentle voice urged me.
Corwyn, I started the letter. As my tears flowed so did the words from my heart to pen to page.
I love you and I apologize for dragging you into this mess. I can’t let Fiona hurt either of our
families when I have the ability to stop her. Julian isn’t an idiot and he has provided me with the
best opportunity of stopping Fiona dead in her tracks...
Don’t blame him, it was as much my idea as it was his and I agreed to it. Tell Penelope thank you
for everything and please tell Esteban I learned his lessons well.
If Fiona wins, just let it go. You’ll do more here by staying with our families and everyone working
together as a team to take her down. I don’t want anyone hurt because of one psychotic succubus
with a hard-on for revenge. You once said that you loved me more than your own life. If you do,
prove it now. Live. Live for me because I ask it of you. Remember that I love you.
Yours always,
Wren.
I folded the note and scribbled his name on the front, slipping it onto the card table where I knew he’d easily spot it. He and Jack were talking as I willed my body to be invisible to them and slipping past them unnoticed. I made it out of the barn without difficulty and I saw the glyphs were down as requested.

I needed to get Fiona’s attention. Closing my eyes, I let my mind’s eye take over. I felt a presence a few miles north of me, enraged and sinister. It was Julian who pinpointed her location with the strange link that he shared with the rest of his family.

Rather than attempting teleportation, I ran. The incubus’s strength flowed through my limbs and I ran faster than the approaching storm. The skies darkened overhead, thunder crashing in the distance that signaled her impending arrival.

I considered what might have been had Fiona not entered my life as she had. Corwyn and I would have dated, and then eventually married. I knew that. Yes, a brouhaha would have erupted between the Solomonari, the Sabin and the Phratry but we would have worked through it. We would have loved fiercely and spent the rest of our lives making each day better than the last.

Might have. Could have. Would have. Not now.

I stood in the middle of a field belonging to one of Jack’s neighbors; the young corn plants grew only a few inches above the ground. I don’t know if I had Fiona’s attention but I knew one surefire way of getting it. I focused my mind on the swirling storm clouds above me, feeling the electricity coursing through them. Fiona controlled electricity and rode the lightning while I possessed the ability to call it to me.

Three thousand years of ingrained instinct guided my actions as I opened my mouth and sang to the skies. I beckoned nature’s energies to coalesce to my will, calling the lightning to me and daring the psycho bitch to come with it. A streak of pure white electricity shot from the sky, burning into the ground only a few yards in front of me.

“Hello, Wren.” A husky feminine voice greeted me. “I have to admit, calling out to me is very brave. You’re as foolhardy as the rest of your family.”


“Yes, I did,” I lied.

I watched Fiona flow like liquid latex over skin as she hovered a few inches above the ground as she moved toward me. How could she look that good in black leather? Life just wasn’t fair.

“Do you really think that you can save your pathetic family by meeting me out here?” She purred.

“Once I’m done with you, your Uncle Garrett-”

“That’s Great-Uncle Garrett,” I rudely interrupted her. “Get it right, at least.”

“I really don’t like your cheeky attitude, Solomonar. I’m going to enjoy every luscious moment of watching you burn,” She hissed.

“Didn’t you know? I’m fire-resistant!” I said with more bravado than I felt. Stall her. Don’t provoke her unnecessarily. Julian’s calm voice warned me.

“You really believe that you’re invincible, don’t you?” Her crimson eyes flared with amazement.

“You truly think that you can beat me? I’ll grant you this much, I admire your bravery, misplaced as it is. I must admit, I find it refreshing.”

“Then you and I have something in common, Fiona.” I agreed, hearing Julian’s thoughts urging me to appeal one last time to any sense of family she had remaining within her. “I know you love your family as well. Julian wouldn’t want you to do this. He wanted it to end ninety years ago.”

“My brother was a martyr and a fool.”

So much for that bright idea, Jules. Not so much with the persuasiveness. Hey, it was worth a shot.

“I just want to know one thing,” I pressed my luck. “I know you didn’t kill Lydia. Was it Tyr?”

“Oh, yes!” Fiona’s laughter rang like wind chimes, melodic and cadent. “Tyr wanted to have a little fun with Lydia first before he drained her. However, he didn’t know that she was invulnerable to his particular brand of charm. He was stronger, of course, and had his way with her. She fought like a hellcat, he said, and he loved every minute of it. When he was done with her after she lay broken and bleeding in her bed, he set it afire and watched her burn.”
“Dear God,” I whispered Julian’s question that haunted my thoughts. The mental imagery that invaded my mind made bile rise in my throat. His anger and mine united as it coalesced into unyielding wrath with Fiona’s admission.

“That what she said toward the end according to Tyr. We all know that God isn’t ever in Nebraska except during football season...” Fiona slowly walked toward me. “Too bad for her.”

“Doesn’t that sicken you?” I asked as I gawked at her.

“No, I was jealous.” Fiona replied in a sing-song voice.

“Of Lydia?” I couldn’t believe that Fiona desired to be someone’s victim.

“No, of course not. I was jealous of Tyr because I didn’t get to watch.” She growled.

“You are one sick, twisted bitch!” I bellowed.

“Why, thank you,” she gave me an artificial smile that turned my stomach. “I like to think so. When I’m done here, I plan on having some fun with your family and then I’ll move on to your precious lover, Corwyn. That wretched family of his won’t even know what happened because it will all look like a natural disaster. Then, I’ll kill them one by one.”

“Johann will know,” I challenged to buy time. “He is Julian’s twin and he’ll want justice.”

“Johann is going to take the blame,” Fiona scoffed. “He just doesn’t know it yet.”

Fiona held up her hand, a blazing orb formed in her palm. She drew her arm back as though she was ready to throw a curveball across home plate. “Enough chit-chat, Wren. Let’s get started.”

The fireball flew from her hand, straight and true, across the cornfield straight toward me. Her perfectly painted lips turned into a smirk as she watched the sphere burn a path in my direction. Julian forced his presence in front of me and I watched, astonished, as my hand came up and caught the fiery globe and closed around it, smothering it.

“How can you do that? You can’t control fire!” She screeched.

“I can,” Julian’s voice rang loud across the field as it came from my body.

“No!” She hissed in amazement when she heard the deep resonating baritone replace my alto voice. I watched only a few feet away as his dynamic form towered over hers.

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“No!” She hissed in amazement when she heard the deep resonating baritone replace my alto voice. I watched only a few feet away as his dynamic form towered over hers. “Impossible. You’re dead!”

She stared at him/me, her eyes burning crimson with shock as her body began to tremble with rage. A shrill screech cut through the air when she charged faster than I could track with my human eyes, her body tacking mine into the turned earth of the field. Stunned by the force of the blow, I felt a sharp pain in my ribs and knew some were broken from the impact. We rolled around in the soil, hissing and cursing like two women in a bar fight, with fists flying and hair pulling. I felt her hands wrap around my throat, tightening in a vice grip that cut off the air from my lungs. All went black and my last thought was, “I’m dead.”

I awoke to find Fiona standing over me, placing one heel on my chest and stomping down. The sharp stiletto of her boot pierced through my skin, past my ribcage, and into my lung. Screaming in pain, I also thought, she should have killed me immediately when she had the chance. A burning pain filled my chest and I tried to scream, but nothing came out of me except a gurgle and a hiss of escaping air. I fought to breathe and instantly knew that Fiona had punctured my lung. I thought that I had more firepower, more strength to fight her, but I had overestimated Julian’s power and my own. A dark thought entered my head as I envisioned my gravestone’s epitaph, ‘She was both crazy and stupid.’ I couldn’t think because the pain clouded my mind as I reached for her ankle, praying that my ring’s protection was enough to stall her for just another moment or two.

I grinned with satisfaction as the violet glow of my ring shot up her leather-clad calf, forming a chain that wrapped around her body and retrained her arms. I heard Fiona’s shriek of fury as my ring bound her to me, weakening her body so that she fell to the ground beside me. I willed the last of my life force into that ring and I felt Julian focus his will into that narrow band of strength, solidifying the hold the ring had on Fiona.

I suddenly felt cold and my focus snapped when I became too weak to control the ring’s power. A triumphant snarl came from Fiona’s ruby lips as she broke free of my hold, her face hovered only inches above mine. Searing pain scalded my skin as she grabbed my arm; flames burnt through my jacket and seared my skin. With my last bit of strength, I struggled to escape her grasp but it was
too late.

“It’s a pity that Garrett and you’re family can’t be here to take part in the festivities,” Fiona gloated as the flames burned away my clothing and licked at my skin. I watched her dark eyes gleam with amusement as the flames consumed me.

I screamed as the agony engulfed my entire body. Anything was better than this hell I felt melting away the flesh from my bones. Even Corwyn’s face vanished from my mind as the searing pain overwhelmed every inch of my body. The blackness started to surround me and I knew it brought release from agony. I felt cool water being poured over me, extinguishing the fire that burned my skin. I also felt Julian’s presence leave me at that moment and I knew that I was alone.

Corwyn launched his lithe body in mid-air towards Fiona and they rolled head over heels in the growth of the spring corn. I watched Corwyn’s skin gleam copper and Fiona’s blood red nails extend into long talons. It was Cambion against Succubus, a duel to the death that left no room for mercy or compassion.

She sat atop Corwyn not far from me, straddling him as she raked her pointed claws deeply across his cheek. I saw five jagged wounds appear across his cheek. He glared at her with wild eyes full of fury and hatred and I found it hard to believe him capable of such rage.

“Fool,” she shook her head in disapproval. “You don’t stand a chance against me and you know it. Why fight for the life of one frail Solomonar? She isn’t worth it.”

“She is worth everything to me,” he growled at Fiona threw clenched teeth as he hurled her across the field. Scrambling to his feet, he scooped me into his arms and looked down at me with pained eyes. “Forgive me, Sweetling.”

I felt a familiar numbness tingle through my limbs but it abruptly stopped when Fiona teleported behind Corwyn, propelling us both into a nearby portion of irrigation pipe watering the cornfield. The blinding flash of light followed and we landed squarely in the middle of the barn, just to the north of the water tank. I flew out of Corwyn’s arms and against some of the metal rails of the holding pen that fenced off the north portion of the barn from the rest of the cattle lot. Like raging bulls, Fiona and Corwyn charged one another with teeth bared and talons extended, striking each other with a furious exchange of blocks and blows fast than my eyes could follow.

The pain in my chest worsened and I found it harder to catch my breath. I slumped against the wooden beam against me, falling into a heap on the ground. Sticky, wet warmth made my shirt stick to my skin and I brought my hand to it. Pressing it there for a second, I held it out in front of me.

In a detached portion of my mind, I realized that it was blood from where Fiona’s stiletto had impaled me.

Della knelt at my side, lifting me up while Jack came in with a first aid kit. “Wren, sweetie, it’s gonna be okay. Just lie still and Jack will patch you up.”

I couldn’t talk but I nodded to let her know I understood. My head lulled back to where I saw Garrett and Justin chanting in an ancient tongue that I didn’t quite understand, while Stephan and Liam teleported in front of them. They advanced on Fiona as she tried to teleport, but Della waved her hands and the invisible glyphs on the walls of the barn glowed fiercely once reactivated them. Fiona found that she was trapped inside a protective circle of magic with several unforgiving Solomonari and a few incensed Cambions. Vertigo played with my senses, making it difficult to focus, but I couldn’t help but smile.

Tristan stepped between Corwyn and Fiona, blocking his brother’s charge. “Corwyn. Stop. It’s done. Let it go.” I saw Tristan’s eyes glance over to me. “Go to Wren and do what you must.”

“Turn on the water!” I heard Jack bellow over his shoulder. “Fill up the tank.”

Fiona howled and hissed like a trapped animal as I watched Cordelia appear from nowhere, cross the pen to the faucet and turn it on. Water poured from it and the rushing sound filled the barn as it rushed into the tank. I watched Garrett and Justin finish their incantation, their rings glowing with a violet light that snaked its way around Fiona’s struggling body.

I heard a loud splash and felt droplets of cool water spray my face and arms. I fought the darkness that wanted to claim me, watching wafts of smoke rise from the water tank. I hovered weightlessly in the darkness, hearing the sweetest voice in the world echo in my ears.
The familiar tenor filled my heart with its angelic tone before it transformed into a rumbling, feral howl laden with wrath. I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and glanced over my shoulder to find Julian standing next to me. His handsome face was a mask of grim satisfaction as he stared back at me. “Justice has been served.”

“Yay for team ‘us.’” I said halfheartedly. “Where did Esteban and Liam go with Fiona?”

“Swimming,” he gave me a wicked smile that told me everything I didn’t want to know.

“Ooh,” I shuddered at the thought. I returned my attention to Corwyn, longing to wipe away the tears streaming freely down his face. I was far from ready to leave behind my life and a chance of loving Corwyn. The weight of my eyelids became too heavy for me to keep them open and the coldness seeping into bones lulled me to sleep. I needed to rest for just a little while. Everything would like better once I slept.

I don’t know if seconds or minutes passed, but I was far from asleep. Instead, I felt buoyant and carefree with every worry gone. It wasn’t an epiphany of joy but a sad realization. Even though we won, we lost.

I became a passive observer watching Corwyn through the din of the netherworld as he knelt beside me, begging me to come back to him. If I could have, I would have been back in my body in an instant.

“Don’t leave me, Wren!” Corwyn urgently commanded me; his broken sobs slashed my soul and my heart, his anguish becoming my own.

“Wren, please! Wren, listen to me, Sweetling, stay with me.” he pleaded with my still form.

I wanted to let him know I was fine and that I loved him, but there was no way of communicating that to him.

“Tristan!” Corwyn bellowed, agony in his ragged voice. “Wren, Wren, no, oh please, God, no!” My heart broke into a thousand pieces ten times over with every ragged sob that came from him.

He was the other half of my soul and to hear Corwyn weep tore me apart. I reached out to him, to hold him close to me and let him know that I wasn’t in pain, but my arms past through him and the empty air of the night. I did the only thing I knew to do; I sang the song he wrote for us. Corwyn’s head snapped up, desperately looking around, and I knew that he had heard me. I put all of my love into each note and let the silver flecks drift around him like newly fallen snow.

“Wren!” Corwyn rocked me back and forth, holding me close to him.

“She has a punctured lung and broken ribs,” I saw Tristan kneel down beside Corwyn, his fingers lightly applying pressure over my ribs. “She also has second and third degree burns over most of her body.”

“Do something,” Corwyn snarled at his brother.

I watched Tristan place his hand above my nose to feel for any breathing and then he pressed his fingers to the pulse points at my neck.

“I’m sorry. She’s gone.”

A roar of fury tore from Corwyn at the news.

It became harder to stay near to Corwyn and Tristan. To my left, I saw a golden form hovering, expectant and waiting. Turning to look at it, it became clearer as it drew closer to me. When it was only a few feet from me, I recognized those summer blue eyes and silky blonde hair.

“Matthew?” I gasped, so happy to see him.

“Yeah, Wren. It’s me.” Matt gave me a lopsided grin. He reached out his hand to me and I took it in mine, holding it for the first time in three and a half years. “I’ve missed you, Wren.”

“And I’ve missed you,” tears welled in my eyes. “It’s been so hard with you gone.”

“We don’t have to be apart anymore,” he pointed to the oval light several yards behind him. Three more silhouettes hovered behind him, just out of focus so I couldn’t quite tell who they were. I looked at Matthew, confused. “Who are they?”

The shimmering figures came into clear view once they were behind Matthew. My heart leaped with bittersweet joy when I saw my mother, father and Nana Wren. I raced into their arms and we joined in a group embrace that seemed to never end. “Mom, Dad, Nana, I’ve missed you so much. Are you really here?”
“We’re really here, Wren.” Mom smooth back that white streak that fell in my eye. “You’re a Solomonar.”

“Yeah, very recent development,” I blew the errant streak out of my eye. “If you’re here that really means I’m dead, doesn’t it.”

“Yes, it does.” Dad murmured softly. “It’s time to come home with us.”

“Home as in where?”

Dad looked over his shoulder into the light. “Heaven, Nirvana, Summerland, the light, whatever you want to call it.”

“Am I dreaming?” I asked, looking down at Corwyn and Tristan working frantically over my body.

“Do I have to go?”

“You can choose,” Nana explained. “But, your soul and Julian’s were linked at the time of your death. He can’t cross over unless you do.”

“Julian,” I gave him a questioningly look, seeing him as a man rather than a demon. His handsome features were a mix of joy and sadness. “What happens to you now?”

“I’ve found justice and I have peace,” he wiped that falling piece of hair out of my eyes. “What about you? You've only found love and purpose in your life? Are you so quick to give that all up?”

I glanced over at my body, “I'm dead, Jules. I don't think I get much of a choice.”

“You do,” he corrected me.

“And you?”

“What will be will be,” he said cryptically.

I looked at my family, each in turn, studying their faces and vowing to burn them into my memory. Mom stood next to me with long, thick black curls and a white streak pinned back from her eyes. Dad's blue eyes and café au lait skin became a portrait that I ingrained into my mind. I turned to Matt, my wonderful golden Matt, and I let him go. Too much time had passed and no longer clung to the love we once shared. I finally healed and was ready to live rather than spend the rest of my life in a grave with the past as its headstone. I studied Julian, his expression a neutral mask with hints of anxiety. “I choose life.”

“Take the last of her emotion into you and then meld with her,” I thought I felt someone clutch my wrist. No one was grasping it but I saw Tristan taking my body's wrist in his hand to feel for a pulse. “Her pulse is faint, but she’s still alive.”

“Tristan, I don’t think I can,” I heard the anguish in his horse voice.

“I can’t help her here. We won’t get to a hospital in time. You have to choose. Either let her go or bring her back. Only you have the ability with the love you share to bring her back to life.”

“Screw the martyrdom!” I yelled at Corwyn.

“Take me to my family,Corwyn.”

How one confronts death reflects how one lived life. Once I make up my mind, I’m stubborn. For all of my indecision, I made the decision in that second to fight for my life. I had been afraid to live and to die. Now I burned to live and I wasn’t ready to go without a fight.

I looked at Matthew, the man I first loved. I stared into the expectant, hopeful faces of my parents and grandmother and then I gazed at my soul mate below me, torn between keeping me alive or truly killing me by draining dry the last of my life force. Matt’s face went tight with anticipation, then pain flickered in his blue eyes.

“You love him, don’t you?” he asked sadly.

“With all of my heart.” I looked down at Corwyn who held my body so gently in his arms. “A part of me will always love you.”

“I tried to warn you that night in your dream,” he lamented. “But he has you and you want to be there.”

“Yes, I do.” I felt the joy escape me. “I love you all but I’m not ready to leave him. He needs me as much as I need him. I have a life to live and I actually got it back. I’m not ready to give that up.”

“We understand,” Mom nodded, looking at Dad. “When you love someone that much, it’s hard to leave them behind.”

Corwyn’s face became taut as he held me close to him, and then lowered his lips to mine. I saw his eyes blaze with crimson fire as his voice filled the air with absolute command.
“Wren Elizabeth Bryant, I love you and if you leave me, then I’ll follow you into whatever afterlife you want. But, you will come back to me and you will live.” I watched his lips lower to mine and I felt heat brush against my mouth.

My limbs felt heavier, unseen gravity pulling me towards my still body. I looked at Matthew, my parents and Nana until their clear features became golden and blurred. Their voices became distant as I heard them tell me that they loved me. I watched them float toward the corridor of light behind them, enter it and vanish as the light disappeared along with them.

Warm heat seeped into my heavy, cold body as the burning in my chest exploded into agony. I felt the last bit of life ebb from me along with the searing pain in my punctured lung and experienced a hint of something familiar that bordered on euphoria. A familiar coil tightened within me as Corwyn deepened his kiss, willing my still body back to life.

Time froze as I felt Corwyn’s lips kiss my eyes, my cheeks and my brow, all while he murmured words of love and devotion in a reverent whisper. I felt my energy seeping into him because his eyes flamed amber but I felt something flowing into me, an essence, masculine and primal, It was love, passion, desire, and hope mingled into a kiss too powerful for words and a devotion that defied human understanding.

Corwyn held me tightly against the solid wall of his chest, hearing a sob when I found it impossible to respond. In the darkness, his heart broke and his soul went supernova, detonating into blinding array of pure emotion. The scent of smoke grew sharper as the kiss continued and his hands gripped me tightly. Bliss spiraled inside me until I felt feeling return to my heavy limbs and my desire to live collide with Corwyn’s abiding love. His body trembled as he held me, shivers caught us as the tight coil sprang and banished the cumbersome darkness that held me captive. A current of current surged through my body, causing it to convulse repeatedly. I felt the jolt of electricity shock me and I yelled from the pain of being electrocuted. I felt unseen chains wrap around me as the energy surged from Corwyn into my body and though my soul. Jolting pain ran through me making me remember what it felt like to be alive. I preferred being dead if it meant the pain stopped. Who said death was painless? Yeah, right.

A sudden eddy engulfed me as I felt my soul slam back into my body. I wrapped my arms around Corwyn and returned the kiss with abandon. My tongue danced with his as I told him with my kiss how much I loved him. I heard a relieved sigh come from my soul mate, prompting me to reach upward to wipe away the silver streams streaking down his cheeks.

“Corwyn, I have a heartbeat,” Tristan’s soft voice cut through the tense silence and I felt cool metal of his stethoscope against my skin. Then, he carefully ran his fingers along my ribs. “How do you feel, Wren?”

“Like I’ve been run over by a MAC truck,” I wheezed. “Not so much with the death. It really isn’t my thing.”

He pulled back my blouse to examine my wound. “You’re not completely healed but you’re safe. Corwyn, you did it.”

“My Superman,” I muttered as I slumped into Corwyn’s embrace. “I can’t wait to see your electric bill.”

“My Lois Lane, always getting into trouble,” he pressed a kiss to my brow.

“Much with the cheesey,” Exhaustion invaded me and I wanted just to close my eyes, but was too afraid that the eternal darkness might come back for round two. “Don’t leave me.”

“Never,” Corwyn fervently vowed. He carefully lifted me, cradling me tenderly in his powerful embrace.

“No teleporting, please.” I mumbled as I struggled to keep my eyes open.

“No teleporting, I promise.” Corwyn pressed his forehead to mine. “Whatever you want, you need only ask, Sweetling. Now rest.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice.
Through my open bedroom window, I heard the roar of a car’s engine coming up the driveway. Grabbing my purse, I cautiously swung the strap on my shoulder, careful not to overuse my sore muscles in my ribcage and chest. It had been three months since Fiona’s apocalypse and I still hadn’t fully recovered from my injuries. Tristan had made a few house calls, keeping me on extended medical leave until my injuries completely healed. Thank the Powers-That-Be for Internet, otherwise, Penelope and I wouldn’t have been able to get any office work done.

If you're still wondering, fair reader, let me tell you that I was deader than a doornail for almost seven minutes. When I came back, I was a changed woman. The healers in my both families healed most of the physical wounds and burns, but I had lost used in a great deal of mobility and that required physical therapy. Corwyn, as an empath, possessed the singular gift in his family to heal others of injury. Unfortunately for me, his power lacked enough mojo to fully recuperate me.

Great-Uncle Garrett, being a healer as well as a curmudgeonly metamorph, conjured a cure-all complete with glowing hands and stoic mysticism to heal my punctured lung but couldn’t completely heal the burns Fiona’s fireballs had caused. For the most part, I ambled around well, but still needed a cane because I tired more easily than before the battle. Tristan predicted that after another two months of therapy that I would need it. It had already been three months too long. I knew that that meant some extensive time spent at the Archangelus foundation under Tristan’s watchful eye as he oversaw my therapy.

As I said, I came back a changed woman. I knew that the naive, innocent woman I once had been had long since left the building, leaving a darker cynic in her place. I found my emotions more primal and powers stronger. I innately knew something within me remained permanently altered and I feared whatever it might be. I didn’t want to burden Corwyn with any of my suspicions, so I turned to Della for counseling and advice.

Della performed the equivalent of a psychic cat scan on me, including incantations, dead folks, and some charged crystals. She informed me that possession and indwelling frequently carried similar repercussions as near-death experiences. After Julian Darcy left my body and moved on, passed over, whatever you want to call going to a better place; he had left me with lasting consequences. The gestalt had grafted two minds into one and melded to personalities together. I wasn’t sweet, efficient Wren anymore, I was someone…no, something, else. When I regained came back to my body, I came back tainted. Fire? That was a new and permanent addition to my arsenal. Teleportation? I risked using that only if I wanted to redecorate some place with splattered body parts because I had horrible navigational skills. I retained some of his knowledge. Now, I found I possessed better control over my ability to call lightning and that rudimentary knowledge enabled me to boost some of the talents I currently possessed.

I also had the nagging sense that I wasn’t alone. Julian didn’t seem that far away from me. I suspected that maybe he hadn’t gone into the fire or the light or wherever demons go, at least not completely. It was as if I had my personal guardian eudemon watching over me. For me, that wasn’t creepy as much as it was comforting. I knew Julian had been a bad-ass demon when he was alive but with a kind heart and the soul of a man.

Della advised me not to share this knowledge with the rest of the family because they wouldn’t understand the gestalt. I was still me, but I was “upgraded” for lack of a better term. She and Tristan consulted every tome and every bit of knowledge they shared between them, finally concluded that I was supernaturally mutated at the molecular level. I found that I better understood my boyfriend’s family, knowing things about them that had previously been unrevealed, used that knowledge to deal with Zoe on occasion.

Uncle Garrett remained absolutely certain that Corwyn would lead to my downfall. He adamantly
refused to have anything to do with him after the Fiona fiasco. Hypocrite.

Only Jack maintained any semblance of reason and I was grateful for it. He treated Corwyn with courtesy and respect whenever he came to the farmhouse. Selena Rohan quit playing poker on Wednesday nights with Jack once she learned Corwyn was a regular staple at the Bryant house. It amused me when Cordelia moved in temporarily, with Jack’s blessing, to nurse me back to health. Uncle Garrett never spoke to her and always left the room the instant she entered it. If he didn’t like how Jack ran his household, he should have damn well left.

One morning, Corwyn didn’t drive the midnight blue Aston Martin. Instead, it was a sporty, hunter green convertible with tan leather interior. I peered out my window, watching him drive up to the front porch and leap out of the car in a single bound. That’s my Superman. Joy bubbled within me as my other half of my soul made his way up the front porch. I had never been incomplete before I met him, but now I felt whole whenever Corwyn was near.

I didn’t wait for him to knock on the front door. I threw it open and wrapped my arms around him in a tight hug. His jade eyes widened in surprise at my enthusiastic greeting, but he wrapped his arms around me. Garrett sat on the front porch, whittling some animal carving and muttered his disapproval of my mixing with ‘a damned hornhead.’ I looked around Corwyn’s shoulder, shouting to my uncle to get his cranium out of a particular orifice and go get some quality alone time with his piece of wood.

“Sweetling, you’re feeling feisty this morning,” he purred in my ear as he placed two butterfly kisses on the pulse points of my neck before looking at me with mirth-filled eyes. He glanced over his shoulder toward the front porch where Uncle Garrett sat in the porch swing. “Don’t curse, Wren, especially at an elder. It isn’t respectful.”

“Then said elder shouldn’t be a prejudiced bigot,” I spat defiantly, trying to catch my breath as Corwyn captured my lips with his and stole away my next sputtering tirade against Uncle Garrett. Breathless from the taste of cinnamon on my tongue and the tingling of Corwyn’s kiss on my lips, I remembered how to speak. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Not a problem,” he grinned.

“Where’s the Aston?” I asked.

“I parked it for the season and brought this one out of the garage.” Corwyn patted the dashboard. “I thought you might enjoy some fresh air.”

I stared at the silver hood ornament of a jungle cat caught in mid-stride. “Jaguar?”

“You know your cars.”

“Nice,” I gave him an approving nod.

Taking me by the hand, he carefully led me down the wooden stairs of the front porch. He helped me into his car, being very careful of my bandaged ribs as he put his hand around my waist. I took each step carefully, taking great pains not to move too quickly or I knew I’d get a sharp jolt of pain for my exuberance. For the most part, my burns were healing well, but the soreness in my chest occasionally reminded me of my mortality. A pained looked crossed his features when he saw me grimace in pain.

“Are you all right?” Corwyn asked quickly, his gaze intent with apprehension.

“I’m fine,” I gave him my best artificial smile and flashed him two thumbs up. In return, his sardonic glance revealed that he was far from convinced. “No pain, no gain. So, what’s on the agenda for today?”

“Sweetling, we’re going apartment hunting,” he gave a mysterious smile and my lungs ached for the breath he stole from them. Would I ever get accustomed to his gorgeousness? It was too overwhelming for the human psyche to bear.

“What?” I gulped, taken aback with the unexpected statement. “Much with the confusion, Hot Stuff.”

“You told me once that you wanted to regain control of your life on your terms,” Corwyn cupped my cheek with his hand. “Is it so horrible if I want to be a part of that?”

“I’ll do it the old-fashioned way with Craigslist, the classifieds, and hoofing it through my favorite
“neighborhoods,” I said, thinking of Belmont, Havelock and the Near South neighborhood of Lincoln. “My mind and body aren't up for that yet.”

“What about using magic?”

“Negative, Handsome.” I vehemently shook my head. “Whenever one uses the mojo for personal gain, it yanks something from somewhere else. No thank you! I'm not messing with the natural order just to get a dream crib.”

When he knew I was comfortable, he settled into the driver’s seat and started back the driveway and toward Havelock. It was a sunny Saturday morning with a spring blue sky dotted with fluffy clouds drifting overhead. I inhaled deeply and slowly the fresh scent of lilacs from the tree on the left side of the porch, wincing from the twinge of soreness that contracted my muscles into tight knots. Spring had finally arrived and I wasn’t going to miss a bit of it.

“What if I said that it wasn’t for you, but for us?” Corwyn gave me a side glance through his lashes, his face remained an unreadable disguise of his emotions. How that expression reminded me of his father.

“Been there and done that,” I countered, remembering my relationship with Matthew. “I really want to take my time and just enjoy our relationship. I'm not ready to jump into a heavy commitment. Hell, until I heal, I can't even commit fortification with you. I’d like to finally get some unlawful carnal knowledge of you.”

“Wren,” I watched his eyes burn amber and a slight metallic sheen tinge his cheeks. “All will come in time.”

“Will it?” I said in a small voice, doubting the stability of this new, unpredictable life that I had. Corwyn nodded. His lopsided, boyish grin made my heart stutter and lose a beat. “I don’t enough money saved up for deposit and rent. Besides, I’m not in peak condition yet.”

He pressed a finger to my lips, effectively me before I uttered another protest. His other hand entwined with the straightened hair at the nape of me, letting his hand slowly trace a path along my flushed skin. Corwyn turned the full force of his molten amber gaze on me, dispelling all of my willpower. It proved difficult to defy his charm when he spellbound me. However, being a Solomonar I’m not without a few charms of my own.

My naughty side whispered saucy suggestions, inspiring me to fight fire with fire. I licked my lips, quickly caught the tip of his finger between my teeth. As I looked up at Corwyn through veiled lashes, his eyes widened with bewilderment, I heard a deep gasp catch in his throat. I leisurely savored the saltiness of his skin; suckling it his he gritted his teeth. Corwyn’s eyes never left mine when he shuddered, partially from anticipation and mostly from yearning. I felt longing surge along the bond of our empathic rapport, jutting columns of heat flaring out around him. I drank in the primal emotions of want mingled with the sweetness of his devotion and, together, they were heartstopping. A ragged growl escaped him as he framed my face in the steel restraint of his hands. The one thing about Solomonar that I had recently learned was that we had the ability to control demons, thoroughly enjoying that perk.

“Wren,” his voice caught on my name, coming out as both a curse and a prayer. “Sweetling. It doesn’t hurt to see what’s on the market.”

I quickly pulled away from him, calm and collected, while he struggled to regain his composure. “Trying to compel me with supernatural charm isn’t the way to win me over, Corwyn Darcy.”

He closed his eyes as if in his own private torment. His eyes snapped open, his stare hard and angry. “That isn’t fair, Wren, when you do that.”

“All’s fair in love and apartment hunting,” I quietly teased. I waited until he seemed himself again.

“Why are we going apartment hunting today? It’s still too soon.”

At Cordelia’s insistence, she had stayed at the farmhouse aiding me with my recovery. Tristan insisted that I take medical leave from work, but I refused. He and I argued back forth for several days until we came to an understand that I would take conditional medical leave, as long as I was allowed to work via Internet from home. I took it because I knew it was the best that I would get when going up against a Cambion. Frankly, I was surprised by how well I held my own to get that much.
I knew that if I took it slowly that I would be fine. He allowed me to work on the condition that I come to the Archangelus clinic for weekly check-ups so he could monitor my progress and if Cordelia assisted me until my injuries healed. Jack joined the conspiracy with resilient approval, making me realize that I was outnumbered.

Garrett had temporarily turned his carpentry business in Sioux Falls over to his grandson, Thomas, deciding that he would stay on indefinitely at the farmhouse. He appointed himself as my chaperone whenever Corwyn came to visit. Add Cordelia to the mix, ergo one extremely crowded family dwelling. After several heartfelt talks with Corwyn, I finally made up my mind to get my own place without telling anyone in my family. I needed my space. I hate crowds.

The last thing I wanted was to upset Jack or deal with my condescending Great-Uncle Garrett giving me a lecture about duty and responsibility. To get away from the brouhaha, Corwyn had moved me up to the attic where at least I had some alone space but I felt too cloistered for my comfort. For the last few days, Cordy had subjected me to numerous color charts and paint samples, wanting to turn the unfinished attic into a Better Homes and Gardens masterpiece. I affectionately called her renovation project: Extreme Makeover - Cordelia’s Edition. “Wren, your relatives and my sister are crowding you. I know how you hate being smothered. The best alternative is to get you an apartment you can call home.”

“It’s a matter of funding,” I reminded him, rubbing my fingers together to indicate my lack of paper and coin.

“I understand, Sweetling.” He gave my hand a gentle squeeze as he cruised down Cornhusker Highway. “That’s only temporary.”

“I’m going I’ll go postal if Cordelia makes me look at one more upholstery swatch or another color palette,” I griped. I’d spent the better part of the day of Friday evening with Cordelia as she put color samples up against bare wooden attic walls. Every time I became uneasy or protested, she told me that she wanted to do something nice for me, warning me not to spoil her vivid enjoyment.

Then she took me to every furniture store in Lincoln to look at pieces that that didn’t have price tags on them. I come from the mindset that if something doesn’t have a price tag on it, then I can’t afford it.

Earlier that morning she had disappeared, telling me that she had errands to run and that she would return later that afternoon. He eyes had been glimmering with a crimson haze, so I knew something wasn’t on the up-and-up. I quickly learned in my short time of knowing Cordelia Darcy that she was just as wily as her brother, Corwyn, once her mind started scheming.

An obnoxious ring tone chiming from Corwyn’s cell phone jerked me back to reality. Corwyn touched his earpiece and then answered “Hello, Zoe.”

“Zoe?” I frowned. Zoe had been temperamental since Cordelia had moved into the farmhouse to aid with my recuperation. In typical Zoe fashion, she had classified my near death as my entire fault. Toward Jack and Garrett, she was practically reverent. Her attitude toward me was that I was to blame – because if not for me mouthing off to Fiona, I wouldn’t have put her family in danger. Corwyn and she weren’t speaking at the moment. Ergo, the unexpected call caught me by surprise.

“Hello, Zoe.”

“Zoe?” I frowned. Something Zoe was saying made Corwyn’s eyes expand in amazement, and then another wide smile lit up his handsome face.

“That’s great!” he laughed.

“What does she want?” I muttered in a low voice. My grumbling didn’t break his concentration for a minute. Just like Corwyn to get caught up in an exuberant moment.

“No?” Corwyn asked with obvious delight. He paused for a bit before speaking. “We’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“Where are we going?” I asked him as he turned off his earpiece.

“Did I tell you that Zoe is a very successful real estate agent?” he said gleefully.

“No,” I said slowly. What he said made sense. Every member of his family was talented in some way. Corwyn was a gifted artist, Penelope a gifted teacher and musician, Tristan was a doctor,
Liam owned a restaurant, and Cordy was an interior decorator. Esteban was a successful financial advisor and stock-market analyst. It explained why they were wealthy. Then the pieces began to fit together. The color swatches, the window-shopping at furniture stores, moving me up to the attic all had been a ruse to distract me from what had been going on all the time without my knowing. I felt like an absolute idiot.

I let loose a stream of expletives that brought a bronze blush to my boyfriend’s coppery cheeks. Who would have thought I could make a eudemon blush?

“Corwyn, you have something going on in that mind of yours but I don’t see the point of looking when all I can do right now is window shop.” I felt my temper rise. “It’s my life and where do you get off trying to control it. Damn it, Corwyn! I don’t like being manipulated like a pawn on a chess board.”

“Wren, I only wanted to help make your dreams come true.”

“That’s my job, Hot Stuff!” I unbuckled the seat belt and opened the car door. I grabbed my purse and cane, swinging my legs out to the side. I exited the car, glaring at him. “Don’t presume to think for me. What is so hard about understanding that?”

“And how can you be so stubborn as not to accept the gifts from those who love you?” he bellowed angrily. “I want to give you the world and you won’t even accept a pebble. You’re the most hard-headed, stubborn, prideful woman I’ve ever known.”

“Not all of us can be born with a silver spoon in our mouths, Corywn!” I huffed. “Some of us actually have to work for a living. I need that. It grounds me and keeps me sane. After finding out that I will never have a normal life again, dealing with ghosts, a pissed succubus and being possessed, I just want ordinary.”

We glared across the car at each other in silence before his anger dissolved into hurt, then comprehension and finally, shock. “For the first time in my existence, I have found someone who accepts me without exception and I want to give you everything, but time.”

A bright flash of light followed by the scent of smoke and cinnamon filled the air. Instead of being in the car, he now stood beside me, supporting me as I grew tired from standing too long on my injured leg. “Lean on me, Wren.”

“I lean,” I said, tilting into him.

“I don’t want to control your life, Sweetling, I want to share it with you and give you all I have,” Corwyn wrapped his strong arms around me. “All I’m asking is that you come look at the apartment,” I heard his voice lower in volume. “Where’s the harm in that?”

In the past few weeks, we had developed an empathic rapport that allowed us to get glimpses of what the other was feeling. It was compelling, seductive because of the intense emotional and physical connection it provided. It drew me in, allowing me to savor sensations that I never knew existed. Now, it flowed and ebbed between us as I felt his confidence and optimism. I knew he truly wanted to capture the moon and the stars and give them all to me. He also knew that I wanted to make my own way in the world, succeeding or failing on my own victories and mistakes. When an immovable force meets unstoppable object, worlds collide.

This generous, thoughtful and breathtaking man continually surprised me. No human had ever felt as treasured as I did at that moment. I was humbled and awed by that blessing. Tears of pure emotion pricked the backs of my eyelids; I willed my composure to stay in place.

“I can’t argue with the logic,” I turned my head away so he wouldn’t see the naked intensity on my face. I gave him a silent nod, and with that, he helped me into the car and we headed into the city.

“What have I done to deserve you?” Corwyn asked, brushing his lips against my eyes, my palm while driving.

“Well,” I gave a wry laugh. “Do you want me to be nice or honest?”

“We share a bond, exceptional beyond all imagining. I knew what you wanted and when I saw it, I asked Zoe to look into it for me. If it isn’t what you like, you don’t have to take the apartment.”

His poignant gaze in those amber eyes bedazzled me with all of their fierce devotion. My heart threatened to detonate in his presence because the depth of his adoration overwhelmed my senses to the point of meltdown. It was too much for my mind to integrate, the urge to find respite made
me want to hide.
“I said I’d look at it,” I reminded him. “I’m not ready to move anywhere and I want all of my things moved back to the house.”
“Wait until you see the place and then decide, please?”
“Deal,” I murmured, burying my head into his shoulder. Life was getting closer to ordinary; my family getting closer to being functional and I held a job that gave me great personal satisfaction. I sat next to a man with whom I shared my heart and his with me. There would be no equine teeth examinations that day. “Just don’t renege.”
He teased my lips with a lingering kiss. “You won’t lose me, Wren. I’m not going anywhere.”
“Promise?” I placed my hand on his chest, feeling the strong cadence of his heart beating beneath his white tee shirt.
“Promise,” Corwyn's eyes held mine for several poignant seconds before he finally glanced at his watch. “Cordelia isn’t going to be happy if we’re late.”
“Much with the prompt,” I gave him a smile. “Lateness bad.”
“Very bad,” he agreed.
“Cordy’s there?”
“Along with everyone else.”
“And of course,” I gave Corwyn a wary glance. “Zoe?”
“Yes,” he admitted.
“Oh, joy.” The tender feelings mutated into abject dread. Being in the same room with Zenobia was akin to being a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. I was her private brand of holy water and she was my personal bogeywoman hiding in my closet that went bump in the dark. To say we didn't get along was a severe understatement.
He chuckled, amused my discomfort.
“Yes, please! Laugh at poor Wren,” I scoffed. “Everyone else does.”
He started the car and headed toward midtown. Several minutes later, I saw that we were in the Historical District of Lincoln. It’s a part of the city with tall Victorian manors where large, mature shade trees lined the old brick streets. Pulling up to one of the buildings in the neighborhood, I saw Cordelia standing in front of the building waving at us, enthusiastically motioning for us to hurry. Corwyn parked the car on the street in front of the building. A wrought-iron fence framed the green lawn dotted with bright irises, daffodils, and hydrangeas. In the left front corner sat a stone birdbath and above it a cardinal perched in the lower branches of an ancient-looking oak tree. It was a three-story tall building made of white brick with a flat roof and turn-of-the-century charm. Corwyn became a blur to the human eye as he got out of the car, coming around to my side to open the door for me. He bent forward and helped me get out of the car, keeping one arm around me to help me to my feet.
“What do you think?” he asked gently.
“Charming,” I gave him a hint of the smile.
Cordelia and Zoe met us at the front entrance. Cordelia bounced and flitted along the corridor to a door and the far right while Zoe brandished a set of apartment keys. She cleared her throat then turned to me. “Penelope recently bought and renovated the property. It’s a two-bedroom loft, nine hundred fifty-four square feet with a sizable patio on the rear side. Heat is natural gas; it has central air, and secure entry from the outside. Liam is going to install the security system tomorrow.”
If I had to ask how much they wanted in rent then I knew I couldn’t afford it.
“Pets?” I asked. I had thought about getting a cat.
“No.” Zoe shook her head disapprovingly, her nose wrinkling is disdain.
“Oh,” I replied. I knew this wasn’t the place for me.
“We can make an exception, I’m sure,” Cordelia interjected, giving Zoe a slight nudge in the arm.
“After all, it was Wren who exonerated Father and gave him some justice.”
“Well,” Zoe awkwardly cleared her throat. “One cat might be permissible but I’d have to get Penelope’s approval.”
“Hmm,” I’d seen enough. If she were going to be this snobbish, there was no since in wasting my
time. “Corwyn, it's very nice, but I'm ready to leave.”
I turned to leave and started down the stairs when a voice whispered, it's not easy for her to
apologize.
I don't want her insincere attempt at one, I answered Julian with one frosty response. If she wants to
apologize, she can do it like everyone else by starting off with-
“Wren, I'm sorry.”
“Huh?” I said aloud, miffed at not being aloud to finish my thought.
“Look,” Zoe glanced at Cordy, who gave her an encouraging nod. “I know you and I don't get
along, but you're part of my brother's life and you make him happy. I'm not good with words, but
I'm hoping that this apartment would be a token of what I'm trying to say.”
For the first time in my life, my sharp tongue lost its edge. I was dumbfounded.
“You can have a whole zoo if you want,” she rushed.
I gave a silent glance to Corwyn to say, “where is the real Zebobia and what have you done with
her?” He nodded in return toward the door of the apartment, urging me to step inside and look at it.
I saw a slight smile cross Zoe's full lips as she unlocked the wooden door to the apartment.
We stepped inside and my jaw dropped. The walls were a light mint with soft coral and muted
turquoise accents. Light oak hardwood floors spanned throughout the entire great room and I
noticed a white tile fire place in the far right corner closest to the door. Dumbstruck, I walked in
and looked at the bedroom just off of the fireplace, done in an Asian motif with a large Samurai
Sword hanging on the wall. I saw two paintings hanging on the wall and I immediately recognized
the artwork. Done in red and black, I knew that this bedroom wasn’t decorated according to my
tastes.
I gave a Corwyn a questioning glance. He smirked, “It’s a guest room.”
He gave me a shrug. I saw several pieces of furniture that I had drooled over the previous day but
had turned away from because of the expensive price tags they sported. Cordy grabbed my hand
and tugged insistently at my arm. “You have to see the kitchen.”
Knowing the Darcys, I figured it would be stainless steel, environmentally conscious appliances.
Instead, I saw a vintage gas stove from the 1950’s that I had pointed out to Cordelia at a thrift store
we had passed on our window-shopping trip. The refrigerator was a Kennedy-era classic with a
large silver handle and contoured edges. The island in the middle of the kitchen was topped in rose
granite and I loved how the pots and pans hung from a frame connected to the ceiling. The
country-style custom cabinetry was done in distressed white paint and in the dining area was an
oak table that I remembered seeing Jack working on in the barn.
“Oh, WOW!” I twirled slowly in a circle as I took in my dream kitchen. I had to admit, Cordelia
was good.
“You haven't seen your bedroom yet!” Cordy twittered with excitement. “Come on!”
We walked out of the kitchen to the door immediately next to it. I stepped inside, studying the pale
chiffon yellow walls. I recognized two sets off hand-carved oak bookcases that I knew had come
from home along with all of my favorite books. I also saw the rocking chair in the corner that Jack
had recently finished making.
“How much was Jack in on this?” I gave Cordelia a stern look. “Besides that beautiful table?”
“He did all of the cabinetry in the kitchen and he and Liam laid down the floors,” she said as a
hopeful look crossing her feature. “Esteban and Penelope did the painting yesterday. What do you
think?”
That petite little pixie had a way of making every spark of indignation melt away. I shook my head
in amazement. “This is just-just… beautiful.”
“I knew you'd like it.”
“I can’t afford this.” I told her.
“Yes, you can!” she hastily disagreed. “Rent-free.”
“No way,” I shook my head, stepping back from the apartment.
“Yes way,’ as Justin would say.” Cordy assured me.
“No.” I drawled slowly. “I mean, no. I won’t live here rent free.”
“Why not?” Cordy’s brow furrowed with confusion. “It’s your dream apartment. You’re only a few blocks from work. The spare room has been decorated so you can have Corwyn stay here whenever you want.”

“Cordelia,” I didn’t quite know how to begin. “I will not live off charity. How much is the rent?” She named the figure and it was half of my month’s salary. I let go a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry. I can’t afford that.”

“We worked hard to make a nice place for you and you just turn your back on it?” Zoe huffed angrily. “I told you she wouldn’t—”

“Stop,” Corwyn’s jade eyes flamed amber, effectively silencing the redhead. “Are all of the apartments completed?”

“No,” Zoe replied slowly. “Only this one. What does that have to do with anything?”

“What needs done on the others?”

“Painting, electrical wiring, polishing the floors,” I saw Zoe's mind working as she ticked off a list of things on her mental to-do list. “I think I have a solution that will make both of you happy,” Corwyn rubbed his chin, obviously in deep thought. “What if a portion of the rent was paid with sweat equity?”

Cordy, Zoe, and I all looked at him with puzzlement in our eyes. “Go on.”

“If Wren agreed to help paint, wire, polish, buff, plant to make this place complete, that would be a substantial contribution toward getting the other units ready,” he explained. “You get labor and she gets a rent discount.”

“Hmm,” I saw Zoe silently adding the numbers in her head. “Can she paint?”

“I can teach her.” Corwyn gave her a sardonic glare. “Jack can show her how to install ceiling fans and do basic carpentry. You’ll also need a leasing agent and a manager to run the place. You know she’s effective as Pell’s administrative assistant.”

“She can help me with the decorating and make administrative decisions” Cordelia added. She cast large blue eyes on me, soulful in their gaze. “Please, Wren? What do you say? You get to ‘earn your keep’ and we get the perfect tenant.”

Now it was my turn to do the math. I already worked a full-time job and the extra work involved in this place would take months. I wasn't ready physically to take on the challenge this building presented, but I could hire others. Still, this was a dream come true and I'd be able to live in my private little paradise with a clear conscience if I thought I was contributing to the effort. I wouldn’t be living on charity and I wouldn’t be offending my boyfriend’s family.

“Much with the liking of that idea,” I admitted. “I can learn.”

“Oh, good!” Cordelia closed her eyes in relief. “Then it’s settled. When can you move?”

“Hold on!” I held up a hand to stop her. “I have to get things packed and tell Jack. I can just vanish without a trace.”

“Most of you stuff is still boxed! Just say the word and Esteban and Liam can have it hear by day's end.” Cordy's excitement reverberated throughout the apartment.

“We can talk to him tomorrow,” Corwyn gently reassured me. “It doesn’t have to be today, Cordelia.”

“Okay,” she smiled. “I’ll let Pell know.”

The rest of the day was simple and sweet with Corwyn. We ate a picnic lunch from our favorite bistro, walked in Antelope Park and caught an outdoor jazz concert. By the time the sun started to set, we arrived back home to find Logan sitting in the porch swing. Garrett sat in the rocking chair across from him with a stoic look on his face and I knew something was amiss.
“When you’re done out here, we need to talk.” Garrett growled sternly, never taking his eyes off Corwyn.

“About what?”

“Your future.”

“My future is mine to decide and not yours,” I replied hotly. “Get that through your head, Garrett.”

“I am still the head of this family and you’ll do as I tell you.”

“Wrong,” I felt Corwyn lay a steadying hand on my shoulder but I shrugged it off. Stepping away from his touch, I walked over to Garrett until we stood only inches apart. He rose from the rocking chair to tower over me at six-one and all strapping lean muscle. I’m glad that I had my cane for added support.

He loomed over me, looking like some phantom cowboy in that black Stetson and dark denim jacket. “Here’s how it is. You are one member of this family and that is all. You don’t tell anyone anymore how to live his or her lives, especially me. Do you understand?”

A feline growl escaped him. “Where do you get off-“

My temper rose in a heartbeat along with a sudden burst of heat within my chest. My eyes literally burned in their sockets as I saw red when I glowered at him. I watched him take a sudden step back as I poked him in the chest and then I saw why. A single flame spiked from my index finger as I pointed at him. Like my other abilities, it appeared connected to my emotions, especially anger. I knew that I could have burnt the house down with all the anger he inspired in me.

“You committed murder almost a hundred years ago and be thankful I don’t turn you over to the cambion’s version for judgment. They’d love to string a Solomonari high in a tree for what you did to one of their own. So, if I were you, Garrett, I’d shut up and be thankful that the Darcys are very forgiving. I’m not.”

Was that Julian or I speaking? I couldn't tell. I knew I felt an all-consuming hatred that made me want to incinerate him battle with a pity I felt for him. The pity won. Barely.

“Don't you go threatening me;” Garrett moved forward, grabbing my arm. He yelped as pulled his hand back, the skin smoking on his palm and covered with red burns.

“You've received your one warning. There won't be another.”

He said nothing as he cradled his hand, glaring at me.

“Jack will teach me what I need to know. He is more than capable of tutoring me in Solomonari tradition and magic. You will no longer interfere in anyone's life and will leave sundown today on the first mode of transportation out of town. If you don't, I think I will need to speak with Penelope about what I know.”

“Solomonari can’t control fire,” he said in gruff, ragged voice. “You've got a demon in you girl.”

“Then I guess I’m hell on wheels, Uncle Garrett.” I stated with more bravado than I felt. Secretly, I was amazed at what I had just done through will alone. Still, family was family. “Uncle Garrett, I’m not asking you to give me your blessing. I am asking you to treat him with a little respect. Is that so difficult?”

“You are going to burn,” he shook his head sadly, looking away from me. “I don’t want to see that happen, Wren.”

“It won’t,” I said as calmly as I could without turning him into an ash pile. He gave me a soulful look as he hastily walked past me, letting the screen door slam behind him.

“Wren?” Corwyn looked at me, his eyes wide with shock. “When did you learn how to do that?”

“A by-product compliments of Julian,” I replied. “I thought it was a one-time thing.”

“Your eyes are flaming,” Corwyn said in a hushed whisper. “You’re a Valkyrie when you’re angry.”

“Yeah, that’s what worries me. It took all of my self-control not to turn him into kindling,” I said in a low voice, still reeling from the realization at how close I had come to losing power over my temper. “How do you do it? I don’t know how you can always be so calm.”

“Over a century of practice,” he pressed his brow to mine. “Oh, Wren. I’m sorry. I never meant for this to happen to you.”

“I’m not complaining,” I pressed a kiss to his lips. “If you’ll teach me, then I’ll learn how to deal
“May I speak with you, Wren?” Logan gave a wary glance in Corwyn’s direction. “Alone?” Corwyn’s face said nothing, his face expressionless. His only answer was to give me a nod as he headed inside the house to wait for me.

“Thanks,” Logan nodded in thanks.

“What was that?” He asked once Corwyn had stepped inside.

“Me finding my inner fire,” I smiled, joining him on the porch swing.

“Major difference from what I saw the last time we talked.”

“It’s been an interesting few weeks,” I hedged.

“Yeah, Jack clued me in on the details.”

“Then, you know what happened,” I replied gravely. I tentatively looked over at him. “Are my eyes really glowing red?”

“Fire engine,” Logan replied.

“What brings you over to this neck of the woods?” I asked.

“The Phratry have reactivated,” he adjusted his spectacles on the bridge of his nose. “Due to the recent sightings of the Emrys Cadre, that violated the Accords that we had made with them in 1923. We’re on red alert.”

“Great,” I drawled sarcastically. “Does that mean war?”

“It means we'll be watching. Jack told me how Julian was proven innocent and that throws the politics of everything into disarray. The Phratry are reconvening in a few days to reconsider the Accords and see if we need to take action.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Phratry and Cambions can’t occupy the same space. The Solomonari were always neutral parties making this farm a safe haven for any and all,” he looked at me with those tranquil silver eyes, waiting for my reaction. When I said nothing, he continued. “Selena wants you to stay away from the Darcys so that there won’t be any catalyst for further activity until we can hash this out.”

“She knows about everything, too?” I rolled my eyes in disbelief. “Let me guess. Jack told her?”

“No. Garrett did.”

“That interfering, pompous son-of-a”

“Hey, now.” he waned me gently. “He is just looking after his family. You can’t blame him for that.”

“He argues on behalf of the Darcys in 1923 and then takes part in Julian’s execution,” I sighed in exasperation. “That man needs a heavy dose of ass-kicking redemption.”

“I have a message for Selena,” I began then thought better of it. I pulled out my cell phone. “Better yet, what’s her number, Logan? I call her and tell her exactly what I think of her message.”

“Stop,” Logan covered his hand with mine. “Think for a moment before you let your temper get the better of you. There’s more.”

“Go ahead. You have the mike.” I scoffed.

“Selena says that the Phratry will take whatever action necessary to deal with any immediate threat.”

I balled my hand into a fist, causing Logan to leap out of the seat as if he’d just been set on fire.

“What?” I asked, surprised by his sudden reaction.

“Look at your hand, Wren.” he nodded toward my fist. I looked down to see that my hand was engulfed in bright ruby flames. I let my hand go slack as the ring on my finger pulsed violently with protective energy, shielding me from the heat of the fire.

“I’m sorry, Logan.” I immediately regretted my sudden burst of temper. “I know you’re the emissary that’s responsible for everything running smoothly. I don’t blame you at all. I’m just tired of everyone around me trying to dictate how I should live my life. Keyword there, Logan, is MINE.”

“I know,” he replied softly, agreeing with me. He paused for a moment. “How are you at creative solutions?”

“What did you have in mind?” I asked, wondering what thoughts were churning in his head.
“Today, I seem to be on a roll.”
“Phratry used to be advisers and mentors to the Solomonari, like familiars.” he explained easily as he sat back down beside me. “Selena is all worked up and Garrett’s just wanting to egg this on. What if I become your adviser as I’m supposed to be? Garrett has no problem with the Phratry and Selena would be ecstatic if she knew that someone was keeping an eye on you. I can help you learn to broaden and strengthen your abilities, Wren. It would get Selena off my back and Garrett off of yours.”
“Jack is going to teach me.”
“Why not both of us?” he suggested.
“You have a point.” If nothing else, Logan was logical and I always appreciated sound logic. “But, on two conditions.”
“Name them.”
“Don’t tell me how to live me life and don’t try to control me,” I said as I steadily met his gaze. “Be my teacher, my adviser but not a spy to the other side.”
“I can do that,” he nodded. “As long as you don’t upset or betray the peace the Accords guarantee. What’s the second?”
I tried to get out of the porch swing, but a searing pain jolted through my ribs and I quickly sat down again. Corwyn must have felt my empathic wince because he was out the front door like a shot and standing at my side. Gently, he helped me to my feet and I leaned on him for support.
Logan reached forward to help but Corwyn’s stern glance stopped him.
“I’ve got her, Logan.”
Logan flinched, his body tense as arctic silver met molten amber in a heated gaze. He gave me a questioning look and I gave him a quick nod.
“What’s the second?” he asked again.
“Get to know the Darcys. Give them a chance,” I pleaded with them. “Please.”
Logan didn’t say anything, but glanced at Corwyn. The silence between them lasted several seconds before he returned his attention to me. “All right. I’ll give you a call to set up a time when we can start.” he told me as he descended the porch steps.
“Do you have my number?”
“Yeah.”
“Drive safely back to Omaha,” I told him as he headed to his car parked behind Corwyn’s in the driveway.
Once Logan left, he swung me up into his arms and put me in his lap. He embraced me tightly to him. The moon was a radiant sphere shining down on us from the starlit sky. In the semi-darkness of the night, I saw his brow furrow and his eyes narrow.
Through our bond, I felt his worry, but couldn’t pinpoint the source.
“Corwyn, penny?” I asked quietly, cupping his strong jaw in my hand.
“What?”
“For your thoughts?” I asked. I saw the sparks of red and blue dancing around him, indicating thought and concern. “Care to share?”
“Fire, Wren.” he whispered into my hair. “In one way, it warms and heals. When out of control, it burns and consumes.”
“Thermostat. I’ll buy one.” I answered glibly, wanting only to take away him worry.
“I came into your life and turned it upside down,” Corwyn tucked my head under my chin as he stroked my hair. “I don’t want to be the one who puts you in harm’s way, Sweetling. I know you want control of your life and I don’t want to be the one to take that away from you.”
He regretful words sent shivers of dread through me, turning the warmth flowing through my body into an icy chill. “I’m still making my own choices, Corwyn. No one put a gun to my head and forced me into what happened. I chose this. I decided to be involved. I found my spine and I’m not regretting anything that’s happened.”
“I wonder if sometimes if it’s better to have never loved you.”
I stiffened and sat upright. “Don’t say that.”
“You almost died because-.” he began. “Now, you having difficulties with your family.”
“Garrett has always been difficult,” I gave him a knowing glance. “He’s just a major pain. Now, stop. I was the walking dead before you came into my life. Remember that painting that you did, ‘In Search of Fire?’”
“Yes?” Corwyn looked down at me, puzzled by my question.
“Because of you, I found my spark, my will to live again.” My words flowed together in a rush. “I found that I still had some life within me. Without you, I’d still be hiding behind everyone’s problems instead of living. I made the choice to get my life back but you were the gift that came with that. I love you, Corwyn Darcy, and I’m ready to live my life anyway I can as long as you’re in it.”
“Even if the fire consumes you?” I saw pain flash in those beautiful jade eyes.
“I’ll take my chances,” I told him. “Life doesn't come without risk or mistakes and I’m willing to have both if it means that I'll learn from them.”
“From Wren to Phoenix,”
“Hey, I’m tenacious.” I shrugged. “Besides, I want stick around just to annoy Uncle Garrett. That, in itself, is going to be fun. Then again, so much for my happy ending.”
He smiled, bringing his lips to mine until fiery heat teased the corner of my mouth. “Are you so sure that you can stand the fire, Wren? Are you so willing to walk through it?”
“Since we’re playing with allegory, show me the way and I’ll dance on hot coals,” I promised. I had already decided that my life was mine and he was a part of it. It didn’t matter as I felt that heated sensual energy coil in my stomach, or that I felt the primal urges of need and love mingle within him as he kissed me slow and deep. “I do a mean cha cha.”
“You won’t give up, will you?” There darkness in his voice matched the grave expression he wore.
“Never,” I promised.
“Are you really ready to be burned alive?”
“Fire resistant, remember?” I laughed wryly at his saturnine expression. “Besides, I can always dunk you in holy water if you get too rambunctious. You and I are meant to be together. It’s just that simple. Much with the simple.”
Corwyn’s somber gaze melted at my defiant words. “I love you. I will always be with you. What if the cost of loving me is too high?”
“Then I’ll pay.”
When an immovable force meets an unstoppable object, worlds collide. “Then I’ll spend eternity loving you.”
I knew this wasn’t over. With everything that had recently happened, I knew this was only the beginning. I didn’t know what our future brought, or if I could be the Phoenix of legend. I only knew that I wanted to be at Corwyn’s side when the day of reckoning came.
As we kissed, all of the fire, our love and passion of our bond burned brightly and deep within our souls. I had found my fire.

Not The End.

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