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Walking with G-d: A Fantasy Novel Inspired by
Merkavah Mysticism

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Abstract

This project is a 28-chapter fiction novel preceded by a 5-page introduction and informational footnotes throughout the novel. This project contributes to the canon of Jewish fiction as well as serves to enlighten modern Jews of the spiritual traditions of their people. In this novel, sources from Merkavah Mysticism and Ancient Jewish Magic have been thoroughly researched to form the basis for the world in which the characters live and the magic they use.

Plot synopsis: Thousands of years ago, the humans, scared of the power and creatures that existed in the Immortal Realms, created a fatal spell to build a Barrier between worlds. The entity, Enoch, was sent by its kin to the human realm through a weak point to find the seven Keys that will unlock the Barrier and restore the equilibrium between worlds. In present day New York City, Mina Voorsanger is a normal college sophomore that has *abnormal* intuitions about people. One night, while leaving her job at the local haunted house, she encounters a strange man with eyes that reveal him to be more than he seems. Enoch has found her, his final Key, at last.

There are no subdivisions within the project by subject other than between the Introduction and body of the text. Otherwise, it is a continuous narrative that should be read as such. Primary sources used include the books of Genesis, Exodus, Ezekiel, Enoch, Isaiah, Sod haNachash, Siddur HaAri, Hekhalot Rabbati, and the Guide for the Perplexed. Secondary sources include *Ancient Jewish Magic* and several scholarly articles by Gideon Bohak, The Daniel Matt translation of the Zohar, *Legends of the Jews* by Louis Ginzberg, and many other scholarly articles by Karl Erich Grözinger, Shaul Shaked, Ithamar Gruenwald, Avriel Bar Levav, and others.

Introduction

1. Why is this novel Jewish?

This was a novel born of dreams and a deep, deep love of all things esoteric. As I sat in my pre-Kabbalistic mysticism class in my second year of Cantorial school at Hebrew Union College, I was flabbergasted by the words I found familiar in texts I had never read before. It seemed like there was a depth to the prayers I had memorized as a child that I was never made aware of. It didn't sit well with me that we were taught to say these words from memory and never taught why we say them in the first place or where they come from.

As a fantasy author already, it is easy for me to find the strange or magical in anything that I read. I was used to reading fantasy novels based in Christian mythologies. Beautiful angels, with perfect morals, and pure white, feathery wings. But reading these texts, angels were terrifying things. Shapeshifting near monsters that filled humans with awe and sheer terror.

Likewise, I began to read about the ancient Hebrew people who had a thriving magical practice involving invoking said angels for blessing or curse. It was a deeply physical magic that was based in the power of words.

In this book there is a flashback scene where the entity, Enoch, arrives on earth for the first time in a human body. Because of the Barrier, he is stuck in this form until the realms can be reunited again. This was the first scene that came to me. I thought, what if a creature like one of those terrifying shapeshifting angels was forced to live among humans and had to deal with their foibles and stupidity?

From there, the more I learned about ancient Jewish magical practices, the more this book blossomed. In a way, Mina's awakening to her heritage is reminiscent of how I felt as I discovered the depths of my own.

This book follows a world that is reliant upon both the sacred and the mundane, a very Jewish concept. Just as it states in our scripture that the angels exist because of humans and humans are elevated because of their formation in the image of God, so too are the humans and entities reliant on one another in this book. Ultimately, it all goes back to the Source. The thing that flows through all beings, divine and mundane.

2. What general sources did you consult to write this book?

As stated above, my interest in this topic began with a pre-Kabbalistic mysticism course. As such, we began with several primary sources. The first, that forms the basis for all of the magical and mystical texts beyond, is the *Book of Ezekiel*. In the first chapter of Ezekiel, the prophet has a vision while sitting in exile by the banks of a river.

This vision is wild and fiery. Full of different types of angels hailing the arrival of God's chariot—or *merkavah*. Merkavah mysticism stems from this vision. We see the *ophanim*, giant wheels with hundreds of eyes carrying the chariot that holds the divine throne. We see the *chayot*, multi-headed and winged creatures that speed back and forth, announcing the Divine Presence.

Beyond this, the books of Isaiah and Enoch further expounded on these angelic visions. They detailed new types and names of God's creatures, and further ways that humans interacted with them. The third book of Enoch, in particular, has lengthy descriptions of Enoch as Metatron and how he became God's scribe. While the character

of Enoch in this book is inspired by the mythological Enoch of these texts, he is not meant to be a one to one comparison.

The text that forms the basis for the structure of this world is called *Hekhalot Rabbati*, specifically synopses 198-277. It is a series of accounts that expands further on ascending to God's so-called "chariot." Mentions of the seven realms, seven gates, fires of heaven, etc, all come from the visions seen in this text. This is where we get the most in-depth view of what the heavens look like beyond the earthly plain because Rabbi Ishmael is able to ascend and impart instructions on how to move safely through the gates. These gates will play a more directly visible role in the second book of the series when Mina must cross over to rescue her father and friend.

The magic's basis in words and the power of the will behind the words is from several texts. The most prevalent is the book of Genesis itself, when God speaks, and the world is created. There is further expansion on this in the Zohar commentary on Genesis 1 when it is stated that the letters that follow a melody are the things that give it meaning.

I used copious amounts of secondary sources when fleshing out the mythology for the book, both Jewish and non-Jewish. The major Jewish ones include *Ancient Jewish Magic* by Gideon Bohak, from which I pulled the knowledge of protection amulets and incantation bowls. Professor Bohak was also kind enough to send me several of his other scholarly articles on the topic for further reading. Other texts that shaped the world in this book were Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, much of modern Jewish liturgy including the Hashkiveinu prayer and the Jewish concept of Satan, *Sod haNachash* an esoteric texts that talks about the balance between order and chaos rather than good and evil. Various passages in the Talmud helped clarify some of these more ancient texts and

copious scholarly articles helped to parse out the historical significance behind the poetic Biblical and Rabbinic words.

3. What does it mean to translate these works for a popular audience?

Other than the popularized or Christian versions of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism is a largely gate-kept side of our religion. For a long time, it was exclusively available to people of specific genders, ages, and life experiences. The reason given was that the “deep truths” are too much for some minds and it would make someone who is not prepared go mad.

Fair enough, but the assumption that only a man could handle these truths really bothered me. Of course, in putting these texts in fiction form, some of the nuance is lost. But my hope is to spark an interest for this knowledge in a new generation. I have watched my siblings and many of my peers become disillusioned with Judaism, not finding the spirituality they need within the religion they grew up practicing. Many Jews are searching for some sort of spiritual ascension and go looking outside of their religion for it. The goal in this project was to give them a glimpse of a tradition that already exists within Judaism—let them know what they are searching for is already here.

4. What liberties did you take with the mythology?

In order to make the mythology more understandable, I toned down much of the strict requirements for practice and melded some of the Jewish practices with more recognizable fantasy tropes. In this way I allowed a normal reader of fantasy *and* a Jew to access the book’s content.

There are recognizable beats of a typical fantasy novel within this book. The main character is young and unassuming, but strong-willed. While she has gone to synagogue

as a kid, she is not well-versed in the lore behind what creates magic and has to discover how to use this new-found power for herself.

As stated above, Mina's journey in many ways, parallels my own. (SPOILER) As she takes on this new life and learns what she must to perform her job, she becomes a conduit between worlds, bridging the gap between human and divine. (END SPOILER) This is how I have always viewed my role as clergy. We cannot let people see everything at once because it will overwhelm them or scare them away. But we cannot keep them from crossing into new realms if it is what they desire. This is the line I tried to walk in both the book and my recital.

5. What do you think you are adding to Jewish fiction?

Growing up, I always found there to be a dearth of Jewish fantasy. While there has always been plenty of Jewish fiction, much of what I was able to find was Holocaust related. After a certain point, I stopped reading any of it because it became too depressing. I am an adamant advocate for Holocaust education, but what I was looking for in my fiction reads was Jewish representation where Judaism was not a reason for the character to be ostracized or killed. Nor did I want Judaism to be the butt of the joke. I craved Jewish fiction where their Judaism was the character's source of power.

In the course of researching for this project, I discovered to my delight, that there is a growing genre of Jewish fantasy. Much of it is of varying quality, but it seemed I was not the only one who finally turned inward to get the representation I needed. In this day and age, representation is crucial for younger generations to connect with their roots. To see themselves when they look at the page or screen.

This book is my endeavor to create that representation I so desperately wished I had as a child. But it is also a chance to tap into an underutilized source of wonder and magic that is unique to our people. Overall, it is using the medium of a fantasy novel to introduce Jews to a world that exists just beneath their fingertips.

Author's Note

This is an early draft of a novel that will continue to be edited until official publication. This draft, intended for Hebrew Union College's thesis publication only, emphasizes the Jewish aspects of the novel pursuant to the requirements for Cantorial Ordination from the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music. Any and all details contained herein are subject to change at the author's discretion.

The footnotes in this edition used when a piece of the world-building calls directly to research that was done or a specific primary source text that inspired the moment.

Prologue

ENOCH¹

The Mongol Horde, Camp, Hungary, 1237 C.E.

It was not long after the latest battle when I felt the Barrier ripple as it hadn't since my arrival in the mortal realm. The disturbance was not far from my current Earth location, meaning my kind wanted to catch my attention. The humans noticed nothing, but the horses and hounds about the camp shifted restlessly. Some let out a whine or soft whinny. It amazed me that though humans could channel essence from my realm and create the Barrier itself, most of them didn't so much as twitch when its foundations shook.

Slipping out of the Khan's slumbering camp, I took my steed and rode North. Pulling my cloak tighter around my body, I spurred the horse faster. I remembered my own entry into the human world. The freezing desert, the hard stone beneath newly formed feet. Whichever of my kinsman that had just arrived would need assistance. Even more than I had, this new entity would need aid because this part of the humans' world would not be kind to an unclothed, newly birthed entity.

¹ This character's name was inspired by the man who "walked with God" according to Genesis 5:24 and for whom the books of the same name were written. In Jewish mysticism, Enoch becomes Metatron, the scribe of God, and the closest thing to God as nearly makes no difference. Further descriptions of Metatron can be found in *Hekhalot Rabbati* beginning at synopsis 277. This character is not a one-to-one comparison to the Biblical figure because he was never human, but much of his power and motivation stems from descriptions of Enoch as Metatron.

I rode until the sensation grew strongest, stopping and veering off into the trees at its apex. I dismounted the panting and sweating mare and tied her off in a way that would allow her to graze while he searched.

Then I opened myself to the surroundings, allowing every sound within miles to filter through my mind. *There.* I tore off on foot towards the sound of labored breathing. The creature's teeth chattered in the frozen northern air. She—and I could hear by her breaths that she had chosen a female form—was not yet equipped for this climate.

I slowed as I got closer, not wanting to frighten her. But she had sensed me and was preparing to flee. I stepped into her path; hands outspread in a human gesture of peace. Though she could have sent her own mind out and known that I was of her kind, she was too new for that kind of strength. I stopped within ten feet of her and said into her mind, *Welcome kinswoman. It will be good to have some assistance in this never-ending search.*

She glared at me; mis-trust evident in her piercing blue gaze. I ignored it and held out an extra cloak, knowing her human form would perish if she was not covered soon. She did not speak, but snatched the warm covering from my grasp. Looking at her, I realized how attractive her human form was—something I never would have noticed before spending so much time in human form. But of course she was attractive. Our kind would never choose an ugly form. It was to our advantage to be desirable to the humans. This would be a problem though. I would have to spend inordinate amounts of time protecting her. Women in this society were not accorded the same guarantees of safety as men. And the men I traveled with were brutal soldiers.

I stepped forward, taking her arm to guide her back to the horse. But as soon as we touched, I recognized her.

“Lilith.” I hissed.²

She punched me in the gut before responding.

“Take your worthless hands off of me. I warned the others you would not succeed. And look, many generations have passed. Thousands of human years have elapsed, and the Barrier still stands. If it were not for your incompetence, I would not have been sent and would not have to inhabit this useless form.”

I finally sucked in enough air to speak—perhaps I would not have to protect her as much as I thought.

“You have no idea what it has taken just to find the first four keys. They are not objects to be picked up and stored— “

“I am not interested in your excuses. While you have wasted your time here cavorting with the humans, our kind have been diminishing past all recognition. We are subsisting on mere memories while you glut yourself with the dreams of all of humanity.”

I bristled. How dare she question my dedication to our kind?

“You have no idea—“I stopped myself. This entity had never supported me being chosen to go to Earth. They had fought hard to dissuade the others. If this entity had been sent, that meant my people were losing confidence. It didn’t matter that I had found and tracked more than half of the Keys.

“I take it then that you are not interested in working together to save our kind?” The entity gave a delicate sounding scoff, the kind that females in this realm gave when their

² According to Jewish mysticism, Lilith is the feminine embodiment of Chaos or disorder. This character is named as such because her motivations directly contradict those of Enoch.

men were being ridiculous. But a great shiver wracking the fragile human body told me the cold was starting to affect her.

“Be that as it may, if you do not accept my aid here, your form will die, and all the energy spent by our kind getting you here will be in vain.”

The entity contemplated for a moment. Vain and subversive though I knew her to be, stupid was never a trait I would assign to her.

“You will equip me with what this body needs to survive, then I will depart to finish what you could not.”

I found I could not stop my body’s eyes from rolling.

“Very well. Follow me.”

I rode back to camp with my kinswoman behind me on the horse. Her hands reluctantly rested on my waist so as to not fall off, but as soon as they slowed near my tent, her hands sprung away as if scalded. I swung down from the horse with practiced ease then reached up to help her down.

She snarled at me and slid off with only minor difficulty. Our kind were quick learners, but I had been sure she would be too numb from the cold to manage. Clearly her anger at the idea of accepting my help warmed her enough to manage the dismount.

“Follow me.”

I led her into the tent and rifled through the trunks of spoils I had won while traveling with the hoard, among which were several articles of women’s shoes and clothing. I pulled them out and set them before her. Before I could turn away, she dropped the borrowed

cloak and picked one up. I was thankful there were no humans in the tent. While I had no issue with nudity, humans had strange ideas about what was proper.

“This is—why do women wear this? It is impractical.”

I laughed. “You are surprised by the impracticality of humans?”

“I will not wear things that trap my limbs. It is hard enough to animate this body with its wrappings slowing me down. If the brutality I sense in the surrounding humans is any indication, I will have to fight.”

“More than likely.”

“These foot coverings will work, but you will fashion me clothes like yours to wear.”

My eyebrows rose.

“You will ostracize yourself from polite society.”

“I have chosen a female form. I will enter any tier of the humans’ society that I wish.”

“I suppose that is possible.” I would never underestimate this entity’s ability to manipulate those around her. “Very well.”

I turned to another trunk and pulled out what looked like the clothes for a male child. Tossing them to her, I watched as she struggled for a moment to figure them out. When she began to put on the outer most layer, I stepped forward and snatched it from her hand.

She snarled and refused to let go. I picked up the inner layer and pressed it into her chest.

“I told you I will not wear their women’s clothing.”

“This piece you will want. It will keep certain body parts from causing you pain. I looked down at her chest deliberately. She gave an exasperated sigh and a look passed over her delicate features that I knew instantly and relished. Uncertainty. She was not as sure of herself as she’d like me to believe. But I would not gloat over it. We already did not have

a cordial relationship. If we were to save our kind on the other side of the Barrier, I could not make an enemy of her.

She released the outerwear and put on each layer now as I handed them to her. She even allowed me to help with some of the fastenings—until she understood the mechanism and shoved my hands away, that is. Finally, she was fully equipped in a combination of male and female traveling clothes. I handed her a pack loaded with what she would need for her travels. This was it then.

Neither of us spoke as I shepherded her toward where they kept the horses. Horses were a very important commodity in this society, so I would need to be very careful in stealing one. Though there were plenty to go around, horse-stealing was a crime punishable by death. This was a people who relied on the beasts' strength and power to move as far and as fast as they did.

We crept into the enclosure, trying to avoid the sporadic pools of moonlight through the trees. When I recognized a horse whose rider had recently been killed, I quickly saddled the swift and biddable gelding. I knew this mount and knew it would not spook easily. Though I disliked this entity, we were fighting for the same thing, and I was determined to give her the tools to be successful.

When she had mounted the creature and prepared to ride away, I snatched the reins and stopped her.

She bared her teeth, but I held on, needing to impart one last piece of advice for her sake.

“Head West,” I said pointing in the opposite direction of the lightening horizon, “though you look like the natives of this land, that will not help you as long as the hoard is here. Head West and stay ahead of the hoard lest you are captured and become their slave.”

I waited while she puzzled through the more advanced human concepts I presented to her still adapting mind. She nodded and turned to go, but stopped again.

“What about you? You do not look like them. Why is it that they treat you with respect?”

He shrugged.

“I look like I am from many lands. I let them surmise which one, then earned their respect through my prowess in battle. You will not be given such luxury no matter how good a fighter you turn out to be. Human males will assume they can take what they want from you. Until you learn to control this body, stay out of their grasp.”

She gave me a long look. I knew she intended to argue that humans were not a threat to either of them, but realized that in her weakened state I was right. At our full power, entities could outmatch any ill-meaning human, but limited by a human form and diminished power, she would need to develop more human tactics for personal defense.

“Are you sure you will not remain here and work *with* me? We could put aside our differences for the good of our people.”

That was the wrong thing to say. She snatched the reins from my hand with such viciousness that the horse beneath her stamped and pawed at the snow, throwing its head with an anxious snort.

“Do not speak to me of the good of our people. If you knew what that was, I would not be here. The next time I contact you will be after the Barrier has fallen.”

And she was gone. Riding off into the West on a stolen horse. I breathed in the frigid air. Stupid. If she actually wanted to save their kind, she would have asked how many of the Keys I had already found. She would have asked even *what* the Keys were, then demanded I transfer all of this knowledge to her.

Back home, there was always something off to me about the entity's energy. Now she was here. I did not trust the intentions she had voiced and worried she would become more of a hindrance than an asset. Was it possible an entity could be corrupted? There were tales among our kind, but it was so rare that the possibility had not occurred to me until now. What would this detachment from our kind do to her? And what was *I* supposed to do if she began to cause more harm than good?

Chapter 1

MINA

New York City, present day

“Do you feel that chill?”

The delicate hairs on my arms stand on end, but my best friend Elyse seemed unbothered, and wiped at the fake blood on her cleavage. If it weren't for the synthetic gore covering her from head to toe, she would be a knockout in her sequined diva dress. We had just finished our shift at the public library's haunted house and were gingerly wiping gobs of red-dyed corn syrup off our hair and bodies in the bathroom.

“I think you're getting a little too into the Halloween spirit, hon. Let's just get as much of this crap off now so we can go home and take showers. We have to do it all again tomorrow night and I need at least *some* sleep.”

I shrugged and went back to my paper towel bath. If I pressed the issue, she would probably just accuse me of going on one of my flights of fancy. I didn't feel like getting into that particular argument tonight. Elyse was a hardcore realist. She didn't believe in anything supernatural, whereas I was prone to strange insights and bizarre...insights.

When I was sure I wouldn't be dying any part of the subway car red, I grabbed the rest of my things and gratefully exited the New York public restroom whose stench and stains had nothing to do with seasonal decor.

Dad had not been happy when I told him I'd signed up to work the late shift at the library haunted house. In fact, unhappy was rather an understatement. He'd gone ballistic, shouting about the dangers of being out so late and riding the subway at that hour of the night.

Then, of course, I'd been forced to pull out the big guns to win the argument—I was nineteen, in college, and legally allowed to make my own decisions. One of which would include moving out and getting my own place if he didn't allow me to live like an adult. That always shut him up quick. Most parents tried to get their kids out of the house, but dad seemed to dread it. Besides, not many college students were fortunate enough to live in a Manhattan brownstone, rent free.

Walking down West 124th street to catch the 2-train downtown, the weird sensation from earlier grew stronger. I glanced behind me. There weren't many people around at this time of night, but the ones that were, kept their heads down. No one seemed to be taking a particular interest in us.

Normally, I got insights into people. I could read their intentions and whether or not they were being truthful. It was how I'd known Elyse meant well the day we met when she'd warned me my shoes clashed with my purse.

This was different. It was a cold, foreboding that nestled at the base of my skull. I was sure we were being watched, but there was no way to tell by whom.

I picked up my pace and caught up to Elyse, linking my arm with hers.

"Thanks for doing this with me," I said, "I can really use the money—Dad would never support me traveling without him, and I didn't know how else to raise the funds for the semester abroad. But I didn't want to do this by myself."

“No problem. I’ve had my eye on the new Coach line. After this, I’ll be eighty percent of the way to a delicious-looking, leather-studded, medium-sized bag. A few more babysitting gigs and I’ll be good to go. Then, I won’t have to sigh longingly whenever I pass it in the store window.”

I laughed. Elyse had not met a goal yet that she couldn’t achieve. Her tenacity—as well as her lust for fashion—was unmatched.

We descended down to the platform just in time to hop on the train—a New York miracle. As the doors closed, I scanned everyone around us. Eyes flicked over our ridiculous dresses without a second glance. No one stood out to me, but the nagging feeling didn’t go away.

Elyse was talking to me. *Pay attention, Mina.*

“—so, then I told him, if he couldn’t handle that, then we probably wouldn’t work out.”

“What? You broke up with Evan?” Elyse and Evan were one of those campus power couples. Everyone knew them and you rarely saw one without the other.

“Yes! Pay attention.”

I was an awful friend. I’d been so worried about a feeling that may or may not be real, that I hadn’t noticed how devastated my best friend was. No wonder she’d been short with me earlier.

“I’m really sorry, El. It’s been a weird night.”

She snorted. “No kidding.”

“Do we need to put ants in his underwear drawer?”

That got a laugh.

“No, no. We’re just going to plot his ultimate destruction.”

“Oh, okay. Well, good. I thought you were going to do something drastic.”

I was a little worried that she meant what she said. Elyse didn't like when people crossed her. I still wasn't sure exactly what Evan had done, so I didn't want to weigh in for fear of unleashing her anger in my direction.

The train screeched to a stop, and we exited quickly, hurrying up the steps onto our cute, tree-lined street. Elyse and I lived on opposite ends of the same block from one another, so we didn't say goodnight until we reached my place.

I gave her a tight hug. “I'll call you tomorrow and we'll start plotting revenge, okay?”

Her eyes welled up a little as she nodded. My tough, take-no-prisoners friend was really hurting. Shit. I was the worst.

Before I could say anything else, she jumped back down my front steps and hurried further down the street. I remained where I was. A minute later, I saw her distant figure hop up her own steps, unlock the front door, and flash the porch lights.

Best friend duties complete for the night, I unlocked my own door and entered into the cozy front hall. Thick carpets muffled my footsteps on the original wood flooring. My father had inherited this house when his maternal grandmother passed away. He was her only grandchild, so everything had gone to him, including the priceless brownstone in the heart of the city.

We had moved here when I was six because of dad's job as a professor at Columbia. I loved this old place and couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

ALEJANDRO

New York City, present day

Mamá was in deep conversation with the man we traveled thousands of miles to see. She wouldn't leave me at home despite the fact that I'm a grown man of twenty-two. Apparently, things were heating up amongst the different factions of the Society, and as a Key, my life was in danger.

She needed to deliver a message to the man, Benjamin, I thought his name was. His daughter was like me. Cursed by something her ancestors did more than four thousand years ago. I'd never met another Key. Never been able to look into someone's eyes and know without a shadow of a doubt that they knew what I was going through.

But she was not here.

Because she went to a normal, non-magical college and had a normal, non-magical job. The sudden ache that filled me at the thought of leaving all of this doom and dire responsibility behind was crippling.

I turned away from the other two in the room to peruse the bookshelves so neither of them could see my face. That poor girl. She'd lived a mostly happy, unremarkable life for nineteen years. As soon as she got home from work and walked through that front door, it would all be ripped to pieces. Her world would never be the same.

I hated the bubble of envy that filled me as I thought about what her life had been like up until that point. Don't get me wrong. I loved magic. I loved being able to do things that other people couldn't. But the weight of being a Key³ had been with me since my uncle

³ This concept of a bloodline holding power was inspired by the descendants of the priests (*kohanim*) still holding a special place in synagogue life even today. In this case, it is not passed down from father to son, but from closest relative to closest relative.

died in that car crash ten years ago. I'd been a Key longer than not, and lost any sense of being a normal kid growing up in the Society at the same time I also lost my father. He'd been in the car with my uncle, who'd been drunk and angry that he couldn't go anywhere alone. My father had been there to protect him. And my uncle had killed him and cursed me with the same breath—his last.

The sound of the door opening pulled me from my maudlin thoughts and caused the three of us to turn toward the door. All the breath flew out of me.

Mina Voorsanger was not a sweet young girl as my mother had implied. She was a woman from head to toe. *Díos*. Thick dark hair, wide soulful eyes, and that creamy skin. My self-pity washed away as lust took over.

Then I noticed what she was wearing.

A tight blue dress that hugged every one of her wicked curves, and it was covered in...

Was that blood?

"Mina." Her father's voice caused her to drop her stuff with a loud thud. She rounded the corner fully, and peered into the study. Her eyes flicked first to her father, then my mother, before finally landing on me. I almost purred when those stunning greenish orbs latched onto me, giving a once over that told me she liked what she saw.

I leaned into the bookshelf in a careless slouch, locking her eyes with mine.

That's right preciosa, I can do all those things you're thinking and more.

It wasn't arrogance—though her mind had good natural shielding, and I wasn't touching her like I usually had to in order to read someone's mind—for some reason I still picked up

Otherwise, because it is descendents from a specific person and not a whole tribe, there would have been a risk of some of these bloodlines dying out.

a few salacious images from her surprised thoughts. I couldn't stop the grin that spread over my lips. I knew I should steer clear, but it would still be fun to flirt with her.

"Mina." Her father said again, this time rising from the chair where he'd been conversing with *Mamá*. I tried to ignore the empty feeling that filled me as she moved her gaze to rest upon her father. Reading glasses perched on the end of his hawk-like nose; Benjamin Voorsanger was the stereotype of "Dad." He even had the disapproving glare down pat. I didn't miss the sidelong glance he tossed my way.

Right. Off limits. Got it.

"Hey, Dad! *Shabbat shalom*," she said. Damn it. Even her voice was sexy. I should most definitely steer clear.

Benjamin's eyes took in Mina's "blood-stained" costume, and he sighed. "How was the haunting tonight? Did you go to services at the Hillel beforehand?"

"*Spooktacular!*" She joked, as if hoping it would lighten the air of Dad Disapproval. He rolled his eyes and she sighed. "You know, for a literature professor, your lack of appreciation for a good pun leaves something to be desired. But yeah, I did. My favorite cantor was off tonight, though, so it was a bit boring."

"Mina, I'm really not comfortable with this."

"Me going to services without you or making puns?."

"You know what I mean. I'm glad you're getting involved with the Jewish community on campus. That's not the issue. The issue is that this is a dangerous city that only gets *more* dangerous at night."

"Dad, *every* city is dangerous at night if you're not careful. I *am*. And I had Elyse with me. The girl is nearly six feet tall."

She suddenly adopted a thick New York accent I'd only heard in movies and TV, and pointed her finger as if it was gnarled with age. "You know, if she were a candle on the menorah, she'd be the shamash. Such a helpful and tall beacon." I bit back a chuckle as her voice switched back to normal. "But seriously, Dad. Nobody messes with her."

I watched their banter with amusement. The deep love between these two was evident. When *Mamá* and I glanced at each other during their back and forth, I watched her lips quirk up and knew she was thinking the same thing. It reminded me of the relationship I'd had with *Papá*.

I'm not jealous. Mina has lost a parent too. I'm not jealous.

"Are you going to introduce our guests?" She finally asked, turning toward my mother and I.

"Right," the other man said, bringing me out of my dark train of thought, "This is Maite and her son, Alejandro. Maite is an old friend of mine from before I met your mother. They came all the way from Spain to see us."

She nodded at my mother and me, then turned back to her father. "Ummm. Okay. It's kind of late. Are they staying here?"

"Yes. I—Mina, there are some things you need to know about me. And Maite. And your mother."

I watched the pain flash across the older man's face. It was clear this was not how he'd planned to reveal his daughter's heritage to her. If at all. Would he have kept her in the dark? I couldn't say. But I was sure tonight had never been in the cards.

When we'd knocked on his door an hour ago, the blank shock on his face had told me everything I needed to know. I would need to ask *Mamá* later when exactly was the last time they'd spoken.

He gestured for his daughter to sit in the cozy armchair he'd just vacated. He and *Mamá* sat on the couch on the other side of the tiny end table, leaving no seat for me. I walked over and leaned against the shelves next to the armchair where the beautiful *Señorita* Mina sat. As if I could protect her from the fear and betrayal she was about to experience.

I had no idea why it mattered to me how Mina felt. I didn't know her. I had no ties to her other than our mutual curse. But the ache in my bones told me I would throw myself on a sword to protect her.

Mierda.

Benjamin took a deep breath and began to speak, "You know how you have intuitions about people?"

Mina stiffened and I heard the panicked thought that flashed through her mind, *What the hell? Why would he bring that up in front of people? He's the one who told me to keep it secret at all costs!*

She glanced up at me and then to *Mamá* as if trying to tell her father to shut the hell up.

He noticed. "They're okay, Button. They're part of this."

"Part of what, exactly, Dad?" Her voice was clipped. Impatient. I didn't blame her.

And then Benjamin proceeded to tell her the history of the Society and our people. The fact that she was a Key. That she could do magic. That we all could. That there were factions of the Society who debated what to do with the Keys. That a minority faction

wanted her dead⁴, and that they were gaining traction because an entity had come through the Barrier and was wreaking havoc on the mortal realm.⁵

Her face had gotten paler as he spoke. *Mamá* interjected a few times when he left something out, but mostly the two of us remained silent. I thought at first that Mina might not believe him, but I could see puzzle pieces putting themselves together in her mind. It both chilled and excited me that I could see into her mind so clearly without touch. It shouldn't be possible, but the longer I spent in her presence, the clearer her thoughts became.

“Why—” she rasped, “why did you never tell me any of this before?”

Benjamin sighed, “I thought keeping you away from all of it was the best way to protect you. Being a part of it got your mother killed. I couldn't—”

Tears filled his eyes. I was suddenly very uncomfortable. I looked at *Mamá*, trying to signal that we needed to get out of here and give them some privacy. But she clasped Benjamin's hand. He gave her a grateful smile, but I saw Mina's eyes narrow at the physical contact. Mine did the same. I wished *Mamá* could read my thoughts so I could tell her to back off. But she was not gifted in the same way I was and stroked her thumb over Benjamin's hand while his daughter glared at the two of them.

⁴ This concept of a bloodline holding power was inspired by the descendants of the priests (*kohanim*) still holding a special place in synagogue life even today. In this case, it is not passed down from father to son, but from closest relative to closest relative. Otherwise, because it is descendants from a specific person and not a whole tribe, there would have been a risk of some of these bloodlines dying out.

⁵ Despite the fact that the original creators of the Barrier were ancient Hebrews, their descendants have not all remained Jewish given that roughly four thousand years have passed. Thus, the Society is a blend of cultures and methodologies on magic. This is possible because all cultures draw from the same Source, no matter how it is accessed.

Mina finally spoke again. “And them?” She tilted her head toward me. “They’ve come, what, to warn us of my impending doom?”

I spoke up, at last, wanting to take her glare off of my mother.

“Actually, that’s exactly why we’re here. The Extremist Faction is no longer just grumbling in the shadows as they used to, *querida*.” I couldn’t help when the endearment slipped out, and purposefully didn’t look at *Mamá* as I continued, “They are actively looking for you and the other Keys. You will need extra protection. And training. Knowing how to use your powers could be the difference between life and death if and when they find you.”

I stared into those blue-green eyes, trying to show my sincerity. Trying to make her see that whatever secrets her father had kept from her had been for her own good. That how she reacted now could make all the difference in her survival.

Now I realized that without thinking, I’d sat on the wide arm of her chair and taken her hand in a mirror image of our parents as I finished speaking. The shock of our skin touching blasted me with a jumble of her thoughts. Her confusion, fear, buzzing attraction—oh no. That was bad. Not allowed.

I got up and dropped her hand, flexing my fingers as if I could stretch the feel of her warm smooth hand away.

Mierda.

“So, what now?” She asked, wrenching her eyes from mine, and settling them back on her father. It was like being thrown from a warm bath and into a frigid winter storm. I wanted that gaze back on me.

Always on me.

Lust filled every pore, and she glanced back at me. Something sparkling in her eyes. Could she feel it too? Or was she picking up on something else?

Her father leaned forward. “Well, we need backup. I can’t protect you by myself. So, we’re going to see my father.”

“I have a grandpa?” She looked alarmed and even more hurt.

Benjamin flinched. “I haven’t spoken to him in many years. Not since before you were born. But he’s head of the US branch of the Society now and based in California. He will have resources to protect you and teach you that I don’t.”

She was silent for a moment, but I sensed her acquiescence a second before she said, “When do we leave?”

All three of us turned to Benjamin.

“Tomorrow night. I couldn’t get us flights until late.”

“What should I tell Elyse?”

Who the hell is Elyse?

Benjamin grimaced. “The less she knows, the better. We don’t want her getting mixed up in this.”

I saw Mina swallow and then lower her shoulders in defeat. “I don’t want to leave her right now with everything she’s going through, but I suppose I don’t have a choice.” The glare she cast toward her father again was sharp enough to cut glass.

Then the image of an angular face flashed across her mind. It was a man I felt like I should recognize. There was something about his eyes, but the image in Mina’s memory was too far away to figure it out. There was fear there. This man scared her. And intrigued her. He’d been watching her. She was thinking that her leaving would draw the man away

from Elyse. That he would follow *her*. For some reason, the thought of him following her didn't seem to scare her all that much. The damn girl was attracted to this creature.

I almost said something. If this man who at the very least could be an extremely powerful member of the Extremist Faction wanted her, then she was in more imminent danger than we'd thought. But I kept my mouth shut. I would confront her about it when our eagle-eyed parents weren't hovering. Perhaps I was over-reacting. Perhaps the man, though dangerous, was merely a run-of-the-mill stalker.

Chapter 2

MINA

New York City

The next day was Saturday, so I had to leave the house to avoid my father's frantic pacing and packing. It started to get on my nerves by midmorning, but I held out until early afternoon so I would not have to come back before my haunted house shift. I may have also felt a bit claustrophobic with Alejandro and Maite's electric personalities soaking up all the air in the room. I needed to get out.

"I'm going to meet Elyse for coffee, Dad!"

I was halfway out the door when I heard, "Wait!"

My father came running up. A normal Saturday would see him in jeans and a t-shirt, ink stains on one hand, and a cup of steaming coffee in the other. Today, he ran toward me with the same slacks and button down as yesterday. He still had the ink stains and coffee, but there was no sense of serenity, and the shirt was half untucked.

He ran a hand through his hair—an action it was clear from the state of it that he'd done many times this morning—and then thrust an oblong object in my hand.

"Here," he said, "take this so you at least have some protection while you're out. I want you home the minute your shift ends. Do you understand?"

I glanced down at the object in my hands.

“Um Dad, this is a dagger. What am I supposed to do with this?” The weapon looked old. A worn black leather sheath boasted carvings of a beautiful script I recognized as Hebrew, while the hilt crawled with silver vines.

“You stab anyone who gets too close.”

I looked up, shocked. My peaceful bookish father was telling me to stab someone. His blue-gray eyes held dark circles and as mine connected with his, I realized just how terrified he was. I felt guilty for wanting this time with Elyse.

“Dad, I’ll call Elyse. We can just go—”

“No. You were right. You can’t just cut her out of your life. Besides, I didn’t realize last night how complicated it would be to find coverage for undergraduate classes. Especially the senior seminars. I can’t leave them with no one. Just come straight home. And don’t hesitate to use that.”

I look down at the dagger once more, squinting at the Hebrew letters. There were none of the little telltale vowel dots beneath or beside the letters, so my once-a-week Hebrew school education would not suffice here.

“What does it say?”

“*V’haser sátan milfaneinu u’machareinu.*”

“*V’*—wait—*sátan*? Like, Satan?”

Dad chuckled.

“No. This is older than that. It’s a line from one of our shabbat prayers. It means roughly, ‘protect us from the *evil forces* in front of and behind us. Jews tend to view Satan as a

concept representing chaos or disorder rather than an actual creature sent to corrupt mankind.”⁶

“Oh. Well, those are high hopes for a little dagger.”

His smile was genuine when he said, “You’d be surprised.”

There was a moment when I thought he’d say more, but Elyse appeared on the stoop behind me.

“Ready to go? Hey Mr. V!”

Dad quickly slid the dagger into my tote before she could see it.

“Hi, Elyse. Be careful, girls.”

“Bye, Dad. Love you.”

He watched us walk down the steps and down the street before closing the door.

“Is your dad okay? He seemed stressed.”

I felt a twinge in my neck as the tension wrenched tighter. It was time to tell her. But what could I possibly say? *I* didn’t even know what was going on.

“Um. He’s fine, I think. Tell me more about what happened with Evan.”

Crisis averted for now. I’d bought myself some time as Elyse opened the floodgates. Would she ever forgive me for leaving her?

“You’ve been quiet all night,” Elyse said. We were back in the same bathroom as the night before, once more wiping the gore off our chests, hands, and faces. “What’s going on? By now, you should have offered to dismember Evan in twelve different ways.”

⁶ This line is from the daily prayer liturgy. Found in the *Hashkiveinu* prayer. References to Satan as a corrupting force in Talmud Bavli Shabbat 89a.

I winced and threw away the defiled paper towels before turning to face her. “Something...happened, and Dad and I have to go away for a while.”

“Something—what happened?”

“I—don’t really know. Dad won’t tell me much.” There. The truth. And now she wouldn’t blame me for ditching her at a vulnerable moment.

Elyse, ever astute, took my arm and forced me to look up into her eyes. “Are you safe?”

My eyes got watery looking up into the swirling ochre ones above me. These were the eyes of my sister. I loved her more than almost anyone in the world. If I was in danger, she shouldn’t be anywhere near me, shouldn’t be involved. Whatever this was, it had nothing to do with her.

“Of course,” I lied.

“How long is a while?”

“What?”

“You said ‘Dad and I have to go away for a while’, so how long is a while? Will you be back before Chanukah?” Her normally steady voice rose in pitch by the time she finished her sentence. I cringed.

“I don’t know.”

She was opening her mouth to question me further when the fluorescent lights above us flickered, making that eerie horror movie zing. The sensation from yesterday was back too. I skimmed the far stalls. I had thought we were alone, but—was that a shadow in the farthest stall?

I bent down to see if I could see someone’s shoes. Nothing.

Uh-uh. Nope. I’d seen this movie. I was out.

“Come on,” I said, grabbing Elyse’s arm. “Let’s walk and talk.”

I barely gave her enough time to grab her bag before herding her out the door and down the stairs. Passing ghosts, ghouls, and fake spiderwebs, Elyse and I wound our way out of the haunted maze.

We were almost to the door—I’d avoided Elyse’s attempts to resume the conversation thus far—when I noticed a tall, gorgeous man who looked to be in his thirties standing by what tomorrow would turn from a large coffin back into the circulation desk.

The head librarian, Regina, was telling him, “I’m sorry, Sir. The haunted house is closed, and this was its last night. You’ll have to return next year.”

The man looked like he was about to reply, but his head snapped up and our eyes met.

And I was immediately falling. There was no ground beneath my feet. The air was stolen from my lungs, and I knew nothing but the eyes of the man in front of me. I fell so fast and so far, I didn’t know which way was up. Nor did I feel Elyse tugging on my arm or register her whispering with increasing concern for me to “move my ass”.

In those eyes was all of Creation. I swore I could see galaxies. It was as if the very stuff that made up the world was swirling in the captivating orbs. Something in my chest tugged with an emotion I couldn’t place. Because even as confounding as those eyes were, there was something about *him*. A closeness that beckoned. I was so blinded to everything else; I couldn’t even read the expression on his face as he continued to hold my gaze.⁷

⁷ Mina can see the entity in his true form through his eyes. This is elaborated on further throughout the novel. However, Mina’s unique reaction to him implies that they have a connection beyond her status as a Key. Most others throughout the novel who are able to witness his true form become immediately terrified as most Biblical encounters with angels involve them scaring the humans who see them. Enoch’s true form is based on Biblical descriptions of angels from *Ezekiel* Ch. 1.

If I was in danger, oh well. There was no way I'd be saving myself right now.

A particularly forceful shove from Elyse broke the trance. I stumbled more toward the doors and was forced to look down at my feet. Clarity collided with fear, and I didn't dare take another look at the man. I was terrified. For a moment, I'd completely lost myself.

"Come on, M. Let's go!" It was Elyse's turn to drag me behind her. "Who the hell was that? Do you know him? Why was he staring at you like that? Hello? Earth to Wilhelmina!"

I took a deep breath and focused on the sounds around me to gain my bearings once more. Here in South Harlem, I could hear horns honking, ceremonial drums, and shouts crisscrossing the wide streets. There was so much more movement and life here than the hushed streets of the Upper West Side where Elyse and I lived, but I couldn't see any of it.

"*Mina.*" Elyse was getting impatient.

"S-sorry. I don't know. I don't know *him*. Can we please just leave before he comes out?"

Thankfully, Elyse had not wanted to brave the subway after 10PM on a Saturday night and called a ride share. It turned the corner as I asked the question and we piled in, me practically falling on Elyse when I saw the man step out of the doors of the library. I caught a glimpse of the dark brown, windswept hair and cut-glass cheekbones before the car sped away.

The ride home was tense.

"Does this strange creepy-yet-hot man have anything to do with why you and your dad are going away?"

“I—” How much should I tell her? I didn’t want to put her in danger, but the thing watching me had already seen her. How much more harm could it do? *Wait. Thing? It was a man watching me. Wasn’t it?* “Yes. I think so. I don’t have a lot of details yet, ‘Lyse.”

She heaved a frustrated sigh, but seemed content to not take the conversation further. We rode home in silence. I watched the Northern Woods of Central Park fly by to my left, wondering as I always did when encountering the least tame part of the park, what Manhattan must have been like before Europeans arrived and *everywhere* was untamed. Falling into that man’s eyes had been like glimpsing the past, present, and future of all things at once, and for the first time I felt as if I could truly picture a Manhattan without *Manhattan*.

Wild notions of ancient trees and steep cliffs spun through my mind. I was so deep in my thoughts that I didn’t notice when the car pulled in front of my house. My father, who must have been waiting at the front door, rushed down the steps and opened the car door.

“Let’s go, Mina. We have to get to the airport.”

Elyse popped out the other side and the car pulled away.

“Are you guys okay, Mr. V?”

My dad pulled my best friend into a tight hug. “We’ll be fine, Elyse. We have to go away for a while though. Take care of yourself. Okay, hun?”

“Uh yeah. You, too.” My poor friend looked so bewildered. If I didn’t know better, I’d say there were tears at the corners of her eyes. Elyse was too tough for tears though and instead turned and wrapped me in a bone crushing hug.

“Love you, M.”

“You too, E.”

“Text me, okay?”

I nodded, but made no promise. I didn’t know what my immediate future held, but if Dad and I were going on the run, it was unlikely I’d get the opportunity.

She glanced between the two of us one more time before jogging back to her own stoop and disappearing into the house. When I saw the porch lights flash twice before turning off, I got a lump in my throat.

“Let’s go, Button.” My Dad spoke soothingly and put a hand on my shoulder. “The car is almost here, and you need to change. Maite and Alejo have already left. They will meet us there.”

I glanced down at my stained costume.

“Right.”

And as I marched back into the only home I’d ever known; I couldn’t help but feel as if I was walking back into that vast realm of the unknown.

ENOCH

New York City, present day in the mortal realm

I threw the ornate lamp across the room, and it shattered against the stuffed bookshelves. Colored glass rained everywhere. She wasn’t here. It had taken nearly eighty years, but tonight, I had glimpsed the final Key in person once more. She was young—barely more than a child.

And now, she was gone.

When I'd looked into her eyes, she had been able to see me in my truest form. No human, not even other Keys had ever done that. It had been millennia since anyone had come close. Such power and natural affinity for the Sight.

And something else. Something about her beckoned me to take a closer look in a more human, more carnal sense. I was pulled to her by forces even *I* couldn't understand.

And then there was her untamed, raw, delicious power. I had never heard of a human being left untrained by the Society, but this girl had no discipline yet. It made her both a danger to herself and others.

I continued to search the house for any clue as to where they might have gone. When I got to the girl's sleeping quarters, I was abhorred by the clash of strange images on the walls and the stuffed toys that sat gathering dust on the shelves and bed. Despite the assault to my eyes, I dug in every drawer, unearthing what looked to be old journals, but there was nothing. No evidence of where they had gone or that she was the Key at all.

It was clear to me that she didn't know who or what she was. She'd sensed me and *seen* me, but there was enough shock in that sensation that I could confirm she was untrained. Her father, however, *had* known. The power leaking off that man was strong for a human of this time, but I had also sensed protection spells from many others. It was the only reason they'd been able to escape. The unassuming professor and his friends had blocked my ability to track the girl, essentially blinding me.

They were powerful and effective spells, but costly. Soon, the man would tire and have to ease back to preserve his life force. When he did, I would be ready.

This woman wasn't just a tool I needed to solve a millennia old curse. She was mine. I would follow whatever this feeling was until I knew why she had such a deep hold on me.

And then, she would be mine for good.

Chapter 3

MINA*Somewhere on the West Coast*

“Dad, stop! We’ve been driving this weird pattern for the last two hours. If anyone was following, they would have stopped by now because you’ve probably made them motion sick.”

“I’m sorry, Button. Let’s go check into the hotel, take some hot showers, then I’ll explain everything over dinner.”

“Dad...I saw *something*. ”

“*Something?*”

“It was a man—I think. His eyes were like...forever.” That was the closest I could get to the feeling of looking into that stranger’s eyes. “Wh-what was that?”

My father’s face paled, and he gripped the steering wheel tighter. After taking a deep breath to calm himself down, he said, “Oh, love. There’s so much to tell you. And I promise I will. Let’s just get somewhere safe first.”

I sat back into the crisp leather seats of the rental car. I couldn’t wait to hear my dad’s explanation. I was trying really hard right now to be understanding and just do what I was told, but it had been increasingly hard over the last hour.

We were still fairly near LAX by my estimation. Maybe closer to Santa Monica. Dad had only taken me here once as a kid, but some of the place names that flashed by on signs looked familiar.

The hotel we eventually pulled up to was nicer than I expected from our being on the run. Dad and I had never really gone on vacation before though, so I wasn't really sure *what* to expect. I still wasn't sure what we were running from; Dad's reaction to what I told him had been way out of proportion, but the strange man and the sensations he caused were gone. Now, all I wanted to know was what the *hell was going on*.

Dad's phone rang and he snatched it up, switching off of the car's Bluetooth immediately. He sat rigidly, with one foot out the door as soon as the person on the other end started speaking.

"Yes, we're here. No, not tonight. I have to tell her the truth. She deserves to know what really happened to Abby—what's going to happen to *her* if she's not careful. No, I won't tell you that yet. I want time to explain. I understand that, but you aren't giving me much of a choice. She's a child, for all she's nineteen. You can't—"

He slammed the end call button with way more force than necessary. My vocabulary was now reduced to three words.

"What. The. Hell."

Dad burst out of the car and began unloading our bags from the trunk. He was ignoring me.

I climbed out and grabbed my bag from him.

"Dad! Tell me what is going on right now! What was all that stuff about Mom? Explain what to me?"

I was making a scene in the hotel parking lot. I knew it was a bad idea, but I was at the end of my rope.

I could feel tears gathering in my eyes. My throat constricted as I tried to speak, but Dad just turned and entered the hotel, leaving me standing aghast by the open trunk of the car. The frustration and rage caused the tears to spill over, and I hated myself for that. I hated that any strong emotion and I became a fountain.

Slamming the trunk, I wiped my eyes and followed Dad. By the time I got all the way across the massive gilded and marble lobby, Dad was turning away from the front desk with keys in hand.

He jerked his head at me to follow him and stalked over to the elevators. Looking at his face, I noticed there were lines etched into his forehead and cheeks that hadn't been there before I'd opened my stupid mouth and this whole thing had started.

When we were almost to our floor Dad turned to me and spoke. I was expecting an apology or the beginning of an explanation, but all he said was, "Here's your key. I got us adjoining rooms because I know you like your privacy, and I wanted at least something about this to be easy on you."

The elevator dinged and he was off again, leaving me to exit the elevator at a more reasonable pace.

I put my stuff down on the rigid mattress. I sat down and stared at the door to the adjoining room—the room where my father was alone with all of his secrets.

Anger bubbled up again. How could he keep secrets from me? We were closer than that. At least, I'd *thought* we were. The man was an English Literature professor, for God's sake. What did he have to keep secret? Except there was that whole thing about coming from a

secret world of wizards and magic. Oh, and the super-hot ex-girlfriend with her smoke show son. That too.

I don't know how long I sat there, but after a while, a soft knock sounded on the adjoining door. I debated not answering out of spite. It would serve him right. But I was too curious to put off his explanation any longer.

When I opened the door, he looked worse than before. I didn't remember much about when Mom died, but I imagine the expression on his face then and now were similar.

Oh boy. Here we go.

"Do you want to order room service or go down to the restaurant?"

"Restaurant," I said.

He seemed relieved, like he knew my reasoning. Given that he could read me better than anyone, he probably did.

The hotel restaurant was so generic, it almost hurt. Faux columns framed poorly painted images of Ancient Rome—or maybe it was Greece—and fake plants were placed strategically around the room. The hotel's beige and gold theme continued in there as well. It made me miss home; the lush darkness of the cherry paneling and the vibrant colored blankets and throw pillows accenting everything. This was a place of transience and anonymity. *Perfect for a chat between two fugitives to meet up and discuss their next heist*, I thought, but what we were fugitives *of* I still couldn't say.

We sat and ordered. As soon as the waiter was gone, I leveled Dad with a stare that could peel the caked paint off the walls.

He gritted his teeth, but reached into his pocket and sprinkled some sort of herb concoction on the table in front of us while murmuring words I couldn't hear. The sounds of the restaurant seemed to muffle, as if we were in our own little bubble.

Then, he finally started talking.

"I was hoping to tell you this after graduation, but since that's only seven months away, I guess now is as good a time as any."

I tapped the table impatiently. We waited in silence as the waiter entered our cocoon and placed our food in front of us. He sensed the tension between us rather than the magic that was keeping us from being overheard, and backed away without asking if we had everything we needed. It was just as well, not even the side of ranch I had asked for but didn't get was going to make these fries taste good right now.

I raised an eyebrow, a signal to begin.

"Your mother—her death—it wasn't an accident."

I gasped. "What? What are you saying?"

"As Alejo and Maite mentioned back in New York, there is one person in that side of the family that has a certain *importance*. They're called a Key. When one dies, another one takes over. Your mother was one of those people. It's why she moved around a lot as a young woman. When we got married, she changed her last name, hoping that would cover her tracks. And it did. For a time.

We settled down in Boston. Eventually, those looking for her caught up. There are some, like most of my family, who wanted to hide and protect her, but others thought the world would be safer if she died. No one knew about you yet, so they thought the line would end with her."

“Wait, what was so special about Mom and the other Keys that their deaths would affect the entire world?”

“I’ll get there. Hang on. So, when she realized they found her, we began packing, hoping to escape before they got to us. But we were too late. She was coming home from the store, having picked up some supplies for the road.” He stopped for a second and swallowed harshly.

Neither of us had touched our food. I couldn’t focus on anything else. The restaurant, the other people, LA itself had faded. There was nothing else but this conversation.

“I was waiting with you at home. Our bags were packed, sitting by the door. Just like—just like yesterday. When she was late—I knew they’d gotten her. We couldn’t—we couldn’t even bury her properly. I had to leave it to distant relatives. The thought of *them* saying *kaddish* over her grave instead of me—instead of us—still makes me ill. That should be our job. She was *my* wife. *Your* mother...” He choked off for a second, pulling himself together as much as he could. “But we could never visit her grave. They would know who you were immediately and come after you.”

A single tear rolled down Dad’s cheek. He reached over with his napkin and wiped tears I hadn’t noticed from my own cheeks. *Oh my God. That’s why he looked so panicked when I got home from the library with Elyse earlier today before the flight.*

He cleared his throat and continued in a voice that was huskier than before, “I put everything in the car, and got the hell out of Boston. With your mother’s death, you were now one of the most sought-after people in the world. We went to New York. The house is still in my grandmother’s name, so I knew they wouldn’t be able to trace my movements.

If you've ever wondered why I pay cash for everything, well that's why. I wanted us to disappear. And we did. For twelve years."

"Then how did they find me now?"

"You're nineteen, which means that your natural...abilities...are developing.⁸ You leave a sort of...scent. People who know what to look for can sense it and track you down. I've been doing my best to cover it up, but well, it's powerful. *You* are powerful."

"Ummm..." I narrowly stopped myself from sniffing under my arm. I had a *scent*? What the hell did that mean? "Dad, I think you're leaving out some crucial bits of information here." I didn't doubt that I had some sort of power. My "insights" had been happening for as long as I could remember. Was he telling me there was more? *I* could do more?

"Yes, well. I can give you the basics, but tomorrow I'm going to take you somewhere. They can explain things better."

"Okay, go on."

"There is something called the Barrier. It is a powerful force that protects our world from a group of beings that like to feed off of humans.⁹ Thousands of years ago, your ancestor and six others trapped those beings behind the Barrier by pooling their power together. Afterwards, they formed a society amongst themselves to keep watch. And to protect the Keys."

"The Keys? You said I'm a Key."

⁸ In Hebrew, the number representing "life" or *chai* is eighteen. In the novel, most people within the Society come into their power at eighteen, thus, starting a new life.

⁹ The entities, based on Biblical angels, require a connection to humanity to survive. There is a midrash that says the angels were jealous of Moses' ability to contact the Divine. "Born of woman, flesh of man, who is he to seek divinity?" So too is there contention between the entities and humans. Some deal with it better than others.

“Yes, when they formed the spell, they had to root it in something that would not fade with time. Objects can erode and humans die, but humans are special because we can continue living through our progeny.”

He was in full-on professor mode now. It was preferable to the heart-broken anguish from a few moments ago, so I didn’t call him out on speaking like a dictionary.

“They anchored the spell in the bloodlines of the seven original casters because spells always work better when performed by those who created them. When those seven died, it passed to their eldest child and so on. But the spell had unforeseen consequences on those families. Each generation only ever gave birth to one child, male or female didn’t matter. Once they held the mantle of Key, they could only have one child.”

“So that’s why I don’t have any aunts or uncles on Mom’s side?”

“Yes.

“And your side?”

“Why mess with perfection?” he said in a lame attempt at levity. “Anyway, the other caveat was that six of the bloodlines would be dormant while the first was active. If the first Key were to be unlocked, the second would come into its power. It was meant as a precaution to keep anyone from sensing and wiping out all seven bloodlines, but it also meant those hunting your mother—you—would be focused on only one target at a time. At least, that is how it was supposed to go until such a time as the Barrier needed to come down. Then all seven Keys could gain their powers at the same time. It seems the universe has decided the Barrier may need to come down because you are coming into your power.”

Magic powers? Spells? Was my dad cracked?

“Dad, what do you mean by power? And what do you mean the Barrier *needed* to come down? And what exactly is *your* role in all of this? Other than being my father, of course.”

He chuckled at that. It felt good to lighten things up a bit. My head was already spinning with information.

“My ancestors were among the original group that voted to cast the spell though they were not part of the casting itself. Since that time, anyone directly descended from my line and others like it exhibits certain abilities and they become part of the Society, which still exists today. When they turn eighteen, they are trained and then placed strategically to protect one of the Keys. I didn’t expect to fall in love with your mother, but, well, how could I stop myself?”

I smiled at the misty look that came over his face, but asked the question that was nearly burning a hole in my tongue. “So, what powers am I supposed to have? What about my training? Why didn’t you tell me about this before? Wait. What am I saying? Dad, how am I supposed to believe all of this?”

He rested his forehead in his hands and was about to respond when the tentative waiter approached our table again. His presence broke our focus, and sounds around us started to filter toward my ears again.

“I noticed you haven’t touched your food, is everything okay?” Came the inevitable question.

“Yes, yes,” said Dad, “we’re just having an important discussion.” The implication was clear: *Leave*.

The waiter blushed and disappeared again. The bubble was back. How was Dad controlling it?

“Anyway, Keys can do many different things. They’re generally the most powerful magic practitioners of our age, because they are a conduit to the other side—where the magic comes from. Your mother could do amazing things, but had to stifle herself for protection. As to your training, we were hoping you would never need it. And I didn’t tell you because I wanted you to have a normal life. I didn’t want you to live in fear. It was bad enough you were going to grow up without a mom. I couldn’t take your childhood too.”

I softened a bit at that, but couldn’t let go of my resentment completely. There was a whole part of my life he’d concealed from me. He’d *lied* about Mom’s death.

“And the *magic*?”

“We call it the Source. It’s the essence that runs through all living things.¹⁰ All humans have it, though some—like us—can channel better. And the creatures on the other side of the Barrier are entirely made up of it. They feed on our essence to sustain themselves, which is why the Barrier was built.

“Wait so they, like, suck out our souls?”

“Not really. They consume our essence, but it can be replenished. Though the Council will tell you different and our ancestors believed so, the act of feeding from us doesn’t have to harm us unless they want it to.

Nevertheless, they have managed to get a few of their kind through to our world over the last few thousand years, and been especially brutal in their pursuit of the Keys. I believe

¹⁰ Lurianic Kabbalah states that a vessel full of the Divine essence shattered and shards of that vessel now fill every living thing. This was the basis for the Source in the novel, except it is taken a step further and people can use the shard within them if they are intuitive enough to tap into that level of consciousness.

that's who was following you, given your description of his eyes. No human eyes could ever do that. “

I thought of the man with the infinity eyes and blanched. Then he was *ancient*. And I was a crucial piece he needed to accomplish his goal and save his kind. I thought of the way I'd felt utterly consumed by him, lost, no more Mina, and shuddered. *Avoid the beautiful man with the forever eyes that wants to eat my soul. Got it.*

“We've been following their movements and noticed that there is one who tends to start long and viciously bloody wars in search of the Key. If they get close enough to a person, they can influence them subtly. That creature has induced some of the worst moments in history. Anyway, you were sensing the presence of one of those beings—which one, I can't be sure. You are the final thing they need to begin taking down the Barrier. If they ever got a hold of you, their kind would be unleashed on the humans, and it would be disastrous for all of us after the thousands of years of near starvation we've put them through. I don't want to think what that many years of pent-up resentment has done to those entities.”

I pondered that.

“Is that why some of the people in your society wanted Mom dead? Want *me* dead? If I died, wouldn't that end the spell too because it wouldn't be anchored to anything anymore?”

Dad looked at me with pride. Apparently, I was catching on quick. “They are a small, but persistent faction. The truth is, no one actually knows what would happen. Lesser spells die out or transfer to the nearest object of the same kind. But with a spell of this magnitude, it's impossible to tell. It took fifty lives when the original was cast. If a Key died without a successor, that untethered power might kill whoever it tried to latch onto next.”

“So, what you’re saying is I need to have a baby to ensure the succession.”

Dad’s horrified expression was priceless, and I couldn’t help the laughter that burst out. My head fell back, and I felt tears of laughter gather at the corners of my eyes. This was all so ridiculous. “Oh my God, Dad! Your face! That was amazing!” I wiped my eyes and laughed some more.

He frowned at me. “Please don’t ever speak to me about you getting pregnant. That’s a nightmare I don’t think I could live through.”

More laughter bubbled out and I took my first bite. The sandwich was cold now, but it was just good to be back in familiar father-daughter territory.

Chapter 4

MINA*Somewhere in LA*

Dad was back to not telling me things. We'd been riding in the car for over an hour, and he still wouldn't say where we were going. At this point, we were well North of the city, cruising along a highway. This time, though, I let silence reign. He looked so tense, and I wondered how long it had been since Dad had actually had to confront these people.

The rest of dinner last night, I peppered him with question after question about what he called "the Society." How they worked, who was a member, the basics. I'd always known my mom's family held a sort of distinction in synagogue because they were Cohens, supposedly descended from the priests that tended the Ark of the Covenant. Nowadays, in a Reform synagogue it didn't really hold that much weight, but people still looked at you differently if you revealed you were of that lineage.

I had never really pushed the issue because, living in New York City, I was by no means the only Cohen descendent in the room—like, ever. Also, I was a *female* Cohen born of a *female* Cohen, thus my claim to that title was next to nil.

So, to hear that my ancestors were not only ancient priests, but some sort of multi-dimensional wizards as well, should have surprised me more. It didn't really, but that didn't mean I wasn't going to try to learn everything I could.

I watched the ocean whizz by out the front windshield. At least something good was coming out of being on the run: this scenic drive along California's Route 1 was absolutely stunning. I imagined driving along this road forever. We would never reach our destination; we would just keep going.

Dad looked even more tired than yesterday. I'd offered to drive, but he laughed and flat out refused. I had my license, but living in the city meant I could count on two hands the number of times I'd actually gotten behind a wheel in the three years since my sixteenth birthday.

But I was worried about him. His shoulders were hunched, the lines of his face deeper than ever, and his knuckles were white where they gripped the steering wheel. Something was wrong, and not just the obvious stress of fearing for your daughter's life.

It took another four hours to reach our destination: San Francisco. I marveled at the difference between the two cities. LA was vibrant and gritty, beckoning people to look past its ugliness and find the hidden adventure. San Francisco was picturesque, like a painting, but there was something sinister lurking beneath the rolling hills and shimmering water. I didn't know if that was just my apprehension of meeting members of the Society, but I immediately wanted to go back the way we came.

We pulled up to another hotel. The lady at the front desk gave Dad a weird look for paying with a prepaid card and giving the name John Smith, but she took down the information and handed us our room keys.

"Enjoy your stay, Mr. Smith."

She looked at me and I could tell she was trying to gauge whether this was my dad or whether I was a too young woman running away with a much older man. I had to disabuse

her of that gross idea, so I said loudly as we walked away, “I’m starving, Dad. Can we go get Mexican food?”

“Maybe later. We have to go meet with your grandfather first.”

That got my attention. I stopped worrying about the front desk lady. The elevator doors swished shut and once again, Dad didn’t elaborate.

“Excuse me?”

I knew that Mom’s parents were long dead so that left Dad’s. He told me he hadn’t spoken to them since before he married Mom. Honestly, most of this whole time, I’d forgotten I had living grandparents. After what Dad told me about them, I wasn’t all that eager to meet them.

“Uh yes. I *did* say my family was involved with all of this. Dad is the current leader of the US chapter.”

“Oh. Woohoo. Family Reunion.” Dad smiled at my sarcasm and squeezed my shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Squirt. I’ll try to make it painless as possible. We’ll get in there, tell them what’s going on, then get orders on where to go next and get out of dodge.”

I nodded. But then I thought, “Wait. ‘Where to go next.’ We can’t go back to New York?”

“I’m sorry, Mina. I thought you understood. Your life is in danger.” He pointed to the cell phone I held in my hand. “You’re going to have to leave that in the room and when we leave San Francisco, you can’t take it with you.”

My thoughts turned to Elyse. I’d been avoiding her frantic texts for an update for days now, but last night she’d sent me one that broke my heart: **If you can’t be bothered to even respond to a text message, maybe you don’t need me as a friend anymore.**

“Dad! Elyse thinks I just ditched her! I can’t just drop off the map and never speak to her again! She just broke up with Evan! I can’t—”

“You can and you will. Besides, leaving her behind will keep her safe. You don’t want to involve her in this, Mina.”

My vision blurred with tears, and I hung my head to conceal my face. I knew he was right, but never had I wanted to confide in my best friend more than right now. I wanted her toughness and resilience. I needed her ability to handle any situation with a cool head. And I wanted to make her see I wasn’t abandoning her willingly. I hated that she would think back on all of our years of friendship with anger.

I looked down at my phone, staring at her final text. Then, I wiped my eyes and shut the device down, handing it to my father without comment. He was right, of course. It was better to keep her far away from whatever this was.

The elevator pulled up to our floor, and we stepped out to turn toward our once again adjoining rooms. Before we took a single step, three large men in black suits and black button down shirts approached. The first one blocked Dad’s exit from the elevator while the other two crowded me out into the hallway.

“What is the meaning of this, gentlemen?” Dad’s voice was higher than usual, but steady as he tried to push past the first man to get to me. “You boys don’t know who you’re dealing with do you? I suggest you step back.”

His left hand moved to the inside pocket of his leather bomber jacket, but the suited man shoved him against the wall, pinning his hand to his chest and shoving a bulky forearm against his neck.

“What the hell are you doing?” I shouted. “Let him go! You’re cutting off his air!”

I tried to move toward my father, but the other two men grabbed a hold of me, their grips tightening so fast around my upper arms, I was sure I'd have bruises later. I locked eyes with Dad. Growing up in New York City, he'd always been a little paranoid about us getting mugged or attacked in some way. And now his worst fear was coming true. I realized, a bit belatedly, that this situation we were in was probably *why* Dad had always been overly cautious with my safety.

Since I was held so tightly, I lifted my feet from the ground and did my best to aim kick after kick at the men's sensitive spots. But they were at the wrong angle, and I only pissed them off. Blondie to my left snarled, his generically handsome face turning ugly with rage. He wrenched hard on my arm, nearly liberating the joint from its socket.

"Careful," goon number two growled. "Augustus wants the girl brought to him unharmed."

"Too. Late. For. That." I spat, punctuating each word with another flail of my limbs. Dad's face was turning blue. "And what about him?"

Blondie shrugged, "We don't need him. Only you were mentioned."

My heart slammed into my chest as I fought desperately to get to my father, despite the increasing pain in my body. His eyes were fluttering shut. He would lose consciousness soon. My desperation must have angered them even more because the brunette pinning my father to the wall pressed harder against his neck.

I screamed in protest.

Where the hell was hotel security? It's not like this was a Motel 6. They had elevator cameras that would be recording this entire encounter.

Tears filled my eyes when Dad slumped against the wall. “Please,” I begged, sagging in my captors’ grip, “Please let him go. I swear I’ll come without a fight. Just let him breathe again. Please—”

“Shut up,” said Blondie. “Matt, let him go. We got what we came for.”

Matt stepped back, and I watched Dad’s unconscious form drop in a heap to the floor. He looked so small. So much older than he had even moments ago. But as tears streamed down my face, I took solace in the fact that he wasn’t dead. It would have taken much longer to choke him to death, and I had a feeling these henchmen for Augustus were short on time and patience.

They bundled me down the stairwell without another word.

My thoughts reeled. Augustus. Wasn’t—wasn’t that the name of my grandfather? I was sure Dad had mentioned it at some point in one of our conversations. But we were going to see him later. Why would he feel the need to kidnap me when we already had a visit scheduled?

I was thrown without ceremony into the back seat of a black SUV as we exited into a back alley.

Was there some reason I needed to be separated from Dad? And why would Augustus not instruct his men to leave his own *son* unharmed? There were too many questions, and my mind was in hyper drive. What had Dad been reaching for in his coat? Could it really have fought off three massive men such as these?

Before I could open my mouth to voice any of the former thoughts, Blondie shoved a foul-smelling rag under my nose. Everything went dark.

Chapter 5

ELYSE*New York City*

Elyse Lloyd Dawkins shivered as the cold seeped even deeper into her bones. But it wasn't really the cold that bothered her so much as the shame and the fear. Shame, because she'd sent awful texts to her best friend, Mina, for ghosting her and going on the run God knows where. Fear, because the reason Mina had ghosted her was now standing over her.

For the first time in Elyse's nineteen years, she felt expendable. This woman searching for Mina looked like a normal, yet beautiful, late twenties or early thirties woman of indeterminate race. But her eyes were blank. There was nothing in those dark orbs but a yawning abyss that scared Elyse more than anything she'd yet said to her.

She knew without a shadow of a doubt that this was connected to the man from the library. They had the same eerie thousand-yard stare. She also knew that whether she gave the woman Mina or not, the bitch would kill her. Elyse vowed she would never tell this crazy stalker where her friend was.

After Mina had stopped responding to texts, Elyse had wanted to use the Find My Friends app to figure out where she was. Needless to say, she had felt disgusted just opening the app and shut it down before it could triangulate. If Mina didn't want to tell her, then Elyse would just forget about her. That hadn't worked very well, of course.

The woman reached for her again, and she flinched, expecting another blow like the one that had spilled her across her living room floor, but all she did was reach into her pocket and pull out her phone. She grabbed her face and forced her to unlock the device, fingers digging into Elyse's jaw and leaving future bruises. Elyse watched in horror as the screen opened and she started rifling through the different apps.

She knew the minute the woman found Find My Friends. Those soulless orbs of hers lit up, burning with eagerness. Within seconds, she frowned and began tapping angrily on the screen.

Elyse sighed in relief when she knew that the app had been unable to find Mina. *Good girl*, she thought, *you turned off your phone*. Elyse began looking around again for a means of escape. If she could get away, maybe she could somehow get a message to Mina and warn her not to come back.

But the woman had her trapped in her own home. Elyse's parents were out of town, so there was no one to call out to for help.

Gritting her teeth, she resolved to kick her in the boob as hard as she could the next time she came close. Maybe she could take the woman down long enough to get out of the house and get help.

"Oh, little girl, you would not make it ten feet."

That stopped Elyse cold. How had she known what she was thinking?

"Since you can be of no help to me with your knowledge, perhaps you can serve another purpose."

Elyse didn't like the sound of that, and her suspicions were confirmed when she reached out a vicious hand and wrapped it around her neck, cutting off her air. Her bruised and battered body protested as she was partially lifted by the beautiful monster before her.

Her lips came in close, as if she was about to kiss her. Elyse fought with all her might, kicking and scratching, but her blows didn't even register on the smaller woman. The creature's grip only tightened. At five foot eleven, not many people could overpower Elyse. This woman stood many inches shorter than her, but was as hard as a concrete wall.

"Know, human, that touching your disgusting mortal flesh is not something I relish, but your knowledge of the Key will be much more useful if I can have it all at once."

Elyse didn't know what that meant. She continued to fight, but she felt herself weakening. The edges of her vision became grey and fuzzy as the woman continued to strangle her. She opened her mouth, and Elyse watched as something silver and ethereal passed from her throat to the mouth of the other woman. Those eyes of hers locked onto Elyse and she felt her entire self falling into an abyss. Elyse fought to stay inside her body, knowing that entering that void meant she would never come back.

A lone tear escaped her eye when she realized she couldn't hold on anymore.

A commotion sounded behind them, causing the woman to drop Elyse just before she lost consciousness. The strength was gone from her body, but she heard a deep male voice, and desperately tried to focus her eyesight to find out what was happening.

"Lilith. I should have known you wouldn't be far off." The man's voice made the room vibrate. *This is library guy*, Elyse thought. *Why the hell are these two after Mina?*

“Can you blame me, Enoch?” Lilith sneered. “You make it too easy to track your movements. Frankly, given your incompetence all these years, I’m shocked you even got close to this Key.”

Elyse heard a scoff. *Yes, please keep her distracted.* She attempted to pull herself up. *If I can even get to my knees, I can get out of here.* But her body wouldn’t cooperate. There was no strength left in her limbs. It was not the kind of weakness she sometimes felt after a hard workout. This was soul deep; every fiber of her being felt like it was about to spread apart and dissipate into the ether.

Her vision grew darker, and she strained to follow the conversation.

The man, Enoch, was responding. “If I am so incompetent, why have you dogged me for centuries, walking in my shadow and attempting to thwart my endeavors?”

Lilith snarled, and turned to pick up Elyse once more by the neck. “I don’t answer to you.” The woman leaned in as if to give the final kiss of death. There was no chance Elyse could fight this off. A pathetic whimper escaped her lips, but no other part of her body would cooperate.

Just before Lilith’s lips met hers again to deliver the death blow, the man’s voice made them both freeze. “No, not to me. But there is someone else you answer to. Or rather, *something*. Killing this human will only anger the Source and all of our kin.”

He stepped forward and wrapped a massive hand around Lilith’s wrist, making her fierce grip on Elyse’s throat look delicate. “Release the part of her soul that you have taken, sister. Do not cross this line.”

This guy is trying to save me? What the hell? Elyse felt a trembling rush through her as the beings on either side of her clashed more than just gazes. Some sort of energy pulsed

from them both, pushing hard in first one direction then the other. Was that wind she could hear rushing around them?

Their voices rose as the turmoil in the room increased.

“You think this is the first human I’ve killed in pursuit of my goals? Brother, humans are food at best and insects at worst. Their *only* purpose is to sustain *us*!”

The hand on Lilith’s wrist tightened until she was forced to release Elyse’s neck. Elyse crumpled to the floor, her head hitting with a crack that would have been loud if not for the storm raging through the Dawkins’ living room.

But her vision cleared just enough to watch the battle before her. Enoch and Lilith strained against one another. It should have been comical given how large he was compared to her, but they seemed evenly matched—locked in a physical tableau as whatever crazy powers they possessed ripped at the room and one another.

“You want this human’s soul so badly?” Lilith screamed, “Here! Take what scraps you can salvage.”

At that she tilted her head back on a violent scream, and loosed a spray of silver mist above their heads. Enoch released Lilith to immediately consume the mist, but there was too much and some dissipated into the whirlwind of papers and potted plant debris that swirled in the commotion.

As abruptly as the storm started, it ceased, for Lilith took Enoch’s distraction as an opportunity and fled. Elyse watched Enoch slump with exhaustion and relief amidst what she now saw was absolute chaos. Broken glass from shattered windows was scattered everywhere. Her mother’s prize shelves full of rare books were nearly empty, the precious tomes torn apart by the gale force winds that had just rocketed through the home.

Enoch rushed over to her as her vision began to darken once more. His voice was not optimistic. “Damn, Elyse. She took too much. And I—I cannot restore it to you because—because I was unable to retrieve all of it. A scattered soul such as yours can never return to its original body. I cannot save you.”

Huh. He looks like he’s actually sorry about that. “Figures,” she breathed out. Of course, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Eerily Handsome comes to my rescue just seconds too late.

He snorted as if he could read her thoughts. Who knows. Maybe he could. But his words were fading. She couldn’t feel anything anymore either.

I’m sorry, Mina, she thought. Her heart ached at the thought of leaving her friend alone to face whatever this new danger was, but she couldn’t stay awake. The darkness was closing in.

The tether that held her in her body snapped, and then Elyse Lloyd Dawkins ceased to exist.

ENOCH

New York City

As the human’s life faded, I made a split-second decision. I leaned in, pressing my lips to hers as Lilith had done, and pulled the last remnant of her soul into my body. My sister’s conduct angered me. There was no reason to take the human’s soul. We could feed from them without harming them. But this was pure malice. At least now that I had the majority of the torn human soul within me, I could begin sifting through her memories.

The fight with my kinswoman and draining the human soul had taken much of my stored power and her young life would not sustain me for long. I made a mental note to feed again tonight, but not to kill. I disliked the taste left in my mouth by the fear.

Hello?

Though this human was young, she had done many things in her short life. I disregarded all of the memories of family and some boy named Evan.

There were an inordinate number of memories involving clothes, alcohol, and boys. Those, I tossed away as well. Finally, I came to the deep well that was her memories of the Key, *Mina*. I knew her name now. The two had been friends for a long time, linking their psyches. I followed the thread, twisting and turning through thousands of moments the two had spent together.

No, no, no! Leave her alone!

Finally, I found where one left off and the other began. I probed further, unfamiliar hope rising in my chest. I knew she wasn't in the state. West. I would need to go to the West Coast. California. I pushed harder, but just as I was beginning to find a specific location, a wall slammed down, cutting me off from all access. Somehow, something had kicked me out.

Hah! Take that Murderer.

What in the names of every god was that?

It's me, Elyse. The one whose body you just dropped to the floor.

The one—Elyse? The friend of the Key? Her soul was not supposed to be intact enough for this. Even though approximately ninety percent of it now resided within me, I should not be hearing her voice.

“You should not be here still.”

And where exactly would I go? You ate me, fuckwit. Well, you and your crazy-ass sister. I can see the other side, but there's, like, a shiny curtain in front of it. When I get too near, it shoves me back in your stupid body.

I groaned when I realized what happened. In all my years on Earth with the Barrier in existence, this was the first time I had killed anyone by taking this much of their soul. The human essence would normally dissipate and cross to my home to move through the seven levels until they rejoined with the Source. Elyse had tried, but was thwarted by the Barrier and because *I* had consumed her, she did not disappear or become an apparition. Instead, she was an annoying voice in my head.

Annoying?! I'll tell you what's annoying, asshole. What's annoying is getting killed for something I had nothing to do with and then having to ride shotgun in the body of my murderer!

“I may have taken your last breath, but I did not kill you, human. That said, I—apologize.” I could think of nothing else to say.

You apologize. Incoherent rage radiated through my head causing the start of a human condition called a migraine. *You need to let me go. Either put me back in my body or get me across the shiny curtain thing.*

“I cannot return you to your body. Even if your shattered soul would remain in the mortal container, I have no way of channeling enough power while the Barrier still exists. Similarly, I cannot get you across the Barrier until the day the human Jews call Yom Kippur. On that day the Barrier is thin enough to push you through.”

Why is it thinner then?

“Because the ‘Gates’ are open then.¹¹ If the Barrier did not exist, it would take a learned person barely a thought to cross over. As it is, you are stuck with me for now. Or rather, *I* am stuck with *you*.”

Damn. Yom Kippur was last month. You mean I have to sit in your head, see with your eyes, feel with your body for the next eleven months?

“If you help me bring down the Barrier, it could be much sooner.”

Is that why you want Mina?

“Yes.”

I won't help you hurt her. My fist clenched of its own accord as Elyse said this, and I began to grow concerned. I could not have her taking control. I shoved at her, driving her presence further back into my mind.

Hey!

“Your friend does not need to die for me to lift the spell, but she does need to shed blood. I would rather her come willingly, but it has been my experience that most Keys do not find my invitation so appealing.”

I can't imagine why.

“Even though I don't know exactly where she is, I now have an image from you, little Elyse—the Golden Gate Bridge.”

I remembered when the bridge was built. It had been advertised in many papers. So, I was going to San Francisco to find my prize. The excitement started building again. This

¹¹ In Yom Kippur Liturgy, the “Gates of Life” are open only one day a year, allowing humans to atone for their sins and start the new year with a clean slate. For the purposes of the novel, human prayer is another way of connecting with the Source. Because that is a day when most people attend synagogue, direct connection with the Source is stronger, leaving the Barrier thinner for the duration of the holiday.

hunt was different. I could feel it. This Key was powerful, beautiful, and fierce, but untrained. The chase would be brief, but entertaining. Then, I could gather the rest from the places I knew they hid, perform the ritual, and be reunited with my kind, embracing the full spectrum of my powers.

When I glanced one final time at the body on the floor before exiting the apartment, a soul-deep sadness that was not my own ripped through me. Grief like I had never known in all my years on Earth before or after the Barrier Spell. I marveled at the form's reactions to mental stimuli as my throat clogged and my eyes threatened tears.

After several thousand years, the human species could still amaze me with their capacity for emotion.

Chapter 6

MINA*San Francisco*

Our destination turned out to be a nondescript office building in Silicon Valley. I woke just as we pulled up to the massive front doors. When I tried to get a sneak peak through the windows, I found they were actually two-way mirrors—I could not see anything on the other side. My head throbbed with the remnants of whatever my grandfather's goons had given me.

I was dragged without preamble into a massive lobby with ceilings at least three stories high, into an elevator, shot up to the highest level, then dumped unceremoniously into an empty office. I sat down on one of the white leather couches, knowing there was no possibility of escape.

There was a TV on my right tuned to a national network. Closed captions were scrolling across, trying to keep up with the speed of the reporters' speech.

An image that flashed on the screen above the anchor's left ear made all my breath leave me. I waited until the captions caught up with her:

And in other news, a nineteen-year-old young woman, Elyse Lloyd Dawkins, was murdered in her home in New York City last night. Authorities are still baffled as to the cause of death since her injuries appeared to be non-fatal. There was no sign of

forced entry and all the doors and windows were locked. One source says the main living area was completely destroyed, with books and broken glass strewn everywhere. Police ask that if anyone has information pertaining to this horrific crime, that they call the number below on the screen...

“Mina! Mina! What’s wrong?” Someone said.

It was Maite. What was she doing here?

I realized then that a high pitched wail was emitting from my mouth. People stood in the now open door to the hallway, staring at me. I pointed to the TV where Elyse’s picture was still burning a hole in my retinas. The reporter continued to talk, but I couldn’t read anything else.

Maite stared at the TV for a few moments, taking in what had shocked me. Her face grew pale. She hadn’t directly met Elyse, but she would have seen the pictures of us around the house when she and Alejo visited.

“Oh my God,” I said, “this is my fault. It went after her, just like you and my dad said it would. It’s my fault. She died thinking I hated her. Oh. My. God.” My words were barely coherent between the sobs that wracked my chest, but Maite understood.

“No. Mina. Look at me, *querida*. This is not your fault. There’s no way you could have known who or what was after you. If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s mine because I didn’t warn you and your father sooner.”

“I’m sure there is blame to be laid at your feet for many things, Maite, but this particular death is not something you could have prevented. It is no one’s fault save for the creature who murdered her.” A voice of deep gravel with a slight German accent echoed across the stark room, and we both turned from where Maite held my still sobbing and shivering form.

“Augustus,” she said.

“Maite, it’s been too long.” There was no warmth in that statement. “When did you get here?” He looked as if he would have rathered she not be here at all.

“Why does your granddaughter look drugged and terrified, Augustus? What have you done to your son?”. I peered over her protective arm and took the first look at my paternal grandfather as I wiped tears and snot from my face. There was a black hole in the middle of my heart after hearing the news about Elyse, but the novelty of meeting a blood relative other than my father temporarily staved off the grief. I hated him immediately. I wanted to go home. I wanted Dad. I wanted my friend back.

His response to Maite did not ingratiate him further in my eyes. “This is my branch, Maite, not yours. I run things how I see fit. My son was being uncooperative. We needed to speak with Mina without his...interference.”

Augustus Voorsanger was eerily tall and rail thin. His thin skin and high cheek bones made him look like a skeleton. He was bald, with a beak-like nose and wore a suit that radiated expensive. I disliked him instantly and no longer blamed Dad for not introducing me all these years. When I thought of my father’s kind, thin face, I could see traces of Augustus there, but tempered with a sweetness the older man could never possess.

Augustus’ beetle black eyes finally rested on me with a look of deep disgust and condescension. *Right back at you, Grandpa*, I thought. Maite left her arm around me and we both stood. If you had asked me an hour ago what I thought of this woman, I would have told you I had no feelings one way or another. Now though? I was ready to throw her a parade for showing me this kind of protectiveness.

“We have much to discuss. Come, Mina. You have made enough of a scene here.” When I moved, bringing Maite with me, Augustus seemed about to object, but she tightened her arm around me and continued walking. Augustus turned on his heel and stalked down the hallways, entering a labyrinth that would take some doing to find my way out of. We made our way after him, hoping that the rest of the Society would be more personable. Otherwise, this was going to be an interminable day.

Maite kept a tight hold of me as we walked, for which I was eternally grateful. My normal feelings and insights were going haywire. Other than knowing my grandfather was not a nice man just by looking at him, I was unable to read anything about the situation. I couldn’t tell if it was because I’d just been hit by the equivalent of an emotional nuclear bomb, drugged and kidnapped, or because Augustus was shielding himself somehow. It left me feeling blind and too vulnerable for my liking.

Outside of the initial cold and minimalist office, this floor of the building was awash with much warmer colors and patterns. The theme seemed to be *Beauty and the Beast* chic with dimly shining wood-paneled walls and lush carpet running the halls, spilling into the various rooms. There were wall sconces in ornate, twisted bronze frames that seemed to bathe the room in the heady memory of firelight. I rather liked it in spite of myself. It reminded me of home.

We walked through the main area where several people sat conversing on deep comfortable couches of various colors. As we made our way across the room, conversations halted. People turned to stare at me. That’s when I remembered. They knew exactly who—what—I was. They’d known before I had. Could all of them do magic too?

We walked further down a hallway and entered a massive conference room. There were easily forty seats around the glass-topped table with intricate wrought-iron legs in the center and probably another hundred around the sides. Then people started entering the room and I understood why.

Augustus took a seat at the head of the table. Other important-looking people filled in at the table, and still more began filling in the seats on the edges. Maite gestured for me to take a seat at the table halfway down from Augustus and co-opted the one across from me. Behind her in the flickering shadows of the torchlight, stood her son, Alejandro. His eyes swept over my face with concern, but otherwise there was no hint of recognition.

I was relieved to see that not everyone here looked as mean and sinister as my grandfather. Some gave me a friendly smile or waved. There were so many races and cultures represented here. Dad hadn't been kidding when he said the Society had members around the whole world. Not every seat was filled by the time the stream of people ebbed.

Augustus stood and held up a hand. The room went deadly silent.

"Let's begin."

Begin what?

Chapter 7

MINA

US Society Headquarters, Silicon Valley

They were arguing about my right to live. They had attacked me and Dad, kidnapped me, and now I was sitting in a room full of strangers in a building with walls made of glass you could see out but not in and they were discussing whether or not my being alive would be more or less beneficial to humanity.

It was too much. The sweat dripped down my temples and between my shoulder blades as I held in the blood-curdling scream that hadn't finished after finding out about Elyse's death. My eyes clashed with Maite's across the table. Neither of us liked what was going on. *No wonder Dad left this place as soon as he could.* Tears threatened to spill over my lower lids, but I refused to let them fall. I didn't think Augustus would be very understanding. Then something happened that was the last straw.

Augustus, who had simply been moderating the discussion—if you could call an angry shouting match a discussion—up to this point, finally weighed in.

“It seems to me that if we can come up with a way to minimize the potential fallout of the spell, being rid of the Keys altogether would be safest for humanity.”

I gaped at him. My own grandfather. Wanted to kill me. And he'd said it like I wasn't sitting ten feet away from him. I wrenched my hands from their death grip on the arms of my heavy wooden chair and stood, knocking it behind me to the floor.

"Mina—" Maite started, but didn't finish.

"Excuse me? How *dare* you? Not only am I your flesh and blood, your *granddaughter*, but I am a *human being*." I glared at Augustus, then looked around at the rest of the table. Most of them looked outraged on my behalf, but there were a few who had nodded in agreement with Augustus.

"I know for a *fact* that none of your religions condone murdering innocent people. And many of you I can see call themselves ambassadors of those faiths." I stared pointedly at the various clothing items that marked a large amount of the men and women around me as members of their faith's clergy. Was that a *cardinal*?

"Here's a thought, instead of killing me to get me out of the way, why don't you train me? From what I hear, in addition to being pompous assholes, you're also some kind of magical sorcerers or whatever."

A few people around the room chuckled at my last remark. A woman sitting next to Maite flashed me a grin of approval. She had been one of the ones over the course of the discussion to advocate for sparing my life.

"Keys are to be protected. Teaching them our ways brings them too close and puts them in more danger. But it seems you, Wilhelmina, are finding danger without our help." Augustus' expression hadn't changed throughout my entire tirade, but now that I could think a little clearer, I noticed a pointed maliciousness emanating from his thin frame. There was great violence hidden right beneath the surface, I was sure of it.

I felt kind of bad for calling the entire room “pompous assholes.” Not all of them had advocated for my death. Many, in fact, had done the opposite—most of those were sitting on the edges of the room instead of at the table though. That didn’t sit well with me because though I wasn’t sure how the Society made decisions, if it came down to a vote of the inner circle, I would not live much longer.

“Are you really *blaming* me for nearly getting captured in New York? You can’t be serious. I didn’t even know that thing *existed*, much less you people or my family...shall we say...heritage. If I *had* known, maybe I could have defended myself. Maybe my best friend wouldn’t have been killed. Or have you already forgotten about that?”

“There are civilian casualties in any war. And this one has been going on for millennia. You are just one cog in the wheel.”

I think I turned purple. I could not believe my grandfather’s callousness.

“You know, I hear they feed on human souls. I hope they don’t try to feed off of you because they’ll starve.”

There was a commotion at the doors behind me before Augustus could respond. Shouts, grunts, several loud thumps, and then silence. The doors blew open and there, sweaty and bruised, but alive was Benjamin Voorsanger. I’d never been so happy to see anyone in my life. I didn’t even care how he’d gotten in here. Just that he *was* here.

Dad walked up behind me and put a hand on my shoulder.

“Mina,” he said quietly, “there’s no need to yell. I won’t let anything happen to you. No matter what my father says.” He raised his voice then, to address the rest of the room. “I brought my daughter here as a courtesy and to have stronger wards placed around her than I can cast on my own. Instead of allowing us to come to you as allies, you’ve tried to steal

my only child from me and threatened both of our lives. If all we can expect from you is hostility, father, then we will seek asylum elsewhere.”

Several of the inner circle members rose to stop us, but Dad held an object high above his head that made them stop in their tracks. It looked like an old shofar¹², a ram’s horn, beaten and chipped. It probably shouldn’t have worked, but he put it to his lips as if he meant to make a sound.

Many of those around the table flinched in anticipation, but Dad spoke first. “My daughter and I are leaving this place. Unharmed and unfollowed. If anyone makes a move to come after us, I’ll bring headquarters down around all of us.”

I didn’t dare ask how he planned to do that, but the others in the room seemed to believe him. Nobody even twitched as we backed toward the open double doors.

Without letting go of my hand, Dad walked us out of the room. No one moved to stop us, but I didn’t know if that was because they wanted us to leave with whatever dangerous power my father held, or they were so sure they could stop us should they so choose. We were almost at the elevators when Maite caught up to us.

“*Espera*,” she said to me in Spanish. I waited. “Augustus has many ways of running this conclave that I don’t agree with. My family, we have always felt that the Key should have more of a say in his or her own outcome. If you go to my family’s outpost in Spain, they will help train you and keep you safe. We believe you could be a great asset to us and not just a passive tool to be shuffled around. Your mother, she inherited the mantle later than usual when her father died and only had it for a few years before she was killed. There was

¹² This is meant to be the horn that Joshua used to bring down the walls of Jericho.

no time for her. Don't shy away from this. I know it's a lot to take on, but embracing it will keep you alive longer."

She kissed my cheek and then scurried away with a "*Buena suerte*" and a sly glance at my father. "Benjamin." Dad gave her a tight nod then hustled me into the elevator.

He was silent the entire elevator ride down, but when we were driving away in the car, he said, "Maite's family have been members of the Society since the first crusades. They have a powerful hold over the Society of Western Europe. And she was right. The safest place for you would be out of the country where my father and his disciples can't reach you."

"So is that where we'll go? Spain? Are they really going to teach me?"

"If Maite can get word to her brothers, then yes, they will help. If not, it may take some convincing. They don't like me very much."

"Why not?"

"I was...dating Maite when I was assigned to protect your mother. A couple months later, I broke up with her because I had fallen in love with Abby. They didn't take it well, but Maite never held it against me. We were fond of each other, but not overly attached." That explained a lot about the dynamic I'd witnessed between them on the night we'd met.

"Wow, so you were really part of this world your whole life?" I tried not to let the jealousy sink into my voice, but Dad was onto me.

"Sweetheart, your mom and I wanted to tell you when your powers started showing, but then she—Well, anyway, after that I just thought keeping you out of that world until the age a normal member of the Society would begin their training was the safest path."

"Well, at least I know I'm not behind yet."

“Augustus wasn’t lying though. Keys are never allowed to practice once they inherit the magic. They train only enough for control. The accumulation of magic needed for a spell sends out a signature that those things can follow. Before the other night in New York, I hadn’t practiced since your mom’s death, other than to ward the house. I didn’t want to be the reason they found you.”

“So that stuff you were chanting and the oil—”

“Yeah. That particular spell was ancient Hebrew.¹³ There are many different ways to harness power and every culture has developed and perfected their own methods. Different languages and rituals, etc. In the predominantly Judeo-Christian countries, we use a combination of ancient Hebrew, Latin, and native pagan rituals. But as the world globalized, so did our practices. When members found certain spells that worked better in a different language, they often altered their practice. The Aguilers will explain it better.”

“Dad?”

“Yeah, Button?”

“I was really mad at you for not telling me before, but I’m just thankful you’re ok. Watching that guy knock you out was—”

“I know, Love. And, well, it turns out you were right. I can’t take care of you forever and God forbid anything should happen to *you*, there’s no one to take your place. You’ll be safer if you can be a part of your own defense. I’m not going to hold information back anymore.”

¹³ Spells do not have to be in any one particular language. They tend to be stronger when the caster is personally connected to the language or culture of origin. Hence, Benjamin primarily casts spells in Hebrew.

I sat back in my seat. I was floored by that statement. I was expecting more of the “I’ll tell you when you need to know” approach, but Dad was actually treating me like an adult. I could see how hard it was for him. I gave him a smile and patted his hand, then turned to look out my window. After the day we’d had, it was nice to get back to some semblance of normal between us. I watched the landscape rush by in numb fascination. After everything that had happened, there would be no normal for a long time. With Elyse’s death, I wasn’t sure I’d ever get there again. And now, I was leaving everything I’d ever known, ever wanted for something and someplace that might kill me.

I was going to Spain.

ENOCH/ELYSE

US Society Headquarters, Silicon Valley, Outside

I stood across the street and watched the people coming in and out of the mirror-like building. It was well warded.

That high of a concentration of what the mortals called magic should have blazed out to me like a beacon. Instead, the building was a blank space in a city where every square inch teemed with the essence of humanity. The fact that I could not sense *anything* from it was what caused me to take notice.

Stupid mortals, thinking they could outwit a creature made out of the very substance they used to protect themselves.

You’re kind of a dick, you know that?

“Shut up, human.”

Make me.

I was about to retaliate—the human in my head had been driving me insane for the last twelve hours—but then, I could sense her.

Not Mina.

Well, her too.

But no.

Lilith was here. I could feel her. Nothing about that could be good.

Elyse moaned in my head. *Not this bitch again. Doesn't she know when to quit?*

I rushed to the back of the building, where the feeling was strongest. There she was. Two guards lay dead at her feet, and her eyes blazed with the stolen light of their stolen souls. She chanted in a forgotten human language; one that had no place in this part of the world. Its people had been warlike, savage, and destructive. They had blazed out just as quickly as they had come to power—lost to the annals of time, living only in the memories of those of us who had witnessed their downfall.

But their spell work remained just as potent today as it had been thousands of years ago.

And just as destructive.

We have to stop her, yelled Elyse as the building started to shake. *There are likely hundreds of innocent people in there!*

“We cannot. The spell she is using not only destroys whatever is in its path, but transfers the kinetic energy created by the building’s movements to a shield around the wielder.”

What?!

“We were seconds too late.”

Lilith had not seen me, so concentrated was she upon her task. But that level of concentration would only need to be maintained for so long. After a certain point, the building would do the rest of the work for her.

Instead of confronting my sister again, I ran to the side entrance. Another guard stood there, looking up at the shaking building in terror and bewilderment. I was torn by two motivations at the moment. Help the people my sister was trying to kill get out of the building, or go after the Key I had searched for for millennia and finally found.

My decision was made before the guard even acknowledged me when a torrent of humans came rushing out of the side exit.

They all looked unnerved by the building's abrupt movement, but it was not until they hit the solid ground outside and realized it was not moving as well that they became truly scared. That's when the screams started. They began to flee toward the main road, some pulling out cell phones and recording as great fissures appeared in the glass panes covering the building.

That was fast, Elyse remarked.

"They have efficient earthquake evacuation plans in this part of the world, I believe."

Yes, well, what about them? She called my attention to four well-built humans piling into a black SUV amidst the chaos. A quick glance told me three of them were the same ones I had seen drag Mina into these headquarters earlier.

We have to find Mina before they do!

She was absolutely right. I spared one last glance toward the crumbling building. Those were lives I could not save. But if I rescued Mina now, many billions more could be spared.

Guilt that was not my own curdled my stomach as I turned us out to the main street. Elyse would understand eventually. “Mina, Elyse. We’re going to save Mina.”

Right. Ok. Let’s go kick some evil henchman ass.

ALEJO

US Society Headquarters, Silicon Valley

We ran to the lowest floor we could when the building started shaking, but we were still on the fourth floor when the shaking got even worse. At first, Benjamin had thought it was an earthquake. Smaller ones were common enough in California, apparently. But then the rumbling beneath us continued to strengthen.

Benjamin grabbed my mother and I with surprising force and practically threw us down the stairwell. “Get out now. I have to find Mina.”

“But—” my mother protested.

“Go back to Spain. I’ll send her to you.” He’d locked eyes with me and I’d nodded. As much as I’d wanted to burst in there and rescue the damsel in distress, I knew it was just as important that I survive. Plus, with *Mamá* protesting, someone needed to keep a clear head and get us both out.

We stumbled down another half flight of stairs. There was an ominous crashing sound above us. I looked up just in time to see a chunk of the upper floors falling through the gap in the stairwell. I yanked *Mamá* to the very outer edge and shielded her with my body just as the ball of concrete and metal came crashing through.

Smaller bits of debris rained down on my back. I'd have bruises, but I didn't think I was injured yet. We looked up in time to see the ball of detritus rip a nearly two meter gap in the stairs just below.

Mierda.

There were maybe ten centimeters of stairs left to walk on, less in some cases and a dubious metal railing attached to the far wall. It was ok. We could do this. Taking *Mamá's* hand, I stumbled down to the edge of the gap.

I shook the metal railing bolted to the wall. It seemed sturdy enough. I could jump and boost myself with the railing. But my mother was barely over five feet. I glanced back. Here normally passive expression was wild and a little rattled as she gripped my hand tightly.

"*Mamá,*" Her eyes stared off into the distance. "*Mamá!*"

When her eyes finally landed on me, they were brimming with tears. "We should have stayed upstairs, *mijo*. They would have had the spell ingredients I would need to stop this disaster."

"*Mamá* there is no way you could stop this building from coming down on your own."

"Maybe not, but you could. Between you, Mina, and the rest of the Council, we'd have had more than enough power."

"*Mamá* they kidnapped her. I'm not sure they would have worked with us even to save their own skins."

"But—" She was cut off when more debris rained from above. I pinned her between me and the wall, gripping the railing tightly so as not to fall into the gap behind me.

Something large and metallic fell past. Its edge ripped through my thin t-shirt and left a deep gouge in my flesh. I grunted in pain, but shielded my mother until the worst of the shaking stopped.

My left shoulder began to ache, and when I tried gripping the railing to launch myself over the gap, agony ripped through me. I gasped and flexed my palm.

“*Mijo*, you’re injured!” My mother reached for me but I was done waiting. We needed to get out of here now before something worse happened.

I whipped around before she could touch my ruined flesh. “*Mamá*, I’m going to jump the gap. Then you hold on to the railing and use what’s left of the stairs to get across. I’ll be on the other side to catch you.”

For once, she looked at me and allowed me to take charge. *Finally. It only took twenty-two years*, I thought. I couldn’t take the same method as her. Those flimsy pieces of stair remnants would definitely not hold my weight. So I would jump across and be there to catch her when she made it far enough.

I backed up to the top of the landing. Since I could no longer use the railing, I’d use the down-hill momentum to launch myself well over the gap. I took a deep breath. If the building wasn’t rumbling, I’d be more sure of my footing, but we couldn’t wait any longer.

I sprinted toward the gap, taking the stairs two at a time and pushed off as hard as I could. Too hard. I cleared the gap and the last few steps to the next landing, but couldn’t control the force with which I plowed into the far wall. And of course, in turning to protect my face, I landed with my left shoulder against the crumbling plaster.

My vision went white and my knees crumpled beneath me. I thought I could hear my mother screaming, but mostly the ringing in my ears drowned out every other sound. I

don't know how many seconds passed before my vision cleared and the pain subsided, but I pulled my sweating, shaking body to its feet and faced my mother.

She'd gone white under her olive complexion and there were silent tears streaming down her face. I staggered over to the edge and gripped the railing in my right hand for extra support. "*Estoy bien, Mamá. Estoy bien.* It's your turn. Face the wall and grip the railing with both hands. Then slide along until you reach me."

The building started shaking again. More debris fell past us and I pressed as close to the wall as possible to prevent further injury. *Mamá* lost her footing and sat down to keep herself from falling into the jagged hole before her. Another large chunk of building fell past us and took out another portion of the stairs lower down. Smaller this time, but enough to make me worry.

"Now, *Mamá!* You must come now!" Whether it was my command, or the need to not be separated from her son, Maite stood and faced the wall.

She began sliding her way across the gap. She was almost halfway when the ledge disappeared completely for about a foot. She widened her stance and stepped over, the knuckles in her hands graying with the force of her grip.

Over halfway.

I held my breath. *Mamá* was not dressed for escaping. Her usual diaphanous skirts and slippery little flat shoes might get in the way before she was within arm's reach and there would be nothing I could do to help her.

Sweat dripped from my temple and between my shoulder blades. She lifted her left foot and was about to place it on the ledge below when an intense shaking stirred the building. The foot slipped and so did the hand.

Her scream of terror nearly stopped my heart. But she was still hanging on. One foot and one hand remained. I stepped onto the tiny ledge without thinking, but jumped back when it began to crumble beneath my weight.

Mierda! How could I possibly help her?

She was hanging onto the railing with her right hand. Her right foot was still on the remnants of the stairs and her left hand scrabbled for purchase on the same ledge. I could see her trying to calm herself.

“It’s okay, *Mamá*. You’ve got this.” I made my voice as calm and even as possible, shoving my heart back into my chest and out of my throat where it was trying to lodge. “Grip tight and use your right leg to push yourself up. You just need to get a little closer. Then I’ve got you.”

I was on my knees now. Stretching my right hand as far as it would go. My left arm was tucked into my abdomen. I could see blood staining my shirt out of the corner of my eye but chose to focus on my mother and not the potential blood loss.

Steel crept over her expression. There she was. The situation had rattled her, but Maite never let anything phase her for long. She ground her teeth and let out a warrior’s cry as she hauled herself back onto the ledge. My fingers were centimeters away. I could almost reach her.

The building shook again, but she held tight through the waves of dust and concrete. At last, she was on her feet again. She crept her way further along the ledge, and as soon as she was close enough I stood and wrapped my arm around her waist, pulling her onto the landing with me.

Her fingers dug into the bruises in my sides as she composed herself again, but I'd never tell her to let go.

It was she who pulled away. "Come on, *mijo*. Let's get out of this fucking building."

"Couldn't agree more."

We spilled down the steps to the second floor. Parts of the stairs were missing here too, but not so severe as the last time, so we were able to cling to the railing and get past the worst of it.

When we reached the bottom floor, the building gave an ominous groan. We'd made it to the bottom floor, but we still had to get out before it came down on us. And *gracias a Díos*, there was an emergency exit in the stairwell. I slammed my good shoulder and hip into the push bar and the door opened with a screaming alarm.

Mamá and I tumbled out into a side alley. I'd never been more thankful for the smell of garbage in all my life. Outside, we could see firetrucks and ambulances had been summoned. My mother, though scraped and bruised from her near three-story fall, seemed okay.

That was when the pain hit.

Like before, my vision blurred, and I sank to one knee. *Mamá* was talking to me. The words rapid, frantic. But the world had gone gray, and I only knew the pulsing agony in my left shoulder.

She must have rushed off for a paramedic because I soon felt a pair of rough hands pulling me gently onto a flat surface face down. It was a relief to know I was safe enough to rest, but I could still hear my mother's terrified voice fluttering around above me. It had

taken on an edge. Maite protecting her cub. I tried to tell her I was fine. That she didn't need to worry anymore.

But then the world went dark.

Chapter 8

ENOCH/ELYSE

San Francisco in the mortal realm

The doors to the hotel opened as a man and young woman came rushing toward the entrance from a rental car. They quickly disappeared into the cool darkness beyond.

That's her! That's Mina.

"I know," I growled. "I know what she looks like."

Oh, right. Because you were stalking us in New York.

"I am going to ignore that." I had better things to worry about.

Now that I was close to her again, I could sense the Key's—Mina's—energy. She was still shrouded in something powerful, but it was beginning to wear off. As we crossed the street to follow in Mina's wake, the black SUV pulled up behind the rental car and the Society's men jumped out.

Shit! They look like the FBI.

Unfortunately, not. It is the Society. They want your friend as much, if not more, than I do.

They could not permit a Key to roam free and undetected. Her father had worked so hard to keep her safe and out of everyone's clutches. But their time of safety was over. I was

not afraid of competition in this chase. All I need do was out-wait everyone else and my prize would eventually tire of running.

Hey, she's not a prize. She's a person.

Can she not be both? I shot back.

Just as I entered the stairwell, I saw the men crossing from the front desk to the elevator. I ran to the elevators on the second floor before they could reach the ones in the lobby and pushed the up button. I did the same for the third, fourth, and fifth. Then I reached the sixth floor and edged along the hall. The suits would still be riding up in the elevator, stopping on every floor as the doors opened to admit a passenger that wasn't there.

That was such an asshole move. I loved it.

I ignored my unwelcome passenger's remarks, but couldn't stop the smirk that appeared on my face.

I followed my connection to the Key until I knew she was behind the door not ten feet away.

Just as I was about to lunge for the door and snatch her away, she and her father burst out of the room further down the hall and toward the staircase at the opposite end.

Before sprinting down the stairs, the girl turned around and spotted me. Her eyes widened and I was sure she recognized me. From the look on her face—the same she had given me at our prior meeting—she could still see my true form. Something halted me in my tracks. How could I ever take her by surprise if she could see right through my disguise? Why did I feel an essence-deep connection with her?

Unbidden, a memory of holding the girl as she cried from a slight paid to her by a jealous classmate entered the forefront of my consciousness. This was followed by her holding me

when I'd been called a freak or giraffe by our vicious classmates. A righteous anger filled me, and I suddenly wanted nothing more than to protect the young woman staring back at me.

Elyse. *Stop it*, I said.

Now the memory of Elyse's righteous anger turned inward. I batted away feelings of inadequacy and self-loathing like they were the irritating tiny flying insects that never left humans alone in the summer.

STOP.

No. You need to know her, so you won't do to her what you did to me.

It took everything I had not to snap back and remind her that *I* was not the one who had killed her.

I was about to put on a burst of speed and head the Society members off before they reached the bottom of the stairs, when the elevator doors opened. The four suits rushed out. The second they spotted me, I knew they could sense my energy, just as I could sense theirs. What was more, I knew I had to protect the girl. Whether for Elyse's reasons or my own, I could not let those men get their hands on her.

They lunged at me, pulling out wicked-looking knives with one hand while throwing their various incarnations of power with the other. I was neither surprised nor scared. I was irritated. This skirmish would be nothing but a minor delay, but it would be enough to allow the Key to escape again. Once more, I would have to track her down. Being this close to my final goal and losing her again vexed me.

I thrust my right hand into the chest of my closest attacker and pulled out the man's heart. The human soul, not having anywhere to go and not having been consumed, dissipated into the stale hotel air.

The next suit came at me, lunging low with his knife. I blocked the swing and the following kick before stepping into his space and using my foot to trip him to the floor. Before he could retaliate, I landed heavily atop him and slid one arm underneath his head. I snapped his neck, just as I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder.

Rolling off the dead man, I stood and faced the other two. One was weaponless owing to the knife in my back. The other tossed his from hand to hand in a vain display of bravado. Having realized their magic would not do me any harm, they launched at me simultaneously. Instead of backing away, I stepped in and grabbed each one by the nape of their neck before slamming their heads together.

They crumpled like limp sheets to the floor. The tiny thud from the knife was drowned out by the larger thumps from each body. Bending, I fed on the power within them. Unconscious was as good as asleep when it came to mining new power, so I took my fill then stripped the bigger one of his shirt and jacket and used them to replace my own bloodstained attire after removing the dagger from my flesh. The fresh power flowing through my form helped stop the blood flow and heal the wound quickly.

Whew. That was awesome. It was like a fight scene from a movie only I was the one kicking ass!

A surprised chuckle escaped me as I cleaned the blood off the dagger with my ruined shirt. I'd almost forgotten about my passenger during the fight. She'd stepped back in order

to not distract me and was now doing a victory dance in my neurons. As amusing as she was though, I would be glad to have my mind to myself once more.

Before I left, I relieved one man of his sheath for the ornate dagger I still held, and placed both upon my person. Now, at least, something was gained from this thwarted venture.

Chapter 9

MINA*Dulles International Airport, Dulles, Virginia*

I held my second boarding pass in trembling hands and looked up at Dad. We had flown from LAX to IAD and were supposed to catch a connecting flight—or so I’d thought.

“What do you mean you’re not coming with me?” This wasn’t okay. Was it hot in here? I wiped the sweat from my upper lip and willed my knees to hold me a little longer. A knife stabbed my gut when the thought that Elyse would be handling this much better popped into my head.

Had that man I’d seen just before we fled the hotel in Silicon Valley been the one who killed her? He was certainly the same one who’d followed me on Halloween. I would know that buzzing, falling, electric feeling anywhere. The expression on his face when he saw me wasn’t menacing though. It was protective.

“Mina, they’re expecting me to go with you. Us traveling together makes you an easier target to spot.”

“You said you weren’t going to keep things from me!” My voice cracked on the last word. “That didn’t last very long, did it?” I couldn’t keep the betrayal from my tone despite Dad’s pleading expression.

“I’m sorry. Maite called and said she will be there.”

“I’ve met her twice, Dad! That’s not exactly comforting. Are you sure she can be trusted? What if she’s secretly switched sides since you dumped her for the last Key?”

Staring at his furrowed brow, I noticed that the last week seemed to have aged him ten years. But he didn’t hesitate on my last question.

“Yes. You can trust her. I have been in sporadic touch with her over the years. There’s no ill will there. If it makes you feel any better, I’m trusting her with the most important thing in my life—you.”

Before I could respond, Dad grabbed me in a tight hug. Some of my ribs protested when he didn’t let go, but I wasn’t going to be the one to break contact. Unfortunately, Dad loosened his grip, kissed the top of my head, and stepped back all too soon. I stared at him.

“Where will you go?”

“Colombia’s nice this time of year,” he said, brandishing a ticket I hadn’t seen him acquire, “I think I’ll go visit some old friends there.”

“Do you just have friends in every Spanish-speaking country? Do you even speak Spanish?”

He chuckled. I was distracting myself by trying to remember if Dad had ever helped me with my Spanish homework in school.

“Go. We’ll talk soon.”

Before I could protest, he disappeared into the swarming crowd. I turned toward my gate and stopped in my tracks. There was a woman hovering by the restroom about a hundred feet away. Petite as she was, I shouldn’t have felt threatened, but those angular features looked sharp enough to cause injury and dark penetrating eyes were locked on me. Every

hair on my body stood on end. She shouldn't be threatening, but the black smear of hatred wafted over me, choking and smothering.

She was standing between me and my gate. I looked in the other direction frantically, but Dad was long gone to his own gate. When I turned back, she had halved the distance between us. There was a pressure building behind my eyes like she was taking an icepick and seeing how deep she could get into my tender gray matter.

I needed to move. But my plane. I couldn't miss this flight. Looking at my watch, I saw that I had about forty-five minutes before boarding began. Maybe I could lose her in the crowd and circle back. A sharp stab behind my left eye made the decision for me.

I turned and bolted as fast as my luggage would allow. The benefit of being on the run—at least I'd packed light. Turning toward the central hub of the terminal where people milled and ate at the various tables, I spotted a large crowd of men's soccer players standing and yelling to one another. Perfect cover.

I slid amongst them, losing myself in the sea of matching uniforms and toned bodies. *Elyse would have gotten so distracted right about now*, I thought. As it was, I couldn't help mourn the fact that I was fleeing and couldn't linger when a tight jaw and gorgeous green eyes smiled down at me. I think I smiled back, but it probably came out as more of a grimace because the ice pick in my brain chose that moment to launch another attack. I clenched my jaw, imagined steel encasing my brain, and pushed through to the other side of the soccer team.

Once free, I took a sharp turn down one of the side hallways that led to employee only restrooms and supply closets. I prayed someone had left a door ajar and I could slip inside. There was sweat beginning to soak through my shirt and causing my backpack to stick. My

sharp turn caused the suitcase I dragged to flip over and I skidded into the wall, banging my shoulder on the corner.

Breath sawed through my lungs. I was in a sterile white hallway with locked door after locked door. The crush of people was gone, but this maze of back hallways seemed to get longer and more twisted. A sudden push from the pressure in my brain brought tears to my eyes and blurred my vision. I gasped and fell to my knees. A cold voice pierced my agony.

“I must admit, that shield you’ve erected around your mind is impressive for one so untrained, but if you’d like to spare yourself some pain, let it dissolve. Now.”

“Sh-shield?” I stuttered, “I’m not doing anything. You have the wrong person, I swear.”

The strange woman’s delicate eyebrow rose in a perfect arch. “You swear? My dear, if I had the wrong person, your mind would be a puddle of irrecoverable nonsense after the assault I’ve put it through.”

Tears leaked from my eyes, unbidden. Sharp eyes, piercing mind, and now this voice, like cut glass that was trying to shred my sanity.

“Who even are you,” I gasped as I clutched my aching head. Something about her presence made me remember one of the times I’d felt like I was being watched. I’d thought it was the strange man again. The one with the infinity eyes. I looked up into her eyes. To my detriment.

The same sense of being crushed and pulled apart.

The falling.

The expanse.

But there was something else too. Something wrong. The man had felt dangerous, but not evil. Something had pulled me *toward* him.

There was a taint as I looked into this woman's eyes, an evil I couldn't escape. As the sheer terror sank into my blood and bone, my mental steel wall wavered.

A liquid smile spread across her face. It should've been beautiful. Should've caused me to marvel at the perfection of her form, but it was grotesque. I felt ill to witness such an abomination.

"That's cute. They thought keeping you ignorant would keep you safe. You know, you remind me of another one I dispatched not too long ago."

Dispatched?

I was immobile. I could do nothing but hold my mental shields in place. The ice pick had left off, but now there was a vice around my head. It tightened more and more, my steel wall beginning to buckle beneath the assault.

Her head cocked as she scrutinized my face. If I had to guess, she hadn't paid much attention to my physical appearance before this. The light of recognition shone in those endless eyes, and she let out a delighted laugh.

"I know! You're her daughter! Yes, the last Key I dispatched. You know, this would have been over so long ago if you humans would just stop breeding. It really was clever of your ancestors to root the spell in their blood. Humans never stop procreating, so they'd never have to worry about the longevity of the Barrier."

"You-you killed my mother?" The vice was gripping my chest now. I felt paralyzed, could barely get the words out, but the sudden stab of agony was like a breath of fresh air. I sucked it in and fed that spark into a flame of anger. The vice loosened a bit more.

If I hadn't been so focused on her face, I would have missed the look of surprise. It was there then gone, and she doubled down. I was flattened to the floor in agony, sure I was

about to die. My thoughts turned to my father. He'd lost so much—given up his family for my mother only to lose her when she was still young. We'd always been close, me taking care of him when he got lost in his books. He would get to Argentina, expecting a text from me, only to receive a message that his only family left had been killed. Everything he'd dedicated his life to was pointless now.

And I could only stare at the pulsating chaos in my killer's—my mother's killer's eyes.

Was this the last thing she saw too?

The jagged smile was back on her porcelain face.

The world began to grow dark. My shield held, but it was now only a thin membrane holding back a torrent of power. She opened her mouth to say something else, no doubt another taunt about my mother or my human weakness, but instead an agonized shriek escaped, and she was thrown into the wall to my left.

My vision cleared and the vice loosened almost to non-existence. Standing over the woman and straining against her power was the strange man with the infinity eyes. His hand closed around the woman's throat.

"I warned you sister, that I would not allow this kind of behavior to continue." She bared her teeth at him, and I felt her power surge.

Sister? "Dude, your family might be more fucked up than mine."

He turned toward me and said simply, "I cannot hold her for long right now. You should go. Your plane is boarding."

I gaped at him for half a second more, wondering if I should try to help him. But who was I kidding? I didn't have any skill in...whatever this was. I needed to get the hell out of here and board my plane. I snatched up my discarded suitcase and bolted back down the

hallway into the crowded terminal. Just as I turned toward my gate, a voice came over the loudspeaker.

LAST CALL TO BOARD FLIGHT 1492 TO MADRID. LAST CALL TO BOARD FLIGHT 1492 TO MADRID AT GATE C12. PLEASE HAVE YOUR BOARDING PASSES AND PASSPORTS READY.

I sprinted back down the hall and reached my gate, taking grateful gulps of air as a long line disappeared into the doors leading to the plane. I swallowed around the dryness in my mouth, joined the end of the line, and pulled out my new passport with my new name. Why did my father know people who knew how to make these things?

The picture was me, looking mildly shell-shocked. There were dark circles under my eyes and puffiness from the tears I'd shed for Elyse over the last several days. Eventually there would be time to mourn her properly. It was killing me that I would miss her funeral. I wasn't even going to touch the fact that the Entity—that's what Dad had called them, right? — had helped me escape for a second time.

No, there was no mistaking who was in this picture. But the name on the document and country of origin were lies. According to Dad's wishes, I was going to pretend to be Maite's cousin on her father's side.

I got to the beginning of the line and handed my boarding pass and passport to the lady at the desk.

"Have a nice flight, Miss Romero."

Chapter 10

ENOCH

Dulles International Airport, Dulles, Virginia

My “sister’s” sharp nails clawed into the hand that was still wrapped around her throat, but I didn’t let go until I felt the presence of the Key fading back down the hall. The young woman’s frantic footsteps echoed her heartbeat and the panicked rebuilding of her mental shield. She had strong natural abilities. It was the only thing that had saved her life just now, buying enough time for me to force my kin’s mind out of hers.

Dude, ow. Elyse complained as the nails in my wrist drew blood. *Who is this bitch? If I weren’t inside your head, this would be so much more terrifying.*

“Take your disgusting hands off me, human lover,” choked out the woman beneath my hands. “You will not rob me of my destiny.”

“Destiny?” I scoffed, “You are systematically killing off the descendants of the blood spell that created the Barrier. And what then? The Barrier will still come down only it will take everyone with it!”

Oh, she’s craaaaazy. An image of Elyse flashed through my mind of her crossing her eyes and twirling a finger around her ear.

Silence, woman. I’m trying to work here.

I love it when you get bossy. Very alpha male. Very sexy, she said. While her tone indicated it was anything but.

I ignored her. That girl was too much sometimes. I needed to conclude this mission and get her out of my head as soon as possible.

Lilith finally peeled my hand off her neck and stood on shaky legs. Her glare of hatred threatened to pierce my flesh, it was so strong.

“You truly know nothing of the Source.”

“Enlighten me then.”

“I am not merely killing the Keys. Once I’ve wiped out every descendant of those bloodlines, I will consume the magic of the spell from the last Key in every line. *I* will become the spell and thus, have ultimate power over the Barrier. I could open it for those who are worthy, and bar movement across for those who are not. I could keep those who are the true leaders of our kind in power.”

I stared at her, envisioning the future she laid out. If I wasn’t absolutely sure I would be barred from ever returning home were she to take charge, I could almost see the merit in allowing her to achieve her goals.

Um, also she sounds like a genocidal maniac. Pretty sure you’ve witnessed the “destiny” of a few of those in the name of finding the Keys, right Big Guy?

Elyse was right, though I hated to admit it.

Thank you, sir. I watched her mocking bow in my mind’s eye before answering the physical woman before me.

“You speak like those you fought for in the 1940s. You saw what they did—the waste of ten *million* human lives. You would only be trading human atrocity for immortal.”

“Why do you care so much if they live or die?” She asked. And I thought she might be genuine in her desire to know, for once. “One human is much like another. They are our Source of *food*, not creatures capable of any true goodness.”

“Fish are friends, not food.” Elyse chanted. *Bad scary lady. Bad.*

What? No. Never mind. Tell me later.

“And you *are* capable of true goodness?” I was baffled. Did she actually think that wiping out humanity was the answer?

“We have seen it happen before. First, there were only creatures with small amounts of the Source for us to sup on. Eventually, a more powerful creature—humans—rose that met our needs more sufficiently. It would happen again were humans to perish. The Earth would be better off. You know it would. And we would be free once more. Is not that the point of all this? To be free of the shackles with which the humans burdened us?”

“I am *trying* to free us. By getting rid of the Barrier altogether. Not by wresting control of it for our kinsmen. It shouldn’t even exist. It is harming the Earth as much as you claim the humans do. If it had not been built, perhaps the humans would not have needed to create the earth-destroying machines they have.”

Do you really think so?

I don’t know. It’s possible that had the magic not dwindled from their lives, the humans would not have invented some of the things they have.

Lilith rolled her eyes and I tried to keep my focus solely on her though I could feel the distancing of the Key—Mina. She must be taxiing in the plane now because the feeling became smaller and smaller until it was nothing more than a pinprick in the distance. If I

could keep Lilith talking, I could give Mina more lead time and hopefully buy myself a way out as well.

“You have always been too attached to their kind,” she said.

“And you have always been too hostile toward them.”

Our obstinate stares locked, neither willing to see the other’s side or compromise in their chosen mission. Even through the mental shields she kept around herself, I could still feel the rabid anger, chaos, and despair running through her. There would be no reasoning with my kinsman here. Her scales were unbalanced, and she was lost to the void.

Weee-ooo-eeeeee, came Elyse’s fake whistle. “*This town ain’t big enough for the two of us.*” She made whooshing sounds as if to imitate the wind. *I feel like you guys need to have pistols at dawn in the town square.*

While I’m sure that would amuse you, guns would hardly solve anything. Our human bodies can be harmed, but it is very difficult to kill us with bullets. I doubt that an antiquated honor ritual would end up being as satisfying as when it was done by humans.

Um, whoa. Lighten up, Encyclopedia Brown. I’m just trying to diffuse the tension.

There was a pressure on my own mental shields, and I slammed great sheets of granite in front of any gaps, turning my attention fully back to the woman in front of me. Lilith’s eyes examined me, trying to figure out where my mind had gone while she continued to berate me.

When unable to sift through my secrets, she growled in frustration and shoved past me toward the exit to the main terminal and crush of humanity beyond.

“Do not get in my way again, *brother*. You will not find me so lenient.”

Having felt Mina's essence disappear from the surrounding area, I let her go without responding to the taunt.

I expected Elyse to interject again, but she was silent, contemplative.

What? No witty rejoinder?

Hey, I can't be on all the time, Sasquatch. Clever one-liners take work.

There she is, I thought. It should have bothered me that I was starting to get used to not being alone in my own mind. This human soul was growing on me. I couldn't be sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing, but I knew her presence no longer angered me. If I closed my eyes, I could picture how she'd looked in her own body and it was almost like having a face-to-face conversation. A stab of regret went through me as I imagined a vibrant and *alive* Elyse.

I gritted my teeth and moved toward the exit. I knew where Mina was going, I would gather the remaining Keys and return to fetch Mina when all else was ready.

BENJAMIN

Dulles International Airport, Dulles, Virginia

Benjamin walked away from Mina quickly, unwilling to watch his only child go off on her own. He couldn't ignore the pit in his stomach. *I should be going with her*, he thought. *I know we said it would be safer alone, but I feel like parting from her is the more dangerous option right now.*

He stopped in his tracks, wondering for the umpteenth time if he should change his ticket.

“LAST CALL TO BOARD FLIGHT 1492 TO MADRID. LAST CALL TO BOARD FLIGHT 1492 TO MADRID AT GATE C12. PLEASE HAVE YOUR BOARDING PASSES AND PASSPORTS READY.”

The words coming out of the loudspeakers were a death knell in any plans he had to change his mind. He would have to proceed with the current plan, and trust that Maite was more than capable of protecting and training his daughter.

He rounded another corner to his gate and ran smack into a stunningly beautiful woman. She looked to be about mid-thirties, rich dark hair, almond-shaped eyes, and immaculately dressed.

“Oh,” he exclaimed. “My apologies.”

Having steadied herself, she smiled warmly up at him. Goodness. Even her smile was captivating. Did this woman have any flaws? It had been a long time since Benjamin felt this attracted to a woman. Frankly, he’d thought he was a bit over that hill. But here she was, her deep dark eyes devouring the sight of him and making him want to drop to his knees.

“Not a problem,” she replied. Her voice washed over him, pulling him closer at the same time he caught a whiff of something...wrong. “Benjamin, would you like to take a walk with me?”

There was nothing wrong.

He was just paranoid.

The gorgeous woman wanted to take a walk.

But Mina—

She put her hand on his. "You know my name," he said. Some part of his mind knew that was impossible and he should be more cautious, but it was a whisper compared to the roar of need that filled him at her touch. "What's yours?"

"Lilith," she said, swaying even closer.

"Lilith," he said. "Such a beautiful name. Let's go for that walk, gorgeous."

The look she gave him made him feel ten feet tall, and he held out his elbow for her to take.

"Such a gentleman," she purred. "We're going to have so much fun."

"Yes," he murmured. "Fun."

Chapter 11

MINA*Somewhere above the Atlantic Ocean*

I'd never been out of the country except to visit Israel a few times with Dad before my Bat Mitzvah. I was twelve and couldn't fully appreciate the breadth of the world. The trip to LA was the closest thing to an exotic vacation we'd ever taken, and the DC airport definitely didn't count. Now I was flying 30,000 feet over the Atlantic Ocean and I was completely alone. Oh. And a whole bunch of people, including my grandfather and two immortal Entities—or maybe just one now—were trying to kill me.

Just another day in paradise.

I stopped myself short. If I dwelled on what had happened at the airport this entire flight, I'd go just as insane as the scary lady wanted. There would be people I could ask when I reached my destination in Spain. All I knew was that both entities wanted me, but supposedly only one wanted me dead. The faster I learned everything I needed to know about this world, the faster I would be able to defend myself.

I cracked open the book my dad had stuffed into my backpack at the last second—*Spanish for Dummies*—and laughed. To my relief, my high school and college Spanish lessons from the last five years meant I was halfway through the book before I needed to stop and actually read.

I finished flipping through the book, promising myself I would take a closer look later, and peered at the screen showing our progress on the tiny little map. Three more hours. This was going to be the longest wait of my life. You would think after what happened I would desperately need sleep, or coffee, or a hospital. But I was frozen in a state of denial. If I didn't dwell on it, it wouldn't catch up with me. God, I hoped neither of them could fly. I don't think I could handle enemies that could chase me even on an airplane. Once more, I gritted my teeth and actively focused on something else.

Dad hadn't told me much about where I would be going once I got there. The only thing I knew was that Alejandro would be waiting outside customs to drive me there. I was flying to a foreign country to be escorted around by a man I'd only met twice in my life. An incredibly attractive man who made my knees weak with a single word. And ever since we'd met, everything in my life had changed.

For the worse.

I was so tired. The wonder I should have felt at leaving the country for the first time in so long was suffocated by a sense of dread. Why did I feel like the worst was still to come? There was also a guilty knot in the bottom of my stomach at being the reason my best friend was dead. And then there was the revelation about my mother...

The next three hours passed in a dizzying combination of fitful naps and staring out the pitch-black windows. At the beginning of the flight, we'd turned our backs on the sun and flown East. Now, we'd flown so far, that any light that might still linger on the Western horizon had long since sunk into memory. Since touching the mind of that woman in the airport, a soul-deep cold had settled in, and I tried not to see my physical path forward as

a metaphor for what would happen next. There was nothing ahead of me but opaque black and a world gone dark. I'd never felt so small in my life.

I drifted off to sleep hoping unconsciousness could solve one or two of my problems, but knowing it couldn't.

ENOCH

Somewhere

I hated that I had to let Mina go at the airport in DC, but it was the right call. Lilith would have killed her to absorb her power. Those wide round eyes haunted me though. By now she was hundreds of miles above the Atlantic Ocean. On her way to yet another secure Society compound.

I wished I could tell her that the Society did not want what was best for her. Granted, neither did I, I supposed, but at least my goals might leave her alive. I pictured Mina after the Barrier fell. She would be free of all obligations. Her life would be her own.

And I...I would be a distant memory.

The thought didn't sit well with me for some strange reason. I felt a connection to this little human beyond my use for her to save my kin.

"What have you done to me, you horrible woman?" I asked Elyse from where she lurked, smirking in the back of my mind.

Human emotions are hard, aren't they? It seems my love for Mina is rubbing off on you. Although, I've never thought of her the way you are starting to.

I shrugged off the feelings of lust for the beautiful young woman that had indeed begun to stir within me. Though I was not human, I had had a few sexual liaisons in my years in

the human realm. It was not just Elyse's mind that influenced me. Humans were such visceral creatures. It was impossible to be around them for as long as I had and not experience some of their needs.

This was different. When I met her eyes, I felt Mina's soul fall toward mine. The Keys could always sense my true self, but Mina had been able to delve into me. It left me feeling broken open.

And craving more.

If you think I will ever let you touch her, you've got another thing coming, buddy.

I smirked. "You have no way of taking control, little girl."

I'll think of something.

I was done listening to this. There was only one place I could be alone in my own mind. Ironically, I would have to go into someone else's to achieve that. Elyse was stuck in my body and could not follow as I projected myself into the minds of others and renewed my powers.

I traced the connection to Mina, which was tenuous given her distance, but still there. Even better, she was asleep.

Wait! No! Don't—Elyse was yelling in my mind, but faded into nothing when I jumped from my mortal form and into the network of minds. I slid along the connection to Mina like a caress, wanting her to be pleased by my presence instead of alarmed.

When I reached the doors of her mind, I slipped in through a crack she didn't yet know how to close. There she was. A sun dress falling to her knees, long dark hair framing that porcelain doll face. She was breathtaking even as a figment of her own imagination.

She sat watching the sunset on a New York City rooftop. The light gleamed in her dark hair, bringing out reds and golds that normally didn't show, and set off her skin with a pearlescent glow. Those deep green eyes turned to face me as if she already knew I was there.

"You saved me," she said. I nodded.

"And you were in New York." I nodded again.

"Who are you?" A look of confusion marring the moment's perfect serenity.

"My name is Enoch," I said. "My kinswoman, Lilith, would have taken your power and your soul for her own. I couldn't allow that to happen."

She stood and crossed to me. Nervousness, a sensation foreign to me, spread from my fingers to my toes. She was so close now. I could breathe in her scent of blackberries and sage, a perfume that reminded me of ancient magic and wild, mist-covered midnights.

"Why not?" She asked. "Don't you want me dead too?"

"Of course not. I take no pleasure in killing humans. I do merely what I must to save my kind. Would you not do everything in your power to do the same?"

Her eyes clouded over with anger and sorrow. "I would have. But you never gave me the chance. Elyse wasn't part of this. How could you take her life?"

My head tilted back as I fought off the guilt from the accusation in her eyes. "I did *not* kill her. I preserved her soul after my kinswoman tore it to shreds. Though you are correct in one respect, it was not altruistic of me to do such a deed. I needed to find you. I have managed to connect with all six of the other Key bloodlines centuries before this, but yours has been kept so well hidden, it eluded me until several days ago when I tracked you down in New York. If it weren't for your ancestors hiding so efficiently, I could have rid our

worlds of the Barrier centuries ago. Magic would have been restored to the earth. You would not have this burden on you or your loved ones.”

I realized I was ranting and stopped. I had never opened up so much to a human, except perhaps Elyse, who I could not stop from rifling through any and every errant thought.

She paused for a moment. “You didn’t kill her? Wait. That woman—”

“Lilith.”

“Lilith. Lilith killed her? She’s—” her breath hitched. “She’s gone.”

“No,” I said, suddenly glad for the unwelcome hitchhiker I had left back in my body, “Not gone fully. Her soul is still with me. Mostly intact.”

She gasped, the lone tear that had been trailing down her face catching the light dying behind the skyscrapers. “Does that mean there’s a possibility of getting her back?”

I didn’t want to lie to her and just say yes, but I couldn’t break her heart anymore. So instead, I went with, “It will not be easy. As soon as the Barrier is down, her soul will be released to the other side. But if you bring her back before she reaches the seventh gate¹⁴, there is a possibility of restoring her to humanity.”

The way her eyes lit up as I gave her hope stopped me from adding that no human had been able to make it back even from gate one. Then again, no human had ever had one of my kind on their side. It would be a problem I would address with her once we had broken down the Barrier. I could not help her if she did not help me.

¹⁴ The seventh gate is a reference to the levels of Heaven detailed in the synopses of Hekhalot Rabbati. In the text, the seven levels of Heaven are full of fire and terror. One must fulfill all of the requirements with each gate’s guardian angel in order to enter the seventh level where the Divine presence resides. In the novel, the Source resides on the “other side”, beyond the seventh gate. The physical levels will be more prevalent in book 2, but for now they are mentioned in regard to spirits rejoining the Source once they have passed on.

I placed a gentle hand on the side of her face, surprised when she didn't shove it away. "I never meant to cause you grief, little one. Twenty-six hundred years I have been on this side of the Barrier, searching for a way home. A way to right the balance that was knocked askew more than four thousand years ago. Twenty-six hundred years I have been alone in this world with no one of my kind save for my corrupted sister. It is easy to forget that before the Barrier, my sole purpose was protecting and guiding humans."

Her breath hitched and she placed her hand on mine.

"Your friend is reminding me every day now what it means to have a conscience. She is very...persistent."

Mina snorted. "That's one word for it." She paused. "Is—is she here right now?"

"No. Her soul can stay only within the confines of my earthly body. You are dreaming."

When her face fell, I added, "But if you had words you would like me to pass on to her, I would be happy to carry them back with me."

She flung her arms around my neck at the offer, and I froze.

When was the last time any creature had shown me affection? Her lush body pressed to my hard plains, and I forgot what she was thanking me for. I wrapped my arms around her in return when her feet lifted off the ground and buried my face in her neck, breathing deep. Damn, but she smelled better than the seventh heaven—not that my paltry memories of such a divine place were likely to do it justice.

She pulled back slightly, meeting my eyes. There were too many emotions there to read. But she wasn't pulling away, and I did not want to let her go yet—she felt too good in my arms.

When her eyes dropped to my lips, I forgot that I had come here to impart information. To connect with the final Key. *This is a connection, is it not?* I reasoned with myself. *There is no deeper connection for humans than physical. And she is definitely willing.*

There was no mistaking the desire I saw tentatively creeping into her gaze. She did not want to want this, but like me, could not fight the tides pulling us under. The forces drawing us together were too strong.

Possible cut rest of scene, move to later in the book

MINA

Madrid, Spain

I woke with an unpleasant jolt when the wheels touched the ground on the airstrip outside Madrid, Spain. The flight attendants had switched to Spanish, and the rhythmic sounds washed over my tired ears. Slowly, I began to decipher them and translate... “...*for flying United Airlines and we hope you enjoy your stay in sunny Madrid.*”

I glanced out the window. Still night.

My thoughts turned back to the dream I’d just had. Um, that was wholly unexpected. But could I even trust that it had happened? Was the entity—Enoch—really there? Had he really—? No. Nope. I wasn’t going there. It was a dream. My crazy, sleep deprived, and jetlagged brain needed to make sense of things. Yeah. That was it.

After the frantic push, wait, repeat of getting off the plane, I inched my way through customs.

“*¿Tienes algo declarar?*”

“No.”

“¿Por qué estás en España?”

“Para visitar a la familia.”

“Bueno. Que tenga un buen viaje.”

“Gracias.”

Nice. One point to Mina. I could do this. I’d just had a full conversation with a customs agent in Spain. I could do anything...except apparently deal with a wild and erotic dream about a guy who’d been stalking me my whole life. I found my way to a bathroom and locked myself in a stall, bags and all, leaning against the door. When I went to pull down the pants I was wearing, a flare of pain on my hips stopped me. I let the yoga pants fall to my ankles and gasped when I looked down.

Bruises. There were five distinct bruises from where he’d gripped my hips in the dream. Oh my God. He’d warned me. He’d said that dreams could be more intimate than real life. Fuck. The next time I saw him, I was going to chain him down and not let him go until he’d explained every little thing to me.

That settled, I finished my business and went to find the man who was supposed to take me wherever-the-hell-I-was-going. Alejo. Yet another person who I felt that deep pull to. Which was annoying as hell. How was I supposed to handle this crazy attraction to an entity who wanted my blood *and* a smoking hot wizard guy who looked at me like I was a full course meal, and he was starving?

I stood in a wide expanse while people rushed all around me. Frantic and ecstatic embraces erupted on all sides. Drivers held signs for their clients. I squinted at every sign, but couldn’t see my name.

Maybe Alejo had gotten the time wrong.

Maybe he was running late and would be here any minute.

Maybe he was in a car accident and would never show.

Maybe he...

“Perdón, Señorita Elena?”

I look up at the voice coming from nearby, startled to see the chiseled jaw and cheek bones of the man I hadn't been able to banish from my mind, even in recent dreams that shall remain unmentioned. He had perfect olive skin and wicked deep green eyes that I'd been told were more common in the north of Spain.

“Señorita?” He said again. Why was he treating me like we didn't know each other? *“Eres Elena Romero, no?”*

Who the hell was Elena Ro—oh. Me. Right. He was gesturing to the sign in his hand that I had already glanced over twice. How the hell had I missed him standing right there?

“Sí. Lo siento. Mis ojos están muy cansados,” I answered. His eyes lit up when I spoke his native language back to him. Right. Guess I hadn't done that back in New York at all.

“No problema, señorita. Sígame al coche, por favor.” Got it. Finally. We were pretending we had never met because *Elena* and Alejandro *had* never met. Mina was gone. Buried beneath the rubble of that building in California.

He took my bag and our hands touched, sending a pleasant tingle up my arm. Those hands were warm, strong, and calloused. And now I was staring at a practical stranger's hands. Maybe Lilith—as Enoch had called her—*had* actually destroyed my mind. Maybe Enoch had been too late. I crossed my arms, tucking my hands away where they couldn't embarrass me further as they began to sweat from the memory of my recent dream. First,

I'd been attracted to an immortal being who had been stalking my family for thousands of years. Now I was lusting after the first man to be nice to me all week?

New low, Mina.

As we made our way through the crowds, I noticed his gaze kept landing on me. Could it be that for once in my life the feeling of attraction, the pull was mutual? Of course it would happen at the worst possible time. I couldn't have relationships like a normal person.

Was that a blush in embarrassment from getting caught ogling me? Oh no. I was in trouble. The sidelong apologetic glance he sent me sealed the deal. If only this guy was just the driver, and I would be able to forget this most delicious distraction after a few days in the mysterious headquarters.

My heart, which had started to beat a little easier, sped up again. God, I'd need to be careful. If I was back in New York, I would have flirted this guy's shirt—and probably pants—off. But running for my life didn't seem like a good time for a hookup. Heh. Well. At least not out of the dream world.

We made it out of the building. Alejo's hand that wasn't rolling my suitcase hovered less than an inch above my lower back. I did my best to ignore the warmth of the beautiful body attached to that hand. So far so good. Maybe I would live to see my destination after all and not melt into a puddle of girlish need in the foot well of Alejo's passenger seat.

He led me into the parking lot. I forced myself to focus on something other than his delicious smell and perfect hair. Seriously? Was this guy even real? There had to be something wrong with him because no one could be that perfect. Maybe he was an awful human or had a shameful secret. One could only hope.

Close to the front of the row we approached was a sleek black sedan. The kind you see in movies that picks up rich people. He headed straight for it and popped the trunk.

Well.

I guess Maite had more money than I thought. I immediately berated myself. Why would I have assumed *anything* about her or the people I'd met over the last week? I knew nothing about them or their world. I was walking into a nest of vipers with a blindfold on for all I knew.

The slight sense of confidence I'd gained from successfully using a language other than English outside the classroom vanished. I sank, dejected, into the plush black leather of the front seat and prepared for an indeterminate amount of time driving through the Spanish dawn. I hated this feeling of complete lack of control. The first thing I was going to do when I saw Maite was give her a piece of my mind. I wanted answers and, by God, she was going to give them to me.

I hope.

We were silent for a while. Alejo navigated through the city streets with the easy confidence of someone who'd done this a dozen times. I glanced at him every couple of seconds, unable to look away from the way the pink light of dawn caressed his flawless skin.

He said something to me in Spanish, but it was too fast and unexpected after twenty minutes of straight silence. My brain had defaulted back to English and couldn't catch up in time.

"Sorry?"

One corner of his mouth tipped up and revealed a disgustingly attractive dimple. *Ugh.*

“We can switch to English if you’d prefer, *señorita.*”

I needed him to stop calling me that. The sound of his voice making that word was sending shivers down my spine.

“Um, sure. But please, call me Elena.” I still wasn’t used to the new name, but it was safer this way.

“Elena? Or Mina?”

I resisted the urge to slap him. He knew how dangerous it was if he slipped and used my real name. Multiple groups of people were trying to get to me. Use me. Or kill me. He could be one of them. Shit. *God, my life has become so weird.*

He held up his right hand in a gesture of surrender when I glared at him.

“I know, I know. Sorry. I could not resist. You just looked so grim about everything.”

“Grim? Why would I look grim? You’re driving me to a secret underground magic school where I have to learn how to use this power everyone says I have or the people trying to hunt me down and kill me might actually succeed. They already killed at least one person I love, and I have no idea where my father is. I don’t know, *Alejandro*, why the hell would I look *grim?*”

I realized my voice had risen to a shout and Alejo had pulled the car over so he could turn and face me. Tears threatened to fall from my eyes with the anger, frustration, and unfairness of the situation. I was meant to be finishing my second year of college. Not fleeing for my life.

A warm hand wrapped around my clenched fist, and I looked up.

“Discúlpame, querida. I know this must be hard for you. I didn’t mean to make light of it. But I know from experience that dwelling in the heartbreak and helplessness can paralyze you and make things worse.”

What did *that* mean? I was about to ask, but he continued, “For better or worse, this is your life now. If you would like to *keep* living, you will need to keep your head on a swivel and to develop a sense of humor.”

He was right. God damnit. He was right. I just wished there was an adjustment period for this sort of thing. There were so many things I didn’t know. It felt like drowning.

My fist unclenched and I turned it over to lace my fingers with his. Right now, those strong, warm digits were the only thing keeping me above water. Our eyes locked. I could see sympathy there, but not pity. Alejandro believed I could do this. I had no idea why, but it was an incredibly comforting thought. Plus, having someone as capable and reassuring as him on my side was doing wonders for my shattered sense of self.

His phone rang with a video call, and he loosened his grip on my hand to answer. A second later, a sultry sleepy voice answered.

“Mijo? Estás bien? Dónde está Mina?”

“Aquí, Mamá.”

He turned the phone, and I was greeted by the stunning—though quite groggy—face of the woman I’d last seen as I was fleeing California.

“Mina. Dear. How are you? Have you heard from your father? Is everything okay? You look pale. I see you found my son. Are you on your way?”

The woman had a rich and soothing voice. I had a stray thought that in a different decade, she could have made a fortune operating a *certain* kind of call center. No wonder my dad

had a thing for her when they were younger. Ew. She was just as stupidly gorgeous as her son.

“Um yeah. We’re good. On our way to—where are we going, by the way? Alejo won’t tell me the actual location.” I shot a glare at her smirking son. Those wicked eyes sparkled, and I turned back to the phone.

Your life is in danger. You are not to flirt with the sexy man who seems to know exactly what to say to make you feel better. Bad Mina. Bad.

“I cannot really say. It is the headquarters of the Society here in Spain.”

My eye twitched and my shoulders tensed at the mention of the Society. My last encounter with them had not been so cordial. “But isn’t the Society trying to kill me? I’m not sure I should be going there.”

“My dear, *I* am the head of the branch here, not your grandfather. No one will harm you. Besides, only Alejo and I know your true identity. To everyone else, you will be a very distant cousin or family friend. They will barely pay attention. People come and go from here all the time.”

“But won’t your brothers know I’m not actually family?”

“I’ve sent the two of them on a critical mission in North Africa. They will not return for some months.” She brushed masses of wavy black hair out of her face with a tired hand and stifled a yawn with the other. “If that’s all, *querida*, I will go back to sleep until you arrive in a few hours.” I winced at the term of endearment. It felt very different when Alejo called me that name.

“Oh. Yes, of course. Sorry to disturb you.”

“Buenas noches, Mamá,” Alejo said.

“*Cuídate, mijo.*”

“*Vále, bye.*”

He hung up.

I fidgeted in my seat, unsure if I should be embarrassed for my freakout or not. He squeezed my hand again, forcing the cold and shadows that had begun to set in to flee once more.

“I’m only a little offended by your outburst, *princesa*. I will think on how you can redeem yourself to me.” *Whoa there, cowboy.*

“Listen, I’m s—did you just call me ‘princess’?”

He chuckled and started the car. As he pulled off the shoulder and back onto the road, he said, “*Claro*. Is that not what you are? A Key to unlock the sacred Barrier. A woman who must be protected at all costs. Like the princess in the tower.”

“I never asked for any of that. I just wanted to live a normal life. I *had* a normal life. I had graduated high school and was in my second year of college. In a few years I was going to find a job. I was going to get married and have kids. I’m so utterly average. None of this makes any goddamn sense!”

I was getting worked up again. The changes of the past several days were catching up to me. I’d hadn’t had time to process the death of my best friend, the fact that I was born of a secret bloodline that could basically end the world, or the reality that there were immortal creatures who for one reason or another were hunting me down like it was open season on Mina.

Alejo turned to look at me, making sure our eyes were locked when he said, “You are anything but average, Mina.”

Well okay then. My mind was suddenly blank. And I was so thankful.

He turned back to the road and his face hardened as he continued, “Besides, we don’t choose our fate.”

A muscle in his jaw clenched, but he said no more.

I didn’t know what to make of either thing he’d said. *You are anything but average, Mina.* Holy smokes. I was not prepared for the potency of that statement. I’d almost reached for the door handle to get some air back into the car. I didn’t know how to deal with attention from men. I’d dated a bit, messed around with a few boys in freshman year of college, but not with anybody this confident in himself.

Then he’d gone all brooding and mysterious. My poor overtaxed brain that loved a brooding anti-hero had to look away or combust. I really hoped this guy was secretly evil because I didn’t think I could handle being around him and not make a fool of myself.

I fell silent and watched the sun continue to peak over the horizon out my window. If I noticed Alejo occasionally glancing at me out of the corner of my eye, I didn’t acknowledge it. I’d just gone through a full century’s worth of emotion from anger to terror, to curiosity, to lust, to trepidation, and that was only in the last five minutes. This would be a long drive.

ENOCH/ELYSE

Mountains of Uruguay

Why are we in Uruguay again, Elyse asked.

Damn but that woman could ask her fair share of questions. *Because, human, I must collect the other six Keys. Bring them to Jerusalem. Now that I know where to find your*

friend, it is not urgent that I go after her first. My...visit to her earlier allowed me to sup from her mind. We are more closely connected.

Sup from her mind? You fed on her? Is that what you do? What you did to me? You ate me?

I groaned at her tirade as I picked my way through the shrubbery that coated the hills of Uruguayan countryside.

In a manner of speaking. You were...not exactly an accident. More like...collateral damage.

Incoherent sounds of rage filled my mind, and I wished not for the first time that I could have left her sitting in the parked jeep at the bottom of the hill. But if I could do that, then I would not need her with me at all. I could have left her in New York where she belonged.

Alive.

I ignored the guilt that tried to form at the thought and continued, *Anyway, you are the exception to the rule. We do not have to kill to feed. In fact, when we do not, we often do not affect the humans in any way.* I decidedly didn't mention exactly *how* I had affected Mina in our dream visit. Elyse would not take that well.

Before the Barrier, why didn't you just pop home, have a meal, and come back? She continued.

This questioning *would* end eventually. It had to. I gritted my teeth, but answered despite my exhaustion. *Because we were assigned posts here on earth. A soldier does not leave his post to go get a snack. He eats whatever is provided while on shift or waits until the shift is over.*

I guess that makes a weird sort of sense. She fell silent then.

I chose not to respond. We were getting close.

My quarry was nestled in the little valley just on the other side of that hill. This Key lived on a small farm with her foster parents. I'd been tracing her family for years only to be surprised when I learned of her father's death.

He'd been the Key before her. Strong, healthy, in his prime, I had expected to come to this country and put him into a deep sleep. When I arrived and found my connection to him was faint, I realized the mantle had passed to his child. The connection had been thin enough that I had been forced to ask for information from the humans. They had been reluctant to share, and I'd resorted to feeding from their minds until Elyse threatened that it would get too crowded in here if I did not let them live.

I hated when she was right.

I had the information now, thanks to some judicious mind-sleuthing, but a tiny concern rolled around at the back of my mind.

This was a different situation than I'd expected. The former Key was an adult. He could be reasoned with, convinced, persuaded. He could be useful in this endeavor. His and his wife's deaths had passed the power to their too young daughter. It might make taking her easier, but children were messy. People noticed when they went missing.

Are you sure this is the right place? It doesn't look like anyone lives here, intoned that never-ceasing voice in my head.

I straightened from my trudge up the hill. We had reached the top and Elyse was right. The foot of the hill was so thick with trees that I couldn't see the cottage that was supposed to be there. There were sheep grazing on a neighboring hill, and I thought I could hear the low of a cow, but no buildings in sight.

There was very clearly a gravel drive coming from the other side of the valley. It would have been nice to be able to drive right up to the house and snatch the child, but I was trying not to be chased by human authorities unless absolutely necessary. It made traveling a sticky situation, and given that I would need to lug an increasing number of humans around the world...

The sun was setting behind me, throwing the valley into shadow and my silhouette into stark relief. I quickly crested the ridge and started down the decline toward the cottage.

Winding through the thick trees, I lost sight of my direction and tugged on the faint remnants of the previous Key's psyche to maintain my course. After several more minutes, the trees cleared a bit to reveal the home of the couple that was currently raising the tiny human Key.

I stood looking at the back of the house and—there she was. Already. Alone save for a handful of puppies running around in the grass under her careful supervision. This was clearly a child who had been given a job. One which she took very seriously.

I spied the mother dog off to the side. She was resting with the rest of the litter. She would be my main concern as I tempted the child to come with me. As exhausted as I was sure new motherhood made her, dogs were protective of their humans. I would need to tread carefully so as not to alarm her.

I stepped out of the tree cover and the dog's head came up immediately. Staring in my direction. I slowed my footsteps and tried to assume a less threatening posture.

"Excuse me," I said to the little girl in her own language.

Her head came up and her eyes widened, darting around as if she was not sure I was addressing her. I smiled.

Elyse stirred in the back of my mind. *This is so creepy. We're a child predator. I can't watch.* She retreated without another word. Thank the Expanse. I did not think I could do this with her running commentary rattling around in my aching head.

"How old are your puppies?" I asked. Start with something innocuous. Simple. Disgusting. Elyse was right. There was something so inherently wrong with this. If only she wasn't a crucial and irreplaceable part of my plan to end the suffering of my kind.

ANA

Mountains of Uruguay

"Four weeks," she responded, looking up at the gigantic man. There was something off about him. Like the lady who had taken *Mamá y Papá* away.

Before she could meet the man's eyes, some of the puppies chose that moment to tackle her. She let out a giggle. Their furry little bodies always made her happy. They were like a warm hug when she missed her family. They always had such silly things to say that made her laugh. Once she'd told *Tía* Marisol about it, and had gotten the belt for "making up lies." Ana didn't talk about her special ability to communicate with the animals anymore.

"Are your *mamá y papá* home?" the man said, asking after her aunt and uncle since he didn't know better. That question was one she got a lot nowadays. It hurt every time.

"They're not my parents. But no. They went to the store." Ana didn't know why she added that last part. She had know reason to offer that information to the man. But if he was here to talk to them and knew they weren't here, then maybe he would leave soon. Then she and the puppies could play some more.

He sighed. Uh oh. Ana hoped he wouldn't blame her aunt and uncle's absence on her. Some adults had very strange priorities.

Instead, he changed the subject. "Are you selling your puppies? They are very beautiful."

She finally looked up. The last sliver of sun was disappearing behind his head, shrouding his features in darkness. She couldn't even see the color of his eyes and unnerved her. She sent a quiet order for the puppies to go join their *Mamá*.

But even though Ana couldn't see into his eyes, she could *feel* him. He pushed into her mind. She tried shoving him back out, but he overwhelmed her. This man was *un monstruo* like the ones her *mamá* used to warn her about. She didn't know how she could tell, but she wanted him to leave.

He poked at places in Ana's mind she didn't even let her aunt and uncle see. The dark places. The scary places that were full of the monster lady who took *Mamá y Papá*.

But soon, the man's presence calmed her mind. Settled her. Her thoughts filled with light and love. For a brief moment, it was as if Ana had not lost her parents. As if she were only waiting for them to come home from the store. Soon, they would come through the back door and shout at her to clean up for dinner. She would parade inside with mama dog and puppies trailing behind her. They would be together again.

A family.

He crouched down to speak with her on her level. She finally looked into his eyes and saw him for what he really was. The sight of his true form behind those eyes made no sense. There were too many faces. Too many eyes. Too many...wings? A scream of terror built in her throat, but something clamped down hard on her sense of self preservation.

It wasn't quite fast enough because a small squeak of "*Monstruo*" escaped. Monster. Yes, that is what he was. Ana had no doubt in her mind.

ENOCH/ELYSE

Mountains of Uruguay

Even though my cause was just, my actions were still harming people. Especially this sweet, ignorant child who had lost everything and was trying to rebuild in the ashes of what was left behind.

I took a deep breath and pulled on the extra power I had consumed from the town locals. I would weave her enough of a fantasy that she would willingly come with me.

The puppies had cleared out the moment I got close to their mistress and the mother dog was standing with hackles raised. She had moved closer when the girl cried out, but stood in alert confusion as the little girl's fear subsided and she began to smile at me.

As a rule, creatures of the animal kingdom were better able to sense my unearthliness. They were not always afraid, but certainly more wary. As the dog's mistress relaxed beneath the hand I had laid atop her head, she too settled back on wary haunches.

There we go, I thought, just relax.

Do not croon to her, you freak. Elyse was back.

I thought you could not watch this.

Yeah well, I can't exactly close my eyes, now, can I? I tried to stay away. Just put her to sleep and let's get the Hell out of here. This whole situation is giving me the creeps. And if you thought I was softening on you before, I've since changed my tune.

I rolled my eyes. The sooner I collected these humans, the better. I do not think I would last any longer than necessary with this woman in my brain. Her human conscience was filling me with emotions I neither wanted nor needed. I would collect this child and the other six. I would bleed them dry if I had to. My goal was the only thing that mattered. Saving my kin. Saving the Earth. Saving life as we knew it. It had taken far too long to get here just to have a nineteen-year-old human derail me at the final stages.

I clenched down on the girl's mind and put her to sleep. Not a moment too soon. I picked up the sound of tires on the gravel at the front of the house.

The dog looked conflicted. She wanted to protect her pups, her mistress, and greet her owners at the same time. I made the decision for her, sending her a little mental nudge, and she trotted around the house with her pups at her heels.

Finally alone, I scooped up the child in my arms and loped back up the hill and through the dense tree cover. As I once more reached the apex of the hill, I thought I could hear the voices of her foster parents calling to her. The sound held me hostage for a moment, conflicted.

Time to go! Elyse urged. *I can't believe I'm saying this, but get a move on, asshole!*

Right. Time to go kidnap the next person on my list.

Ah yes.

A seventy-nine-year-old man.

I was really earning points in the "monster" column today.

Chapter 12

ALEJO*North of Madrid, Spain*

We were back outside the abbey. I watched as Mina crawled stiffly from the car, and stretched. *Look away, look away, look away*, my conscience chanted. I didn't listen.

We stood outside the front gates to a gigantic, walled compound. I had driven us almost four hours northwest to the middle of nowhere. Before us stood the place that had been my home for the majority of my life. Ever since the accident, anyway.

A man I recognized as one of my mother's lackeys took the keys from my hand, slid into the front seat, and whipped around a corner to park the car. The abbey—a massive gray monstrosity on the outside, sat waiting to swallow me whole once more. Not a soul was in sight, but the feeling of being watched crept down my spine.

Was this my ancestors' idea of a joke? Who in the name of all that was holy would want to house such influence and power with the already overbearing Catholic Church. At the time this abbey was built, the chokehold the Church had on the world was monumental.

"Elena!" A new voice called out to Mina. *Mamá* strode up to her wearing one of her signature floor-length dresses that managed to look both modest and alluring at the same time. The high neck and long, slightly puffy sleeves led to a tight waist that then fell in flowing fabric to her sandal-clad and painted toes. She called it her "benevolent witch"

look. Mina's eyes darted between the two of us, pupils dilating when they landed on me. I'd always been told my mother and I were a devastating pair when we stood side by side. But it was different to see that effect wash over Mina's exhausted and lovely features.

I wasn't sure what to expect when she used Mina's alias, though there was no one else around. But as soon as she got near enough, she wrapped the young woman in one of her phenomenal motherly hugs that warmed every inch of your soul. It was the hug a mother would give her child—one I'd been lucky enough to receive many times. Even from this distance, I could read Mina's desire to simply melt into my mother's embrace, and sob. Over the girl's shoulder, *Mamá* gave me a grateful smile. I nodded to her, indicating all had gone well on our end, and she turned her face back into Mina's tight embrace.

She let Mina go after a long minute, seeming to sense she needed the extra time and affection, and looked into her pale face.

"I'm so glad you made it here safely. I will send your father notice as soon as it is safe."

Her tone was almost as warm as the hug she'd just administered. Mina tried to respond, but her face was graying quickly with sheer confusion and exhaustion. I didn't know where this protective streak was coming from, but I needed to see her taken care of. Now. "*Mamá*. Let's get her to her room, yes? Logistics can be worked out tomorrow.

"Come my dear, I will show you to your room so that you can rest. Unless you're hungry?" She waited for an answer, but all Mina did was shake her head. My senses were so finely attuned to the mahogany-haired beauty beside me, that I nearly tripped over a piece of gravel as we began to move away from the main entrance. So many unanswered questions for both of us. My brain was basically shutting down with the onslaught from her carefully guarded mind.

“Easy, *princesa*. You will have your answers, *te prometo*. First, you must rest.”

Those green, green eyes gazed up at me with such trust, I suddenly felt guilty. She couldn't know about—could she? No. It wasn't possible.

Mother took one of her hands, and I took the other as we led her around the side of the building. I hoisted her bag over the opposite shoulder, marveling out how light she'd packed. I saw *Mamá's* eyes scanning the stucco wall for the Society's hidden entrance.

Ah. There.

We entered through a nondescript door into a maintenance hallway on the upper level, hurried down the hall, and crammed our bodies into a small broom closet. Mina was too tired and bewildered to even question it, but I found it difficult to ignore the tight fit and press of her body.

Down, pendejo, tu mamá está aquí también.

Reminding myself that my mother was also in the room had the desired effect. My heart rate calmed. Slightly.

There was a loud *click*, and the back wall of the closet slid away revealing an elevator. Most days, the reality of an honest-to-God secret passage sent me into a spiral of nerd-dom. Though I often loathed living in a secret compound, this was one of my favorite things in existence. Today however, I just made a sigh of relief like I did this all the time. Because I was cool and collected.

“After you, *querida*. ”

“Stop with the pet names,” she protested while still preceding me into the metal contraption.

“If you didn’t enjoy them so much, maybe I would, *muñeca*.” I taunted her as we rode down several floors.

“Alejo, enough.” *Mamá* cut in with a glare. There was no time to respond. Because it wasn’t even a moment later before there was a final chime and the door slid open without a sound. This hall was decorated much the same way as the one in LA. Similar runes ran along the walls. Lighting was muted in tastefully placed sconces. I’d always told *Mamá* it reminded me too much of secret cult compounds.

She’d merely shrugged and responded, “Technically we *are* a secret cult, *mijo*.” I’d stopped pushing for redecoration shortly after.

“Welcome to our Spanish headquarters, *Elena*.” My mother turned to her, smiling.

Mina finally found her voice after having told me off. “Ummm...do the monks or nuns upstairs know about this?”

Mamá gave a rich belly laugh. “Of course! Many of them are part of the Society. They help protect us!”

“Oh,” was her only response. But I could hear her thoughts. Conspiracy theorists would have a field day with this place if they ever found out about it. She wasn’t wrong.

We turned down the dizzying number of hallways that all looked the same. *Does Alejo have to put his hand on the small of my back every time we turn?!* That errant thought floated to me from her mind. I did my best to tamp down a grin. She was officially lost in this bizarre underground compound, and my presence was not exactly helping. Underneath the smug male pride that I couldn’t help but feel, was a small twinge of remorse at causing her emotional upheaval. She didn’t need any of that while she was trying to adjust to a new life.

Eventually, we turned toward a plain door halfway down our current hallway. This wasn't far from my room, but I happened to know that this hall was mostly empty. I wondered why *Mamá* hadn't assigned Mina to a room closer to the rest of the students. She pulled out a large, old-fashioned bronze key and ushered her in.

It was all I could do to lift the suitcase onto a luggage rack that had been set up in the corner of the room before I was given a distinct Mom look to *get the hell out*. I gave Mina my best apologetic smile and then disappeared out into the hall without protest. There would be time to taunt and tease her when she was better able to fight back and give as good as she got.

I couldn't wait.

MINA

Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain

I woke feeling more refreshed than I had in a long time. For a few moments, none of the events of the last week weighed on my mind and I lay blissfully in the embrace of very high thread-count sheets.

That bubble popped as soon as I realized it existed and I sat up in the bed. Looking around, it was like something out of a fairytale. The room wasn't over-large, but the bed was. Everything was in rich jewel tones. There was no window—because duh, secret underground wizard bunker—but there was a bureau, two side tables, and a second door that I assumed led to a bathroom. Or, at least, I hoped it did because I suddenly had to pee with the greatest urgency.

I clambered out of the mound of blankets, noticing I was still wearing all my clothes, and flung the door wide. Thank God. The gleaming white porcelain almost hurt my eyes when I flipped the switch, but I squinted until I could see enough to find the toilet and got right to business.

That out of the way and a quick hair and toothbrush later, I finally felt like I could take stock of my situation. I was just about to start in on my habit of making lists of what I knew when there was a polite knock on the door and in walked Maite.

She beamed when she saw me.

“You look well-rested! And just in time, too! Lunch is being served. I will bet you are ravenous.”

Lunch? Did I sleep only a few hours or the whole day?

As soon as she said the words, I knew questions would have to wait, no matter how burning. My stomach felt as if it was going to devour itself. *Probably the whole day*, I concluded. Confused, weak, and hungry, I followed Maite down another dizzying array of hallways before we reached two ornate doors carved out of a beautiful cherry wood. In the dim light from the sconces on the wall, everything gleamed, and the images dug into the door panels threw deep shadows.

I made another mental note to check out this set of doors too. I had a feeling this place's stories had stories. I just needed to find someone who knew them.

For now, though? I would sooner eat those doors than admire them. My stomach gave a loud growl of assent and we stepped into the brightly lit dining room.

ENOCH

Somewhere

She was awake. That would make reaching her harder. I had left Elyse behind, excited about the idea that the two of us could have a real conversation. One that was not so fraught with emotion. I needed to speak to her. Win her over. I was not sure why the idea was consuming me so much. She was just another human.

Just another means to an end.

But as I slipped into her mind, those rationalizations were left behind with my physical body.

Mina, I whispered. Not trying to startle her.

You shouldn't be here, she responded. She sounded hostile. Tired. Angry. I could not imagine why. Last time we spoke, she was welcoming. Open to the idea of working with me. It had barely been a day. I would discover what had changed.

Mina, we need to speak. About things other than our...connection. We need to speak about the reason I sought you out. I must impress upon you the reasons for my actions and the effect they will have if you do not cooperate. If you want your friend back, you must listen to me.

Instead of responding, I felt the depths of her uncertainty and fear come through. A flash of anger speared toward me. Mina did not like being dictated to, apparently. So, I tried something I had never done with a human.

I begged.

Mina, please. I cannot do any of this without you. You are the last piece of a very complicated puzzle.

I felt the hesitation on her end. She was thinking about it. But I could also feel how overwhelmed she was. Slowly, the two emotions battled one another inside her mind. My hopes sank when I saw which one won out. Before I could interfere, try to talk her emotions down, an impenetrable steel wall slammed between us.

I was thrown from her mind like a leaf on the winds of a hurricane. My own mind slammed back into my mortal shell, nausea washing over me. That kind of severance was not supposed to happen. Our souls had been comfortably mingling.

To be ripped apart so abruptly would leave us both weakened for the next few hours.

Chapter 13

MINA

Somewhere north of Madrid, Spain

I kicked Enoch out of my mind too fast, and a wave of nausea swamped me. But at least he was gone. Despite his assurances that he was not behind Elyse's death, I didn't know if I could trust him. Besides, I had enough voices bombarding me from the outside. I didn't need any more on the inside.

"Where are you from?"

"How long have you been in Spain?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Who are your parents?"

The questions flew at me fast and hard in Spanish. I didn't know what to say. I repeated my cover story over and over, but it left a bad taste in my mouth.

"My name is Elena Romero. Maite is a distant cousin. My parents are deceased."

Somehow, that last sentence was the hardest to grind out. Even though it was true my mother had long since passed, my father was very much alive. At least, I hoped he was. I was learning words and intention have power in this world and I worried that my lies would come back to haunt me, and I would lose my father too.

“*Mijos!* Leave the poor girl alone! She just got here. You will have plenty of time to get to know her while she is with us. Now off with you. Go clean up and gather your things before class. The ten students left the room with good-natured grumbling, jostling each other as they tried to pass through the door four at a time.

“Mina.”

The use of my real name from Maite made me jump and turn. Alejo stood by her side. Their faces were almost exact copies of one another, excluding the slight differences for masculine or feminine features. His face was like granite, no expression, and all angles, but the corner of his mouth tipped up when he caught me staring.

I glanced back at Maite.

“Mina, Alejo will be your guide to this place. He will make sure you get to where you need to go while you are here. You can trust him with any concerns you have. I am not always in the training corridors, so if you cannot find me, go to him.”

Before I could open my mouth to blurt out the millions of questions I had, chief among them being, “What the hell am I doing here,” she put up a hand and continued. “I know you have so many questions, *querida*. Many of them, Alejo and your classes will hopefully answer—“

“Classes?”

“—The rest we will have to find time for a nice long chat in private. Unfortunately, right now I am called away by duty. Alejandro will take good care of you.”

As she said the last sentence, she reached up and pulled her son’s cheek down for a kiss. He dutifully bent so his petite mother could reach. Then in a whirl of spicy scent and a

clicking of stilettos, she was gone. I blinked up at my companion, dazed. This time, he wore a genuine grin on his handsome face.

“*Sí, mamá* has that effect on everyone.” *Ummm...so do you, buddy.* “Come, you must eat before class.”

He took my elbow and guided my shocked body to the buffet. It was clear several young people had already been at it. Many of the dishes barely had one or two servings left.

When I didn’t move, Alejandro said, “If you don’t want to eat, at least let me. I’m starving.”

With that, he grabbed a plate, knife, and fork then started scooping generous helpings of the delicious looking food onto his plate. When he had a mountain, he sat down at one of the tables and started digging in without hesitation. The smell of the food finally registered in my brain and my stomach growled louder than it ever had. That’s right. I, too, was starving.

I grabbed a plate and utensils from the same places and piled them high. When I was satisfied that my eyes were not bigger than my stomach, I sat across from Alejandro and tucked into my own food. We ate in companionable silence for several minutes before curiosity finally got the best of me again.

“Can I ask you something?”

“That depends,” he said. One of his perfect eyebrows rose. “Do you want the truth or to feel better?” Oh, that was a challenge if I’d ever heard one.

I sat up straighter. “The truth.”

He snorted as if he didn’t believe me and made a dismissive gesture with the hand holding his fork. “Ask away, then.”

“This place seems really busy. There are so many people.”

He waited.

“I just—will I really be safe here? With so many curious eyes? Your mother and my father seemed to think so, but I don’t know.”

He studied me for a moment longer than said, “No. You will not be safe here.”

Shit. I guess maybe I *did* want him to make me feel better instead of telling me the truth.

He continued before I could spiral. “You will never be safe anywhere, but you can stay here for a time and *learn*. Then you will know how to keep *yourself* safe. But here, as in anywhere, you must always be on your guard. Do not trust a kind face or a listening ear from *anyone*.” He paused at that. “Secrets are best kept when only one person knows them.”

Well, if that wasn’t an ominous speech, I don’t know what was. But I was grateful to him. “Thank you, Alejandro.”

“Alejo. Please. My father is Alejandro.”

I chuckled. “That must get confusing.”

“Hence the nickname.” He stood with his empty plate. “If you are finished, we only have a few more minutes to get to class.”

I looked down at my half-eaten food. My appetite had left me, so I followed him to the dish dispenser and out the door.

Chapter 14

ENOCH/ELYSE

Toorak, Melbourne, Australia

Seriously? You couldn't think of a better way to approach this guy? And why the hell are we in Australia?

"If you would shut up for five minutes, you might realize that I have spent thousands of years forming lasting connections with these bloodlines, but that doesn't mean I've met *this* incarnation of the Key. We will need to act with some level of stealth and discretion if they are all to join us."

Join us? Dude, you realize you're kidnapping these people from everything they know and love, and telling them you need their blood for a magic spell, right? Do you know how insane that sounds? How do you plan on winning this one over?

"Sheer charm" I gritted out. "Now hush, we're here and I need to concentrate."

Right. Far be it for me to distract you from your kidnapping plot.

My mental passenger grumbled a bit more, but eventually quieted down and settled into interested observance. After all, it wasn't every day a sheltered young human woman witnessed the things this one would. An entity at work was a sight to behold, if I did say so myself.

I had followed the thread of the first Key in my mind. This one was faintest because it had been many generations since I had fed from her. Her many-times-great-grandson now held the burden of the Key within his blood. The man was past his prime now, aging without grace and without regard to his vital bloodline. Perhaps, he felt because he now had children and grandchildren, that his own safety did not matter.

As I approached the house, I saw my target through the window. He was sitting in the study, staring blankly out into the water. I could sense the untapped power. Not untrained—no this man knew what he was capable of—he simply chose not to use it. It...scared him. As well it should. As a Key, he would be much more powerful than those around him. No one would know how to handle him. They would have instilled that same wariness and mistrust they held for him into his very being. He was eaten up with fear and bitterness in his old age. What a waste.

I pondered; would it be better to take the man or do away with him and retrieve the one who would inherit? If I took the man, he would be much easier to control, but there was no guarantee he would survive long enough to complete the ritual. If I killed the man and took his successor, the heir would be hardier, but more difficult to subdue for the length of time it would take to gather the rest of the Keys.

In the end, I decided to spare the old man's life and retrieve him as is.

JAMES

Toorak, Melbourne, Australia

James set down the crystal tumbler of whiskey with a clack. He was now far enough into the bottle that the simmering conflict of grief and anger roiling in his gut was somewhat numbed by the twenty-five-year-old scotch.

Don't speak ill of the dead, they said. What if I have nothing but ill to say?

His mother had been quite an unkind and cold woman. The only good thing to come out of her death was that now he could have his father's study to himself without the worry of her barging in with another demand.

Not even the brilliant view of kayaks and boats floating by on the Yarra River could shake James out of his stupor. He was legless—more drunk than he could ever remember being—on the Old Girl's most expensive liquor. And that was saying something. Even at ninety-five and him seventy, she'd loved to berate him about, well, everything. He drank too much. He smoked too much. He was lazy, useless, pitiful. She'd treated him like a criminal from the time he inherited the "curse" from his Uncle Timothy.

She was right to a certain extent. He was pitiful. And dangerous. But only because he couldn't really function sober. The deep dark secret that had gotten him sent to psychologist after psychologist until he learned to keep his mouth shut plagued him every day. It was worse around other people. All of their negative thoughts—only their negative thoughts—filtered into his mind, and poisoned his every waking hour.

Once, when he was eight, he'd been sitting in the back of their car, trying to do his homework while on their way to yet another of the Old Girl's charity functions. This one was for the children of Melbourne, so of course she'd felt obligated to bring him along.

He'd looked up at his mother, dressed in shimmering diamonds and an elegant dress, and been startled by the sad look on her face. Then, unbidden, her voice sounded in his head as if she had spoken out loud. *G-d I wish I was anywhere but here. Would that I could leave all of this behind and never look back.*

James had responded, "Can I come too, mum? When you leave?"

He would never forget the look of horror on her face as she realized he knew what she had been thinking. That was the day their relationship died. She could never be in the same room as him for long. She stopped taking him places. She did her best to ignore him and would find fault in everything he did. And all because of a curse he had no control over. The only clue James ever had to why he was this way was one time when he'd overheard her thinking, *Just like Tim.*

But now, at seventy, he was resigned to never knowing why he was plagued with such vitriol from other people's minds day after day. He knew other people in his mother's circle could tap into certain...forces...but none of them experienced what he did. And *all* of them treated him like a diseased inconvenience. A pariah even in a group of weirdos and outcasts.

James launched the crystal container across the room and watched it shatter with satisfaction. There was a knock on the door then. James stayed silent, hoping whoever it was would just go back to the wake his kids were hosting in the backyard. No such luck. When he didn't answer, the person opened the door and came in anyway.

"Ned," James growled. "I shoulda known you'd come find me."

James's friend Ned Williams had been the family's lawyer since they both graduated law school. How the two of them had been friends all these years, James didn't know. Ned

was clean cut, hard-working, and the son James's mother had always wished for. James never held it against him though. He figured if a guy like Ned continued being his friend, then he couldn't be in that bad of shape.

Ned sat down in the leather studded armchair next to him and set his briefcase on the table between them.

Uh-oh.

This was business Ned then. Friend Ned never would've brought work to comfort a grieving mate.

"Alright then, mate. Get on with it. What did the Old Girl leave behind?"

"The kids will be joining us in a second, Jim. I've asked that they all be present to read the will."

James flinched. He didn't like for his kids to see him when he got in one of these moods. Oh well. There was no chance of sobering up from half a bottle of twenty-five-year Scotch in the next two minutes. He didn't like to see the looks of disappointment on his kids' faces, but what could he do?

He straightened from his drunken slump just as the door opened once more and his four children filed in. Mary, his oldest and named after his mother, sat on the very edge of the low couch opposite him, looking as if she was prepared to take flight. Edmund, named after the man beside him, came in and gave Ned a hearty handshake before plopping down beside his sister. George filed in, stepping gingerly around the shattered crystal and remaining standing due to the sleeping infant in his arms. And finally, the youngest, Samantha, newly engaged, kissed James on the cheek before squeezing in next to Edmund.

Ned cleared his throat.

“Thank you all for joining us here. It’s important you all hear the contents of your grandmother’s will first-hand.”

“Go on then, Neddy. What’s she left us?” Edmund looked bored, but James knew better. The boy was shrewd. He was looking forward to his piece of the Old Girl’s estate.

Ned glared at his namesake, but pulled out a folder and began to read. The fact that there was only one paper in that folder escaped no one in the room.

“I, Mary Olivia Turner, hereby leave all of my possessions, assets, and wealth to my four grandchildren, Mary Katherine Turner Robinson, Edmund James Turner, George William Turner, and Samantha Eleanor Turner, in equal portion.”

Ned fell silent and put the paper down.

Samantha’s brows furrowed. “That’s it? What about Daddy?” Her large doe eyes landed on him, confused.

James felt his heart melt somewhat from its numb stupor. His baby girl had always looked after him—even when he was at his worst. Then the words registered, and he looked at Ned. Ned pointedly avoided his gaze.

His best friend had written up this will for his mother. He’d known for *years* that James would receive fuck all. Some mate.

More throat clearing.

“Well, kids. It’s up to you what happens to the money. Your grandmother specified that everything was left to you. Not your father. As you know, your grandmother was a tremendously wealthy woman, but I’m not sure you realized just *how* wealthy.”

Edmund sat forward, hands folding together and elbows planting firmly on his knees. “How wealthy, Neddy?”

Mary looked ill. Like she would rather be anywhere other than here.

“Well, if you live within reason, you will never have to work again. You or your spouses.”

There was a collective gasp around the room.

“But what about Daddy?” Samantha again.

Yes, what about Daddy? James thought.

“Well, he’s retired. And still has his government pensions, so if you wanted to sell the house he could get by alright—”

“No way. None of us are that cruel. Father will continue to live here for as long as he wants. We’ll of course retain the staff and he’ll have every need taken care of.”

The others stare at Mary, no one more surprised at her generosity than James. She had always made her disdain for James and his drinking habits very clear. But today, she showed a breadth of kindness James didn’t know she possessed.

“I mean how would that look? Grandmother dies and father has to go live in some squalid apartment by the Melbourne docks? People would think we were monsters.”

Never mind. That sounded more like the Mary he knew and loved.

“Wow, Mare. Real nice. Very generous of you. But I do agree, Dad. You should stay in the house,” George said, bouncing from foot to foot with the baby on his shoulder. Edmund nodded in agreement. James didn’t argue. With his room and board taken care of, his pensions would provide plenty of pocket money.

The room emptied out quickly after that. Ned tried to stay behind and apologize for not warning him, but James couldn’t look at his oldest friend. The words *pitiful, useless, lazy*,

and *worthless* were pinging around his head in his mother's voice. The alcohol numbed his ability to hear Ned's thoughts, but he could still read the old boy's face better than his own.

He turned shamefaced to stare out the window. Ned disappeared and returned long enough to bring him a large bottle of water, then left him to sulk alone.

James glanced between the tumbler of whiskey and the bottle of water. The damage was already done. His kids had seen him utterly smashed and had treated him like an invalid or a child. He shouldn't need to rely on their mercy, but here he was, a drunken misanthrope who only made the lives of the people he loved that much harder.

Chugging the bottle of water, James shuffled out of the study to find the toilet. When he was finished, he and his bottle of water ambled out the front door and away from the prying eyes of the neighbors, friends, and family milling about the back yard.

James knew he could very easily rely on his children's mercy for the rest of his life. And Lord knew he would. But a thought occurred that perhaps he could be a bit better. Then maybe he wouldn't be so ashamed to look in their eyes that way.

As he made his way down to the little park by the riverbank, James thought the obvious decision was to quit drinking. But then he would be bombarded by unwelcome and unstable thoughts from those around him. Maybe there was a way he could learn to control it. He wasn't the only person in the world who'd ever experienced this, he was sure. He would go to those insufferable friends of Mother's and begin research tomorrow. He would attempt to leave his children with a better impression before he, too, passed. Even if he couldn't change their minds, maybe he could redeem himself to the grandkids. That way, at least someone would have fond memories of him when he was gone.

A shadow fell beside where he sat on his jacket on the riverbank, and he looked up. Since the sun was directly behind the man, he couldn't make out much of his face except that he seemed young, tall, and strong.

"What can I do for you, young man?" James sipped the water, trying to rid himself of the alcohol induced fog. The big man made him nervous. For the first time in his life, James wished he was sober so he could read the man's thoughts.

"James Turner?" The voice was a deep gravel, as if its owner was not accustomed to speaking. The accent was not from Melbourne. Not even from Australia, if he had to guess.

Narrowing his eyes, James struggled to his feet and answered, "Who's asking?"

"One who called on your ancestor many centuries ago to help right a wrong. Since she was unable to fulfill her duty at the time, she passed it down through her descendants and it now falls to you."

Who the hell is this crackpot?

"Son, I think you have the wrong person. I'm too old to be fulfilling any ancestral duties."

"Too drunk, you mean."

James bridled at this. Yes, he was drunk, but how dare some stranger come around his mother's wake and berate him for indulging.

"Now, you listen—"

"Enough. I do not have time for this," said the man. He reached up a hand and pressed the palm to James' forehead. Before James could swat the hand away, the bottle slid from his hand, and everything went black.

Samantha Turner had been worried about her father all day. When she'd walked into the study for the will reading, she noticed the half-empty decanter of Scotch and James' sleepy eyes. He always drank to excess when he knew he had to socialize.

Growing up, when it had just been the two of them or just them and her siblings, he'd been happy and mostly sober—but as soon as anyone else entered the picture, out came the Scotch. Now at his age, she worried about him falling or getting hurt when he wandered off.

That thought caused her to excuse herself from the guests and their insincere condolences. Ever faithful, her fiancé fell into step beside her.

“Off to find Jim?”

She loved that there was no judgment in his voice. Only support.

“Yes, I'm afraid the memories of mother, the crowd of people, and the devastating—though not surprising—outcome of the will may have caused him to indulge too much today.”

He laced his fingers with hers.

“Then let's go find him, love. I'm sure he's fine, but can't hurt to corral him back to safer quarters, eh?”

“Weirdo.” She said, mocking his jaunty tone and choice of words.

“You love it.”

“Unfortunately.”

After checking the study to find him gone, then covering most of the house, Samantha suggested they check out front.

“He does like to watch the boats go past at the park.”

They walked down toward the water, and she immediately knew something was off. Her father's black suit jacket lay spread out in the grasses as if he'd been sitting upon it. There was a half-drunk liter bottle of water, but no dad.

"Daddy?" She called.

"Jim!" Her fiancé walked further down the bank as she walked upriver.

"Dad!"

An awful thought occurred to her, and she started frantically scanning the dark water. He wouldn't have—No. She couldn't think like that.

Instead, she hailed her fiancé and headed back toward the house. They would find him. Chief Inspector Kelley was eating mini quiches in the back yard, for Heaven's sake. This would be resolved quickly, and they would all have a good laugh. At least, that's what Samantha told herself even as a yawning pit of dread ripped open in her stomach.

Chapter 15

MINA

Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain

“Hey, Alejo! Can you slow down?”

His long-legged strides had eaten up the dizzying mass of hallways and I was practically running to catch up. He looked down at me. At what I guessed was six-foot-one or -two, he was nearly eight or nine inches taller than I. I stiffened my spine as his intense eyes pierced mine.

“If you cannot keep up, you will find this a very inhospitable place indeed.”

I glared back. What thorn got stuck in *his* paw this morning? “Where is this place, anyway?”

He turned to the door directly to his left and entered without another word. I scampered after him and stopped short when he moved out of my way. Four other faces turned toward me. One of the girls that had been grilling me earlier gave me a small wave. There were two other students I had not yet seen and the teacher.

“*Alejo, gracias por traernos a nuestra nueva estudiante.* Please, have a seat. Miss Romero, you may sit anywhere you like. In the future, please remember to be on time to my class.”

I blanched at the rebuke. Twenty minutes ago, I didn't even know I would be taking his class. But I wasn't going to argue and earn more censure. I sat in the empty desk next to Alejo. He wiggled his eyebrows at me. I stifled my laughter and turned to face the teacher who had already restarted his lecture.

Oh. This class was about the Source. Something I'd been dying to know more about.

"Unlike the Barrier, the Seven Gates beyond can be opened or closed if you meet the right criteria. We know that before the Barrier, our souls would journey through to the final gate after death and be reunited with the Source. Now our souls are either trapped here, or they dissipate until there is nothing left. As far as we know there are no souls that have been able to cross the Barrier in thousands of years. There are seams where the Barrier is thinnest. In contrast to the occasional tear that can happen anywhere, these are the places where it is easiest to draw power and they are consistent. They never change. Their intersections are particularly useful, but we cannot cross over."

The blonde in front of me raised her hand. "But wouldn't that work in the reverse as well? If we can draw power from the Other Side at these places, wouldn't the entities be able to do the same?"

"Very good. This is why completing any workings at these junctures can be incredibly dangerous. The creatures can sense when enough power flows through the Barrier. If you do not complete your task quickly, you run the risk of becoming a starving entity's lunch. My advice is to never approach these places unless you are part of a group that is able to counteract the entity's pull."

I shivered at the thought of being pulled into the Other Side. It was bad enough to have to leave my home, but to leave my own reality would be more than my poor beaten conscience could take.

I raised my hand as a thought occurred.

“Yes, Miss Romero?”

“I was wondering about the entities that cross the Barrier. What can be done about them? Can they be repelled?”

The teacher looked at me like I was high. “They do *not* cross the Barrier. They were locked away by our forefathers thousands of years ago before most organized religions even existed.”

“But—”

Alejo kicked me, his dark eyes warning me to be silent. It didn’t matter. The teacher had already dismissed me and was continuing on with his lecture. I only half listened to the rest. Did this man who was supposed to impart knowledge to us not know that entities could and did send small numbers to the Mortal Realm to look for the Keys? Or was he forbidden from letting the young people know? Revealing that I had seen one would cause far too many questions, so I shut my mouth and listened to the half truths.

When the class ended, I was handed a small stack of dense-looking books for “catching up” and followed Alejo out of the classroom without another word. He pulled me into the room across the hall before I could object. It was a broom closet much like the last one. In the closeness, I could feel the heat radiating off his body. I steeled myself and looked up into his eyes.

“Not many people know about the ones that are loose in this world. The higher ups keep the knowledge close because they don’t want to start a panic. Señor Mané is not privilege to that knowledge.”

“But wouldn’t it be better if everyone were prepared to defend themselves?”

“Your grandfather believes it would make the Society seem weak. He thinks people will start to worry that the Barrier spell is breaking down. That would diminish the Council’s power—”

“And Augustus is all about power,” I said grimly.

He nodded.

I was silent for a moment, so he added, “Small gaps in knowledge aside, you will receive a pretty decent education here.”

“And the gaps?”

“I will attempt to fill them for you.” I did not miss the innuendo in that sentence. Ah nope. Not going there. *Bad Mina.*

A question thankfully occurred to derail my lecherous thoughts. “Why are you privy to the super-secret info?”

His laugh was brittle. “When my mother realized I would not stop listening at key holes, she began to groom me to take her place in the Council.”

I was sure there was more, but he was not volunteering the information yet. “Huh.”

I looked at Alejo. Really took him in and, oh boy, was this closet suddenly too small? Perfect light brown skin, fine cheekbones, rich smoky green eyes, and that voice! He oozed charm. Yes, he would do well on the council. My heart tripped over itself, and I realized I had been staring. Again.

I felt sweat gather between my shoulder blades and under my hair. Noticing my discomfort—though hopefully not the reason for it—Alejo gave me another half-smile and gestured toward the door.

“Shall we?”

Yes. We should exit this closet immediately. I was not used to the close talking of European men. I needed air. And probably a cold shower. What was I getting into?

Chapter 16

MINA*Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain*

The second class of the day was nothing like the first. For one thing, there were no other students. Alejo dropped me off with an enigmatic, “Good luck,” then left me alone.

The room we entered looked to be cut directly from the bedrock on which the monastery stood. Reddish sandstone vaulted high above our heads and reflected the light of flickering torches. There was very little ornamentation here. The polished stone was the star of the show, flecks of white embedded in the rust-colored stone picked up the light and glowed due to the high gloss polish that covered every inch of the walls and floor.

As we walked in, I noticed that the floor sloped down toward the center, creating a round basin. Maite stood at the center, eyes closed, head tilted back, and arms spread. She looked utterly at peace. There was a pulse that seemed to emanate from the center of the room, but whether it came from the room itself or Maite, I couldn’t be sure.

Alejo patted me on the shoulder, then exited the room before I could object. So, this was to be a one-on-one session then. I almost grabbed his arm and begged him to stay with me. There was something about this room and this whole situation that unnerved me. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but the fine hairs at the back of my neck were standing on end and though I’d only just met him, he comforted me in ways I didn’t want to analyze just yet.

I wasn't sure if I should speak to let Maite know I'd arrived. The oppressive energy in the room took up any space left by the silence. I felt that speaking would fill the room to excess and throw something off. Then I felt stupid for thinking any of it. What the hell did I know about any of this stuff? I remained silent, waiting.

Eventually, Maite gave an audible inhale, lowered her arms, and opened her eyes. They landed directly on me as if she'd already known I was there. I swear I hadn't made a sound, but her radiant smile told me it didn't matter how quietly I moved.

"Mina," her deep rich voice was on par with her son's for absolute deliciousness, though it definitely didn't affect me in the same way. "How was your first class?"

"I-it was good." The throbbing in the room was lessening, making it easier to speak. "Though I had some questions about how much we are keeping from the others."

"Ah yes. It is not ideal, no. But what is the alternative, eh? A panic would lead to our people depleting themselves of magic they do not have. Too many lives would be lost if they were always on their guard against a potential entity breaching the Barrier."

She was right. I knew she was right, but that didn't mean it sat well.

"*Ven aquí*. I want to show you something. You saw what I was doing, yes?"

I nodded and stepped closer. The energy of the room enveloped me as soon as I set foot in the basin. I gasped and met Maite's gaze with wide eyes.

"What *is* that?"

Her chuckle rippled off the stone around us.

"That, my dear, is the 'Other Side'. There are too many names for it—Heaven, Nirvana, the Source—but that is the easiest one for a novice to comprehend. It is the place where all consciousness meets. It is the Source of all things. And...it is the home of the entities."

“Like the one who is after me. But how did he get here? If the Barrier is so powerful, how are they in our world?”

Maite let out a breath.

“The Barrier is a difficult beast. Our ancestors built it in order to keep us safe from the entities who they believed were harming us by feeding from us. Like any wall or membrane, enough pressure can create holes—temporary or otherwise.”

“Wait. You don’t think they mean us harm?”

She gave me a side-long look, her lips quirking up in the same mischievous smile her son gave me earlier. *I guess my dad and I have the same type. Gross.*

“You are an observant one, aren’t you? I have a theory that though the entities *can* harm us, they do not *need* to. Much like how humans *can* harm one another, but often don’t. I have a pet theory that the Barrier inhibits our abilities to tap into the Source and thus perform magic more than it protects us. I believe the risk to our wellbeing from the entities is less than the power to be gained from unfettered access to the Source.”

“What made you think that?”

“In my research, I have encountered...writings. Each subsequent generation is less and less powerful. There are exceptions of course, when one of us finds one of said holes or captures a lone entity, but for the most part our power is being drained. There are tales of my ancestors even only five centuries ago doing things I would need all of my children’s assistance to accomplish today.”

I pondered this.

“Then why am I running from the one that chased after me? If anything, I should be working with him to bring down the Barrier. Or, like you said, capturing him.”

“Oh *muñeca*, my views on the Barrier are very much in the minority. I do not have enough proof to sway most people on the Council to my way of thinking. Besides, you do not yet have the training to be of use to the entity, nor he to you, correct? I would prefer you to aid him without giving up your life. As for capturing him, he is an exceptionally cunning being who has outlasted all other entities on this plane since the Barrier was created. He would squash us both before we even lifted a finger.”

“Good point.”

She clapped her hands together once.

“To that end, let us begin your training.”

And thus began the weirdest hour of my life.

“This is a thin space, a place where the connection to the Source is stronger. It is not a hole, but more like fabric worn thin. Though it is thinner at certain times of year, it will always maintain a stronger connection to the Other Side than most other points of the world. You will do a sort of meditation that will help figure out what your magical strengths are. Sit.”

I did as she instructed me. It was a *lot* like meditation.¹⁵ Or better yet, like the times Dad had taken me to the North woods of Central Park to “talk to God” as a kid. I ignored the stab of grief at that period of lost innocence and tranquility. My legs were crossed, palms resting on knees, face up, eyes closed. As soon as I leaned into the pulsing energy of the room, I understood why she’d told me to sit and not remain standing as she had.

¹⁵ There is a rich history of Jewish meditation that was largely lost during the Holocaust. Recently, several scholars and Rabbis have dedicated their efforts to restoring these traditions. In this case, Mina is performing a version of *hitbod’dut*—a form of communing with the Source that allows her to tap into an inner peace and power.

I lost track of my body.

I was no longer within it, but at the same time was deeper than I'd ever been. I was infinitely shrinking and expanding. I *was* the universe.

Terror gripped me. What if I could never come back? What if I lost everything I was to this strange power that I'd never even asked for?

I jerked my eyes open with a gasp.

"I can't! That was—I was—I can't." I went to bury my face in my hands, but Maite pulled them away and grabbed my chin until I was forced to meet her eyes. Her face was no longer kind. It had turned to hard steel.

"You can and you will because you *must*. Deep breaths. I will not let you lose yourself. Just try again."

She didn't let go of my gaze until I nodded my agreement. Taking a deep breath, I let my consciousness meld once more with the vastness.

The times I'd attempted meditation before now had been nothing like this. Not only was *my* every sense heightened, but I was aware of the sensations of every person in this building, if not also the town surrounding the monastery. My mind darted from one consciousness to another. It wasn't thoughts, but the most vivid emotions and physical sensations I'd ever felt—from thousands of people. And it *hurt*. Oh my God did it hurt. Love, lust, anger, grief, pain, pleasure, rage, embarrassment, confusion, and so many others hit me all at once. It was the entire human experience in one breath and I—I couldn't hold it all.

I felt myself begin to shatter.

As if from a great distance, I heard the voice of my teacher, “Tell me what you are experiencing.”

“It h-hurts. It’s...everything from everyone.” I groaned and clutched my temples. “There’s too many of them.” There were tears streaming down my face and I rocked with hands clamped over my ears in a vain attempt to alleviate the pain.

Cool hands took mine and that voice of ochre and smoke came through the noise, “Focus on me. Only my voice. Only my emotions. Shut the others out.”

Maite’s voice was a lighthouse on this storm-tossed sea of mental agony. I battled my way through the storm as she continued to speak. As soon as I focused only on her voice and could see her as a bright spark in my mind’s eye, I was able to pull a veil around myself and the rest of the sensations bombarding me. The room quieted, the agony receded, and I used the last of my strength to break the connection and scramble out of the center basin.

“That was excellent, my dear! You are a quick learner. I had to yank Alejo out the first time he did it, but you did it on your own.”

I gave her a wan smile.

“Is it always like that? You looked so happy doing it. You actually like that sensation?”

“No, it is not the same. What you felt can only be sensed by those with a specific talent. I do not have the same talent.”

“So, my talent is, what? Absorbing pain?”

She laughed.

“In a way.”

When I gaped at her in horror, her face softened, and she continued.

“Empathy, *querida*. You are an empath. And from the feel of things, a powerful one.”

I winced, remembering the strength of the sensations as they bombarded me.

“Well, shit.”

ALEJO

Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain

My mother was practically skipping toward me after her lesson with Mina.

I had to laugh at her expression. “*Qué pasó, Mamá?*”

“Alejo,” she breathed. “She’s incredible. She has so much raw power.”

“Do—do you think it will be enough?”

Her eyes gleamed more than I had seen since before my father’s death. “*No sé, mijo.*

But it will get us closer.”

It had taken us years after my father was killed in the accident to find a spell that might bring him back to life. Then, it had taken still more years to accrue the type of power needed to perform the spell without killing ourselves.

Some of the things we’d done to amass such power still didn’t sit right with me, but if it meant having my dad back—

“*Mamá*, I know we agreed that Mina’s power was needed, but couldn’t we just *ask* her to help us? There’s no reason she wouldn’t. I mean, she knows what it’s like to lose a parent. I just think—”

My mother shook her head, dark curls swinging. “No. *lo siento, mi amor*. I know you like her—I like her too—but the fewer people the power is divided amongst, the stronger the spell. You know the theory: the whole is much stronger than the divided parts. We don’t know if the spell will even work. We can’t take any chances.”

Her logic was so flawed, and my anger boiled over. “If you need so much power, why don’t you take mine?”

“*Mijo...*”

“*No, Mamá!* It’s because you know that taking someone’s power like that will kill them. I turned a blind eye when it was strangers, but this is *Mina*. She is your friend’s daughter. She’s relying on us to keep her safe. *Mamá, por favor*, pick someone—anyone else.”

Her eyes brimmed with tears. “There *is* no one else, *mijo*. Your uncles have reported back on the power levels of the other Keys. She is the strongest. I cannot take yours. I cannot trade my son for my husband. But I will not let other peoples’ qualms about morality or ethics stop me. We have all this knowledge and power at our fingertips. What is the *point* if I cannot save the man I love?”

My shoulders sank in defeat. She was right. We didn’t know if it would work, but everything we had done—the crimes we’d committed, the lines we’d crossed—all of it would be for nothing if we did not attempt it.

And to attempt it, we needed Mina’s power.

“You’ve done good, *mijo*. She already likes you. Keep getting close to her. Keep her in your sights. We must siphon what is needed before Augustus or the entities find her.”

Yes, I would continue to get to know Mina. I would get close to her. The problem was, could I keep myself neutral? There was something about her that drew me in. Something I couldn’t seem to resist every time we spoke.

“Alejo. Can you do this?” Her stern voice cut through my musings.

“*Sí, Mamá. Yo puedo hacerlo.* For *Papá*, I will do whatever it takes.”

Chapter 17

MINA*Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain*

The next week was a blur of information and pain. I had “lessons” with Maite every day. The first couple of times I went into the Source, I had to bite my lip to keep from screaming at the agony that ripped through me. By the time Maite calmed me down enough to put up the veil and soften the sensations I could taste blood.

But I was getting better. Each time I put the veil up a little faster until it was up before I closed my eyes. Pretty soon, it turned from a flimsy partition into a wall of impenetrable steel that only I could breach. Once I’d mastered shielding, Maite had me focusing on individuals.

“Oh. Oh no. Oh ew. I don’t need to experience that.”

I pulled myself out of a man’s particularly colorful hangover. We’d been at it for two hours and this sensation had been so strong, I’d followed it without thinking. I was in the man’s emotions and physical ailments before I could even identify them. Someone had raged at the bars last night.

“What was it this time?” Asked Maite.

“Some guy is regretting last night deeply.”

Her startled laughter rang against the polished tone around us.

“I think that is our cue to bring this session to an end. Well done, *querida*.”

“Thanks.”

I shook off the stiffness of sitting for so long. Even out of the basin I could still feel the Source. It was like once it was under my skin, it burrowed in and stayed there. It concerned me because Maite had said that she came to this room because she could not feel such a connection with the Source otherwise. Why did I? Why, unbidden, was I catching snippets of emotion and sensation from my classmates and teachers throughout the day?

I’d always had my “intuition”—something I had yet to talk to anyone but Dad about—but this felt like I’d kicked open a door and someone had ripped it off rather than allow it to close again. Sitting in the basin only blasted away whatever separation I managed to maintain.

Maite walked in silence beside me for a while until she stopped and took hold of my upper arms, turning me towards her.

“Mina, in our sessions—or even out of them—have you experienced anything else? Any new sensations that might indicate your powers expanding?”

Does she know? Why do I feel like she shouldn’t?

Those amber eyes pierced mine, searching, probing. For some reason, I felt compelled to throw up my wall and respond, “No, why?”

She continued to gaze at me for a moment. I felt a scraping against my mental shield—like a sharp claw against stone. It left me with a nasty sensation, but didn’t do any damage. And it didn’t get through my defenses.

Why are my instincts screaming, “DANGER”? This woman has been nothing but nice to me.

I kept my face carefully blank.

“Is everything ok, Maite?”

She blinked and smiled.

“Fine, of course. I just want to make sure that we monitor your growth. This power can be exceptionally dangerous and a lot rides on us keeping you safe.”

“Right, of course. I promise I’ll tell you if I experience anything weird.” I crossed my fingers behind my back. Dad had told me to trust no one. No matter how nice this lady had been to me or how smoking hot her son was, I was not safe here. That meant I would need to keep some things to myself.

She let go of me after a minute and we continued on to lunch.

Oh Elyse, where are you when I need you? I could use your no-nonsense practical advice. I’m so in over my head. Even if you would be too if you were here, at least we’d be in it together.

I fought down the swell of grief, anger, and terror. I knew exactly what Elyse would tell me to do.

“Get your shit together and learn, girl. Knowledge is power with these people, so you need to be the most knowledgeable bitch in here.”

Damn straight.

I managed to extricate myself from Maite’s presence for the next class. But a new distraction walked into my last class of the day wearing dark jeans, a t-shirt, and artfully tousled hair. My heart picked up its pace and my palms began to sweat. *Ugh, that’s so cliché, Mina. Damn it. Stupid hormones. Now is not the time.*

The distraction sat down next to me with an impish grin, showing perfect white teeth and emphasizing one delicious dimple in his right cheek.

“What’s on your mind, *hermosa*?”

I was powerless to stop the blush that came over me at the thought of revealing my thoughts to Alejo. His smile grew wider, as if he *could* read my mind. *Wait. In this place that’s a distinct possibility. Oh my G—Did he just call me beautiful?*

“Hey, your mom said we all have specialties when it comes to manipulating the Source.”

Allowing the abrupt change in subject, Alejo replied, “Yes. She said you are a powerful empath. That must be an...educational experience.”

“To say the least. What’s your specialty?”

“We call them affinities, but specialty works too, I suppose.”

“What’s your *affinity*, then?”

“Why do you want to know?” He laid his hand over mine, lowering his voice and causing us both to lean in closer.

“Why do you not want to tell me?”

His eyes burned into mine. I could swear there were only two of us in this room. The longer I stared into his eyes, the more something seemed to unlock within them. My power was giving me glimpses into his emotional state—apprehension, surprise, delight, confusion, lust, and...guilt? Why was he feeling guilty?

Once I got past the sheer excitement of knowing he wanted me—me!—that question consumed every other thought. Could it be good old fashioned Catholic/religious guilt and built in shame about having impure thoughts? He didn’t seem like the kind of person to let that bother him. No, the guilt was from something else—

The loud slam of the door from the front of the room signaled the teacher's entrance and caused us both to spring apart. The staring contest over, I realized I could breathe normally again. I turned toward the front, noticing other students turning away from us and whispering to one another. *Oh great. Barely a week here and I'm only increasing the gossip about me. Not smart, Mina. What happened to lying low?*

A warm hand squeezed mine once more and I turned back to Alejo. "You ok?"

I gave him my best fake smile. *No, you need to stop touching me, so I don't spontaneously combust.*

"Peachy," I replied.

His thumb caressed my wrist and his eyes flared. *He knows.*

"Liar."

"I—"

But I was cut off when the teacher called on Alejo to recap the lecture from last class. He straightened and removed his hand from mine. Once more, it was like a vice had suddenly released me. His touch did very unsettling things to my body, but it was more than that. For some reason, I felt as if this man knew my every secret. One touch and everything was out in the open for him to see.

Danger, Mina! People are trying to kill you all over the world and you just met this dude!

I knew my father would scold me for allowing him to get this close already. Whatever Alejo's power was, it had something to do with reading people. No matter how attracted I was to him, I needed to keep my distance.

ENOCH*Somewhere*

Elyse was asleep within my mind. As were the two humans I had tranced into cooperation. A few more hours on this plane and we would be back in Europe. I loved the old cities of Europe and the Middle East. Despite the hustle and bustle of progress that swept through them, at their core, they never changed. I knew that hundreds, even thousands of years later, I could still find my way through their streets—still remember every stone, every turn, every blind alley.

I thought back to my re-entrance into this world. After the Barrier was erected and I'd spent several hundred years trapped on the other side, my kin had mustered enough power to squeeze me through, in the hopes of finding the Keys.

That city. That place was where it all started. They had thought the Keys would be there. Within easy reach. But that was the beginning of the longest quest of my life. I began to remap what I remembered of the city in my mind. Turning down familiar roads, rebuilding ancient homes and temples, navigating tunnels that dripped with age even back then...

Barrier Rift, 587 BCE

The Earth was dying. I felt it the moment I crashed through the Barrier. My human shape solidified and the power I normally felt coursing through me dwindled until it was barely a spark. I had been sent to reunite worlds that should never have been put asunder. The foolish humans severed the connection, thinking they were protecting themselves. But once cut off from the source, they doomed themselves to a finite supply. Each

successive generation would be weaker than the last, channel less power. And my world too would begin a slow fade into nothing.

I knew it would take decades, perhaps centuries to find the Keys required to unlock the Barrier, but I wasn't concerned. I was not constrained by Earthly time. I could afford to be patient.

Using my newly made eyes, I turned to look across the barren rocks and withered shrubs bathed in darkness. Light emanated from a large human settlement spread across the distant landscape. This was where the last signal from one of the Keys had been felt. It was as good a place as any to start the search. With a roll of my new body's shoulders, I set one bare foot after the other toward the light.

By the time I reached the humans' dwelling place, surrounded by a tall ring of tightly packed stones, my tender new feet were scraped raw and bleeding. *This type of existence is incredibly inefficient*, I thought. But as I reached into my being to mold myself into a less delicate shape, I found my stores of power too greatly diminished to make any changes. Crossing over into the mortal realm had stifled my natural abilities and drained my stores of power. I was somehow now...lesser.

A loud groan sounded in the darkness, startling me before I realized it was my Earthly form's vocal cords responding to my own frustration. *There is much to learn about this new existence.*

A sudden pool of light spilling out in front of me caused me to cover my eyes.

"Hello? Who is there?"

It was the first human voice I could remember hearing without the distortion of the Barrier. For a second, I puzzled through my memories of human language encountered in their dreams before understanding enough to respond.

“Hello.” I croaked out. My unused throat felt strange as the air whistled through it and created the word. I searched with inadequate eyes in the heart of the light source for the voice. Fortunately, my meager stores of energy compensated for the poor human eyesight and adjusted to the bright assault.

“Who is there?” The voice asked again. I spotted a hole in the pile of stones—*wall*, I remembered—carcasses of former trees had been shaved down and flattened to form a cover for that hole—*door*. My memories of the time before the Barrier and human dreams were still merging to create coherent language.

“Help me,” I said in the same language and stepped into the pool of light. The human stepped closer, eyes widening. He muttered a curse but hurried forward a few more steps.

“There is much unrest in this land, but I can clearly see you are...unarmed.” He gestured at my unclothed form. “Come in, young man. We must make you warm.”

It took me a second to catch up to the human man’s words. But one word in particular made me move toward the stranger—*warm*. With the heat of the sun long since faded, deep shivers wracked my human form. I stepped forward and was now acutely aware of the pain in my feet. The man noticed and furrowed a thick, swarthy brow.

“It is not far to my home. Follow me.” With that, he pulled the large black covering—*cloak*—from his shoulders, settled it over mine, and ushered me through the door.

I flinched at the man’s touch but figuring it would do me no good if my human form was incapacitated, I followed the old man to his dwelling. The man called me “young

man.” Was I young? I was older than Earth itself if we were measuring by human standards. I looked beneath the cloak at my body. I was no youth, having chosen the form of an adult male in his prime, but I supposed to an old human, anyone would be young.

As we reached the man’s home not far from the door in the wall—*gate*—I sensed the time passing. It did not touch me. Instead, it seemed to slide over me, like a curious animal swishing its tail in hello before running away from a strange, powerful being.

“Come. My wife left soup on the fire. There is plenty for both of us.”

Soup...ah yes. A type of warm liquid food.

“Thank you” I replied, using the meaningless expression of human gratitude. Once inside, the man handed me a round container—*bowl*—and a tool—*spoon*—with which to eat the soup. The first bite was awkward since I was not used to aiming my food at a single place for ingestion or really ingesting at all. The second spoonful nearly burnt my untried tongue and I spit it out immediately.

“Slow down. Take your time and eat. I will go find some clothes for you.” He got up and began rummaging in a container at the back of the room.

I took my third spoonful of soup. This one went in easily and I swallowed, marveling at the flavors in the human food. The stew heated my tongue and different sensations and textures danced along it until I swallowed, and it began to heat my belly.

Slowly, the shivering that had been my constant companion since my arrival in the mortal realm faded away. I set down the bowl and spoon, stood, and removed the man’s cloak.

The man gave a startled laugh and shoved a pile of cloth into my arms saying, “It is good thing my wife is not awake, or you would have just given her quite the shock. Here.

Put these on.” I puzzled out the old man’s words, surmising that human nudity was not something that was acceptable in their society. If I recalled correctly, they had a myth about that. Something about a man and woman who hid from one of my kind in some trees. Yet another thing I had forgotten. I cursed the human brain slowing down my ability to adapt and causing me to feel weaknesses like hunger and cold.

Silently, I took the clothes from the man and struggled to put them on until the old man grunted and reached out to help.

“We must tend to your feet as well.”

I looked down at my battered human feet, sighed, and sat once more. This form was going to take so much maintenance. Even if it did not feel the ravages of time or illness, it could still be destroyed. I would have to be extremely careful.

The man dipped a piece of cloth into a bucket by the fireplace. It came out wet. Then he knelt and began wiping at my feet. I gritted my teeth and tried not to kick my rescuer. There were cuts and abrasions all over the new skin. The man made sympathetic noises and a comment about the softness of my feet. I did not respond. When the ordeal was over, the man bandaged my feet and settled back to look at his handiwork.

“Here are some shoes. They are an old pair of my son’s, but they will hold and are much more likely to fit than mine. He is quite tall too.” I did not react to the chatter, but I accepted the shoes, setting them aside.

The old man struggled to his feet, but I was too wrapped up in the sudden agonizing and delicious scent of nearby dreams to recognize that a human would have helped the man to rise. Now that my human parts were satisfied, my true hunger reared its head.

The old man interrupted my cravings. “Now that you are clothed and fed, will you tell me your name?”

Name? I had no name. Their kind did not need language to recognize one another.

“I am an en—” I stopped myself. It was unlikely that humans in this age would remember my kind, but the rules were clear. I needed to keep my true nature a secret. Instead, I chose a name that made sense for that place. “Enoch. My name is Enoch. Thank you for helping me.”

“You are most welcome. I am Yakov—”

I rose to leave.

“Wait! *Rega!* You need to rest your feet tonight, Enoch. You can sleep where you are now.”

I stared down at Yakov, wondering if the small man knew how dangerous a being he was inviting to stay in his household. But Yakov was right. Even though this body would heal faster than a human’s, it was advisable that I wait to start my search until the morning. I was sure it would not be long before I found the first key. Its aura had barely faded from this place. The power ran along my skin, tantalizing me.

“Very well. I will stay.”

Present Day

Rolling turbulence jolted me out of my memories. The reminder of what had happened to the old man soured my nostalgic mood. I had been so unused to humanity at that time. Their emotions were so foreign to one who did not need to interact in those ways.

But now—almost twenty-six hundred years later—guilt roiled in my gut at the things I had done in order to achieve my goal.

A goal I *still* had not achieved.

Chapter 18

MINA*Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain*

Professor Mané normally turned the most fascinating subject into the most interminably boring lecture I'd ever heard. It didn't help that the information I'd gotten from my father, Maite, and Alejo sometimes directly contradicted what he was teaching us. Today, however, I found myself tuning in once more.

"The Barrier magic was one of the most complicated spells ever cast. Our ancestors were able to channel much more power than we are, so it only took seven of them, but today I would be surprised if a spell like that only took two hundred sorcerers."

A girl at the front of the room with dark shiny ringlets pulled into a severe pony at the nape of her neck put up her hand and adjusted her wire-rimmed glasses over dark serious eyes. She usually didn't ask many questions, instead furiously taking notes so as not to forget anything Mané said. But I noticed that the rest of the class also seemed to be riveted to the Professor's words today. Normally, we talked about the history of our Society, leaders past, who did what great thing, et cetera. Today, we were finally learning something I think all of us were insatiably curious about.

"Yes?"

"*Profesor*," said the girl, "Why can we not channel power like that anymore?"

He made a face, and I knew a half-truth was about to come out.

“Those ancestors existed before the Barrier. They used the direct access they had to the Source to channel what they needed, in essence, they fought fire with fire—”

The girl put up her hand again. Ever the polite student.

“Yes, Carina?”

“*Pero Profesor,*” she said once more, “you have been teaching us the history of the great acts of sorcery. And I may be mistaken, but it seems like they have been dwindling in recent years, becoming more dangerous, and taking more people to enact.”

“Well, of course there is less access to raw magic with the Barrier intact, but it is to keep us safe, so we make do. As for the dwindling of great acts of sorcery, we have less need of them in the modern world, wouldn’t you agree? With non-magical humans’ technology, we are required to expend less energy than we were, say, a thousand years ago.”

I gritted my teeth. That might be true, but so was Carina’s point. Magic *was* fading from the Earth. It may have taken four thousand years since the Barrier’s creation for someone to remark on it, but only the Keys with our direct connection to the Source had any power resembling those of the sorcerers in our history. It was dangerous for them to spread false information about this. Didn’t Mané and the other faculty know that if magic faded from the Earth that humans would die out too? According to Maite, our very essence was made up of the stuff.

I had zoned out as I went on a mental chastisement of my teachers only to find that another classmate had asked about restoring magic to pre-Barrier levels and couldn’t the Keys combine power to release the Barrier?

I barely stopped myself from leaning forward in interest.

Professor Mané's face went white.

"Think of what happens when a dam collapses and a river is suddenly released. The once balanced system suddenly has no barriers. The Earth would flood with the sheer force of magic being released into the world. There would be so much that even normal humans with enough imagination could manipulate the Source without intending. Eventually, the levels would even out, but not before there were catastrophic consequences."

The class was silent, so he continued.

"This is why we spend so much time training you all. Even the little magic we possess as modern humans can be damaging in untrained hands. Were the Source to be released once more upon the world, the number of accidental disasters that could befall humanity is unfathomable."

Huh. I hadn't thought of it that way.

This time I raised my hand.

"Sí," asked Mané.

"You said that magic has been fading from the earth. Humans are less powerful than they've ever been. What happens when it fades entirely?"

I felt Alejo's eyes boring into the side of my face and glanced over.

What? I mouthed.

There was warning in his eyes. Perhaps this was one of those things I shouldn't be speaking of in "mixed company?" How was I supposed to know? Mané's intense stare confirmed that there was something I was missing about this topic of conversation. The room had gone silent. No one moved.

Note to self. Interrogate Alejandro later.

“Why then, there will simply be no magic and we will have to make do.”

He immediately changed the topic of discussion by pulling up slides of the “biblical angels”.

“These images are artists from the Society’s best renderings of the Entities in their true forms. We believe they were among the most powerful of the ancient Society because they were able to write down their findings and did not go mad—Ezekiel, Isaiah, Enoch, among others. Now. Take out your texts for the books of Enoch and let us discuss why each book is in a different language.”¹⁶

I tried to pay attention, but there was something about that name, Enoch, that sent goosebumps over my spine. I couldn’t place the unease that seeped into my bones. I kept my head down and pretended to take notes. I didn’t want anyone else to stare at me the way our professor and classmates had.

Being in this place used to make me feel safe. With Maite and Alejo to protect my true identity, who would take notice of just another girl starting her training a bit late? I had started to feel like I belonged in this place. Like I could one day be a part of this Society despite my bloodline and my sociopathic grandfather. I just wanted to be somewhere where I wasn’t the strange girl who saw and felt too much.

But I’d forgotten I was on the run. Forgot these people didn’t even know my real name. Forgotten that the man seated next to me was not a cute guy I could have a fling with. This wasn’t a vacation.

I was in danger.

¹⁶ These were the primary sources that initially inspired this book and the character of Enoch.

From everyone.

Alejandro tried to get my attention several times over the course of the rest of the class, but I pointedly ignored him. His hand brushed my arm, and I slid my elbow away from him, but my pulse skyrocketed. His fingers brushed the outside of my thigh, and I scooted my chair two inches to the right, but stifled the sigh of longing that tried to escape.

From now on, I vowed to myself, I rely on no one but myself.

I could feel his frustration. All I wanted to do was run my fingers through his thick dark hair—climb into his comforting embrace. Smack him for not giving me more information about what not to say. Kiss away the little wrinkle of frustration that had appeared between his brows—

Oy. Get a grip, Mina. This isn't high school. Control yourself.

But when he touched me, the cacophony of other people's emotions was suddenly muted and all I could feel was that he wanted me.

How the hell am I supposed to resist that?

ALEJO

Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain

Mina's confused and lustful thoughts filtered into my brain, causing my already tense muscles to clench. There was nothing headier than knowing a woman you wanted felt the same way. It didn't matter that I knew she was doomed either way—at some point, Augustus, the entities, or *Mamá* would kill her for the power that was both of our birthrights. It didn't matter that this was supposed to be fake on my end. It didn't matter that I had only known her a few weeks.

Mina Amara Voorsanger had a hold on me I couldn't explain.

I couldn't hear everything she was thinking, but enough of her thoughts came through that I was confident my approach was working.

Only, it was also working on me. As much as I loved my mother, I didn't think I could go along with her plan much longer. The more time I spent around Mina, the more I couldn't bear to let her go. My father had been dead for more than half of my life. It would hurt to let the dream of having him back go, yes, but Mina deserved a life. She deserved to get beyond these factions of beings vying for her power and attention.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to me. Perhaps, if I brought the Barrier down, I could have both things. *Mamá* would be able to access enough power to do the spell for Dad, and Mina *and* I would be free of our burdens as Keys because there would be no lock to undo. We wouldn't be forced to stay away from each other.

Yes. This was the best course for all involved.

I should tell her. The two of us working together would be so much stronger than me alone.

As class ended, I turned to pull Mina into conversation again. My mind having been made up, I felt freer than I had in weeks. But she had a different idea. Mina was out the door before I could utter a single word.

Chapter 19

MINA*Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain*

After class, I bolted out of the room before Alejo could speak to me again. I didn't miss the look of confusion on his too-handsome face, but I wasn't about to turn around and explain. I ran through the hallways, only taking one wrong turn and backtracking before I got to my room. After a week here, I was finally starting to learn the layout.

I sat down on the luscious bed spread and put my head in my hands. Despite my sprint down the hall, it wasn't the exercise that still had my heart racing out of my chest. I was *sure* now that Alejo knew my thoughts about him. He had somehow been able to discern my feeble attempts at stopping myself from climbing into his lap.

The thought of doing that slid liquid fire down my spine. Of straddling those hard, muscular thighs and pressing my chest against his. Taking his thick silky hair in my hands and pulling his lips to meet mine—

A soft knock on the door wrenched me out of my lascivious daydream. I yanked the hand I hadn't even realized had moved away from my chest.

"Who is it?"

"Alejo."

Even through the door his voice could make me clench my thighs together. Ten minutes. I couldn't escape the man for ten minutes. We had important things to talk about, but I couldn't remember what they were. At this rate my sanity would be gone in another week, and nobody would have to worry about keeping me hidden because I'd never be able to leave.

"Mina?"

Right. There was a Spanish god standing on the other side of the door.

I stood on legs that were not as steady as I wanted them to be and cracked open the door. I was once again bombarded by this unwanted attraction, but I hoped that not opening the door all the way would be somewhat of a buffer. I was wrong. His leather, musk, and sage scent still wafted through no matter how small the crack in the door.

"Yes?"

"You ran away so fast after class, I wanted to make sure nothing was wrong. We should talk about what happened before too, but it seemed like something else was bothering you?"

I stared at him. As if he didn't know.

"I—um—just needed some time to myself. You know—empath. This room is so far underground, it blocks most people out so nicely..."

I trailed off realizing that I'd just revealed I could use my affinity outside of the Source room. Shit. That was supposed to be a secret. *Maybe he won't notice?*

Alejo wasn't stupid though and I watched as understanding filled his face. The corner of his lips tipped up and he leaned his large body against the door frame, forcing me to open the crack a little wider.

That wouldn't do.

I wrenched it all the way open and yanked him inside before slamming the door shut. No way was I discussing this out in the hallway for anyone to hear. I still had hold of his shirt collar and took the chance of pulling him even closer.

"You can't say anything to anyone. There are people who want to tap into my power, suck me dry, use me as a battery until I have nothing left—"

His hands came up and gently cradled mine, but didn't pull them away from him. In fact, he stepped further into my space until our breaths mingled, and I lost one train of panicked thought only to have another filthier one emerge.

"Mina. First of all, you should know I would never harm you. I'm on your side, *vále*? You are safe with me."

I don't know why I believed him, but I did. It wasn't just the attraction...ok, that was a big part of it, but he seemed truly sincere. Being able to sense his emotions with him this close to me also went a long way toward making me trust him. But there was still that guilt I could sense. I had to know, so I asked, "And second of all?"

The guilt and resignation rushed forth in his consciousness. Here it was. I was finally going to find out.

"I—" he halted. Our faces were so close now, I could feel his lips ever so lightly against mine. His big hands cupped the back of my head while mine had released their death grip on his shirt and moved to span his broad chest.

What were we talking about?

He let out a growl of frustration, fingers digging and pulling at my hair. And then his lips crushed mine in a desperate kiss. Whatever he wanted to tell me could definitely wait.

My mouth opened in a gasp of surprise and desperate desire, and he swept in, conquering every corner, narrowing my thoughts until there was only one left—*More*.

I reached up and threaded my hands through his hair. Yup, just as soft as it looked, damn him. He dropped his hands to my hips and lifted me until my legs wrapped around his waist.

“Alejo,” I gasped, “I need—”

I couldn’t finish the sentence because his mouth covered mine again, but it didn’t matter. Mind-reader and empath, remember? Feeling both his lust and my own was making me crazy. I didn’t have the ability to remember anything we should or shouldn’t have been saying or doing. The only thing I knew was that he was now pressing me against the wall next to the door and I could feel every inch of that body I’d been dreaming of for days. I could only imagine the thoughts he was picking up on from me.

“You picked up on my affinity fast.” His teeth scraped the column of my neck.

“You just—always seem to know what I’m thinking,” I gasped. His chuckle did naughty things to my insides.

“There’s something you didn’t pick up though.” One hand slid to the waist band of my jeans and snaked up my rib cage.

“Oh yeah? What’s that?” Honestly, he could tell me state secrets right now and there was no way I’d remember them. When had my shirt hit the floor? When had his? My God, he was glorious. All bronze skin and hardened muscle. My hands couldn’t touch enough of him.

“My affinity—” his lips trailed down my collarbone. *Right. He’s trying to tell me something.* “—Works best—” *I hope this place has a fire extinguisher because I’m so far past on fire.* “—with touch.”

[Redacted for HUC version]

Before he could take a single step toward the bed, a pounding started on the door next to our heads. At first, it blended in with my heart and I could ignore it. But when his mother’s voice came through the thick wood, the blazing fire went out faster than a light switch.

We froze and he gently unlocked my legs from their death grip around his waist. Were my feet on the floor? I couldn’t tell. Too many sensations had run through my system just now and I was tapped out of reasonable thought or coordinated movement.

“Alejo! *Abre la puerta ahora* or I’m coming in.”

My eyes got wide at that. Maite did not need to see me standing shirtless next to her son looking like we’d been doing, well, what we’d been doing. I scanned the floor for my shirt and found it in Alejo’s hand. I grabbed it from him gratefully, and watched as he crossed to the other side of the bed and bent down. Oh. Apparently, we’d been in such a frenzy that his clothes had been tossed to the other side of the room.

I just finished covering myself and Alejo had a single arm through his shirt when the lock turned of its own accord and in walked a protective mother. Her first sight was of her twenty-two-year-old son hastily pulling a t-shirt over his gloriously messed up hair and kiss-bruised lips. Her expression darkened. But rather than the discomfort of a mother walking in on her child, I was picking up on a different emotion. Something that somewhat paused the wave of complete mortification that had begun to sweep over me.

Fear.

Maite was terrified.

“What—no. Never mind. It is obvious what is going on here. Alejo. You knew better. Get out now. I need to speak with Mina.”

Alejo’s guilt rushed back so fast it made my stomach turn. I was glad I was still propped up by the wall because that awful feeling would have taken me to the floor. *What* was he not telling me? Why is Maite scared at the thought of us together?

“*Mamá—*”

“Out. Now.”

I locked eyes with him one more time in a plea for him to not leave me alone with his mother, but he wouldn’t look at me. *No, no, no, no, no! That is not regret I’m picking up from you—you stupid gorgeous mind-reading bastard.*

His eyes flicked up at that, but there was no humor there. No lust. No affection. There was nothing. Had he even heard me? And then he was gone. And I was alone with his mother.

Fuck my life.

ENOCH/ELYSE

Sorbonne University Building, Paris, France

The university was busier than usual. We must have entered the building during a class change. I flinched in discomfort at the crush of humanity, the barrage of languages, styles, and smells. Even after all this time, humanity still had a tendency to overwhelm me.

Ah, no, said Elyse, it's not just you. This many people is a lot. The sooner we get out of here, the better. Put your freakish height to good use and see if you can spot this lady's office. What was her name again?

"I am not freakishly tall...just advantageous."

Same thing. The office Sasquatch. Where is it?

I rolled my eyes, but cast them about as I weaved through the masses. We were here to find Dr. Camille Serrurier. One of the Keys who had grown up with no knowledge of her heritage. I had met her only once when she was a young girl and her older cousin had died suddenly, passing the mantle of Key on to her.

Despite being cut off from the knowledge of her power, Camille had managed to use her affinity for languages to her advantage. She was now a world-renowned linguist at the Pierre and Marie Curie University in Paris. Which was the *only* reason I was braving these crowds of overly perfumed young adults.

CAMILLE

Sorbonne University Building, Paris, France

This day would not end. Camille Serrurier sat in her shoebox office and wiped the sweat from her brow, cursing the broken fan that sat on the overstuffed bookshelf to her left. She could not wait to earn tenure, get a bigger office, and no longer have to teach undergraduate classes.

This new translation she was working on could give her that career. Easily. The problem was not translating the ancient dead language. She had always had an inexplicable ability to understand any language in any form. No, the problem here was proving that her

translation was correct. Because hundreds of years of scholarship outweighed the opinion of one newly minted PhD.

Besides, Camille could never explain why she knew what she knew. She was always forced to find some flimsy evidence to back what she knew on instinct was correct. It was why it had taken her so long to finish the PhD, even though she'd started at twenty.

Now, at twenty-nine, she finally had an office of her own—small as it was.

She turned toward the window, looking out longingly upon the people passing along the Seine. According to her students earlier, it was a gorgeous day outside. A few more hours and perhaps she could catch the last rays of sunshine. It would be too late for coffee at her favorite riverside café, but a glass of wine would not go amiss—

The door of her office thudded open, startling her out of her evening plans. Couldn't be a student. They would know to knock.

She turned and looked up...and up...into the eyes of a gigantic man. Olive skin, dark hair, and darker eyes made a striking portrait. The light coming in from the window behind her caressed his cheekbones and lit his chestnut hair with an ethereal glow.

"C-can I help you?" Camille hated that her voice sounded breathless, but was relieved it came out at all. The longer she stared into his eyes, the more she was sure this man was not normal. The sun, that folded over his angular face like a lover, avoided his eyes altogether. Something sinister slid down her spine despite his beauty.

Camille straightened in her seat, preparing for a confrontation. She knew how to deal with the oversized male egos of academia when she had to.

"You are Dr. Camille Serrurier?" His voice filled every corner of her tiny office, but Camille would not be intimidated.

She rose from her chair, pushing it in. At least now she wouldn't be trapped beneath the desk if she needed to fight her way out. As it was, she was at a disadvantage.

The man held out a hand for her to shake. "Dr. Enoch Ben-El." The way his lips wrapped around the name, as if they were forming it with utter care, told her at least part of his name was an alias.

She didn't take his hand yet. "I have not heard your name before. What are you a doctor of?"

He seemed to ponder that question for a moment before responding with, "Archeology."

Right. Though it was a plausible reason to approach a linguist, Camille had always been able to tell when a person was lying or not based on their speech patterns and intonation. It made no sense, and she had no idea how she did it, but she had yet to be wrong.

"And what can I do for you, Dr. Ben-El?"

He stood frozen before her, his hand still raised to shake hers, eyes locked on hers. It was likely her tone gave away her disbelief in his story and he didn't know how to proceed from here. So be it. She had no time for this kind of bull shit. She wanted to get in another two hours of research before soaking in the golden hour sunshine.

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave if you can't state your purpose. I'm quite busy right now—"

She cut off when the hand that had been extended before her reached up and grabbed her throat. The previously expressionless face flashed with anger. "It is I, Camille, who is quite busy. I wanted to be more pleasant about this, but since you are so distrusting, I will have to do this the more expedient way. I need your help with a...project. If you fulfill your end of things, you will be returned here, unharmed.

Camille didn't understand. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't speak.

A cloud had begun to cover her vision, to wrap around her mind, dim her awareness.

She fought with everything she could, but his grip was too strong. The last thing Camille saw was a glimpse behind his eyes at his true self. She fell into an eternity, and there he stood before her, too many eyes, heads, wings, feet. Too much. The trembling and fear that filled her at witnessing this entity filled every fiber of her being before she finally lost consciousness.

ENOCH/ELYSE

Sorbonne University Building, Paris, France

You're getting worse at this, Elyse taunted.

I pulled the woman's body over her desk and fully into my arms, ignoring Elyse's commentary. She was right though. I *was* getting worse at this. My patience as I got closer to my goal was getting thinner and thinner. The finesse that had allowed me to go largely unharmed and unhunted for twenty-six hundred years was slipping as my desperation grew.

How exactly do you plan to take this unconscious woman from a crowded university building in the middle of a massive city?

Once again, Elyse's scathing commentary cut through my self pity. "I have enough power to deflect peoples' notice from us until we can hail a taxi, but I will have to feed again soon."

Ugh. You know I hate when you do that.

I knew she did. It reminded her too much of her death, even though I had no intention of ending anyone's life. "I know, Elyse, however if you would like us to get out of Paris without getting arrested, it is a sacrifice we both must make."

I felt her acquiescence in her mental retreat, and glanced down at the woman in my arms. The guilt of the trauma this would cause her could wait. I now had three Keys in my direct possession. A swell of hope threatened to burst from my chest. I stifled it quickly. I would not let that hope build until I had all seven at the altar to perform the spell.

Chapter 20

MINA

Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain

“Mina. There is something you should know about you and Alejandro.”

“Oh God. Please don’t tell me we’re secretly half siblings ‘cause you had an affair with my dad. Like Luke and Leia? Wait. They weren’t *half*-siblings, but still. No no no no no no. That’s it isn’t it? Why you’re freaking out so much about walking in on us? Then again, if I walked in on my kid—hypothetically speaking—I’d probably also be freaking out. Maite, I—”

“Mina, *NO!* You are not half siblings. What on earth would give you that idea?”

Was she *laughing*? No. Not laughing—*cackling*.

“I don’t know, my dad said you two had dated and well, too many books and movies, I guess...” I trailed off, some of the horror leaching out of my bones to make way for embarrassment as I saw her reaction.

Maite wiped her streaming eyes. The rich sound of her laughter eased some of the tension between us, but I noticed her fear didn’t lesson. I didn’t dare ask about it. I still didn’t know who to trust.

“Oh, my dear, no.” Another laugh bubbled out of her as if she couldn’t keep it contained, then her face sobered again. “First of all, your father and I were over long before either of you were born. We have maintained a strong friendship since then, but nothing else.”

A hidden vice loosened in my chest. The fear I sensed just under Maite’s calm exterior told me that this secret, whatever it was, was going to wreck me, but my anxious mind had of course jumped to the most awful conclusion.

“Ok, so what’s the issue?”

“You know there are seven Keys, seven bloodlines that carry the magic of the Barrier spell, yes?”

“Yes, that much I got.”

Her sidelong look told me she didn’t appreciate the sass at this particular moment. I bit my tongue rather than tell her that *I* didn’t appreciate one of the hottest moments of my life being interrupted by the mother of the man I’d been climbing like a stripper pole.

“*Bueno*, Alejo’s uncle on his father’s side, *was* one such Key until several years ago when he died under suspicious circumstances.”

“Suspicious—wait, when one Key dies or is murdered, their next of kin takes their place. My mother—”

“*Sí*, your mother’s death passed on the distinction to you.”

“So, who inherited—” I knew the answer before I’d even finished the question.

“Alejandro.”

“Oh.”

The teacher’s words from the last class came back to me. *It took so much power to contain the spell, that it could only survive by tying itself to the bloodlines of the original*

casters. We have been meticulous over the millennia to not let the bloodlines cross because that much power potentially contained within one human could be catastrophic.

If Alejo was one of the Keys, we were doomed before we'd even started. We would never be allowed to be in a relationship. Nor, for that matter, *should* we be in a relationship. I had no interest in causing epic disasters just because I couldn't keep it in my pants.

"Does he know," I asked. But I knew the answer. The intense guilt he'd been broadcasting to me made a whole lot more sense now.

"Of course."

A thought occurred to me.

"How—how did you know what we were doing?" I cringed as I remembered her pounding on the door beside my head as her son kissed, bit, and licked my tender parts. Was it possible to die of embarrassment? I knew my cheeks had turned bright red.

Maite's face remained stoic, but I thought her olive tanned skin looked just a little pinker as she said, "You both contain immense power. In such an—unguarded—moment as was between you just now, those of us with enough power in the vicinity were able to sense the clash you created when you were," she coughed, "focused on other things."

At least I wasn't the only one mortified. I swallowed.

"Oh." I said again.

"Sí." She paused before continuing, "Mina, I hope you know that under different circumstances, I would have no problem with you and my son being together. I am very fond of you and think you are the kind of person he deserves to be with. But—"

"But we could end the world by getting too close."

"The disturbance I felt just now confirmed it. I'm sorry."

She couldn't look at me, but I was glad because something that felt suspiciously like my heart was cracking a tiny bit and I didn't think I could hold it together much longer.

Maite laid a gentle hand on my shoulder, kissed my temple, and left me alone with my thoughts. I don't remember curling into the plush pile of pillows at the head of my bed, but I suddenly found myself clutching one of the smaller throws.

Alejo was a fucking Key.

Why didn't he tell me? I've been agonizing for weeks over this, thinking I had to bear it all on my own, that no one could understand. He's one of six people in the world who I should be able to talk to about this!

But that was exactly why he hadn't. He'd kept his flirting superficial and hadn't allowed me to get close because he knew we weren't supposed to be together. He knew that us having something that deep, that intense, in common would only have driven us further into each other's arms. My heart ached and I realized there were tears on my cheeks.

I'd never been able to connect with another person the way I should be able to with Alejo. Not even Elyse had been able to understand my "intuitive moments". Words like fate and destiny trickled in at the back of my mind, but I shoved them violently away.

There was no way we were fated to be together, no matter how right it felt emotionally or physically. If anything, fate was telling me he was the wrong person for me because our love could end the world as we knew it.

That's it.

I was resolved once and for all to stay away from Alejandro Romero Bastante. And I would ignore the little voice in my head telling me that I hadn't been able to do it before, so why did I think it would work now?

Chapter 21

ALEJO*Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain*

The mortification of my mother walking in on us could not be understated. My cheeks continued to burn with lava-like intensity long after I'd reached my own room and shut the door. I really hadn't intended to take things that far with Mina, so in a way, *Mamá* did me a favor. But once again, I was left with this insatiable need and nowhere to go with it.

Only this time, I knew exactly what Mina smelled, felt, and tasted like. That memory alone would last me weeks if I got nothing else.

Mamá was going to kill me. As soon as she was done revealing the secret she and I had worked so hard to keep from everyone in our lives, she would come here and rip me a new one for getting too attached to the woman who was supposed to be my target.

Sure enough, several moments later, there was a purposeful knock on my door. I didn't even bother to ask who it was, just walked over and opened it before flopping back onto my bed.

"Alejandro, what in God's name were you thinking? Have you learned nothing from all of my warnings? Besides, getting too attached will only make it harder to do what needs to be done in the end." Her eyes narrowed and she glared at my prone form. "You

will do what needs to be done, *si*? We have waited too long for this. I will *not* let you fuck it up!”

Her voice didn’t rise. *Mamá* never yelled when she was truly angry. No, her voice grew hard and quiet, a growl creeping in. It was how I knew to sit up and look her in the eyes. No matter what I had decided on my own, if I didn’t make her believe that I was with her one hundred percent, she would take Mina away from me so fast, I would not even know she was gone until she was halfway across the world.

I sat up straight and locked eyes with my mother. “*Mamá*, you know I will do everything within my power to get my father back.”

She didn’t respond, her gaze searching mine for a long moment. She seemed to come to a conclusion that satisfied her because a minute later she said simply, “Get some rest, *mijo*.” She swept out of the room, leaving an air of disapproval and freesia.

ENOCH/ELYSE

London, England, UK

The fourth Key. There she was. Barely sixteen. Unaware of the role she played in the fate of the world. Unaware of the factions of humans and other creatures that hunted her down. And there she was, tending to a small vegetable patch, her hands feeding health and energy into each plant. I was sure she had no idea of the power that lay in her hands.

She merely considered herself to have a green thumb.

Little did she know. Elyse and I sighed together. We were both worn from the constant travel, maintaining our captives' compliance and health, and holding on to a sense of morality even as we ripped human after human from everything they had ever known.

With a final breath, I stepped forward to confront the girl.

JAINA

London, England, UK

Mum had said to pick some vegetables for dinner, and Jaina had run out of the house before she could say anything else. Her time in the garden was the best part of the day. She could deal with the bullies at school, the grief that hung over the house since Dad died, the strange things that occasionally made her question her sanity if it meant she could have a few hours in the garden to decompress.

She looked up when the back gate creaked open.

Just beyond, stood a large muscular man. He wasn't Indian, which was unusual for her mom's customers. The people who came for her mother's cooking and baked goods also knew better than to come to the back gate. There was a window in the front yard for that.

But this man didn't look like a confused customer. In fact, he stared directly at Jaina with an unreadable expression. "Jaina Acharya?" His voice rumbled through her, sending tingles to her extremities.

And suddenly she found she couldn't move.

She was frozen where she sat, turned to him, her hands still planted deep in the dirt where the beets waited to be pulled for dinner. She tried desperately to free her hands or scream, but nothing. She was completely stuck.

A lone tear escaped as he stalked closer. If only she could call out to Mum. Mum scared off even the strangest characters with her no-nonsense demeanor and swift motherly justice.

When the man reached her, he crouched and looked deep into her eyes. The creature she saw within those dark depths made Jaina's entire spirit pale with terror. But she found herself falling, the edges of her vision turning gray as she began to lose consciousness.

The last thing she heard was the man's voice once more, "I am sorry, little one."

ENOCH/ELYSE

London, England

"Jaina? Sweetheart?"

The mother's voice carried to me as I finished buckling her unconscious daughter into the back seat of my rental car. By the time I was behind the driver seat, the woman's voice had risen with concern and was rounding the corner. I launched myself into the seat and threw the vehicle into drive, peeling away just as a disheveled older version of Jaina rounded the bend.

She screamed after me, but I did not slow, knowing that my nondescript van could only get me so far. An awful feeling churned in my gut.

At least this one was quick. We're more than halfway now, right?

I barked a laugh. "Since when are you on *my* side, human?"

Since I've been stuck inside your sad sack mind. If you don't succeed, then I'm stuck in here forever. I felt her shudder with the horror of the thought and wished I could swat the attitude out of her. I was in no mood.

"Yes, we are more than halfway. Mina will come when I ask her to, so we just need the other two."

Why do you think Mina will do anything you say? What kind of bull shit have you fed her in those little visits I can't accompany you on?

I couldn't tell her what had happened between us earlier. Nor could I tell her that my most recent visit had received the silent treatment. Either piece of knowledge would make her malfunction, and I had found that Elyse's discomfort became my own when it was strong enough.

Instead, I said, "I will give her a choice. One that really is no choice at all because it will involve the well-being of others. We both know that is no choice at all for her."

Silence. Elyse knew I was right. She did not like me manipulating her best friend, but she had no choice in the matter, and I would do anything I had to in order to achieve my goals after so long. No human emotions—Elyse's, Mina's, or my own—would get in my way.

Chapter 22

MINA

Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain

“This next spell is one that originates from the ancient Hebrews,” droned the professor. I had tuned her out when she was teaching us “opening of the senses” earlier. Definitely not something I needed help with. If anything, I needed the opposite.

Though it had been entertaining to listen to my classmate’s gasps as they picked up on sounds, smells, thoughts, and other such things according to their affinities and levels of power. I was a homing beacon for emotion. No part of me needed to be opened any further.

Alejo nudged me when the professor’s gaze locked on my tuned-out form. We hadn’t really spoken in a few days since the incident with his mother, but I still found him next to me in almost every class. My ever-present, ever-torturous shadow.

“Elena, one would think you would pay attention, given that this is a spell originating from *your* people.”

I raised my brow at that and fingered the visible Star of David I wore around my neck. It wasn’t that what she said was offensive. It was just that people tended to make a lot of assumptions about what rules I lived by because of this little piece of jewelry. My father gave it to me at my Bat Mitzvah when I was thirteen, revealing it had belonged to my

mother. I'd never taken it off since—not even when people decided they could dictate my life because of it.

“Lo siento, profesor” I responded and sat up straighter.

“As I was saying,” she said with a pointed look at me, “this spell comes from the ancient Hebrews. Their tradition teaches that each life is a smaller piece of the whole that is the Source, and it is the goal of those pieces to reunite into a unified whole. Of course, their texts and ancient sorcerers called things by different names, but it is but a part of what we know as the Universal Truth. According to the Universal Truth, our pieces, like those of a puzzle, wish to be rejoined with the corresponding adjacent piece.”

Someone raised their hand and asked, “You mean like soul mates?”

“Some might call it that, yes. Plato had a similar idea where the human soul was once a whole being—two heads, four arms, four legs. They were split in half, doomed to forever seek out the missing piece of their soul. Later Hebrew texts also adhere to this same binary. But this is not that. As I said, it's a puzzle.”

“But if it's a puzzle, then there would be four adjacent pieces.”

“Unless you're a corner or edge piece,” someone added. There were light chuckles around the room. I rolled my eyes.

The professor continued.

“You are correct. There *would* be four adjacent pieces, assuming it was a regular shaped puzzle. Given that the universe is largely unfathomable, even to those of us who plumb its secrets, we can assume it is not. We will not even consider edge or corner pieces because it would be the height of arrogance to think you made up part of the very framework of the world. So, taking our standard four potential connections into account, you must know that

a soulmate does not have to be a romantic or sexual partner. It can be a parent, sibling, friend, or child. Anyone, really. It just has to be someone who completes you.”

There was a chorus of sighs at the thought of finding that person. I reined in the scoff that was trying to slip free.

The same guy from before appeared to feel the same when he asked, “So what? We’re brewing a love potion?” A few titters from my fellow skeptics made me feel a bit better. The whole wide world of magic and *this* was what they were teaching us? But I was curious to see how it stemmed from the ancient Hebrews.

“Of course not. That would be not just inane, but impossible. One cannot alter true emotion.”

So many of these professors spoke in absolutes. I wondered how many of those final-sounding proclamations still applied to me when all was said and done.

She stepped behind her desk and began fiddling with a stack of papers.

“This spell is one of connection. You must use your power, the words, and the ingredients and it will give you a direction to go in to find your nearest connection. If they were close—say, in the room, which is nearly impossible given the number of people on the planet—it would wrap around that person, and you would know immediately. The farther away they are, the thinner and lighter in color the smoke will get. If the smoke shoots straight up and is very light and thin, they are likely not in this country or haven’t been born yet. That will be the case for all of you, most likely.”

There were excited murmurs filling the room at the possibility of being the one person whose smoke did not shoot straight up as smoke was wont to do. I had no hopes here. Besides, I figured the other keys were probably my connective pieces. I stopped myself

from glancing at Alejo. Neither of us should perform this spell. I had a bad feeling about the implications.

It was one thing for someone with a normal amount of power to attempt the spell. Who even knew if it would work? It was a fun, light way to end the class. For us, the Keys, we could call that Entity straight to us.

The professor handed out the text we were to use and the list of ingredients. Others jumped up immediately and went to the shelves at the back of the room to gather what they'd need, but I stayed seated and examined the words on the paper.

They were transliterated Hebrew, rather than written in the actual alphabet. The English letters doing their best to sound out the rolling symbols of my ancestors' tongue. I supposed that made sense. All of us were encouraged to learn the ancient languages, but this was a beginner class, and no one was expected to be proficient yet.

I started when I recognized the words before me. It wasn't a one-to-one comparison, but the spell that called out for the other parts of our soul to return to us mimicked the words of a morning prayer I'd said since I was a child.

Instead of thanking God for our souls and acknowledging they would one day return from whence they came, these words—according to the translation provided just below the Hebrew—would ask for our soul to return to its “companions.”

I recalled the way the dagger Dad had given me asked for protection from the evils of the world using another familiar prayer. Those words hadn't been changed at all. It amazed me that the words I'd uttered for nearly two decades without really understanding could have such a profound impact on the universe around me.

I uttered the words on the sheet before me—*Elohai neshamot shenatata banu, tehora hen. Atah v'rata, atah y'tzarta, atah nefachta banu l'hitchaber*—

I cut off because a pull began in my chest. It was a deep ache that begged to be answered by a missing piece. The missing piece it was telling me that sat beside me, fiddling with the ingredients for the spell I'd just accidentally cast without them. I didn't dare let on what had happened—to him or anyone else. That kind of power, that Alejo and I alone in this room possessed, would mean our deaths if people knew.

I looked around the room and realized I was the only one who hadn't retrieved the materials and started the assignment. The recipe called for several different herbs and minerals that I was sure had meanings that contributed to the strength of the spell. They would be used as a focus.

A focus that I apparently didn't need.

Clutching the paper in my hand a little too tightly and crinkling the precious words, I stood, not looking at anyone and made my way to the shelves. I took my time smoothing out the bent paper to read the ingredients list.

"Miss Romero *today* would be nice. This is supposed to be a fun exercise, not an exam."

I gritted my teeth and snatched what I needed into the last cauldron on the shelf. I didn't look anyone in the eye on the way back. *I can do this*, I thought. *There must be some way to fake it, so they won't know.*

I settled the cauldron on the burner at my station and began unloading the ingredients. A large warm hand gripped my thigh and I tensed. How dare he touch me after not speaking to me for days?

Then I heard the whisky-smooth rasp of his voice in my head. Oh right, he was a tactile telepath.

Mina, you can block your power when it is your turn to perform the spell. She gave us this assignment because she believes we will all fail. No one has accomplished it in decades. If you and I succeed, they will know something is up. Block your power.

Um, duh, I responded. It's bad enough my own grandfather wants to kill me. I don't need jealous teachers and classmates after me too. Now get out of my head.

I heard a dark chuckle in my mind before his hand slipped from my thigh and I was alone once more in my thoughts. The loss of his warmth left me momentarily frozen, but I shook myself and turned back to my preparation.

Crush this, cut that, shave that other thing. God, I couldn't imagine having to do this all the time. When I'd asked Maite about the use of physical items in spells a few days ago, she'd told me it was more and more common nowadays because those things contained elements of the Source as well and could be used to focus and strengthen a spell if one didn't have enough power.

What she'd neglected to tell me, however, was that I would not need such an aid in my spell casting. Perhaps she hadn't been able to fathom it when she herself still relied on physical elements in her own castings.

After a while, the professor swept around the room and looked at each of our preparations, ensuring they were correct. She went up and down the aisles, finally ending with me. She gave me a brittle smile and said,

"Elena, why don't you begin? You can show your classmates how to properly pronounce the words."

I bit back the retort that wanted to escape. It was like being in high school choir all over again. Sure, call out the token Jew and make her help the other kids pronounce the words to *Oseh Shalom*, the one nod to another religion at the school's Christmas Concert. At least it wasn't *I Have a Little Dreidl* again.

I cleared my throat and took a moment to build an impenetrable wall of steel or titanium or whatever was the strongest metal around my mind. Then I dropped each ingredient in the now boiling water and began to chant.

I couldn't meet Alejo's eyes after class. I'd faked my way through the spell and noticed the professor's smirk when I'd been unsuccessful.

"Pity," she'd said.

It was like being stuck on the set of one of the teen dramas I'd loved in middle and high school; murderous family, vindictive teachers, *and* a heartthrob I couldn't have? What was this, the CW? The worst part was that even though *I* felt ready to have a much-needed conversation, *he'd* continued ignoring me apart from the mind invasion during class. Neither of us was giving in, but neither could cut ties. We were stuck in a limbo of mortification and longing.

Because yeah, that desperate need that had plagued me since meeting him? That hadn't gone away. In fact, the little taste earlier this week seemed to have made it worse. I'd woken up several nights in a row, sweating, heart racing, thighs clenched together. It was consuming me in the worst way.

For now, though, I shoved it out of my mind as I put away my cauldron and tossed the used materials in the trash. Alejo had nearly sprinted out of the class before I could even

meet his eyes. There'd been a moment during his "attempt" at the spell that our eyes had met. Something had flowed between us, but it had come and gone too quickly for me to identify. His shields had slammed into place, and I was left on the other side alone and confused.

Or so I'd thought.

God, I was tired.

I was done for the day and shuffled blindly down the hallways back towards my room. Each room I passed; I caught snippets of the emotions of the people inside. Love, hunger, sadness, boredom, happiness, anger. It was the pulse of humanity and only I could feel it to this depth. It weighed on me, pushing in, tightening a vice around my head, and starting a familiar deep throbbing behind my left eye.

Taking a short cut down a hall I knew was less populated, I was relieved when most of the sensations filtered away. The pain in my head lessened and I could breathe normally again.

Until need, hunger, lust, and desperation slammed into me like a wall of concrete.

I gasped and leaned up against the wall beside me. There was no mistaking those emotions. I had felt them up close and personal the other day. Pressed against my bare skin. Alejandro was fighting off some serious desire. It was so strong I could barely walk, but I managed to edge my way a bit further down the hall.

As I got closer to his door, the feelings overtook me again. Was that my breath coming in gasps? I squeezed my thighs together in a desperate bid to keep my body focused on moving down the hallway.

"Fuck." Came his voice from the other side of the door. "Ah. *Díos. Mina.*"

Mina?

He was thinking about *me*?

Oh shit.

[Scene redacted for HUC version]

To my great relief, a moment later, I felt him retreat down the hallway. I finally gasped in a breath and let air fill my overtaxed lungs. I'd never been so thankful that my room was in this tiny back hallway. I used the last of my strength to push my still aching body down the corridor and into my room—my refuge.

I sank into the comfortable mattress and stared at the ceiling, waiting for my heart to come back down to normal. The only thoughts running through my mind were the worry that he'd known I was there the whole time and that if he had, what had I done?

The dread swirled through my insides, making me feel almost sick, but then the memory of Alejo calling my name in ecstasy made them flutter for different reasons. I was so conflicted.

The dueling emotions started to swamp me. I was getting dizzy. Wasn't I already lying down? The panic began to claw its way up my throat. Tears stung my eyes.

Why couldn't Alejo have been a seventy-year-old man or a nice little old lady? I wouldn't have any issue keeping things platonic then. But no. He had to be—just—everything I've ever wanted in a guy. And he was the one man in the world I absolutely could not have—

A knock sounded at my door, shocking me out of my self-pity. Wiping my eyes, I went to open the door. When my hand lit on the knob, I felt the emotions of the person on the other side. Lust, longing, guilt.

Alejandro.

I leaned my head against the door. If I opened it up and looked into his eyes, I was sure my face would say everything my mind was so desperately trying to keep inside.

“Mina.” His voice came through the door and wrapped around my senses. My heart rate picked up, remembering the way he’d said my name not fifteen minutes ago through another door. “Please let me in. We need to talk.”

I shut my eyes. I should ignore him. I should let him walk away. Reject him. End this for good. Save both of us the heartache.

But I couldn’t. His need and apprehension battered my mind. I wasn’t that cruel. Alejo didn’t deserve that kind of treatment. And I—I needed to have a final conversation with him so we could both move on.

I turned the knob and backed away to let it swing open. He stood on the other side of the threshold wearing the same black button down and black jeans from earlier. His hair was mussed as if he’d been running his hands through it in frustration.

I wanted to lick him.

So I bit my tongue instead, turned away, and walked to the other side of the room. When I turned back, his eyes were burning as they ran over every inch of me. I tugged at the hem of my thin black t-shirt, willing his eyes to go anywhere else in the room. Finally, I couldn’t take it anymore.

“You came here to talk, so talk.” It came out more aggressively than I’d intended, but so much the better.

“I—” He stopped. He looked lost for a moment. “I just wanted to apologize for the other day. I should have put a stop to everything before it got out of hand. I knew what you were

and what that meant for us, but I couldn't help myself. I should have told you before I ever touched you."

"Yeah, you should have." I couldn't help it. That question of why he hadn't had been bothering me ever since that day. "Why didn't you?"

"I wanted to. But there never seemed to be a good time. I—you were getting settled and learning the ropes here. I didn't want to burden you with another secret."

Screw you for making sense.

"What kind of excuse is that? My life is in danger. *Your* life is in danger. God! The only way I can see us winning against whatever that thing is, is if we're honest with each other. If there are no secrets, we can be prepared for what's to come."

I was practically shouting by the end of my tirade and softened the last few syllables in a belated attempt at civilized conversation. Shit. I hadn't realized how mad and hurt I was by his betrayal until now.

"You are right, Mina. I should have told you. But I cannot change the past. Only move forward. We need to be allies in this or I do not think we will survive."

I nodded.

"And" he continued, "What happened a few days ago. It was my mistake. I should not have led you on like that. It will not happen again. We can be friends and allies, but there is nothing else here." His jaw tightened as he spoke until he was almost speaking through clenched teeth.

His words, though true in letter, were a lie in tone. He was trying to imply that he wasn't interested. Nothing else here? Please. I'd just heard him rubbing one out to thoughts of me. Even now, I could feel his need battering at my senses.

Even so, the rejection settled in my bones and made my heart sting. This was a good, kind, brilliant, funny guy and he wanted *me*. I'd never had anyone look at me, much less touch me, the way Alejandro did. But because of our heritage, because of who we were, a relationship between us could potentially end the world. And since neither of us were sociopaths who lacked empathy (the opposite, in fact), we would never put our needs above those of the world.

It still hurt like hell though.

"Right." I finally said. "Friends then."

"Friends." He rasped.

He didn't move, eyes locked on mine.

"Friends." I repeated. I couldn't get anything else out. His emotions and mine were swallowing me whole. I was drowning. I felt my eyes prick with tears and managed to turn away. I would not cry. Not for him. Not for this.

"Mina."

His voice was closer. As if he was coming to comfort me. No. Nope. Uh uh. That would not do at all.

Without turning around, I grit out, "Goodnight, Alejandro."

I heard his footsteps halt halfway across the room.

"Goodnight."

And then he turned and was gone.

It wasn't until I heard the door click shut that I allowed the tears to fall.

Chapter 23

ALEJO

Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain

“There, I did it. Are you happy?” I stood in front of *Mamá*, my face flushed, and arms crossed in anger and frustration.

“I told you it would be for the best, didn’t I? This way there is no confusion for you when the time comes to take her power. You have to remember she is not a woman, Alejandro, she is a tool. One we need very specific things from. Everything else, well, it is collateral damage.”

I stared at my mother, agape. “Benjamin will never forgive you.”

“I haven’t heard from Benjamin in weeks,” she scoffed. “If he really wanted to know how his daughter was doing, he would have contacted me by now. Instead, he shipped her off to me and promptly forgot about her. She will not be missed. By anyone. Which means our use of her is more important.”

I was pretty sure *Mamá* had gone insane. The idea that my father’s revival could be so close had unhinged her. In my opinion, it was a stretch. This spell she supposedly had found was not a guarantee. In all of my studies, most spell casters agreed in their writings that one could not bring back the dead.

There were those who liked to try, but their success was only rumors. There was never any concrete proof.

The way I had treated Mina made me sick. If she ever found out the whole truth of why I'd done it, she would never forgive me. My stomach settled into what I knew was now a permanent knot. This was my existence now. To be sick with guilt.

I left my mother's office shortly after, but found myself sprinting to the toilet minutes later to be sick. I groaned in physical and mental pain.

How much longer must I endure this? Either way I acted, I betrayed someone I cared about. Either way I acted; someone would suffer.

ENOCH/ELYSE

Cairo, Egypt

The last Key before I went to fetch the leverage on Mina. My power was stretched a bit thin with keeping four humans compliant, so I had fed heavily earlier today. Knowing this would be a tougher endeavor than the past four.

We stood once more outside a tall building in yet another ancient city. The intense Middle Eastern sun had baked the streets to a high heat during the day, and it still emanated from the stone beneath my feet long after sunset. I had quickly abandoned the thick English clothing I had donned the last few days and switched to the lighter linen garments common in this part of the world. My sweat-slicked skin craved every single breeze that teased through the knit fabric.

I focused in once more on the goal, pushing the heat and the discomfort it caused to the back of my mind. The Key was inside. This one was different from the others. Unlike the previous four, this Key not only knew what it was like Mina and the Spaniard, but he was the head of the Egyptian chapter of the Society. He had already assumed the role

when the mantle of Key passed on to him, and people were too afraid of him try and change anything about the situation.

Are we going to stand here and stare at this—admittedly beautiful—building all night? Or don't we have a job to do? Come on, Sasquatch. As powerful as this guy might be, I doubt he's more powerful than you, right? Come on. Let's go get this done. Kidnapping a thirty-seven-year-old can't be any worse than kidnapping a six-year-old.

As always, Elyse's cutting voice pulled me from my endless musings by giving me a practical outlook on the situation. "You're right, human. He will not be more powerful than I. That does not mean this will be easy."

Easy or not, we don't have a choice, right?

"Right." Right. Damn it.

Ok. I was ready. I rolled my shoulders, stretching my needlessly tight muscles, and stalked across the street.

MOSTAFA

Cairo, Egypt

Mostafa Dawood stood on the roof of the Society in Cairo, looking down at the entity on the other side of the street. He had known the creature would come. His affinity allowed him to see into the near future. He'd known this night would come. Not to mention, the reports he had received in the last couple of weeks had put him on alert. Thankfully, the reports had come only to him as the head of the Society here. It would not do to start a panic amongst his people.

The entity moved across the street, keeping its eyes on Mostafa. In another life, Mostafa might have wondered how he could be spotted in the shadows and against the

dark sky, but this was an unknowable being. Its powers were essentially limitless as long as it had a steady supply of humans through which to replenish.

Mostafa stifled the disgust the creature engendered within him. He was unsure if he would need to battle this creature, but even as a Key, he knew he could not win.

Many of the shorter buildings like this one had external fire exits from the roof. The creature had mounted this one and was climbing toward him.

Mostafa spared a thought for his wife and small children. Not for the first time, he cursed the death of his grandfather who had passed this mantle to him. The day the power and awareness had rushed into him was one he was unlikely to forget. He had warned Shireen that this day might come, but he had hoped it would be much later, when his children were grown.

The entity reached the top of the stairs, and stood facing Mostafa on the roof.

“You knew I would come.” It was not a question. “Do you know why, human?”

“Yes, I knew you would come. I cannot pretend to know your motives. Unless,” and here Mostafa prayed hard that the creature was in a generous mood, “unless you would like to enlighten me.”

The creature paused, studying Mostafa for a moment. He didn’t even try to throw up a shield. Whatever the entity wanted, the entity would get.

“I am going to bring down the Barrier. I would prefer your willing help, but it is not necessary.” He didn’t move, but there was a coiled power contained within his large limbs. Even if the two men were to face off without magic, Mostafa was sure the creature would win.

But bring down the Barrier.

He had been taught all his life that it was to be avoided at all costs. The Society had been *created* to protect the Barrier. “You have four of the other Keys, yes?”

“Yes.” No extra details. No emotions. Nothing.

“I have seen the near future for both of us. And as much as I do not want to go with you, it appears to be inevitable.”

The entity cocked its head, surprise showing on the thing’s facial features for the first time. “You will go with me willingly?” Mostafa noticed that its fists unclenched slightly. It had been prepared to fight him. Preparing as if it wasn’t sure it was guaranteed a victory. It continued, “If this is so, we must leave now. My kinswoman is not far behind and she does not want the same things. I cannot promise you much, but I can promise that with me you stand a much higher chance of coming out of this alive.”

Mostafa pondered this. He had assumed he would not live past his interactions with this creature. It had revealed many things unknown to the Society in the last few seconds. First, that undoing the Barrier spell did not necessarily mean the death of the Keys. Second, and perhaps most important of all, there was a second entity tracking down the Keys and they were not aligned with this one.

The Society had always seen the entities as one unified body. But these two, at least, were at odds. Mostafa believed the creature when he said the best chances of staying alive through all this were to go with it.

“Very well,” he sighed. “Let us be on our way then. The sooner all of this is resolved, the sooner I can be with my family again, yes?”

The creature cocked its brow, but stepped aside with a gesture, revealing the roof stairway once more.

Mostafa sent up one more quick prayer, then preceded the creature down to ground level. He did not care what the creature said or didn't. Mostafa *would* survive this. He would return to his family. See his children grown with children of their own. The Barrier coming down would change the world forever, but it would not be the end. Mostafa would make sure of it.

He sent the quick signal text to his wife, letting her know what had happened. They had planned for this weeks ago.

All it took was three words in Arabic:

'ana mae almalayika.

I'm with the angels.

ENOCH/ELYSE

Cairo, Egypt

I watched the Key precede me down the stairs with intense trepidation. As willing as he seemed right now, I didn't trust him. As soon as he lost consciousness in sleep, I would take over. I could not take any chances. No matter how reasonable he was being at the moment.

Oh ye of little faith, Elyse growled. I could hear the scowl in her voice. I kind of like this guy. He subverted even your expectations of humanity.

I responded mind to mind, so as not to let the gentleman hear our conversation. *Yes, well he may have taken me by surprise in this one instance, but I have no doubts about his loyalties. He will betray us the first chance he gets.*

I think you will be surprised again. I think this one will end up being a real asset to us all.

We shall see, young one. When you have lived as long as I have, you find that people always tend to disappoint you in the end.

We reached the street once more and I ushered the Key quickly into a taxi. At least this time there was no guilt. I did not have to watch a distraught mother scream for her child or strangle a woman unconscious. Nor did I have to kidnap a young girl or old man. This time, my prey sat beside me, awake and seemingly docile.

But I knew better.

Mostafa Dawood was dangerous.

He would reveal his true nature before the end.

MINA

Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain

The next several days of class were awkward to say the least. Even other students began to notice. So used to Alejo and I's playful flirtatious banter, they began shooting us confused and worried looks as if mom and dad were fighting. Apparently, they'd been shipping us *hard*.

I caused a real stir the first day I came to class and took a seat next to an Italian guy named Carlo in the back of the room. Alejo twisted from his usual seat near the front, giving me a look I couldn't read. Since that day in my room, he'd been careful not to touch me and invade my thoughts and had kept a thick wall around his own emotions. I'd catch snippets of grief, guilt, and longing, but before I'd even registered who they came from, they'd be gone.

I didn't meet his eyes and instead turned to Carlo who looked a bit bewildered, but pleased, nonetheless. Conversations around us picked up again and it wasn't long before he'd relaxed enough to start flirting back. A flash of anger came from across the room before it was stifled.

I didn't have to glance over to know Alejo was watching. Carlo started off turning that way every few seconds, but after I got fed up and dragged his chin back to face me, he got the hint.

And truly, he was a beautiful man. He had creamy, flawless Northern Italian skin, hair the color of milk chocolate, and warm hazel eyes. As he smiled, I saw a dimple peek out on his left cheek. Yes, he too, had those deadly instruments of male appeal.

But I felt nothing.

Dark brown eyes that could see into my soul burned into the side of my face as I tossed my hair and batted my eyelashes in a way that would have made Elyse proud. Carlo leaned closer. I fought off the quick stab of grief at the memory of my best friend—who I'd yet to properly mourn.

Those wicked, sensual lips moved to my ear, telling me how he'd like to take me out and do *very* naughty things.

And I felt nothing.

I felt a scratching at the walls of my mind, like a tiger trying to get to its prey. I didn't turn my head. I didn't flinch. I didn't *blink*. On one side, a handsome, flirtatious, well-meaning man who I could have with the snap of a finger.

And I felt nothing.

On the other side, a devastating, infuriating, self-righteous asshole who I could end the world with if we got together.

And I felt everything.

Those claws dug deeper into my mental shields. Not to the point of pain, yet, but I rolled my left shoulder as if trying to scratch an itch. It was all too much. The teacher, always ten minutes late since it was the first class of the morning and he had a fondness for Basque wine, ambled in and started talking over the chatter.

Carlo shot me a wink and pulled away to face front. The rest of the class quieted. This was one of our more enjoyable classes where we learned basic magic structures from different cultures. I'd been amazed by the similarities from religion to religion, culture to culture.

Those claws drew sharp lines down my mental shields, and I winced. Carlo glanced at me, and I winked. His dimple peeked out again before he turned back to listened to the teacher.

I stared at the back of Alejo's head hard enough to drill a hole in it. His claws returned, gentler this time. And I couldn't resist anymore. I opened a window for him in my shield.

And his presence filled my mind like smoke released from a bottle. That dark deep whisky rasp filled my mind, and I shivered.

You're only going to break his heart, you know, querida.

Oh, we're speaking again? Don't call me that. And get out of my head.

This time I felt his claws on the inside of my mind, caressing.

How are you doing this anyway, I asked, I thought you needed to touch people to get in their heads.

I do with most people, sí. But not with you. We are linked.

Because we're Keys?

Partially, yes. But you felt that tug the other day in class. You know our souls are...adjacent.

Because we're Keys. I said it slowly, as if he were dumb.

Perhaps, but perhaps not. I asked my mother about our connection. And she—

You what?! Are you insane?!

His laughter filled my head before he continued, I asked her about our destinies and if we would always be tied together.

Pain sliced through my mind, and I knew it was from him. Oh. He'd been hurting after that conversation. He'd turned to his mother out of desperation to not feel the deep longing I could still sense pulsing out of him.

She said it's unlikely because the Keys are what we are. Not who we are.

Oh. So, our assignation as Keys is like our job, but our souls have their own makeup?

Sí. I did not tell my mother about that class. But that tug we both felt. It could mean we have a much deeper connection than just our ancestors creating a world-altering spell that would curse their bloodlines.

Alejo, it's nice to know that this burden doesn't define us, but it doesn't change anything.

Bueno, I've been thinking about that—

We were interrupted when a large history textbook slammed on to the desk in front of me. The professor stood before me; an eyebrow raised and an annoyed look on his face.

Glancing around the room, I saw that everyone was looking at me. Shit.

"I'm sorry, what was the question?"

He sighed.

“I asked, Miss Romero, if you knew the year the ancient Hebrews were exiled from Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The year that the temple fell. It was a turning point for both your people and our Society.”

Was something in the water here with these professors? I’d never felt more targeted for my religion. It was like they hadn’t had a Jew here since the Spanish Inquisition.

Now that I think about it, they probably haven’t. Also, why would I know the answer to that question?

“I don’t know, sir.”

He huffed. “You disappoint me, Elena.”

I tried not to be affected. But I couldn’t help it as someone who was used to pleasing my teachers and professors. I shot a glance at Carlo as the teacher walked back to the front of the room, book in hand.

“Sorry,” he whispered, “I didn’t know he was going to call on you.”

I shook my head. What I wanted to say was, “You should have nudged me before he took a step towards me,” but what came out was, “It’s fine.”

“Aaaaas I was saying. The First Temple was destroyed in 587 BCE. Can anyone guess how this affected the Society which was, at the time, headquartered in Jerusalem?”

Someone raised their hand.

“Sir, the central governing body, the Council would have been scattered with no way to communicate safely if they didn’t want to be caught and executed for witchcraft.”

“Correct. Though members of the Council at the time would have been powerful enough to send messages over long distances using the Source—kind of like a prehistoric phone call—they didn’t dare tap into their power until they were far away for two reasons.”

Here his voice lowered as if he were telling a spooky tale over a campfire.

My, this one is dramatic, I thought.

“One,” he continued, “there is a legend that tells of a man who betrayed Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar and let the Babylonians into the city. This man is rumored in our history to be an entity that had been trapped on Earth after the Barrier was built and he took revenge by trying to destroy the descendants of the original spell casters.”

His voice grew in intensity. What, was this guy in theater? He really should be.

“Which brings me to the second reason they could not tap into their power—because the entity was correct in the assumption that at least one, if not more of the keys were kept safe within the Temple walls, serving as acolytes. The Council only just barely got the Key or Keys out in time. It is thanks to those brave men that it still exists today.”

I tuned him out again when I felt the scrape of those claws once more against my shields. I had kicked Alejandro out pretty forcefully when the professor played percussion with his textbook, but now I hesitated only a second before I let him in. Before he could speak, however, I cut in.

Do not say a word. I’m having a hard enough time figuring things out here without you making professors hate me. You want to have another conversation? Fine. But it will be in private and out loud. Now leave before I throw you out.

I felt a caress against my mind that made my insides clench and then he was gone. God but this man was potent. He wasn’t even looking at me and I was falling apart. I didn’t

know how I would survive another conversation alone with him. Maybe I *should* invite Maite. That would definitely keep me in check.

But no.

Something need to be resolved here. Both of us were coming out of our skin. There were too many feelings caught up in this thing. I knew what I had to do. I had to tell him to stay away from me completely.

The school wasn't big enough for me to switch into a different class section, but Carlo made a decent seat buddy; even he didn't have my back with professors. But I could avoid eating at the same times he did. I could limit my socialization and stay in my room more. I mean it wasn't ideal, but I was supposed to be in hiding anyway. The less I was around strangers, the less the likelihood they would find out my secrets.

I didn't know how Alejo did it. He was always charming and surrounded by people. I was sure my cooling off with him would make a lot of the women here very happy. I was the exact opposite. The other students were kind and curious at first, wanting to get to know the mysterious distant cousin or family friend of Maite's. When they'd realized I wouldn't tell them much—I'd rather stay silent than lie to their faces—they'd lost interest and begun to ignore me unless I was in the presence of His Highness, Prince Alejandro.

Yes, I could retreat until it was time to go. Something told me it wouldn't be long now. I remembered the eyes of the being at the airport as he told me to run from his murderous kin. I was certain he'd have no trouble finding me.

Chapter 24

MINA

Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain

I couldn't go back to my room for this conversation. I knew my ability to resist that man was limited. Instead, I headed to the field behind the abbey. There was nothing there for miles but farmhouses and rows of crops. But behind us, the grey walls and dark windows loomed, like the watchful eyes of a warden.

Maybe that would prevent me from giving into temptation, climbing on top of Alejo, and pinning him beneath me.

I didn't need to look behind me to know he'd followed me out here. I could feel his anticipation beating at me in waves. Without acknowledging him, I shook out my jean jacket and laid it on the ground to sit on.

He followed suit.

For a moment we sat barely a foot from one another without speaking. We simply stared into the distance and watched the setting sun paint the horizon in a passionate rainbow. Passionate. That was the word of the week if ever there was one.

The little hairs on my arms stood up when he inched closer and turned his piercing gaze on mine. I froze. I couldn't do it. Whatever this conversation held, I knew it would end up breaking my heart. I didn't know if I could handle the fallout.

We don't have to speak out loud, he said in my mind, but this will go easier if you would look at me, hermosa.

I swallowed hard, but couldn't make myself turn.

A second later, his rough fingertips were on my chin, turning my face to his.

Look at me, querida. Let me see those beautiful eyes.

A sudden righteous anger filled my lungs, and I jerked out of his grip.

"You want to talk," I said, finally meeting his eyes willingly, "Let's talk. But don't treat this like it's some kind of date. Don't call me your stupid pet names—" Even though they made me melt "—and don't look at me like that!"

I was yelling now, but it was self-preservation. Everything in me just wanted to curl up in his arms, and let the rest of the world deal with its own problems.

I took a breath to continue my rant, but Alejandro grabbed both my hands, pulling me back down from where I'd half risen on my knees. We were facing each other now, my hands in his. I sat back on my heels while he sat cross-legged. It put my face even with his.

"I'm sorry," he said, "You're right. We need to just talk straight. Lay everything out. Then we will decide what to do. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Should I go first, or would you like to?"

He's asking? My mental eye roll could not have been stronger. How considerate.

Mina. I am holding your hands, you know. I can still hear you.

Oops. "You go. You're the one who wanted to have this conversation in the first place."

He sighed, leaning forward a bit and pulling my hands until they were almost in his lap.

"Here's what we know. Tell me if I am missing anything. Okay?"

“Okay.” Where was he going with this?

“One. You and I are Keys—descendants of the sorcerers who originally cast the Barrier Spell, yes?”

“Yes.”

“The bloodlines have been kept separate for thousands of years because the risk resulting from the combined power in one person would be colossal. Yes?”

He waits for my nod before continuing.

“Therefore, you and I could never have a child because of this risk.”

I nod again. The thought of having *Alejo*’s child didn’t freak me out, necessarily, but the thought of having a kid *any* time soon was abhorrent.

“Who said anything about having children? I’m nineteen. I don’t want to think about that for at least a decade. Also, we just met.”

He chuckled and squeezed my hands harder as I tried to pull away.

“Mina. That’s what I am saying. This is the modern world. There is birth control for both men and women. And if I had to guess, there are probably spells to prevent it as well. I don’t want a child either. I want *you*. And if the thoughts running through your mind the other day outside my door were any indication, you want me just as much.”

I blushed. I knew he’d heard me, he’d as much hinted at it. But it was different when saying it out loud. Before the mortification could set in, he released my hands and placed them gently on either side of my face.

God, he smelled good. What was he saying? Oh. Yeah. He wanted me. He wanted *me*. Nothing in this world had ever been as enticing as leaning into the look I saw in his eyes. Nothing had ever felt as good as the emotions that washed over me from his mind.

“I—” I swallowed hard, trying to find the train of thought. “You know I want you too, Alejo. But even if we took every precaution. There’d always be a risk. I couldn’t take that chance. And I *definitely* couldn’t put any hypothetical child through that—”

“So, we bring the Barrier down. If the spell doesn’t exist, it no longer matters what we do with our lives. The Council and Society will leave us alone.”

I sucked in a breath. What he’d just said went against everything we had been taught. Against what every body of authority in this strange new world I had been thrust into said. I couldn’t believe it. There was no way. We—

“How?” The word slipped from my lips, unbidden.

His hands slid from my cheeks to the back of my head as he scooted close enough to press our knees together. His fingers tugged at my thick hair, and I almost lost the train of thought.

He was so close. So close. I could feel his breath on my lips and his deep brown eyes sparkled into mine.

“We find all seven of the Keys. We already have two between us. Then we find the entity who was chasing you. He will help us. We will prove to him it is our goal as well and make him our ally.”

I wanted it so bad. I could see the life I could have beyond this grave responsibility I had never wanted. A responsibility that had killed my mother. Even if Alejo and I didn’t stay together in the end, I would still be free to live the life I chose.

But then I remembered the eyes of the entity. Falling into those endless depths, I had nearly lost everything I was. Too late, other things I’d done and felt with the entity flashed across my mind. Alejo’s grip on my neck tightened, but he chose to ignore the salacious

images. Something dark settled at the back of his gaze, rage saved for later. It reminded me of my first encounter with the entity. That deep, boundless hunger. If *that* was what was on the other side of the Barrier. Perhaps it was better to leave it as is. I remembered our professor's warning about a backlash of power. A dam breaking. What horrors would unleash upon the world should Alejandro and I chase this selfish dream of being together over everything else?

I opened my mouth to tell him I couldn't do it. That this is where it would end. Finally. I knew I was breaking both our hearts, but I couldn't put the world at risk like that. I couldn't destroy humanity just because I desperately wanted this beautiful man before me.

He read my thoughts and gripped me tighter. My hair pulled and I bit back a moan. Damn. How was a girl supposed to think straight.

"How do you know we would survive the breaking of the spell anyway, Alejo? The original was cast with the blood of our ancestors and taking it down will probably take more than we can safely give. We'll probably die and never get a chance to be together. It'll be for nothing."

The muscle in his jaw twitched, but he didn't let me go. In fact, he began to pepper tiny, barely there kisses across my cheeks, eyelids, lips. I gasped with need. His hands held me in a vice grip, but his lips caressed me with the utmost care.

I needed those lips to devour me. To render both of us speechless. To end this fraught conversation with something far more satisfying. The very thing we were arguing about.

Fuck.

"Alejo. We can't," I said as I ran my hands up his chest. Oops. I was supposed to be pushing him away. Instead, they dug in, making him groan.

His lips found their way to my ear and bit down, punishing me for teasing him. They trailed down my neck, licking and nibbling until he reached my collarbone. But I needed those lips on mine. I was sure I would die if they weren't pressed to mine. If I couldn't taste him. I slipped my hands into his hair and pulled his face back to mine.

One of his hands left my hair and grabbed my hip. He pulled me into his lap, spreading my legs around his hips and wrapping them around his trim waist. Our lips were about to meet.

This was it. I could feel it. The rubber band was about to snap. There was no going back.

Just before his lips came down on mine, he uttered the sentence that sealed my fate, "I would burn the world to the ground if it meant I could have you all to myself with no one else to interfere, *preciosa*." There it was again. That dark rage. That possessiveness I wasn't prepared for.

The moan I had been holding back finally escaped and he took my mouth in a devouring kiss. That one hand remained in my hair, pulling just the right amount to leave me breathless. The other ran up my jeans-clad leg and gripped my ass before sliding under my shirt and caressing my bare skin.

I swear his touch branded my sensitive skin, and I ground my hips into his, wrapping them tighter around him. He shifted, lifting up slightly as if he were going to lay us down on our crumpled jackets and the soft grass when a loud clanging jarred us apart.

I scrambled from his lap and up to my feet. I swayed there for a moment. The dizziness and cold from being separated from him so abruptly making me uncertain on my feet.

"Mina—"

“I’m sorry. I have to go. This. It can’t happen again.” And then I said the words that I knew were a lie, wrapping a shield around my mind so he couldn’t get in. “You might be willing to burn the world down for me, but...but...” I took a deep breath, “I don’t feel the same way and it would all be for nothing.”

I turned away, not wanting to catch the fully formed devastation I’d seen begin on his face. This was for the best. There were other men out there. It was a silly crush. Lust at first sight. We’d both get over it eventually and be much happier with other people.

People who didn’t drive us crazy with anger and need at the same time.

People who were safe.

For us.

For the rest of the world.

ENOCH/ELYSE

Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain

Go Mina, go Mina, go!

Shut up, human.

But look at her flirting away! He’s gorgeous. Go Mina!

Elyse was referring to the young humans who sat in the field before us. Keys six and seven. The final pieces to my puzzle. I considered taking them together. An end to my millennia long quest was in sight if I did.

How helpful of them to spend so much time together.

The humans have gotten sloppy if they are allowing the bloodlines to interact.

I felt that if I left them alone for another few years, I might have a little baby Key with a combined bloodline. It had never happened before, but I was willing to bet there would be unforeseen consequences when combining that much power into a single human form. There was a reason the humans had felt compelled to keep the bloodlines separate for all these millennia.

And now two of them were falling in love. Humans. So self-destructive. They always wanted what was bad for them or others around them. It did not help that something in the back of my mind screamed, “Mine,” any time I laid eyes on Mina.

In order to stop Elyse’s continuing babble, I warned, *These two could potentially end the world if their child inherited their power and lost control.*

Who said anything about children? I just want my best friend to get some.

Get some?

You know exactly what I mean oh Immortal Watcher of Humanity. Don’t act like you don’t.

She was right, of course. I’d been on Earth for thousands of years. Not only had I witnessed everything humanity had to offer, I wasn’t going to pretend I hadn’t tested the waters myself. But must this girl have such filthy commentary about everything?

I watched them stare into one another’s eyes. Nothing else seemed to matter. Elyse was right. Children were the furthest thing from their mind. While likely also being the nearest consequence.

The Abbey bell began to toll the late hour and the seventh Key looked around startled, as if she had forgotten where she was. She ran off in the direction of the building, leaving the sixth Key looking frustrated.

Mina, interjected Elyse, *her name is Mina. Not 'the sixth Key'. He has a name too. I don't think it's Hottie McHotterson, but that's still better and more accurate than 'the seventh Key'.*

I am not calling him that. I believe his name is, I paused seeing if I could sense it on the surface of their minds, *Alejandro.*

Elyse immediately started singing a song about a man named Alejandro that I vaguely remembered from a well-known pop star several years back.

Enough, girl, I snapped, *if I take this Alejandro, it will be easy to lure the other.* Our regular dream communication combined with her need to see Elyse restored to the living lit the match. This would fan the flames. Drive her to action.

Elyse's essence within me had finally started to meld into my own. She was losing her distinctness from me which meant that her memories and emotions cut into my thoughts much more than they once had. She would not remain a separate consciousness for much longer. That very consequence was a large reason why my kind did not kill often when we fed. And it was the very reason why I needed to end this Barrier spell as soon as possible.

One good consequence of the overwhelming presence of Elyse's essence, was that I was able to maintain the slight mental connection to the Key. Her strongest feelings came to me in bursts, and it was stronger as I got closer. It was how I knew her feelings for the young man were true just now.

And it was how I was able to slip into the periphery of the young man's mind as their psyches built a tenuous connection. I put him at ease, removing any sense of alarm. I couldn't slip far enough past the boy's mental barriers to send him to sleep, but I could ease his alarm at being approached by a stranger in what should have been a secret location.

ALEJO

Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain

So close. The way she'd been looking at him, he was sure he would finally be able to give in to this intense craving he'd felt since meeting her. That single taste days ago had left him *burning*. And when he'd sensed her outside his door the other day as he touched himself...*Díos*. He'd started calling her name just to get her there with him. He could hear her shame battling with her need and it beat at him until he'd been mindless with desire.

Then today. He'd finally been able to speak with her. Lay it all out. And she'd *listened*. He could hear and feel her giving in to their connection. He'd been right. They could be together. It wasn't their *love* that was forbidden. It was their *child*. And God knew he didn't want one of those any time soon. If at all.

He was sure most people probably wouldn't look at it that way, thinking he'd be putting the world in danger from his carelessness, but he simply couldn't stay away from her anymore. It wasn't possible. And now he knew she felt the same.

Then those *fucking* abbey bells tolled, reminding them both they had obligations beyond each other.

His mother, the students, their teachers—everyone—had seen the feelings developing between the two of them. *Mamá* had warned them not to fall in love. But *no one* would tell them why their *love* was forbidden. Love was not magic.

Was it?

He knew she was special. It was why she'd fled here in the first place. He'd thought at first that maybe she drew him to her because of their connection as Keys. But then they'd

done that spell in class. And however brief she'd allowed it to continue, he'd felt it. She was a piece of his soul, for lack of a better word. She was *his*.

But when the depth of her fear became clear, he knew this was no ordinary woman. After all, she had lived an entire life separated from such an important part of who she was. He didn't think her father was a cruel man. In fact, from the way *Mamá* talked about him, he was the opposite of cruel.

But having that kind of power inside you your whole life, and then being told you were crazy or too sensitive when you felt it would have had lasting effects on her ability to trust your own mind. Mina was trying to find herself here, but not wanting to cross any lines in this new world she had only just discovered.

Alejo's musings on Mina and her mysterious past were interrupted when a shadow fell across his lap. It was just warm enough outside that the sudden plunge into shade chilled him. He tensed where he sat, but did not rise.

Then, just as quickly as the alarm came, it disappeared. A man of indeterminate race and age stepped from behind to face him. Alejo didn't know why he trusted this man enough to allow him to step close without grievous bodily harm, but he found that he was merely curious.

"*Quién eres?*" He asked informally. He didn't trust the man enough to accord him the proper respect due when greeting a stranger.

When the man didn't answer, he tried English.

"Who are you?"

Still no answer. But he felt a pressure in his skull, as if something or someone was trying to breach the meticulous mental walls he'd erected to protect his psyche.

Alejo got to his feet, preparing for a fight.

“You shouldn’t be here. This is private property.”

The stoic face tilted to the side as if debating the concept of privacy. But he still didn’t say a word. Alejo was getting annoyed. The pain behind his eyes didn’t help. He reached out and gripped the man’s shoulder, intending to put him to sleep and drag him into the facility for questioning.

Normally, all it took was a touch of Alejo’s hand and he could slip past a person’s defenses. It was no different this time. At first, Alejo felt the familiar popping sensation that meant he could now influence the person in his grip.

But something was wrong.

Human minds were, at large, well-ordered and easy to navigate. Everything was connected to everything else, so if you couldn’t immediately find what you needed, there was a distinct path that would lead you there.

But this was nothing like that.

This man’s mind was pure essence. Pure thought. There were no lines. Everything hit you all at once. And there was so *much life*. No. There were two lives. One seemingly endless, and one a brief spark next to a blazing fire. *Díos*. It hit Alejo like a tidal wave and crushed him beneath its weight. There were thousands of years of existence thrust into his mortal mind in one instant. No human mind could have comprehended it.

Alejo uttered a final, “*Qué eres?*” This time, shock and wonder colored his voice.

Then the world went dark.

ENOCH & ELYSE

Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain

Seriously, dude? You had to interrupt Mina when she was finally hooking up with a guy?

I ignored the horny teenager in my brain and observed the crumpled human form before me, fascinated. This human's grasp of essence was strong. I had never met a human able to breach my mental defenses so easily. Was it because the human was a Key?

A dilemma to be pondered later when we were not out in the open. I swung the unconscious human over my shoulder and disappeared from human eyes. It would not do to be caught carrying the unconscious form of the town's favorite son over my shoulder.

Connecting with the powerful human gave me a boost and I sped the two of us away from the Abbey. Now that I had six Keys, I knew I could retrieve the seventh easily.

Humans were so attached to each other and this one would come to me when she found out her lover was in danger.

Chapter 25

MINA

Somewhere North of Madrid, Spain

I was worried I might have broken Alejandro.

I hadn't seen him since our conversation outside the abbey. When I arrived at Señor Mané's class later that week, I was sure he'd be there. It had been a couple of days since the conversation, after all. We were adults. We could handle being in the same room as one another.

At least, that is what I told myself.

But when Friday rolled around and he was still nowhere to be found, I began to worry. This couldn't be just about me. Maybe Maite sent him off to help one of his uncles wherever they were. Maybe he'd decided to take the week off and was road-tripping in the Basque Country and France.

Unlikely.

With the exception of his attempts at corrupting me into breaking the rules, he took his safety and security as one of the Keys seriously. He wouldn't just run off on his own. I was sure of it. Maite *must* know.

After class ended, I shot out of my desk and burst through the door. I weaved around other students and faculty on their way to lunch. It was like fighting a tide full of hungry

flesh-eating fish. These people did not want to give way and get to the afternoon *siesta* meal even one minute late.

I finally managed to push through the throngs of people who were completely *done* with work for the day, and made my way to Maite's office. I needed to catch her before she left and was surrounded by her fervent admirers and hangers-on. That woman drew people like flies. Whether they were hungry for her attention, her power, or her body, I couldn't always be sure.

My luck held, and I could hear her dulcet voice rising behind her closed office door. Strange. Maite never raised her voice. She never even got angry. She just shut you down with logic and sweet words until you were convinced her idea was yours. Despite my immense respect for her, I'd learned to keep up a mental shield around her. Better safe than sorry. Especially if affinities ran in families.

I leaned into the door and strained to translate from her rapid Spanish.

"Don't tell me not to worry! He is my son! I don't care if he's an adult. He went off with that *puta* on Monday and hasn't been seen since. Find him."

There was the sound of a phone being slammed face down on a desk and a frustrated growl. Maite was *furious* with someone. Monday. That was when Alejo and I—

But no. Maite had called her a *very* inappropriate name. Maite liked me. I was sure. Right? She and I got along really well. Could Alejo have gone off with another girl after we talked? Was he taking me at my word and trying to rub my rejection of him in my face?

I was so lost in thought, my hand frozen where it had once thought to knock on Maite's office door, that I didn't hear the clacking of her heels on the stone floor fast enough to

back away. It swung open, revealing an irate mother who was desperately looking for her lost son.

And when she saw me, her eyes narrowed to slits. All I could see of eyes the same deep brown shade I'd been drowning in on Monday was a narrow expanse so dark it made her entire eye look black.

She grabbed my shoulder and backed me into the wall opposite her door. I hit the stone with an unexpected thwack.

"Mina. Where is he? Where is my Alejandro?"

"Th-that's what I came to ask *you*. I haven't seen him since Monday and I'm getting worried."

"*Getting* worried? My dear you should already *be* worried. *No* one else has seen him. He's not answering his phone. His uncles haven't heard from him—"

I began to sweat. This wasn't like him at all. Then I remembered. Maite said he'd gone off with someone. A woman.

"When I came to your door you said he'd gone off with someone. Maybe she knows? If we can find her, maybe we'll find Alejo."

The look Maite gave me was filled with such disgust it could have peeled paint off the walls.

"I thought you were smarter than this," she said. She didn't seem phased that I had overheard her phone call. "You are the only woman Alejo would even *dream* of going off with, my dear. You have so thoroughly bewitched him that he won't even look at any of the eligible woman I've tried to set him up with."

Oh. I'd been right before, then. *I* was the *puta*. Damn.

She continued, “So that means your little picnic or whatever it was you were doing behind the abbey on Monday—*don’t* tell me.” She put up her hands and backed up a step. “I don’t need to know what goes on between you and my son. Once was enough. No. What I am *trying* to tell you is that you are the last person to see my son alive. And so help me God, if he is otherwise when I find him, I will rip you limb from limb.”

She had gotten closer and closer as she ramped up her threats. Tears filled my eyes. I was hoping this woman would be a true ally. But if it came down to me over her son. She would always choose Alejandro.

And I didn’t blame her. She had every right to fight for her family. How could I fault her when I had tried to do the same for Elyse and my father had done the same for me since the minute I was born?

“I swear, Maite, we had a *conversation*. As you’ve noticed, things haven’t been quite...normal between us since you...um...walked in on us the other day. We were trying to hash things out and find a new normal.”

She didn’t need the details of how I’d climbed into her son’s lap and almost accidentally given the monks in the building above a show. So, I skipped to the end.

“When the bells rang seven pm, I said good night and went back inside. That’s all. He was still out there watching the sun set when I left him. We were alone. I would have called out if I’d noticed anyone standing there. I swear, Maite. I haven’t seen him. I’m just as concerned as you. I was pissed we couldn’t be together because I really care about your son. But I never would have taken that anger out on him. It’s not his fault that we’re both—”

She cut me off before I could voice our secret in the open hallways. “*Basta, Elena.*”

She seemed to have remembered to use my fake name. “I believe you, dear. But that doesn’t bring us any closer to finding him. See, though you may not know where he went, I think you know who he may be with.”

“Wh—what? Why would I know that?”

“Because. No one knew *anything* about how special my son was before you arrived. No one suspected a thing. Sure, he was powerful, but my whole family is famous for being powerful. Sure, he knew things he probably shouldn’t at his age and rank in the Society, but again his family is well connected.”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at.” I said, suddenly *pretty* sure what she was getting at.

“What I am *saying, Elena.*” This time, my fake name sounded like a curse on her lips. I hoped it wasn’t one of those multi-generational blood curses. One was enough for a lifetime, thank you very much. “Is that whatever thing was chasing you—well, it is possible it has set its sights on Alejandro as well.”

I was right. That was exactly what she’d been getting at. The entity. Enoch. The terrifying being with the infinite eyes that made me feel all kinds of emotions I shouldn’t. Alejo and I had been talking on Monday about possibly trying to find the creature. Reason with it. Help to bring the Barrier down. And now it had *taken* Alejandro?

No.

“I would have felt its presence if it had been anywhere near that field. The last time we met, its power nearly drowned my senses.” To put it mildly.

“You wouldn’t have noticed it,” she snarled, getting impatient, “if it was concealing itself. They are quite adept at that and this one has been haunting the powerful families of the society since the fall of the First Temple in Jerusalem.”

I thought back to the professor who’d told us that the fall of the Temple had been a result of a traitorous entity allowing the Babylonians into the city. This couldn’t be the same one, could it? I mean, they *were* immortal, but that seemed ridiculous. I was having a hard time picturing Enoch walking around 2600 years ago. And being responsible for the destruction of the First Temple? He wouldn’t really have done that, would he?

“Are you sure,” I asked. “You don’t think it could be anything else?” I knew the answer before she responded.

“I am sure. You know this creature. Or rather, it knows *you*. You must call to it with your mind and find out how to get him back. Alive. If you do not get him back for me. I will kill you myself.”

Her eyes were wild and desperate. She was a woman at her breaking point. Her only child was in the clutches of an immortal creature with a single-minded goal. She had no compunctions about threatening me. Even if it meant that my going to find Alejo could spell both of our deaths. At the very least it was playing right into the being’s hands.

Enoch was collecting Keys. I was a Key. Probably one of the last, if I had to guess. His dogged pursuit had let up for weeks only for him to find my exact hiding place and kidnap Alejandro. I was willing to bet he hadn’t bothered taking me as I ran back inside because he’d seen us together.

He knew it would come to this.

He knew I would have to find Alejandro.

And I would.

I knew where I had to go already. Where the spell started. Where my bloodline had been cursed to millennia of misery and murder.

I looked into Maite's fevered gaze. I was resolved.

"I need to go to Jerusalem."

I knew from the moment I stepped foot off the plane that I was being followed. There are times when you can tell yourself it's all in your head—that the man three behind you in line at customs is just staring into space and the back of your head happens to be included, that the woman in line for taxis keeps glancing up from her phone at you because you look like her younger sister or an old friend.

But the truth is I was thankful I'd had even the little bit of training I'd received because I spotted knife scars on the man's hands and knew he didn't come by those as a professional chef. The woman radiated power—low levels, but power, nonetheless. And when I turned to look out the back window of my taxi, they stood near each other and watched me drive off. I had the cabbie pull over at a bus station in the city and caught a different cab to throw off my pursuers.

I didn't know what my grandfather had intended his cronies to do at the airport, but knew they weren't there to wish me a wonderful stay in the Holy Land.

The Holy Land.

I was back in Israel after so many years. Tel Aviv is a great transition city because it's like if New York and the Middle East had a baby. All the cosmopolitan feel and never-ending entertainment of New York with all the delicious foods, loud vendors, and brutally

hot sun of the Middle East. I remembered my first visit, getting off the plane and Dad grinning wide. “Welcome home,” he’d said.

Welcome home.

Yes, that was the way this place had always felt to me. Oh, don’t get me wrong, just like any country it had just as many people and things to be ashamed of as proud, but it was the only place in the world where I didn’t have to explain why I couldn’t come out on a Friday night or that I didn’t celebrate Christmas. It was the only place in the world I could have the day off for the holiest days of the year and not have to threaten a lawsuit for religious discrimination to get it.

I rolled down my window as we made our way out of the city. The air grew less humid the farther inland we drove. All of a sudden, the buildings dropped away. Looking forward to the East, there was only dry rocky ground and sharp-looking bushes. Off in the distance, you could spot towns here and there, but there was a very defined line where humanity ended, and nature took over; and this one parched ribbon of asphalt cut through it all.

Occasionally we had to drive through a town, but it wasn’t until we closed in on Jerusalem that civilization seemed to wake back up. But this place was wholly different from Tel Aviv. Nearly every inch was built of the pale golden sandstone that made up the old city. Dad had once told me it was the law. Buildings were square with round archways, inner courtyards, balconies, and roof terraces. This was not a place that tried to shut itself away from the elements. Instead, the people welcomed the desert. Ceramic tile took the place of hardwood floors, and many windows did not have screens.

It was such a far cry from the muggy mosquito-laden summers that I’d grown up with. But it was still a city and though they spoke different languages, you could still hear babies

crying and stray cats fighting when you walked the streets. There were still corner drug stores and favorite local bars.

I smiled when the scents from a passing bakery wafted into my nose. Another thing I'd missed—ingredients in food here were so much fresher than back home. Everything just tasted more alive.

We continued on up a large hill toward the city center. To my left, the city dropped away in favor of dense vegetation. On a distant hill sat a shimmering Eastern Orthodox Church that caught my eye every time. It sat so precariously on the side of the hill; I could swear it was floating.

The beautiful and highly trained voices of the *mu'azzanat* echoed over the buildings, calling the Muslims in the city to prayer and I glanced at the clock—*Maghrib*. It was about a quarter to five. I was making good time. Enoch would not be pleased if I missed his rendezvous.

I kind of liked the idea of pissing off an all-powerful immortal entity, but decided to save that experience for a time when less was at stake. Still, he'd killed my best friend. Maybe he deserved a little stress and anxiety.

We climbed higher into the city and the stone of the buildings went from crisp golden-beige, to dirt-covered grey, to gloss-covered cream, to finally a shimmering deep golden color that can only be achieved by several millennia-worth of hands brushing every stone within reach. This is where my cabbie stopped. I gave him the exorbitant amount of cash—rides from Ben-Gurion Airport were not cheap. Thankfully, Maite and her people had plenty of money and no compunction about sharing.

I swung my duffle to lay securely across my body. I wasn't worried about theft here, but the crowds in Jerusalem's Old City often rivaled Times Square. Jerusalem's Zion Gate jutted out from the ancient city walls and forced entrants to take a sharp left.

As soon as the dimly lit stone passage fell away, I thanked God for GPS and an Israeli SIM card. No matter how many times I came to Jerusalem, the Old City made me feel like a brand-new tourist every time. Narrow passageways connected one to the next, suddenly spilling out into wider squares only to thrust you back onto the smoothest cobblestones and narrowest streets you'd ever seen. When it rained in the Old City, you better hope your shoes had good traction or you would get a lesson in body surfing ancient and uneven staircases.

Pros: It was dry season, and I could worry less about slipping and falling.

Cons: It was the height of tourist season, and would make getting anywhere in this town a hassle.

I followed my GPS's instructions, only taking two wrong turns and ended up at the Sephardic House, an idyllic hotel nestled in the heart of the Old City, in record time. It was now five thirty. I had an hour and a half to get to the meeting.

Walking into the lobby I heard a combination of Hebrew, Arabic, and Spanish. Maite had told me that though her family was not Jewish, the Sephardic House was run by distant relatives of hers who had fled Spain in the 1400s and slowly migrated their way to Jerusalem. The minute I walked in, I was in love. This place was magical.

An archway with intricate tile work covering the walls opened into a sun-drenched atrium with high ceilings and balcony walkways leading to rooms on the upper floors. As much as I'd wanted the beautiful view of the sun melting into the desert hills behind the

buildings, I'd booked a room on the ground floor just in case anything happened, and I needed a quick escape.

I shoved my duffel into the closet, to be dealt with later, tucked my important documents into my pockets, stuck Dad's dagger into the leg of my boot, and headed out the door. Enoch was waiting.

I headed North as fast as possible. Checking in and setting my stuff down always took longer than I thought it would. I needed to make this tour. It was the last one of the day to go into the tunnels beneath the Temple Mount.

When I'd looked online, I'd seen there were two different tours. One led through the medieval catacombs. The walls and pathways less well-maintained to make the place feel more ancient than it was. The other looked like a museum had been curated within. Lights and screens covered the walls, the pathways were clear and delineated. Any place a tourist could possibly go the wrong way was marked with clear "Turn Back" signs in multiple languages. And yet, despite its gloss and curation, this was the more ancient part of the tunnels.

This was where I would need to meet Enoch. He'd said to go to the oldest part of the tunnels to find him. This tour was the only way I'd get access. I only prayed that the invisibility spell Maite had taught me before leaving Spain worked when it was finally put to the test under pressure.

I stumbled up to the clearly marked queue for the tour with a breath of relief. Two minutes later and I would have been shit out of luck. Maybe at last, *someone* was looking out for me.

The apprehension began to build now that I was so close to my destination. What had Enoch been doing to the other Keys? More specifically, Alejo? Was he okay? I remembered the look of possessiveness both...men...had turned in my direction. It gave me a thrill to think about it despite knowing better. Both men wanted something from me I wasn't sure I could give. And both men were tenacious enough to convince me to give it to them. As I stepped out of the sun and into the cool LED-lit darkness, I was aware I might never be coming back out and that those two were partially to blame.

Chapter 26

ALEJO*Old City Jerusalem, Israel*

Frightened whispers filled my ears as I finally came to. I tried to shoot to my feet, but found myself bound hand and foot. When my eyes finally adjusted to the darkness, I saw I was in a cave of some kind. The smell and weight of the air told me I was probably underground—having lived in an underground facility for some time, it was evident almost immediately.

In the center of the room was a flat circular stone carved around the edges with ancient Hebrew letters. My grasp of the language was not great, but I still recognized a few of the characters. What it said, though, I couldn't say.

The door to the room was blocked a locked metal gate. The kind they put up at dig sites to keep unqualified people from wandering into dangerous spaces. *Mamá* and I had been to a few of those over the years. To wake up in what appeared to be an underground archeological site, tied up, next to an ancient sacrificial alter was not high on my list of desired morning after situations.

I remembered the feel of Mina's lips, her body pressed to mine, and then the panic when abbey bells rang and she came to her senses. I let out a string of curses. That man who had

approached me after she left. I couldn't get a clear image of him in my mind. But he must have been the one who'd taken me.

Where the hell were we?

This must be a very old Society site. I could feel the magic from beyond the Barrier. It felt like the room where *Mamá* had trained me to tap into my powers back home. Perhaps another one of those thin spots?

A weak sob to my left jolted me out of my questions about where and why. I had been too panicked about finding myself in an unfamiliar place that I'd forgotten all my training and dismissed the dark shapes on the floor as large rocks.

Rolling to my left, however, revealed a little girl with a tear-stained face. She was tied just as I was, and her filthy face told me she might have been here for a few days at least.

A wary glance around at the rest of the shapes around the room revealed four other people of all ages and races. Some of them looked terrified. Some looked angry. One old man was entirely expressionless as our eyes met. He had no illusions about what was going to happen.

He thought he was about to die.

I turned to the little girl. When our eyes met this time, I recognized the weight of her power immediately. Shit. She was a Key. Like me. Like the old man. And probably the other three whose eyes I couldn't see in the gloom.

"What's your name?" I asked in English.

Her wide eyes focused on me, but she didn't answer.

I tried again as gently as possible. "What's your name, *niña*?"

At the Spanish word, her eyes lit up and rapid-fire Spanish in a dialect I thought might come from somewhere in South America spilled from her lips. She was so frightened. It took me a minute to adjust to her accent, having not spoken Spanish outside of Spain in a long time, but pretty soon I understood.

No one except “*El Monstruo*” with the scary eyes could understand her and he didn’t tell her anything except that he needed her for something. I noted that she didn’t mention if he had told her what would happen to her when he no longer needed her.

She said when she’d first met him, he’d approached her with kindness. Given her sweets. She’d been playing in her back yard at home. Her aunt and uncle had a farm in the country. The barn dog had just had puppies and she was playing with one of them while mama dog slept nearby with the others. The mama dog normally didn’t like humans near her pups, but the girl had told her she would make sure the pups were safe so mama dog could rest.

El Monstruo had asked her about the puppies first, wanting to know how old they were, if they were good companions.

She had thought he might want to buy one. People had been coming all week for just the same reason. Three of the pups were already gone, but there were five more and *Tío y Tía* were trying to get rid of them soon. It made her sad because she wanted to keep them. Mama dog had told her it broke her heart every time one of the little ones was taken.

The girl could talk to animals. Under different circumstances, that would be the coolest thing I’d ever heard.

“*Cómo te llamas?*” I asked, reminding her that she still hadn’t told me her name.

“Ana.” Came the quiet response.

“And how old are you, Ana?” I continued in the same language.

She held up six fingers.

Mierda. What kind of asshole kidnaps a six-year-old?

I wished more than anything that I could take this little girl's hand and tell her everything would be okay, but I didn't know for sure. And I wouldn't lie to her. If the entity was collecting Keys, he was probably trying to break down the Barrier. And though I'd been too blinded by lust to admit it when Mina said it, I had know idea if we would live through the spell needed to complete the ritual. Our cursed blood was needed, but how much?

"Come sit by me, Ana," I said, "I'll do my best to keep you safe."

Another sob escaped the little girl's throat, and she scooted over until she was almost in my lap. Damn. The poor thing was so terrified she was trusting the first kind word. Had her parents taught her nothing? I was dying to ask her if she knew anything about her powers. If her parents were members of the Society. If she had been raised to relish her powers like I had. As it was, when her skin brushed mine, her jumbled terror-filled thoughts rushed into my mind. I was overwhelmed by the amount of life this little girl had crammed into six years.

Communing with animals was rare, but she'd been able to do it as soon as she could comprehend language. Her abilities frightened her *tíos*—*guess that answers that question*—but living on a farm, they found her useful. It seemed they treated her more like an employee than a child.

As her experiences washed over me, my hands quested behind my back seeking...ah! I closed my fist around a sharp rock. If I could get us untied, maybe I could get us out of here.

I began to saw at my bindings.

Some of the others around the room stirred at the sound. Their hopeful thoughts began to waft toward me—the power in this place combined with their cursed bloodlines slamming me with five sets of captive thoughts.

Damn. Only the old man was aware of what we were. And he seemed resigned to our fate. No help there. The stone was not sharp enough. It would be a miracle if I could get through my own ropes let alone five more.

But Ana...Ana talked to animals without even knowing it wasn't normal. Caves like this, there were bound to be little creatures crawling around. If Ana could talk to them, get them to help...

"Ana?"

"Hmm?" She asked from where she'd begun to doze against my chest.

"Do you know if there are any little animals down here? Like mice or maybe rats?"

She cringed. "Yes, there are. Rats are nasty. I told them to stay away."

"Oh. Well, I think maybe they could actually help us. They could chew through our ropes. Do you think you could call them back?" A horrible image of us being swarmed by rats filled my mind. "Maybe just one or two though."

She made a face, but closed her eyes and cocked her head.

"They don't want to come. I offended them. *La Reina* says that she will let us die here and feast on our bodies." She started crying again. Damnit. I couldn't be angry with her for not having the forethought to ask the animals for help. She was a little girl who was afraid of rats.

I sawed more intently at my ropes with the rock. I was making some progress, but I had no idea when the entity would return.

A little squeak sounded from near our feet. In the gloom, I could make out a tiny rodent. Not a rat. Too small. A mouse, maybe?

Ana flinched at the first squeak, but quickly sat up and leaned toward the creature. After a moment she looked up and beamed at me. “*El pequeñito* says he will help us! He says the rats are bullies and I was right to make them go away.” She giggled when more squeaks sounded. “He says you and that man smell funny. Like the snakes that spark in the smaller tunnels. I think he means the electrical wires. He says this whole room smells like it. It makes his head woozy, so he will be fast.”

With that, the tiny creature zoomed behind Ana and began chewing through the thick rope at her wrists.

He must be able to smell the Source. As the only two people who were trained in it and regularly used it, the Egyptian man and I probably retained the smell of magic more than the others.

As *El Pequeñito*, as Ana had dubbed him, chewed through rope after rope, the jumble of hopeful thoughts crowded my mind. The others were sitting up now. They didn’t need to speak Spanish to know what was going on. I rubbed my now free wrists and gave the little creature a pat on the head in thanks before starting to work on my feet.

Sighs of relief filled the room. I watched as each silhouette stretched their arms above their head and rolled their wrists. There were two more people still to go when we heard footsteps and voices coming down the hallway.

Everyone froze.

“Go, *Pequeñito*! Get out of here!” Ana’s whisper filled the room.

The footsteps stopped. There were two presences. Both powerful. One had to be the entity. The other—

Mina's heartbreakingly beautiful face rounded the corner with the strange man I remembered from before I passed out.

She wasn't unconscious. She wasn't tied up. She walked in of her own volition as the entity unlocked the gate. When our eyes locked, a flood of emotion filled me. Drowning out the thoughts I could feel she was trying to send me. She was shouting down our bond, but the relief, confusion, fear for her safety, and anger at the creature standing beside her swallowed up everything else.

I got to my feet, seeing that the others had too, and pulled Ana behind me.

"El Monstruo," she whispered.

Her little hands clung to the leg of my jeans, and I placed a gentle hand on her head. Through the physical contact, I was able to send her one comforting thought, *I will do everything I can to protect you.*

Then the entity put a hand on Mina's lower back, ushering her forward and I made another private vow.

I will rip you limb from limb, starting with that hand.

MINA

Old City Jerusalem, Israel

It had been easier than I thought to slip away from the tour. There was a boisterous family in front of me the whole time that drew all of the docent's attention. I drifted further and further back from the group until I could barely see them in the dim light.

As soon as they rounded a corner, I was alone on the underground path. I turned to the employees only door I'd spotted a few steps before and tried to open the door.

It was locked. Of course, it was.

I cursed and wished I had asked Maite for a lock picking spell.

What about raw power?

I grasped the Source I could feel flowing through my veins and in the air around me. The Barrier was thinner here. I felt the pulse of power just out of reach and knew I'd come to the right place. With trepidation, I thrust what power I could grasp into the lock. The metal smoked and flashed red hot, but the lock did not budge. Turned out it would take more than three weeks to turn me from a blunt instrument into the finely tuned scalpel I needed to be.

A power I had only felt on a few rare occasions washed over me in an ominous and seductive wave. I felt a presence behind me, and whirled only to look up into the fathomless eyes of Enoch.

"You made it." His low voice rattled my bones and made my breath quicken, but I stamped out those feelings as best I could. I had no business being attracted to this—this creature. He'd killed so many—killed *Elyse*—to get to me. Kidnapped Alejo and five other people.

"As if I had a choice." The words, though still tinged with anguish at the thought of my best friend, came out less angry than I intended, and I cursed my racing pulse and fluttering heart. Wasn't I *just* climbing all over Alejo too? What was wrong with me?

Enoch reached behind me and placed his hand on the doorknob. I tried to back away, but found there was nowhere to go. I was trapped between the metal door bolted to the stone

behind me and the ageless immortal man in front of me. I could feel his power funneling into the lock and knew he would be successful where I had not.

As he worked the spell, he leaned into my ear and whispered, “I can *taste* your internal conflict, little one. There are ways I can show you to turn that off. Once you fulfill your promises and help me bring down this curse set upon us by your ancestors, I can make anything you dream of yours. Including this body if that is what you wish.”

His lips grazed my ear as he spoke. I found myself frozen between burning desire and utter disgust. He said Elyse’s soul still lived within him. Was he lying just to get me to comply? Was I softening toward him in vain? Would I even survive all of this?

Before I could be swayed toward one decision or another, the lock clicked open, and a draft of cool air brought some of my common sense rushing back. I stumbled backward through the doorway, sputtering, “I—I don’t want anything from you except to protect my friends. You kidnapped someone I care about and stole the soul of my best friend. I’m here to make sure they get out alive.”

Enoch smirked, but didn’t say anything. His eyes promised that he would love to continue wearing me down. But we had both waited too long for this moment—him much longer than I. Instead, he gestured for me to proceed him down the dark hallway while he closed and locked the door once more.

The feel of him at my back as the dimly lit path gave way to complete darkness, was not a comfort. My skin tingled from the heat of him, but my mind screamed that this was a being who had killed thousands in the name of bringing me and my six counterparts to this exact spot. That he needed our *blood* to achieve his goal.

“How exactly did you get all of us here?” I asked.

“I built connections with all of the bloodlines but yours generations ago, so I am always able to find the current Key. Your family hid better than the others. It was only through your young man’s family that I found you.”

I shuddered at the thought of him stalking Alejo across an ocean only to stumble upon me. Alejo would be devastated if he knew our meeting was what led to this entire clusterfuck.

Enoch continued, “The little girl was easy enough to pick up and take with me. Same with the old man. Once I started adding the others, I had to keep them in a sleep-state. Otherwise, they would have tried to escape. They have been awake since I deposited them here though. It is interesting how many of them did not know what they were. You know, if all seven of you had been trained, you might have been able to fend me off. I shall thank the Source that your human keepers were too stupid to think of that.”

And now the scale had tipped back to fear and disgust. I suppose I couldn’t hold a non-human immortal being to the same moral standards as a myself or any other human with power, but it would definitely make this whole conflict between my body and my mind a *lot* easier.

I tripped over the uneven ground, and he caught me before I could face-plant. “Maybe you should go first. I have no idea where we’re going.”

“Don’t you?” His voice was a whisper just above my neck. “You can’t feel it? Stop using your human eyes. They are weak. Close them and feel the power radiating from further down. It calls to every living thing, but as a Key you are being drawn to the lock.”

“Is this the place where it...happened?”

“Yes. I had left my post in the human realm to momentarily convene with my kin. There was a surge of power. We all felt it rattle through us. If we had been in human bodies, they would have been ripped apart.”

“Wait. Is that what happened to the seven?”

“I would assume so. It took me another five hundred or so years to return to Earth through a tiny crack in the Barrier and another more than two thousand to round up the descendants of those traitors, and undo the damage they have done.”

I could hear the anger in his voice. I had so many questions about what it had been like before. About his *post* as he’d called it. About his anger and the way he’d referred to them as *traitors*. That implied they’d been working together at one point. That the entities we were taught to fear and fight off today were somehow our allies in another life.

With this strange and alluring creature at my back, I could feel the truth of that statement. Humans were prone to trying to kill things they didn’t understand or feared were more powerful. We would use them up as much as possible and turn on them the minute we felt threatened.

And nothing would have threatened humans more than immortal creatures who used their connection with human essence to power their time on Earth. I mean, the fear wasn’t *unfounded*. Elyse—

I cut off that train of thought as I tripped again. This time, I shook his hands off immediately, closed my eyes and opened my senses. I let the pull of that ancient power draw me deeper into the tunnels.

I wasn’t sure that the people who ran this place knew just how deep they went. We’d long since passed signs that told us these passages were unsafe. Enoch merely brushed the

barrier aside and gestured for me to continue. Deeper and deeper we went. I had never felt the Source this close to the surface of my world. It was even stronger than the room where I'd trained under the abbey in Spain.

Through the eyes of sheer power, I could see every twist and turn and bump in the pathway before me. When the tunnels forked, the correct one was already illuminated.

Finally, we came upon a barred metal gate that led into a large round chamber with an altar at the center. Loose stones littered the floor due to age and five humans stood watching us warily. That made six Keys. Where was the seventh? Enoch had left one single lantern glowing on the altar, and by the dim light I spotted Alejandro.

He was okay. He was alive. He was—furious. The waves of emotion hit me as soon as I stepped into the chamber. Our eyes met. I knew he could hear me. The fact that I was here for him. That I had come to save him. But that didn't seem to reassure him. I wasn't the mind reader of this pair, so there was no way I could ask him unless I let him in my mind.

Movement by his hip startled me. A tiny form clung to Alejo's pants leg. She whispered two words when she laid eyes on Enoch. "*El Monstruo.*" The Monster. Oh God. What had I gotten myself into. One of the Keys was a child? She couldn't be more than five or six.

When I turned to question Enoch—to give him a piece of my mind for terrorizing this little girl—she made a break from Alejo's side and slid past both me and Enoch. She was out the door before I could grab a hold.

Enoch's face turned thunderous, and I could see the burning immortal rage lurking behind the human guise. "I did not spend *twenty-five hundred years* searching for the seven of you to lose everything because of a fucking six-year-old child." He whirled to face me,

and pointed at Alejo. “Find her. Or he dies. He has other family members I can hunt down. She does not.”

I winced at the fury in his tone. I had no doubt he’d do what he said he would. I dared one last glance at Alejo. He looked like he was about to try to come with me. But Enoch’s snarl froze everyone in place.

“Go.” The word came from his lips, but it wasn’t a language I knew. At least, I didn’t think I knew it. Nevertheless, I understood. So, I went. Back into the pitch-black hallways, hoping that the little girl hadn’t learned how to sense her way through the darkness as I just had, and was stumbling along blind.

With the weight of power emanating from the room I’d just left, I couldn’t use my connection to her as a Key. She was completely drowned out. Every person down here was feeling fear, but yes! There!

I could sense the emotions of someone a bit ahead of me. They were scared, confused, tired, hungry, and guilty. For what I couldn’t have said, but the feelings had an air of newness or immaturity that led me to the hope that this was the girl I was looking for.

I opened my mind’s eye to navigate the labyrinth once again before me. This time, heading in the opposite direction from where we’d entered. My brain wondered if this was heading underground or if perhaps there was another exit.

Maybe I could get the little girl out, then go back and rescue Alejo. All reasons for wanting to help or empathize with Enoch went out the window as soon as I saw he’d kidnapped a child. A nasty voice in my head said I should have never trusted him. After all, he’d killed Elyse. But somehow, through his mixed signals and an unwanted attraction,

I'd started to thaw and agreed to his demands. This time, I swore, I would put an end to all of this.

Or die trying.

Chapter 27

ENOCH/ELYSE*Old City Jerusalem, Israel*

I could not ever remember feeling that kind of fury. The look on Mina's face told me I might have irreparably damaged the fragile truce between us, but the thought of failing now...after so long...

You're kind of a dick, you know that? Elyse's voice cut through my musings. My ever-present shadow. The unwanted parasite I had given myself.

Do you want to stay trapped within me forever? Because that is what will happen if we do not succeed today. I retorted.

If it is at the expense of Mina's life, I will happily stay here forever.

"I do not need her life. Only her blood." I said the last part aloud while looking into the glaring eyes of the Spaniard. Perhaps if he knew I didn't intend to kill the seven of them, he would be less likely to fight me.

But to be sure I didn't encounter any more runners, I sent a blast of power at all of them, knocking them once more to the floor. Being so close to a rift in the Barrier, I could feel my power growing. It was a taste I had long been denied. A feeling I had almost forgotten. Ecstasy. Home.

The need to end this once and for all overwhelmed me. Elyse's chatter was drowned out by sheer determination. I carefully placed the reddish-brown bowl on the altar before me. It was so ancient, the engravings along the surface were nearly illegible, but the power within it remained. This was the bowl that had formed from the original Barrier spell.

The knife I placed beside it was made from the bone of one of the original spell-casters. I had thought all of their remains would be dust even by the time I returned to earth twenty-five hundred years ago, but when I discovered the grave after many years of searching, it was as if the skeleton had turned to stone. Plucking the bone from amongst its brethren and sharpening it had felt almost like revenge.

The sound of hushed voices and quieted sobs accompanied footsteps down the hallway toward our room. Mina had caught the child. Thank the Source. I was even more surprised that she had decided to return.

When she rounded the corner, I did not miss the ire burning in those eyes of hers. The sobbing child clung to her, thin arms and legs wrapped around Mina in a painfully tight grip.

"Thank you," I said with a nod at the woman who left me more perplexed and aroused than I cared to admit.

"I didn't do it for you." Her voice was a low growl. Yes. I had definitely destroyed our tenuous connection. Probably for the best. Now I could return home and be rid of the humans who had plagued my existence for so long.

Fine. If she wanted hostile, I could do hostile. "Stand with the others," I gestured toward the five other Keys who had managed to regain their feet by now. When she didn't move right away, I let out a low growl that made her jump. It wasn't the deep throaty sound of

need I'd given in her dream. It was a rumble of menace that spoke of my impatience and desperation.

She moved.

"Step forward. All of you."

Elyse had fallen silent. No one spoke, though I heard sniffles and the ever-present sobs from the child. She had been with me the longest. I thought she would be used to me by now. I guess not.

I filled the bowl with the oil from an ancient olive tree, placed the wick sourced from the robes of the original spell casters within, and lit it with a thought. A soft glow crept across the stricken and dirty faces around me, and a twinge of guilt filled me at the terror I was causing them. The majority of these people hadn't known what they were before I came into their life. They may have known about the Society, but almost without exception, I'd learned that the humans liked to keep the Keys in the dark about their power.

I supposed it was easier to manipulate them that way. And who was I to cast aspersions on their methods when I had knocked unconscious, kidnapped, lied to, and coerced every person here in order to accomplish my goals?

Before I could begin the ritual, the sound of footsteps came to me on the still air. Multiple sets. One sounded like it was being dragged.

I clenched my fists before ripping the child from Mina's arms. When she protested, I hissed, "I do not know who is coming down that path, but they will not be friendly to any of us. You will need your hands free if you want to fight."

I left Mina and the Spaniard loose, but bound the others with magic, depositing the child next to the old man. They had no control over their powers and would only be a hindrance.

The Egyptian might have been useful, but I didn't trust him enough to leave him unbound. I pinched the wick within the bowl, so we were plunged into darkness once more. The brief sting of the flame against my fingertips was a sign to move faster.

I tossed the bone knife to Mina, who slid it into her boot.

An unconscious snarl curled my lip and I stepped into the black hole before me. I had been subduing petulant humans for thousands of years. This time would be no different.

Hushed whispers, a grunt of pain, the sound of dragging feet, and a flair of bright white light that blinded my sensitive human eyes. I was shoved off my feet by a force I couldn't pinpoint.

An all too familiar voice cut through the darkness. "Oh, brother, you have grown weak with your indulgence of humans. You should have sensed me long before this."

Another wave of power slammed against me. But this time, I felt Mina and the Spaniard enter the hallway. The boy threw up a shield, and the pressure pinning me down lessened enough for me to stand with some difficulty. I could feel the tendrils of power snaking out of Mina. They stroked my consciousness, but veered in the opposite direction upon realizing I was the wrong entity to fight.

My sister's frustrated growl filled the space, and there was a gasp of pain to the left of her.

"Stop!" Came the voice of low feminine rage from before us. A soft light began to form above my kinswoman's head and the three of us stilled. Mina let out a choked sob at the sight before us. "That's right," my sister continued, "If you want your precious father to remain alive, you will drop that shield and do as I say."

Benjamin Voorsanger looked wrecked. There were dark bruises surrounding one eye and dried blood caked in his hair. His glasses sat askew on a clearly broken nose, and he clutched his side as if he might have a few broken ribs. So, this was why I hadn't run into her again until now. She'd been collecting leverage.

Mina's voice shook with fear and anger as she let her power drop away from her foe. "Dad," she sobbed. "Dad! Are you okay?"

To his credit, the Spaniard did not drop the shield. And it was to Alejandro that Benjamin finally spoke, his voice thready with exhaustion and pain, "Do not drop that shield, son. Whatever you do. My life is not worth all of humanity—"

He was cut off by a vicious blow to the stomach from Lilith, and fell, gasping, to the floor. I grabbed Mina before she could launch herself through Alejandro's shield. He was already sweating. I needed to do something. Fast.

I stepped between the two humans, pulling on the Source from where I could feel it pulsing in the room behind me. Power surged through me. More than I had felt in too many millennia. When I sent it in a concentrated bolt at my sister, I was sure it would blast her into the Mediterranean Sea. And though she did stumble back a few feet, she remained unperturbed.

"I'll give you one chance, human," the way she spat the last word told me her feelings about our situation had only worsened. "If you want your father alive, you will give yourself in his place."

Mina struggled against the hold I still had on her waist, but I would not let her go. Unfortunately for her, her life was far more valuable to most of the world than her father's,

but especially to me. Benjamin Voorsanger was the least of my concerns. At least, that's what I thought, until it was too late.

Lilith, too, had been waiting millennia for this opportunity. Upon seeing my refusal to release her primary target, she did what I probably would have done even just a few years ago—

She snapped Benjamin Voorsanger's neck.

MINA

Old City Jerusalem, Israel

Someone was screaming. It took several seconds to realize it was me. When my senses started to return, I felt the death grip Enoch had on my waist. Saw Alejo struggling to hold his shield around us. The sound of my father's neck snapping echoed over and over in my ears. The sight of his gaze dimming. The thump of his body on the ancient stone beneath our feet.

I would rip Lilith apart. Piece by piece.

A vicious snarl escaped my lips, and I began to channel my power again, but was cut off when a horn blast shook the walls. Limestone dust rained down on us. Alejo crumpled to the floor with the force of the sound.

The shield disappeared.

Before Lilith could launch herself at us, the horn blasted again. Everyone flinched, and over her head I spotted torches filing down the narrow passage. Hope flared in my chest for the briefest moment.

Had Maite brought backup?

Soon, the torches were close enough to see the faces of the intruders as the light bled across their features. Oh no. Augustus stood at the front of a pack of rabid-looking Society members with a large ram's horn in his right hand and a torch in his left. The flames deepened the grooves in his stern face, and reflected off of the writing engraved on the horn. That must have been what caused the blast.

It had to be a magically imbued artifact because Augustus Voorsanger did not possess enough power to fell Enoch, let alone Lilith. The man beside him began chanting in that language I didn't recognize, but this time I couldn't understand because a howling wind swept through the tunnel. When he gripped a shimmering amulet in one hand, and pointed his other at Lilith, she screamed in rage and agony, and an eerie light began to emanate from her pores.

Enoch, who for some reason still had hold of my waist, shouted above the din, "Close your eyes!"

He directed it at both me and Alejo. The strong arm around me slid up to my shoulders, turning my body into his chest. When Alejo didn't immediately respond, Enoch sent a wave of power toward him, and he buried his face in his arms. Then a light brighter than high noon filled the space. The walls shook, and a massive roar drowned out all other sounds.

I clung to Enoch, wondering what the hell was happening, but not daring to look.

Lilith's scream cut off at the same time as the roaring and the wind. My ears rang, and I could only register the sound of my flying heartbeat. The light had gone out again. Sensation came back in stages. The feel of Enoch's heartbeat joined mine. Our gasping breaths. The fall of rubble.

I lifted my head from Enoch's chest. His eyes met mine for the briefest moment. There was more care there than I expected. More worry. It was a confusing flash of his inner workings that I couldn't process at this moment. A panicked thought had me pulling out of his arms and rushing to Alejo, who was thankfully rising once more to his feet.

We all turned to face the place where Lilith had stood, but were startled to find the floor seared white from the recent blast. Lilith was nowhere to be found. The man who'd cast the spell was on the floor sobbing, holding his face. When he raised his head in a wail, my blood froze in my veins.

"His eyes," I whispered. "They're gone." Two burnt out holes had been left in their place. How he was still alive, I didn't want to know. My grandfather was straightening from a crouch, having covered his gaze in time. Some of their team were not so lucky. The two closest to the spell-caster were in a similar ocular condition while those further back had been crushed as the tunnel ceiling caved in.

The relief of not having to fight off my grandfather's entire team of evil sorcerers was tempered by the sight of the blocked passage. But thoughts of escape were irrelevant. Until we'd resolved this conflict one way or another, no one would be leaving alive.

Augustus straightened, dusting off his fine suit as if his comrades weren't writhing in agony before him. He looked at them in disgust.

"Fool. I told you not to cast that spell. Now you've wasted the potential power we could have gleaned from the entity, and I'll have to kill you myself since the spell couldn't give you even that mercy."

Before any of us could move, he'd sliced through the other man's throat. The agonized groans faded to choked gurgles, and the man was gone. Augustus ripped the amulet from his body and rose to face us.

"Now that we've gotten the idiots out of the way, we can get down to business."

Chapter 28¹⁷**ALEJO***Old City Jerusalem, Israel*

I shouldn't have cast that shield. My legs shook as I stood, their strength drained. Mina came and supported me, and I took in the disaster before us. The men who had followed Mina's grandfather here were dead.

When the old man cut his dying friend's throat, I knew we were in for trouble. I wanted to put myself between Mina and her grandfather, but I barely had enough energy to shift my weight.

Augustus called out from the gloom that had descended now that several of the torches had been smothered. His grating voice filled the cavernous space. "Now that that is dealt with, I hoped we could have more of a civil discourse."

The remaining entity, Enoch, bristled to my left. "Civil? Human, you cannot have meant anything civil by bringing that relic."

¹⁷ The story of the Pardes in Jewish Literature tells of four Rabbis who descend to the Divine Presence. One dies, one goes crazy, one "cuts off the shoots"—meaning he prevents others from achieving such learning and is corrupted by the power—, and the last goes in and comes out safely. All four rabbis are metaphorically represented in these final chapters. Benjamin—the one who dies, Lilith—the one who goes crazy, Maite and Alejandro—the ones who cut off the shoots, and Mina.

He gestured to the rams horn Augustus still clutched in a gnarled grip. The old man shrugged. “Can you blame me? I have never personally encountered your kind, and you and your sister in particular have a penchant for flitting around the edges of history’s greatest atrocities.”

“I know what you want, and what you are willing to do to achieve it. There can be no discourse here. No matter how civil you pretend to want it to be.” Enoch’s sneer chilled my bones. If this battle started up again, I was fairly sure that I would not survive. And I really wanted to survive.

The air between us began to waver, as if a barrier had been erected. But neither Augustus, Mina, nor Enoch was the caster of the spell. My breath left me in a whoosh at the sound of the voice that spoke next.

“If you think I will allow you to lay a hand on my son, Augustus, you do not know me as well as you claim to.”

Mamá.

She stepped between Enoch and I, clutching yet another ornate amulet in her small brown fist.

Augustus’s eyes widened. “How did you come into possession of that artifact? It has been lost for centuries?”

My mother chuckled and small pieces of debris showered down from the ceiling as her words filled the dark void. “Lost? Oh no. My family has kept it safe so that people like you could not keep all the power to yourselves.”

Rage contorted Augustus's face. He lashed out with a fist and struck the invisible wall before him. Mina shrank away from the ugly distortion of her grandfather's features. I pulled her closer in a desperate attempt to take a burden I could never fathom.

Mamá continued forward, using the shield to push Augustus backward. He stumbled over the bodies of his comrades, and fell against the tumbled pile of rocks blocking the exit.

In that moment, Enoch grabbed the two of us by the scruff of our necks like wayward puppies. We were shoved, unceremoniously into the ritual chamber. Enoch roused the passed-out group with a wave of his hand. Some of the others began to protest, but upon seeing the looks on our faces, and hearing the continued commotion from outside, they fell silent.

In seconds, the oil was once again lit. When I tried to shift my stance, I found that my feet were rendered immobile.

"I'm not going anywhere, *cabron*. If you'd talked to me before knocking me out, you might have realized that I have my own motivations for wanting all of this gone."

The dark eyes assessed me, but Enoch did not respond. Mina shuddered in my arms still, but I could sense her pulling herself back together. She was so fucking *strong*, this woman. Her father had been murdered in front of her eyes and her grandfather wanted her dead, but she was still here.

"*Arms.*" Came the order once more in that strange language we knew, but didn't know. A loud shriek of rage caused me to pull away and lurch involuntarily toward the hall.

Mamá!

But this ancient creature would not be deterred. He grabbed my arm in one of his massive paws, then looked expectantly at Mina. She straightened. “What?”

“The pointy object you have stashed in your boot. I need it.”

“Which one,” she countered.

“You know cursed well, which one, human. Do not be a smartass. Let us be done with this.”

I held onto Mina as she reluctantly knelt and pulled two knives from her boots. One was a gleaming silver with markings carved into the sheath and blade. The other was the same crude bone knife, I’d been dreading since Enoch had pulled it out earlier.

The entity hissed when he saw the silver blade.

His voice was guttural when he spoke next. “You didn’t tell me you had that.”

MINA

Old City Jerusalem, Israel

“It’s a dagger. Maybe a little magic. My—” I stopped, nearly choking on the next word. “My *dad* gave it to me at the beginning of all this.”

I placed the wicked-looking bone knife on the altar as the realization hit me that the piece of silver in my hands was the last thing my father would *ever* give me.

“Did your father happen to tell you, when he bestowed that *little magic dagger* upon you, that it is one of the few tools in existence that can kill anything? And I mean *anything*?”

Several sets of eyes immediately flicked between the object in my hands and man scowling dangerously at my side. I didn’t blame them. He’d just given us all a way to get rid of him for good. But the sounds of continued fighting out in the hall told me Enoch was

still our best chance at ending this entire debacle with the least amount of deaths. I'd already lost my father today. I couldn't let Alejo lose his mom too.

I ignored the voice inside that said I wasn't quite ready to lose Enoch either. That was a thought process I couldn't delve into right now. Especially not with Alejo's firm hand still gripped around my waist. I tucked the blade back into its sheath and fed it through my belt loop, wanting it more readily available than its previous location tucked into my sock.

Enoch turned to the distinguished-looking Middle Eastern man across from us. "You said you would cooperate, Dawood. Prove it now."

I felt Alex start at the man's name. Did he know who this was? Their eyes connected in a breath of understanding. Then Dawood placed his bare forearm into Enoch's grip. "Remember your promise to me, creature, and you shall have what you need."

Enoch nodded. "As soon as you fulfill this duty, you are free to go back to your family. All of you are, actually."

Ana shrank in my arms. I wondered what her family situation was, and if she even felt safe going back. I would need to ask as soon as this was over.

Enoch raised the bone knife and made a long slash down the man's arm. A young Indian girl on his left swayed and looked queasy. But she did not move. We were all still bound by his power. This close to a rift in the Barrier, Enoch was almost to full capacity.

There was no chance of anyone fleeing.

I clung to Ana, hoping Enoch would at least be gentle with her. The blood from Dawood flowed freely into the ancient bowl. I couldn't look away. Something stirred in my own blood. I could feel the power coursing through the air, reaching out to the six of us.

Before Enoch had even released Dawood's arm, the blood absorbed into the substance of the bowl, caressing the carved letters, highlighting the words, then sinking in as if it had never been. The bowl itself may have been a touch more red, but I couldn't tell for certain in the dim light. The oil was once again clear, the flame flickered on, unaffected by the liquid that had fallen around it.

"You have fulfilled your duty, Dawood." The man gasped and took a step back from the altar. The cut on his arm was already healing. He looked unutterably relieved, before straightening and glancing at the commotion outside.

"I will help hold Augustus off." Enoch did not respond, but allowed the man to pass out of the room. The shouts grew louder as if a valve was released before muffling once more.

So that was it. Enoch had shielded this room against others. If we wanted to get in or out, we needed permission. Dawood breaking the membrane of the shield had let in the sounds of the struggle outside. But we were once more in our distant bubble.

Alejo, hearing his mother's shouts, thrust his arm forward, but Enoch ignored him. He grabbed the Indian girl's arm next. Alejo's tight hold on me meant I could feel every emotion with minute detail. The rage that poured through me before he bottled it back up, startled me. Because it was not just rage at not being able to go to his mother's age, it was jealousy. He *knew* that there was some sort of tension between myself and Enoch.

And it was making him crazy.

Shit.

The girl's blood joined Dawood's in the bowl. Once more, it was absorbed into the very substance of the ancient container.

Next came the French woman, who I only realized was French when she began cussing him out as the knife sliced through her skin. Then the old man, resigned but trembling. The trembling had started long before Enoch grabbed his arm. I hoped he was okay.

The sensation of power crawling under my skin was now overwhelming. I nearly dropped Ana. Luckily, she had a vice grip around my neck. It took Enoch several seconds to pry her little arm free.

I leaned forward so it could extend over the bowl and whispered to her fervently. “Hush, hush, little one. It will all be ok. You saw how they all healed right away, *sí*?”

She nodded.

“It will only hurt for a moment, okay? Just tuck your face into my neck and it will be done before you know it.”

Her tear-stained cheeks fell into the crook of my neck. I held her tighter, giving Enoch a look that said, “get this over with.” He obliged, making the cut as swift as possible. The little girl still let out a scream right next to my ear that nearly deafened me. But like I had promised, it was over before it had really started. I rubbed her back gently, letting the new hit of power wash through me.

By this point, the others had backed away, but none had left the room except Dawood. Alejo was now trembling with fury beside me. As depleted as he was, he wanted to be out there, with his mother. And Enoch had saved him almost to last.

Now, as the entity gripped his forearm, pure hatred rolled out of his gaze. I had never seen him like this. If I could have, I would have stepped away. What was worse, I was sure he could read my thoughts, as tightly as he gripped my waist, but he didn’t seem to care.

He had closed himself off from everything and everyone but the seething emotions within himself.

Alejo let out a guttural snarl when the knife parted his skin, but he didn't move. Didn't tear his gaze away from Enoch's in order to watch the red liquid absorb into the bowl.

When Enoch had enough, he released Alejo's arm with a violent jerk. I noticed the cut taking longer to heal than the others and gave Enoch a baleful glare.

Alejo's feet were released at the same time, causing him to stumble backward with his newfound freedom of movement. Enoch did not waste any more time on him, dismissing him like a bug beneath his shoe. Once again, I felt a flare of incoherent anger. Once again, it was stifled within him.

Enoch turned fully to me.

I set Ana down and said softly, "Go to the French lady, *querida*. She will watch over you." I didn't know how I knew that. Another one of my inexplicable intuitions about a person. But the woman seemed to understand me and nodded, gesturing for Ana to join her on the far side of the room.

When the woman began whispering in her ear in Spanish, Ana perked up, delighted. Enoch had kept them separate throughout their captivity. Possibly for this very reason. Allowing prisoners to communicate was never a very good idea.

I turned back to Enoch. His eyes were soft on me. He hadn't looked at me like that since our first dream communication. Instead of taking what he wanted, he held out a hand, and I placed mine in his.

I was once more lost in those infinity eyes. The fear that seeing his true self inspired in others was lost on me. There was only beauty and awe within as I witnessed the ever-

changing aspects of his form. I was breathless with anticipation at the thought that I might get to see him for real in mere moments. The thought of seeing him unbound filled me, and I guided our hands over the bowl.

My blood splashed into the oil, the flame somehow staying lit. Power throbbed through me, overtaking all other physical sensations. I was so lost in it, in him, that I didn't notice the slight pressure at my waist.

Alejo pulled the dagger from my belt. Before either of us could move, he plunged it into Enoch's back. The pure venom he'd been holding back finally let loose.

A crazed look had filled his eyes.

His arms tensed to pull the dagger out and stab again, but I could not allow it. It didn't matter that I cared about this man or that he'd thrown himself in front of me only moments ago in an attempt to protect me. Enoch and what we were trying to accomplish here was too important.

I released into my connection with the Source, surrendering my entire self, and suddenly let loose with a wave of power unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

Alejo was thrown back against the stone, and I heard his head hit with a sharp crack. When he slumped to the floor, unconscious, I tried to go to him. My feet were still stuck with Enoch's spell. Not to mention, he still had a physical hold of me and was trying not to pass out himself.

"Alejo? Oh my God. Oh no. I'm so sorry. Please wake up." I cried out to him, but there was no answer.

Enoch's grip on me tightened as he pulled himself to standing once more. A muted groan slipped from between his lips. "Wh-what do I do," I asked him.

“He missed my heart, so I am still here, but I will not last long. This dagger has a tendency to poison the stabbed one.”

“S-so you’re going to die anyway? For real?” I ignored my still bleeding arm, the increasing sounds of battle outside that meant the shield was slipping, and my concern over Alejo. Ana and the Frenchwoman had crept over to him and were seeing to him. He would be fine.

But Enoch...

“Yes, I will die unless we can get the Barrier torn down.”

I straightened my spine, and tore off a piece of Enoch’s shirt to wrap around my arm to stanch the bleeding. “Ok, what do I need to do.”

He gave me a half smile. It lit up his whole stern face and I mourned the fact that either way this ended, *this* Enoch would be gone. It was a damn shame.

“Place your hands on the bowl and repeat after me.”

I did as instructed.¹⁸ Enoch placed his hands on my shoulders. His hulking presence behind me was amplified by the pressure in his grip. I had a feeling I was the only thing keeping him upright. My lips trembled. So much was riding on this. If Enoch died, then Elyse did too. So did any hope I had of gaining the knowledge of how to get my father back.

This *had* to work.

¹⁸ Despite copious research about incantation bowls and how they were used in ancient society, none of the scholarly articles could expound on whether making the bowl itself was the spell, or whether the spell was performed within the bowl after it was made. After consulting with Professor Bohak on his opinion, I have taken creative license to form the spell Mina is about to perform.

I nodded to indicate that I was ready, and he began to chant. His voice was a low, rich baritone that filled the dark places of my soul. It took me a second or two before I could repeat anything. When I did, I began to recognize the words. They were familiar, but not. Similar to things I heard on Yom Kippur, but altered. I remembered the original prayer was about asking God to open the gates of life so that we could pass through for another year. It was about cleansing oneself from sin. Starting the year fresh, knowing you had God's blessing to continue on.

"P'tach lanu sha'ar lifnei g'sisat y'tziratcha.

Open the gate for us before the dying of your creation," we chanted. A great rushing sound filled my ears and the bowl began to tremble between my fingers.

"Keep going," Enoch shouted!

"Ha'olam yifnei, miksamcha tid'och v'tifneh, navo'ah sh'arecha.

The Earth dies, your presence fades and declines, let us enter your gates."

The once solid bowl that I thought might have been made of clay began to disintegrate between my fingers. But instead of crumbling as it ought to, it began to melt. And the liquid looked eerily like blood. It began to drip down my fingers until it hit the altar.

"Ana makor na, sa na, slach na, m'chal na, chamal na, rachem na, azor lanu l'taken et avonotenu.¹⁹

Please Source, we beseech you, pardon us, forgive us, have pity, have compassion, help us fix our wrong doings."

¹⁹ This text is based on *P'tach Lanu Sha'ar* from the *Yom Kippur* Liturgy. I have taken the essence of the prayer and turned it into a spell with similar effect. The Hebrew was vetted by native speakers. In this novel, *Yom Kippur* is a day where the Barrier is thinnest between worlds because there is more interaction with the Source than usual, just as it is a day where more people interact with God than usual in the real world.

The last line came out of me unbidden. Enoch hadn't even told me to say it. He squeezed my shoulders in surprise, but it felt right. One of the many classes I'd sat through over the last several weeks had talked about how spells worked better when they were personalized to the caster.

Enoch had his own idea of how to take down the Barrier. But something in my soul called to the Source through my heritage. The history of my people. A version of the prayers we'd said for thousands of years. He'd used the beginning of that one because of our location and the heritage of the original spell casters. My soul had further empowered the spell through my personal connection to the language.

The bowl was now a dark red liquid pool in the dip of the altar. My hands were stained with what I *knew* to be the blood of the seven Keys both past and present.

The flame, previously a dim flicker in the middle of the oil, burned through the blood. It covered my hands, but did not harm my flesh.²⁰ I heard gasps from the others around the room, but kept my focus, chanting the words again.

The flames grew brighter.

And brighter.

All noises ceased.

My vision was totally eclipsed by the flames. Gone was the flickering. The light grew steadier and steadier, flowing over me, around me, through me. I *was* the light. The deep part of my soul that fed this power I was channeling lit up, recognizing the Source from whence it came.

²⁰ The fire that does not burn is a direct reference to Exodus Ch. 3:1-3 where Moses encounters the Burning Bush. The same fire covers Mina's hands, signifying the Divine Presence.

The feeling rushing through me was the closest thing to sheer ecstasy I think one could feel and still be in their physical form. Because we were not supposed to feel this close to the Source as humans. A deep longing filled my being. A longing to part from this paltry physical flesh and reunite with the peace and power of the other side.

I resisted, knowing I would never return if I gave in to that urge. The Source, as monumental and incomprehensible as it was, was not in charge. I was.

A sound echoed through my ears and mind at last. It was clanging, an echo deeper than the deepest ocean. A metal door finally falling opened. It threatened to turn my mind to jello. The light burst forth from its concentration before me. I only stayed where I was thanks to sheer will and another power I vaguely recognized.

I felt myself settle into my bones once more, but soon realized I could no longer feel Enoch behind me. I turned my head, only to find that the man I had come to know over these weeks was gone. The dagger had fallen out of sight with his change of form.

He glowed almost more intensely than the light surrounding us. It was hard to make out any features. But I knew his voice as it filled my mind. *Oh, little one. Once again, you have saved everyone else at the expense of yourself.*

“What do you mean?” My voice sounded harsh, wrong, in this place. This was not a place for flesh and blood.

He continued, *If you had only done the spell the way I gave it to you.*

“It just came out that way. Why, what did I do?”

You bonded with the Source, Mina.

“Is that even possible?”

Unfortunately, yes. It recognized the strength of your will and instead of just opening the gate, it entrusted the entrance between worlds to you.

“What? But this was supposed to end everything. I’m not supposed to be a Key anymore! None of us are!”

They are free, yes. And no, you are no longer a Key. My shoulders slumped in relief only to climb back up again when he continued, Not a key, no. My dear, you are the door itself. In you lies the ability to cross between worlds. You wanted to bend the Source to your will.

So, it made you its Guardian.