

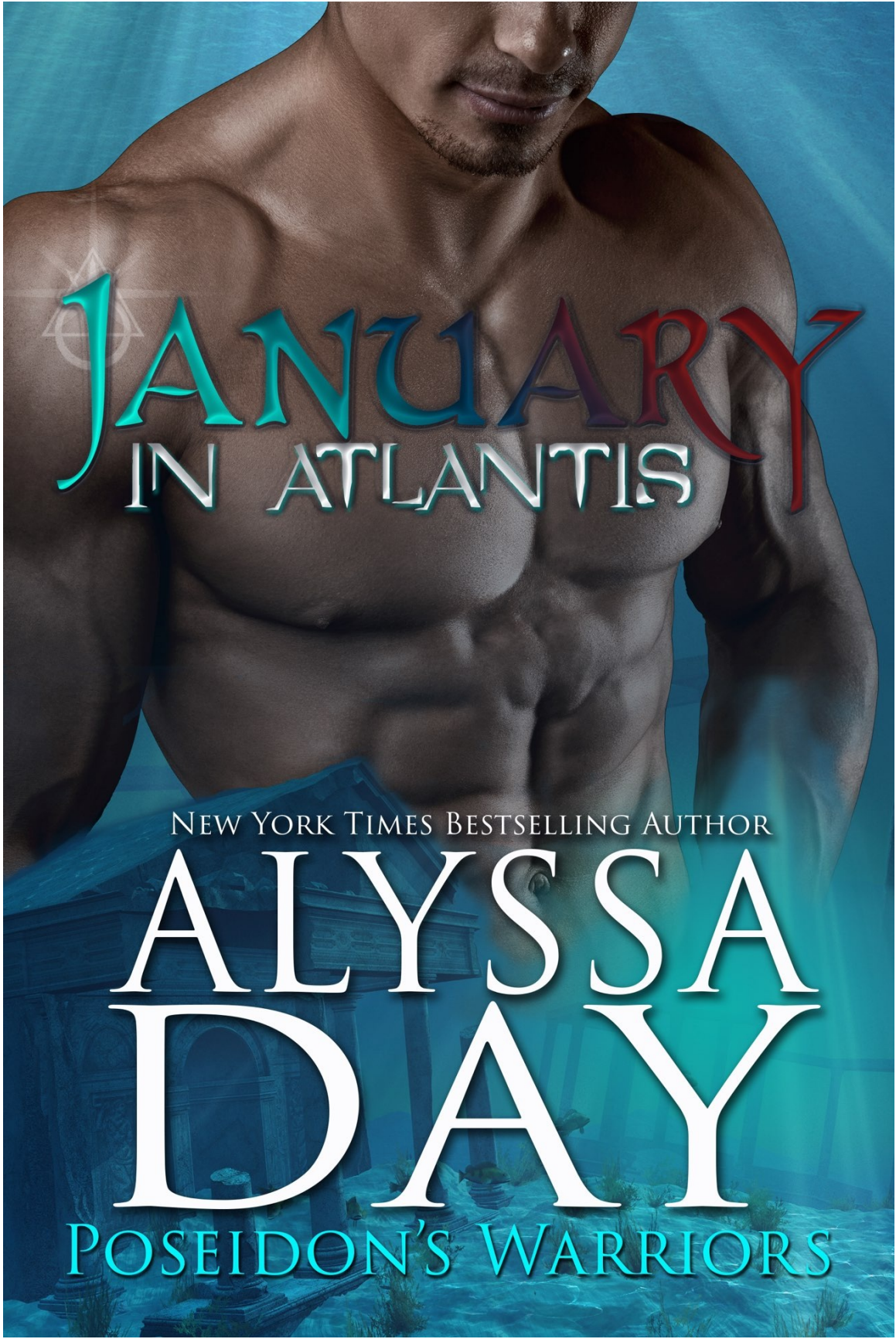


JANUARY
IN ATLANTIS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALYSSA
DAY

POSEIDON'S WARRIORS



JANUARY
IN ATLANTIS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALYSSA
DAY

POSEIDON'S WARRIORS

JANUARY IN ATLANTIS

A POSEIDON'S WARRIORS PARANORMAL ROMANCE

ALYSSA DAY

HOLLIDAY PUBLISHING, LLC

CONTENTS

[Atlantis](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Thank you!](#)

[Books by Alyssa](#)

[About the Author](#)

ATLANTIS

After eleven thousand years beneath the seas, the lost continent is lost no more. Atlantis has risen and is now openly taking part in human affairs. But the creatures who formerly hid in the darkness have come out into the open too. Vampires, shapeshifters, the Fae, and more are now part of daily life on Earth... not always to humanity's benefit.

The fabled group known as Poseidon's Warriors must therefore continue their sworn task of protecting humankind, and a new group of fighters will vow to become the king's elite vanguard: the Twelve.

Earth—and Atlantis—may never be the same.



PROLOGUE



B *ruce's Cave, Ireland*

Flynn twirled the sword in his right hand and the dagger in his left and sauntered toward the three dragons blocking the entrance to the cave. Just outside the entrance, the waves crashed and thundered into the rocks, but at the moment, water was not really concerning Flynn.

Then again, water never did.

“Boys, boys, boys. I’m not planning to tell anyone about your lair, or your treasure, or even that unfortunate tendency you have to dress up in pink skirts and dance in the moonlight.”

The largest of the three, a good twenty feet tall from toes to the top of his crested skull, reared back and roared, and the cave itself seemed to shake. Anyone who has ever heard a dragon roar would be amazed that Flynn wasn’t flat on the ground, trembling in his boots.

Flynn was from Atlantis though. He wasn’t the trembling kind.

Still, maybe not the *best* idea to taunt three of Clan Fury’s most powerful warriors. They were lethal in human form, and like this—in their natural shape—they were Death itself.

Nobody had ever accused Flynn of having a lot of best ideas though.

“How about you come on down from your flying-lizard forms so we can have this out like men? Or just move aside and let me go, and we’ll call it quits. I

don't even want a share of your treasure, even though I helped you... let's just say *collect*, shall we?... some of it."

The largest and fiercest of the bunch, the one who once had been Flynn's best friend in the world, shot a bolt of searing dragon fire straight down the cave at him. It should have incinerated him.

Would have incinerated him if he'd still been standing there.

Flynn, though, had been goading the dragons into precisely this response. By the time the smoke in the cave cleared, he was traveling in mist form down the coast of Ireland.

He'd had his fun. It was time to go home.

January was as good a month as any to return to Atlantis.



The Copper Cantina Bar and Grill, Early, Nevada

Eva Calandar was having a damn bad night.

The cantina after-work rush came in right on schedule, and soon she was so busy she didn't have time to think about anything but mixing drinks and serving bottle after bottle after bottle of beer to the happy, laughing patrons, all of them glad to be done with the week's hard work and pleased to be relaxing and spending a bit of their paychecks with their friends.

Because Eva was so slammed, it took her longer than it should have to realize when things went wrong. By the time the changing mood in the room started to scratch at the edge of her awareness, the instigators were already installed in a corner table by the jukebox. Some sprawled in chairs, and others were starting games of pool at the two tables along the side wall. She didn't recognize any of them, but then again, she didn't have to.

Every single one of them was wearing the trademark sleeveless leather vest with black-winged angels painted on the back and the words HELL'S DARK ANGELS embroidered across the shoulders.

They were here.

There were Dark Angels in the Copper Cantina, and every instinct in Eva's body told her to *run*. Luckily, her brain took over from her animal instincts, and she resisted the urge. Running would only draw their attention. Like any other

predator, the members of the Dark Angels would be on high alert at the first sense of prey.

Eva had no intention of becoming prey for any of them ever again.

These didn't know her though. It wasn't like Scott had put up Wanted posters in every chapter across the country, as far she knew. To do that, he would've had to admit to his criminal buddies that he couldn't "control his woman." He'd never do that.

No, only a few of his trusted thugs knew who she was and what she looked like. So long as she didn't see any of *them*, she was safe tonight. She could wait until she got back to her tiny studio apartment to decide what to do. The problem was, she didn't have enough money to run yet.

All things considered, being broke was better than being dead.

Maybe she'd get lucky though. Maybe this was just a group of them riding by on their bikes, headed to somewhere else. Maybe she'd be okay—but she'd never had any luck, not even once in the four years and change since she'd first met Scott.

"Six Budweisers and six shots of Jack," Missy said, and Eva could tell from her friend's worried expression that it wasn't the first time she'd said it. "Are you okay? What did Noel do? I swear, I'll have Bryce come in here and—"

"No. No, I'm fine. Just... daydreaming, I guess. Here you go. Six Bud, six Jack. Rocks?"

Missy shook her head. "No. Shots. And watch out if that big one in the yellow T-shirt comes over here," she said quietly. "He said something really foul about 'the redhead at the bar,' and you know Noel isn't gonna do anything to protect you."

Eva laughed bitterly. "No, he'd probably sell me to them if he thought he could make some money out of the deal. Anyway, I'll be fine. Here's your drinks. You'd better head over there."

From that moment on, Eva kept a close eye on what the gang members were up to. She made sure none of them caught her watching them, and the one time the guy in the yellow shirt came up to the bar, she made a point to have to run down to the basement for a case of Bud, so Noel had to serve him. By the time

she got back, the man had moved on and was shooting pool.

The nice thing about drunk assholes was they usually had short attention spans. The next time she looked up, maybe thirty seconds later, two guys she'd never seen before—definitely *not* with the Dark Angels—were walking into the bar. The first one was tall, blond, and lean and reminded her of surfers she'd known in California. He was a handsome guy. He grabbed a seat at a table facing the door.

The second guy though... Oh dear God.

Her first thought: this one is trouble.

She'd seen more than a few handsome men in her life, especially working in bars, but this man wasn't handsome. He had nothing to do with such a mild word as *handsome*.

No, this man was male beauty personified. Eva's breath caught in her throat when he turned and she caught a glimpse of his profile. His face was all hard lines and angles and belonged on a statue of a Greek god. Or—no. A statue of a conqueror who would lay waste to continents and ravage the hordes of women who threw themselves at him. His dark hair lay in slight waves and looked ruffled, as if he'd just run his hands through it.

Her own hands suddenly ached to smooth it in place.

She couldn't stop staring at him. She couldn't breathe. What the hell was the matter with her? She didn't have reactions like this to men.

But this man—oh, this man. He walked across the floor toward her with a confident stride, like he owned the place. He wore jeans and a long-sleeved white shirt beneath a brown leather jacket, and *he was coming toward her*.

Eva took a shaky breath and wiped her hands on the bar towel, waiting. Frozen in place. Up close, she could see the color of his eyes. Dark, ocean blue. Their eyes locked, and suddenly time stopped running. This had never, ever happened to her before, and the world turned sideways—vertigo rocked her back on her heels.

She could see only him.

There was no bar, no Noel, no Dark Angels. No Scott, no troubles, no worries.

There was only a searing flash of heat from the raw, primal desire she saw in this man's eyes when he looked at her.

It was too much—too intense. Suddenly she felt fragile, as if her bones had been hollowed out and replaced with air and light. As if she might float away if this man didn't stop looking at her.

As if she might collapse in despair if he did.

It was too much, and she didn't understand. Couldn't breathe, couldn't swallow, couldn't speak.

Across from her, the stranger seemed to be having the same problem. He said nothing, simply stood there and stared back at her. His jaw clenched, and she could see his throat move when he swallowed, and she didn't understand why the sight of his throat was so fascinating to her.

She didn't understand any of it, but she knew one thing. She knew he was trouble. And she was absolutely done with anything that looked like trouble.

"What can I get for you?" she asked, so grateful that her voice didn't tremble. Much.

He just stared at her.

"Sir?"

"I don't know," he finally said in a deep, husky voice that sounded strained. "I don't know what's happening to me. I came over here for drinks, but now all I can think about is how much I want to get you in my bed."

She gasped. She'd been hit on hundreds of times by men in bars, but never like this. Never in such a raw, blunt manner than rang with so much truth.

She wanted—fiercely, urgently wanted—to take his hand, pull him out the back door, and beg him to take her up against the wall in the alley.

She moaned at the thought, just the tiniest sound, but his gaze arched in on her lips. Her body clenched deep in her belly, and she squeezed her thighs together against a sudden rush of heat.

What in the name of all things holy was happening to her?

She forced herself to tear her gaze from his sensual lips and met his gaze again.

Mistake. She fell, drowning, right back down into those ocean-blue eyes.

“I can’t— I have no excuse for that,” he said roughly. “I’m so sorry. Please forgive me. I know you must have enough to deal with without clumsy lines from idiot customers. Let’s start over. I’m Flynn, and you’re—?”

Lines? What? Her brain had quit making sense of the English language, and her body was only interested in the language of desire. Of hot, sweaty sex—*with this man.*

Now.

Damn, girl, pull it together.

“I’m Eva. I don’t... It’s fine,” she said automatically, her lips turning up in a fake, professional smile. Not at all like she’d just been imagining him, hard and powerful, thrusting into her. Her entire body convulsively shuddered at the thought, and omigod what was happening to her?

Flynn’s eyes flared hot again, and he groaned, low and deep, his hands tightening into fists on the bar. “I’m sorry, Eva, but you need to stop looking at me like that unless you want me to drag you out of here and beg you to fuck me.”

“I might be the one doing the begging,” she whispered before she could stop herself, and an expression of purely masculine satisfaction crossed his face before being replaced with hot, primal, naked need.

“When?” he demanded. “When are you done working?”

Now, she wanted to say. She wanted to say it so much that she didn’t trust it at all. She had to turn him down. Turn this into something light and funny. Make him—

The door to the bar banged open, and she looked up automatically to see who was coming in.

And then she ran.



Atlantis, the war room, three days earlier...

Conlan, high king of all Atlantis, leaned back in his chair and blew out a long breath. Then he hurled a red rubber ball at the other man in the room. “You are a giant pain in my ass, do you know that?”

Denal caught the ball without ever looking at it and stared back at his king with flat blue eyes and an expressionless face. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

Conlan came up out of his chair. “Damn it, Denal. You were one of my Seven. My most-trusted elite guard and my friends. You’re also like a kid brother to me, and now you’re going to ‘Your Majesty’ me? I’ll kick your ass, my friend.”

In the old days, Denal would have cracked a joke, or at least a smile. In the very old days, back before Conlan had even met Riley, now his queen, Denal would have all but fallen over himself to please his then-prince.

Now he simply stared back at Conlan out of those empty, cold, dark blue eyes.

“Do you want Prince Aidan’s ball back, sire?”

Conlan rolled his eyes but held up his hand to catch the ball. If he didn’t have it ready when his son woke up from his nap, there would be trouble. Funny how being high king of an entire continent—albeit a relatively small one—didn’t save a guy from his son’s wrath over a missing favorite toy. He grinned at the thought

but then turned his attention back to the problem in front of him.

“Are you ever going to find your sense of humor?”

“Doubtful,” Denal said flatly, leaning back against a faded tapestry and folding his arms over his chest.

The door slammed open and an icy wind blew into the room, followed by a man wearing an even icier countenance, dressed all in black to match his black hair and black mood.

“Babies,” Alaric, former high priest and most powerful mage ever to use magic in Atlantis, said with a slight baring of his teeth. “I do not understand the fascination. Prince he may be, but his chief talent at this age appears to be producing copious amounts of drool.”

Conlan started laughing. Since Alaric was married to Quinn, Queen Riley’s sister, he was forced to spend a lot of time with his nephew. Who was, of course, the most brilliant baby in the history of the world.

He said as much to Alaric, who groaned.

“Certainly the child is a prodigy among prodigies. Just this afternoon, he moved his bowels in such a manner as to cause rhapsodies to all involved evidently.” Alaric shuddered.

“There were people involved in his bowel movements?” Conlan shook his head. “No. Forget it. I don’t want to know. We’re here to talk to Denal.”

“Imagine my joy,” Denal drawled, eyes narrowing.

Alaric pulled out a chair. “Sit. This might take a while. I need to explain what’s happening.”

“You assume I care what’s happening.”

“Sit down,” Alaric snarled. “I understand your anger—”

“I don’t give a damn what you understand,” Denal snarled right back, coming up off the wall he’d been leaning against. “Nobody left *you* in the Fae lands, did they?”

Alaric shook his head. “I said I *understand*. I didn’t say I cared even the slightest bit. You swore your service to your king, did you not? Many have died in that service. So you lost a little time. Now you need to grow up. We’ve got a job for you, and Conlan is still your king, isn’t he? Or are you surrendering your

Atlantean citizenship?”

Conlan, pacing back and forth while the other two argued, felt the question like a punch in his gut. If Denal agreed—if he said he didn’t even want to be a citizen of Atlantis anymore, not one of Poseidon’s Warriors—the loss would be the same as if somebody ripped off one of Conlan’s arms.

Denal’s face turned white under his tan. “I didn’t— I don’t mean that. You know I would never mean that. I won’t give up on my country or my king, even if they both gave up on me.”

“I’m sorry,” Conlan said simply. He couldn’t believe it, but he didn’t think he’d ever said it to the warrior before. “You’re right. We left you in the Fae lands longer than you ever should’ve been left there. The time—well, you know about the time. The years you were in their world were only a matter of weeks here. But we never should have lost you to them in the first place.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “You deserved better.”

Denal met his gaze, and Conlan saw something like shock on the man’s face for an instant before he smoothed it back to the expressionless mask he’d chosen to wear for so long. Denal started to speak but then stopped. He stood there for a moment, nodded to himself, and then pulled out a chair and sat. “All right. Tell me about this problem and what you need from me.”

It wasn’t acceptance, Conlan knew, but it was close enough for now. “The world wasn’t ready for Atlantis to suddenly appear. No matter what they say, no matter all the political fawning and folderol that have gone on, I think there are many, many nations whose leaders would’ve preferred we stay sunken beneath the sea.”

“They liked us better as a mythical lost continent than as an actual *found* continent,” Alaric interjected, frowning.

“Even more so since they found out about Poseidon’s Warriors and our sworn duty to protect humanity,” Conlan added.

“Especially once they found out some of the ways we’ve gone about it,” Denal put in, his eyes narrowing. “Evidently we’re supposed to follow their rules when we fight murderous vampires or demons on their lands.”

“Give me three warriors and a week, and I’ll teach them all what we think

about their rules,” Alaric said darkly, and the temperature in the room dropped twenty degrees.

“Calm down before you turn my ass into an ice cube,” Conlan said. “Let’s try it my way for a while. And if you give me any crap about turning into a politician, I’m gonna order you executed.”

“Can you do that?” Denal’s eyes widened.

“He can try,” Alaric said, calling to his magic, which sparked in his hand. Then he started ostentatiously juggling tiny balls of sheer silvery power from finger to finger.

Conlan rolled his eyes and then leaned forward, pointing at each of them in turn. “Okay, children, back to the matter at hand. I’ve agreed to take part in an international task force looking into some of the rings of paranormal crime going on all over the world. Riley has agreed to be on the international board of Save All the Children Now since her social work background will be very helpful there.” He leaned back in his chair and tossed Aidan’s ball from hand to hand. “We’re starting with the United States since Riley and Quinn know it best, and Quinn, having been one of the two rebel leaders for all North America for several years, can help coordinate. She’ll be meeting with some head guy at the Paranormal Operations division of its FBI—they call it P-Ops—and we’re also talking to Interpol and Scotland Yard in Europe. Since my original Seven, other than Ven and you, Denal, are scattered all over the world, we’ve got eyes on the ground when we need them. But for now we need more immediate help. We need soldiers—warriors.”

Alaric pointed at Denal. “We need *you*. Most of our people are already organized by location. You’re going to lead a new team and work cooperatively with some of these human crime-fighting organizations.”

Denal’s mouth fell open in the most honest reaction Conlan had seen from him yet today. “I’m going to lead—what do you mean, a new team? You’re naming a new Seven?”

Conlan traded a glance with Alaric and then shook his head. “I wish I could. You have no idea how much I wish I could,” he said fervently. “But I’m stuck playing king for a while, now that they know about us. It’s your team. You name

them.”

“This time I don’t think seven will be enough,” Alaric said, frowning. “We’re going to have different missions going on in different places, coordinating with different law enforcement organizations. Why don’t we start with twelve and go from there?”

“Twelve?” Conlan thought about it. Liked it. “Sure. Denal’s Dozen. What could go wrong?”

Denal shoved his chair back from the table and stood. “I guess we’re about to find out.”

He turned and strode out of the room, never once looking back.

Conlan blew out a breath and threw the ball into the wall, hard, caught it on the rebound, and threw it again. “I’m not cut out for politics. My sword hand is itching to get out there with Denal and form this new team.”

“He troubles me,” Alaric finally replied, still staring at the empty doorway. “I don’t know if he’s stable enough for this responsibility.”

“You said that about me once, remember? After I’d escaped from the vampire goddess and years of torture at her delicate hand, may she burn in the nine hells forever.” Conlan drummed his fingers on the table. “The problem is, you were right then, and you might be right now. I wasn’t stable. Far, far from it. But I put on a good front until my duty—and Riley—pulled me out of the darkness. All we can do now is watch him. Let him take the reins and see what he does. He’ll either manage it or he won’t, and we’ll figure it out then.”

Alaric nodded sharply, then rose and headed toward the door. Just at the doorway, he stopped and turned to look at Conlan. “If he fails, there could be enormous international repercussions. You understand that, correct?”

“If he fails, I won’t particularly give a damn about the international repercussions,” Conlan said quietly, crushing the ball when his hands clenched into fists. “We’ll be in far worse trouble than that.”



For the first time in his entire life, Flynn entered Atlantis by way of a ship. To be fair, it was the first time he'd ever actually entered Atlantis. He'd been born there, he'd grown up, and then he'd left and never returned. Now he had to come by ship. The portal hadn't answered his call, not that he'd been all that surprised. He was sure High Priest Alaric, the Holy Board Stuck Up His Ass-ness, had tuned the portal's magic to keep riffraff like him out. So here he was, the prodigal child, coming home by boat. To Atlantis, now proudly in the world again, and on the surface of the ocean instead of beneath it.

It was a spectacular sight.

The marble and crystal spires of the palace rose high over the magnificent structure, and the human tourists beside him on the deck *ooohed* and *aahed* in appreciation. He ignored snatches of chatter about the handsome king and the American queen and focused on his home, suddenly stabbed by a sharp ache of homesickness that surprised him. He hadn't expected to miss Atlantis as much as he had, and by now he thought he'd gotten past it.

But she was beautiful. Even an Atlantean who'd run away from home had to admit that.

From this approach, the palace was the centerpiece of it all. He knew from playing there as a child that the palace was surrounded by magnificent gardens filled with flowers that smelled like the inside of a dream. Nowhere else in the

world had he encountered flowers with such sweet scents.

After the flowers, the garden's second set of jewels was its fountains, with sculptures that put to shame anything Rome had to offer. Atlanteans had always created art on a much grander scale than elsewhere in the world, perhaps because Atlantis had never had rivals to fear, not for thousands of years. His ancestors had been advanced in every way—in technology and the arts, in learning and scholarship. Atlantis had been a paradise for men and women of learning and culture until, as always happened to paradise, someone stronger grew greedy enough to want to possess it and strong enough to try.

They'd tried to fight, those early Atlanteans, but Atlantis had always prized learning over warfare and art over battle. Her trained soldiers had been laughably few and, when they'd been in immediate danger of being overrun by the soldiers packed onto the ships bearing down on them, the high priest at the time and all of his acolytes had worked the greatest magic in the history of the world.

They'd enclosed the entire continent and all her people in a magical dome and taken her down—far, far down—beneath the sea.

Only a few years ago, after eleven thousand years of being lost to the annals of time, then-prince Conlan and his brother, Lord Vengeance, had worked with Alaric to find a way to bring Atlantis back into the world. It had almost been too late though. The dome's magic had been failing, or so Flynn had heard.

But here it was again. Atlantis. Unimaginable beauty. The white-sand beaches where he'd played with his friends, spending hours watching the sea creatures outside the dome. Sometimes the sea creatures had looked back at him. The gloriously green trees that even now, in January, would be heavy with fresh fruit. The soldiers...

The soldiers?

He looked again. Yes. The soldiers. They were checking people in through some kind of bureaucratic process. My, how things had changed. He shrugged. He was an Atlantean citizen, after all. There wouldn't be any problem.



There was a problem.

Nobody knew who he was.

He leaned against the damn sign where they'd told him to stand and scowled.

NON-ATLANTEAN VISITORS PLEASE WAIT HERE

What a joke.

“Look. It’s easy enough for me to prove it. Find one of my brothers. I hear Liam is one of Poseidon’s Warriors now, and Dare might be in port with the *Luna*.” He glared at the sign and considered shaping water into a club and bashing the damn thing into little sign-shaped pieces.

Instead, he blew out a long-suffering sigh and tried again. “Flynn. I’m Flynn. Somebody must remember me. It’s only been ten years or so.”

“Maybe Marcus?” one of the guards said, scratching his head and then putting his hat back on. The blue-and-gold braid on the new Atlantean guard uniform was a bit much if anybody asked Flynn, but sadly, so far nobody had. He felt practically underdressed in his jeans, T-shirt, and beat-up leather jacket.

The head-scratching guard pointed. “There he is now.”

An older man who looked familiar to Flynn was headed down the path from the direction of the palace. The man walked in that ground-eating pace of an old soldier and wore plain black pants with a deep blue shirt—no gold braid in sight. He’d probably been one of Poseidon’s Warriors for a long time. Yes. It was definitely Marcus. He’d had little patience for Flynn and Dare’s pranks back when they were kids. Suddenly Flynn wasn’t all that sure he wanted to be recognized, at least not by Marcus, who was clearly still the captain of the guard.

Marcus’s sharp gaze studied Flynn as he reached him, and a hint of recognition crossed his face. Surprise was there, judging by the way the man’s eyes widened.

But recognition too.

He stopped in front of Flynn. “I’ll be damned. Dare and Liam’s brother. Flynn. We thought you were dead.”

Flynn, who’d been about to say something, he didn’t know what, just stood there with his mouth hanging open. “Dead? You thought I was dead?”

Marcus shrugged. “You’ve been gone with no word for a long time.”

“I saw Dare just five or six years ago,” Flynn began hotly but then realized it was the height of stupidity to argue with the captain of the guard about whether or not he was dead, when he was clearly standing right there. Instead, he’d get some useful information. “Are either of my brothers around?”

Marcus’s eyes widened again, just that slight fraction. “Right. Of course you wouldn’t know. Your brother Dare and his wife Lyric are off on another sea voyage, and Liam’s on a mission. His wife Jaime—I guess that’s your other sister-in-law—is probably in the palace. She’s the queen’s official event planner now, or some such thing.”

The crowd was building up behind them though, so Marcus waved him through without any further bombshells, and Flynn walked off toward... what?

Where?

Did he even have a family home any longer?

Sister-in-law. *Sisters-in-law*, plural. He hadn’t thought—hadn’t realized—but of course his brothers would have moved on without him. And they thought he was dead? True, it had been years since he’d tried to contact them. At least five or six years since he’d run into Dare, back in Dare’s pirate days. Flynn had heard things about him though. Dare and *Luna* were visible, especially since he carried a sea spirit on board with him. And now, evidently, a wife.

Flynn had always thought, somewhere in the back of his mind, that he and his brothers would be reunited one day. He’d known that his parents had died years before, both from complications stemming from their love of drink. But he’d wanted to come back and be part of his brothers’ family again.

We thought you were dead.

Either they’d forgotten about him or didn’t care. It would have been easy enough to track Flynn down. Not a lot of men traveling the world called themselves *Flynn of Atlantis*, after all. You’d think that when a man got married, he would at least try to track down his brother.

Maybe not so much when the brother had abandoned both of them to the caring attentions of a violent father and useless mother.

He shoved the thought away. No use to speculate now. Probably at least one

of the happily married couples was living in the old house, so he sure as the nine hells wasn't going to visit there. What did that leave him?

A pub.

Seemed like nobody knew who he was anymore, so he could catch up on some news or gossip or sailor talk—sailors loved to talk—about what exactly had been going on since Atlantis joined the world again, without having to answer difficult questions about his own whereabouts. Sounded just about perfect, and a beer wouldn't hurt either.

Mind made up, he decided on the Sea Shanty. It had always been one of his favorite hangouts and had the added advantage that his old man, the ever-so-particular drunk that he'd been, had refused to ever enter it over some perceived slight from the owner. Flynn had far too many memories of dragging his unconscious father home from far too many pubs to want to revisit any of them and take a bad trip down memory lane, as the humans liked to say.

His mother, at least, had been courteous enough to get drunk at home.

From out of nowhere, a wave of remembered rage and shame slammed through him so powerfully that he could taste the rusty metal edges of it in his mouth. Suddenly, he fiercely wanted to go back to the dock and tell some of those starry-eyed tourists that Atlantis might look like a pretty tale from one of their bedtime storybooks, but he'd be happy to take them to see her seedy underbelly.

Right. Enough of that.

He turned abruptly to take the left-hand path toward the Sea Shanty, only to run right into someone coming from the opposite direction.

“Watch where you're going,” Flynn snarled, still sunk in angry memories.

The other man, dark-haired, also dressed simply in jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, had merely grunted at the encounter and kept walking, but now he stopped dead and swung slowly back around. “*What* did you say to me?”

Flynn groaned mentally. No wonder it had felt like he'd run into the side of a building. If he had to run into somebody, it couldn't have been any ordinary Atlantean citizen out for a walk. Oh, no. Not with the shit luck he'd been having lately.

No, *he* had to run into one of the king's elite warriors.

And then mouth off about it.

Flynn had been in Atlantis for just over thirty minutes, and he was already ass-deep in alligators. And the alligator in front of him looked like he'd be happy to teach Flynn a very painful lesson.

In the mood he was in, Flynn was almost tempted to try teaching a lesson of his own.

But no. Denal was a member of the king's most-trusted Seven. And Flynn had better things to do than spend the night in jail, even Atlantean jail, which would seem like heaven to human prisoners but which, in the end, was still captivity.

No more captivity. He couldn't take it. So instead of mouthing off again, he tried diplomacy. He bowed slightly, a perfectly correct Atlantean court gesture that he performed exquisitely even after so many years of not doing it (except in Japan that one long, drunken week). "I'm sorry. It was my fault."

Denal said nothing, but his eyes narrowed and a muscle in his jaw twitched.

Time to get moving. Fast. Flynn stepped carefully off the path and around Denal at a safe distance and started to head toward the Sea Shanty, because now he needed that beer more than ever.

An arm shot out to bar his way.

"I. Asked. You. What. You. Said. To. Me," Denal said, biting off each word. "I'm *not* in the mood to be ignored. And maybe you'd better think before you speak, because it's been a very bad day."

Flynn's blood started to boil in his veins. He actually thought he could see smoke rising from the surface of his own skin, he was so angry. There was respect, and then there was acting like a scared jellyfish. He was not about to put up with any crap from the man, Poseidon's Warrior or not.

He shoved Denal's arm out of his way, becoming aware, even as he did it, that a few people had started to gather near them and were staring at them. Probably placing bets on any possible fight. He'd lay odds they were betting against him. Most did.

Most were surprised.

He took a deep breath of the sweetly scented Atlantean air so near the gardens and tried to calm down.

It didn't work.

"I haven't had a great day myself, *friend*," he told Denal. "Why don't we just call it even and move on?"

Unbelievably, Denal smiled. It was the kind of smile that would frighten small children and drive grown men to drink. It was a smile filled with unholy glee and the certain knowledge of someone's—Flynn was pretty sure it was *his*—imminent injury.

"Did you just challenge me?" Denal rolled up his sleeves and took a step forward. "That sounded like a challenge to me. Hey, I almost want to thank you. This is going to be a pleasure."

Fighting his own instincts as hard as he could, in spite of the ugly realization that he'd look like a fool and a coward to the gathering crowd, Flynn held up his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Look. I said I'm sorry. Why don't—"

He never even had time to duck before the fist hit him right in the jaw.

When his head quit ringing, he launched himself at Denal. "You slimy pile of whale shit!" he roared. "I don't care who you are. I'm gonna crush you!"

Before he could lay a finger on the warrior though, Denal's flying kick smashed into the side of his head and knocked the words out of Flynn's mouth.

He considered it a personal triumph that he didn't hit the ground, but it was a close call. He lashed out blindly but missed by an Earth mile.

Denal circled him, fists up, with that horrible smile still on his face. "Bring it already. What happened? Did you turn into a frightened little boy when you were playing with dragons, Flynn?"

Flynn.

Denal knew his name. Knew who he was. Knew where he'd been. The realization sharpened Flynn's addled thinking.

"Just keep thinking that," he advised and followed up with a roundhouse punch that caught Denal on the chin and knocked him back a pace.

Denal wanted trash talk? Okay. Flynn would be happy to oblige.

"Sure you don't want run to the palace and hide behind the queen's skirts?"

he taunted. “I’d be surprised if you even remember how to fight by yourself without Conlan and Alaric and the rest of the Seven to wipe your nose when you cry.”

Denal bellowed something unintelligible and faked a punch, followed by a lightning-fast kick. Flynn saw the kick coming in his peripheral vision though, so he managed to block it, and then he countered with a spinning kick of his own to Denal’s head.

This one connected.

Denal’s head snapped back, but then, bizarrely, he laughed. “Nice one,” he sneered. “Try that again, I’m begging you. I’m gonna break your leg. I’m gonna break *both* of your legs.”

Flynn wasn’t sure if he or Denal would be lying dead on the ground within the next five minutes, but he found he didn’t care. Beating the shit out of one of Poseidon’s finest seemed like a fine way to burn off some of the frustration that he’d been feeling ever since Kyla died. “Let’s go.”

Before either of them took a single step forward, a woman walked right up to them and said hello.

The lilting feminine voice was like ice water poured on the rage that had been flooding Flynn’s body only seconds before. He and Denal both stopped, inches from each other, fists still raised, and turned to look at the woman who’d spoken.

“Hello,” she repeated to the stunned men when neither answered her. “Excuse me. Have either of you seen my book?”

Flynn had never seen her before, but he knew at once that she wasn’t Atlantean. She was human, and very pretty in a beachy kind of way. She had long white-blond hair, cornflower-blue eyes, and a friendly smile. She actually had flowers—Atlantean daylilies—braided into her hair, and she wore a white dress with a belt of multicolored ribbons.

When you put it all together, she looked like she’d stepped out of a painting by some obscure French artist.

And she was still standing there, smiling at them. He abruptly felt ridiculous, fighting like a child over a toy, and he lowered his hands and backed away from

Denal. He also suddenly realized that he wanted, desperately, to make sure that she found anything she needed, and that he would help her in any way possible, because she made him... *Happy*.

What in the nine hells was going on?

He couldn't help it though. He had to smile at her. "I haven't seen a book, but I'd be glad to help you look," he said stupidly, grinning like a fool. What was happening to him?

"Oh, that would be wonderful if you could. I'm Sunny," she said in that silvery voice that he wanted to wrap around himself and roll around in.

Really, this was getting ridiculous. Was it a spell?

Somehow, even though he knew that something was wrong, she still made him feel dazed and incredibly happy. She had an indefinable quality of joy that made him feel a blissful sort of contentment just from looking at her. No, that wasn't it. Just from being in her presence.

She had a... peaceful effect on him, and that it worked on this day of all days meant that she was probably playing with some serious magic or else she was a succubus. Maybe? A Fae princess?

No. Definitely human.

He shook his head to try to shake off whatever altered mental state she'd sent him into and started looking around for the book. Probably better not to look directly at her anyway. Belatedly, he realized two things: first, a crowd of children had followed her, smiling and giggling and chattering; and second, whatever effect she clearly had on everyone else there wasn't working on Denal at all.

The warrior was scowling at Sunny even more fiercely than he'd glared at Flynn, and that was saying something. Apparently whatever peaceful happiness Sunny spread to everyone around her hadn't affected stone-faced Denal in the slightest.

Suddenly Sunny gave a little cry of delight and clapped her hands. "Oh, I see it. There it is on the bench. Thanks though!" With a parting smile, she retrieved her book and headed off toward the palace, still followed by the children.

"Well, now I feel too stupid to live for getting involved with this fight,"

Flynn told Denal when he could wrench his gaze from the woman and her flock of children. “But I’m no coward either. If you still want to go through with this idiocy, we should move it to a more secluded location.”

Denal’s gaze whipped back to him, and the warrior smiled again. This smile though held no glee, evil or otherwise. Instead, it was one of the most bitter expressions Flynn had ever seen on an Atlantean face.

“I have a better idea,” Denal said. “You’re coming with me. We’ve got a mission.”

Flynn blinked, wondering when he’d fallen down a hole out of Atlantis into *The World Is Insane* land. “You are very mistaken. I’m not one of Poseidon’s warriors. That’s my brother Liam. And, from what I hear, maybe my brother Dare now as well. I’m just—”

Denal threw his head back and laughed. “Boy, are you wrong. I just drafted you. Welcome to Denal’s Doomed Dozen. Man, were you in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Flynn had absolutely no idea what was going on, so he guessed his best idea was to follow Denal and keep quiet until he could figure it out. Ten minutes, two KEEP OUT signs, and a guardhouse later, they arrived at the warrior training grounds.

Flynn had been there before, of course. All young men of a certain age wound up there as teenagers, eager to prove their mettle and beat each other into pulp for fun.

It was a guy thing.

But he’d never once gone there with any real idea of becoming one of Poseidon’s Warriors. He wasn’t the law-and-order kind. He wasn’t a rule follower. He definitely wasn’t a person to take orders or commands, even from kings or princes.

Or so he’d told himself. But long years away from home had led him to perhaps a slight recognition of a few painful truths. Just the smallest bit of self-awareness.

It hadn’t been that he wasn’t interested—he’d been sure he wasn’t good enough.

Why wait for someone *else* to tell you that you don't measure up when you can take *yourself* out of the running? He'd managed to figure out a way to slip through the enchanted portal that used to be Atlantis's only connection with the world above the ocean. He'd been barely twenty, but he'd figured things out. He'd learned about Earth, and humans, and jobs, and money. He'd learned about girls.

He'd learned about crime and getting caught. He'd learned about jails when he came very close to being put in one. He'd come into his powers of transforming to mist much earlier than most, maybe as a way to avoid his father's fists, and had used that magic to escape what had been very well-deserved punishment for a stupid, petty crime.

He'd escaped the town, the country, and that entire side of the world. A few months later, in a dockside town in Europe, he met another wandering soul. Someone as lost as Flynn had been. Kian had become closer to him than the brothers Flynn had left behind.

But it didn't matter now. Kian would never forgive him for leaving, especially the way he'd done it. Kian would never forgive him for Kyla.

Flynn would never forgive himself.

He suddenly realized Denal had stopped, and managed to drag himself out of his mental ramblings before he stumbled into the warrior again and caused another brawl. One unplanned beating in a day was really his limit. His head was still ringing from that kick.

"Why are we here?" He looked around and saw that the place was mostly empty. "And where is everybody?"

Denal swept an arm out, indicating the large, empty space. "We have it all to ourselves for the moment. Aren't you special?" Then he stalked off toward the armory, which had always held real weapons as well as training ones back when Flynn was a kid, shoved open the door, and vanished inside.

Flynn decided he'd had enough of blindly following Denal around, Poseidon's Warrior or not. He walked over to a wooden bench on the perimeter of the square marked off for sword bouts and sat down. He turned his face up to the sun shining down on Atlantis, which he hadn't felt on his skin in more than a

decade, closed his eyes, and decided to wait and see what happened next.

When he heard footsteps approaching from the opposite direction in which Denal had gone, he opened one eye.

The newcomer was tall and lean with the sun-streaked blond hair and lanky build of a surfer. “Hey, man. Do you know what we’re here for? Poseidon told me—”

“Wait.” Flynn opened his other eye. “*Poseidon* told you. Are you telling me the actual sea god is talking to you? Man. You may need some kind of mental help or a brain transplant or something.”

Instead of taking offense, the man threw his head back and laughed. It was an easy, open laugh. The laugh of someone who had nothing to hide and no dark places in his background. Flynn decided he hated him.

Unfortunately, Laugh Boy wasn’t picking up Flynn’s *Stay Away From Me* vibes because he sat down on the bench next to Flynn and stretched out his long legs.

“I’m Jake. I spent several years exploring the real world outside this bubble—although I guess it’s not a bubble anymore—and was doing a stint on a deep-sea fishing boat off the coast of New Zealand when we caught a mermaid in our nets. I got her untangled and let her go, in spite of some fairly intense opposition to that plan from the other guys on the boat, and Poseidon showed up and thanked me. Then *whoosh*.”

Flynn turned his head to look at the teller of this preposterous tale. “Whoosh?”

“Whoosh. It was just like going through the portal, but without the portal. Next thing I know, *bam*. Here I am.”

Whoosh and bam. The guy was clearly an idiot. Also... “You *do* understand there’s no such thing as mermaids, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. They were water Fae. I know that, and you know that. But the idiots on the boat with me didn’t know that, and they were planning to sell her to the highest bidder.”

Flynn shook his head. “Humans. They never learn.”

“And yet we keep protecting them. Which of us, then, are the fools?” The

voice came from behind them, and both Flynn and the mermaid rescuer jumped up off the bench and whirled around to meet whoever had managed to sneak up on them with such stealth. Flynn was disgusted with himself. After several years of living with dragon shifters, he knew better than to let his guard down. Even, apparently, in Atlantis.

The newcomer bowed slightly but had a look of such disdain on his aristocratic features that Flynn didn't make the mistake of taking the bow as any sign of respect. He wasn't quite as tall as Flynn, but he held himself ramrod straight. He also had long hair as white as the snow on the top of Mount Everest, although he looked no older than Flynn, and eyes that were silver rather than blue or gray. He was Atlantean, but there was definitely Fae somewhere in his genealogy.

"I'm Griffin. I was ordered to be here. I have no idea why. I intensely dislike not knowing the reasons behind actions I'm commanded to perform." The man narrowed his startlingly silver eyes, gaze weighing and measuring both Flynn and the mermaid rescuer and clearly finding them wanting.

Beside Flynn, the friendly guy did a kind of casual salute. "I'm Jake. Poseidon told me to be here after I rescued a mermaid. Cool hair, man."

Flynn groaned.

Griffin's assessing gaze turned sardonic. "Of course you rescued a... *mermaid*. However, the temple of healing is on the other side of the palace. I believe you'll be looking for the brain-injury rooms."

Instead of shaking Jake's hand, Griffin turned to Flynn. "And you?"

"Flynn. I have no idea why I'm here either."

"No? Not another rescuer of mermaids? Released any krakens lately?"

Before Flynn could think up a withering response to the arrogant ass, Denal came striding back out of the building. He had a sword sheathed at one hip, a dagger at the other, and a bow slung over one shoulder. Whatever was going on, Denal's expression convinced Flynn of one thing: this was no training exercise.

Denal stopped when he was four or five paces away and nodded at them. "Good. You've all met. It's like a party, but without the drinks or food. Or fun, for that matter," he said grimly. "Here's the deal. The king has made an alliance

with certain human organizations. Since we're part of this alliance, I'm going to send some of you off on missions to help local law enforcement, infiltrate groups of really bad actors, and generally save the day."

With that, he closed his eyes, grimaced, and then shook his head before looking at them again and continuing. "And for that, according to the mental bombardment Alaric has been dumping on me ever since I left the war room, I get a dozen of the most useless misfits ever to grace Atlantean shores. Everybody with any talent, skill, sense of responsibility, or ability to function in a team is already busy. Lucky me. But Poseidon and King Conlan evidently think you're good for something, or at least you're so useless you make good cannon fodder. Either way, I don't really give a damn. All I'm asking is that you don't embarrass me, yourselves, or Atlantis."

When Denal was done with his speech, nobody said anything for a few long beats. After that, all three of them started talking at the same time, and for a minute or two it was conversational chaos while Denal just stood there, clutching his bow, looking like he wanted nothing more than to shoot them all.

Flynn finally held up a hand and whistled, a sharp, piercing noise that brought everyone's verbal outrage and confusion to a halt. "Look. I don't know what the hells you're talking about, but I'm not interested. Thanks for the offer, especially as you phrased it so sweetly—how could anyone refuse that? But I have things to do, people to see, you know the drill."

With that, he turned to leave, only to be slammed in the shoulder with a searing pain that drove him to his knees. Beside him, Griffin and Jake landed on the ground next to him, quite clearly in the same predicament. When Flynn could breathe again, which took a lot longer than he felt good about, he yanked the neck of his shirt to the side and discovered that one of his worst fears had come true: he'd been branded.

"How dare you," Griffin snarled, pulling himself up to his feet and aiming a death glare at Denal.

Jake did the opposite and just flopped down on his back on the ground, panting. "I did not expect that."

"What in the nine hells did you do to me?" Flynn dragged himself to his feet

and started toward Denal. At this point, he didn't give a damn if he got beat up again because he really, really wanted to see his fist smash into Denal's smirking mouth.

Before he could carry out his plan, Poseidon appeared—or to be precise, a giant image of Poseidon's head appeared—in the sky above them.

I DID THIS TO YOU. IT IS NOTHING OF THE NINE HELLS. YOU ARE MY WARRIORS NOW, AND YOU WILL BRING HONOR TO MY NAME AND TO ATLANTIS OR YOU WILL REGRET THE DAY YOU WERE BORN.

Jake, still lying on the ground, started laughing. “Here we go again. Hello, your sea godliness.”

Flynn, still gaping up at the sky, was completely speechless. During all his years in Atlantis, he'd never once seen Poseidon manifest himself. Now, when he'd been back for maybe two hours?

Poseidon.

The answer was simple. None of this was happening. Denal had actually kicked him in the head so hard he was in the temple being treated for a brain injury of his own.

The brand aching on his shoulder was a pretty big clue otherwise, but he decided to ignore it.

The sea god ignored them all and pointed one enormous finger at Denal.

MAKE THIS WORK, OR YOU WILL BE SORRY.

With that, he vanished with a clap of thunder.

Flynn whistled. “Bit overdramatic, don't you think?”

“What makes him think I'm not already sorry?” Denal asked, rolling his eyes. Then he turned his attention to the three newest of Poseidon's warriors. “I'm not going to make you swear the oath yet. Complete this mission, decide who you want to be when you grow up, and get back to me. You at least know what the mark means, right?”

Jake, who was rubbing his shoulder and wincing, raised his hand.

Denal muttered something that sounded like “Why me?” and then pointed at Jake. “You don't have to raise your hand, you moron. This isn't a youngling

training school.”

Jake lowered his hand, looking sheepish but determined. “I know what it means. The circle representing all the peoples of the world, intersected by the pyramid of knowledge deeded to them by the ancients. The silhouette of Poseidon’s Trident bisecting them both, to show your—*our*—vow to protect humanity.”



*B*y the end of his recitation, Jake’s face had hardened, his voice had turned serious, and Flynn caught a glimpse of what might be the real Jake beneath the laid-back exterior.

“I’ll take the vow now or then,” Jake continued, shooting a hard gaze at Denal, “but we’re each Poseidon’s Warriors now. Remember that.”

Denal said nothing for a minute, then he nodded. “Fine. Get your gear. For this first mission, you’re working with the US FBI’s Paranormal Operations division to infiltrate and undermine—if not destroy—a chapter of a group that

calls itself Hell's Dark Angels.”

“I know the Dark Angels. They are seriously bad dudes. Rumor is that their overall leader is a demon. An actual Lord Marquis and general of hell demon.” Flynn brushed the dirt off his pants in one quick motion and then aimed his own flat stare at their fearless leader. “I didn't know Poseidon's Warriors were drafting people now. I thought it was a strictly volunteer thing.”

Denal shook his head. “By all means, chase the sea god down and lodge a complaint. In the meantime, the three of you are going to a town named Early, in the state of Nevada, to find the monsters who are kidnapping teenaged human girls and using them for blood sacrifices.”

An icy wave of rage flooded Flynn, sweeping away every objection he'd thought he had. “If I'm going to be one of Poseidon's Warriors, this is certainly a job worth doing. I'm in. Give us the intel.”

Well, that did it. He'd surprised Denal, whose eyes widened. Denal gave him a slight nod and then jerked his head toward the armory building. “I've got anything you might need or want for this job in there. Let's go in for a quick briefing while I tell you the details. You'll see why the need for fast action is crucial, and then you can be on your way within a couple of hours. Is everybody in?”

Flynn glanced at Griffin, who stood next to him as still as a statue. Only the blaze of anger in those odd silver eyes gave away any emotion he might be feeling. Griffin snapped his hand open and pointed at a stone bench some thirty feet away from them, across the training grounds.

A second later, the bench exploded with a booming sound and a flash of silver-blue light. When the dust settled, only a large hole in the ground, twice the length and width of the bench, remained.

Jake's eyes widened. “Whoa. Dude.”

“I'm in,” Griffin—*mage*, Flynn's brain shouted at him—said calmly. “At least to rescue those innocents. And then we'll talk.”

Denal glanced at the smoking hole in the ground where the stone bench had been and shook his head. “I might be impressed, mage, if I hadn't spent years working with Alaric.”

“Just what I was hoping for,” Griffin drawled. “Yet another unsolicited comparison to the mighty Alaric, the greatest high priest Atlantis has ever known, ruler of magic, lord of little bunny rabbits, et cetera, et cetera.”

“Ex-priest,” Denal told him. “And I’d almost pay money to hear you call him the lord of little bunny rabbits to his face.”

Jake, still on the ground, started laughing. “Met him once. Damn near made me run home to Mommy.”

Griffin said nothing, but Flynn could almost see the layer of frost rolling over his expression.

Mages. Better altogether to stay away from them, so that’s what Flynn would try to do on this mission. And afterward? As Griffin said, then they’d talk.

Jake finally bounced up off the ground like a puppy. “Here we go. I’m not about to let the Dark Angels get away with this. I’ve run into them before too, and Flynn’s right. They’re very bad guys. The upper echelon of the club are *all* actual demons, or so the rumor goes.”

“Out of the dragon cave and into the demon fire,” Flynn muttered. “What could go wrong?”



Early, Nevada, *PURRS: Pets for Rescue Society*

Puppy whispering was not for wimps.

Eva held a small piece of hot dog flat on her palm and tried to coax a terrified terrier mix out of the back corner of his crate.

“Come on, baby. You know you want this. Nobody’s going to hurt you,” Eva crooned.

The puppy, who was almost skeletal in his emaciation, strained every muscle in his tiny body toward her hand without actually moving. Eva wanted so badly to hand over the goods, but food was her best chance to coax the pup into her reach so the vet could look him over. She didn’t want to just reach in and grab him. From the looks of him, he had no reason to trust humans, and she didn’t want to add to that.

He’d been dumped at their doorstep overnight in a broken-down crate that had wires poking out from a jerry-rigged mesh door. It had scratched the puppy up a bit, or at least she hoped the scratches were only from the crate and not from predators, but it was still better than some of the ways people dumped their unwanted animals at the shelter. There were many days when they opened the front gate to find dogs and cats roaming loose in the parking lot, clearly having been abandoned there the night before by some heartless person who’d decided he or she didn’t want little Fluffy anymore.

Her blood boiled at the thought, but anger wasn't helping this little guy.

She took a deep breath and slowly blew it back out, consciously letting go of the anger and the pain and the worry, letting go of her own turbulent emotions over her own life, and then she reached for the tiny flicker of warmth deep in her mind that she could sometimes reach... sometimes just *push*...

There.

She'd never known how or why, but she'd always been able to do it. Even sometimes when she wasn't trying. She could access that better part of her own nature that allowed her to share her warmth and caring with animals. An "affinity" is what people called it when they bothered to get to know her, or bothered to call it anything at all. A "gift" sometimes.

For a few tense hours in Arkansas, it had been a curse, and there had been those convinced that the eagle only flew down to her shoulder because Eva must be a shapeshifter or a witch.

Those men had carried guns.

She'd escaped, and her family had raced away from that lonely gas station out in the sticks, but ever since, she'd vowed to stay away from men with guns.

The puppy, who'd started toward her on his belly, eyes hopeful and miniature tail wagging, stopped, crouching low and whimpering. Picking up on her mental distress probably, poor little fellow.

She firmly pushed all thoughts of men with guns out of her mind and reached out again. *Pushed* again. The pup's entire body quivered with relief and, perhaps, the first beginning of trust as he wiggled the rest of the short distance toward her and nibbled the bite of meat from her hand.

"I'm just going to take you to be cared for now, my sweet one," she murmured, gently scooping him up and cuddling him close to her chest.

Eva heard the footsteps, even in the rubber-soled shoes, before she saw her boss turn the corner into the puppy room. She'd had reason to learn wariness, and being aware at all times of who was near her was important. She'd learned that lesson the hard way, and it was one she didn't plan to forget.

"Hey, Mrs. Markowski. I've got this little one ready to go. Do you want me to make the run to the vet?"

Mrs. Markowski, the eighty-something director of the shelter and a one-woman dynamo, fund-raiser, animal savior, and wonderful human being—not to mention Eva’s landlady—shook her head. She shoved her white curls back from her face and smiled at Eva. “I’ll do it today. I’m going out to dinner with friends on the way back. You’re good here until our nighttime volunteers show up?”

“We’re good,” Eva said, smiling at her boss. “I don’t know how you do it. You have the most active social life of anybody in town, and you run this place like a Swiss clock, not to mention all your other charitable works.”

Mrs. M shook her head. “Oh no, dear. So many others do so much more.”

“That’s not true at all, and you know it. Here, take Mr. Puppy here, and I’ll get his intake paperwork for the vet.”

Mrs. M brushed a bit of cat hair from her slim gray slacks and then gently took the puppy. At just over five feet and maybe a hundred and ten pounds, maximum, you wouldn’t think to look at her that Mrs. Markowski had retired from running the entire Early school district after forty years of being a teacher and then a principal at the local high school before that. But almost every person Eva had met at the shelter, and some she’d met at the bar, her paying job, loved to tell her about how they were former students who had fond memories of Mrs. M.

“You’re so good with them, Eva.”

Eva shrugged. “No more than anyone else. I just like animals.”

“Well, dear, I’ve run the place full-time for the past fifteen years, and yes, I find the pets love us just as much as we love them, and the reverse also applies. But you’ve got a gift. They trust you long before they would trust anybody else.”

Eva blinked, caught uncomfortably off guard to hear her thoughts spoken aloud. She didn’t let people in, not anymore. Not even people she liked and respected, like Mrs. M. She certainly didn’t share her thoughts, or her worries, or anything about her affinity.

On the other hand, it didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that the new volunteer at the animal shelter managed to get animals to like her pretty quickly, and Eva’s landlady was sharp as a tack.

“Do you need to get going, or do you have some time to spend with Daisy?”

Mrs. M nodded in the direction of the office. “I think she misses you. You know, I’m sure I told you this before, but I wouldn’t mind at all if you brought Daisy home to foster for some overnights and see if the two of you—”

Eva broke in before her landlady could finish that sentence. “I know. And it’s very nice of you. But I just can’t get attached right now. I have to move around so often for... because,” she ended lamely, unable, or unwilling, to tell Mrs. M the real truth.

She’d been lucky enough to find Mrs. M and the tiny studio apartment over her garage with the TO LET sign. She’d been doubly lucky that the elderly woman had been willing to rent on a month-by-month basis, cash only, to a woman who couldn’t provide references, bank information, or anything else that any reasonable landlord would require of a tenant.

Mrs. Markowski, though, had talked to her for about ten minutes and then offered her the place. She had told Eva that if she couldn’t tell the difference between a good person and a bad person after eighty years on this planet, she may as well give up now.

Then she’d gone back into the beautiful two-story house she lived in all alone, now that her beloved husband Gus had died, and baked the most incredible apple pie Eva had ever tasted.

It had been almost surreal, like being trapped in a nightmare and then rescued by an angel. When Eva had plopped right down on the kitchen floor after eating her pie and played with the seven foster kittens, Lucky, the one-eyed dog (“He’s still alive and has one good eye, so he’s Lucky”), and the de-scented skunk that Mrs. M was caring for her in her home, Eva’s new landlady had immediately beguiled her into putting in a few hours a day at the shelter.

“No pay of course. In fact, I’m going to donate your entire rent to the shelter so I won’t have off-the-books rent on my conscience,” she had said briskly, her eyes shining. “But I can tell animals like you and you like them. It’s a perfect place to get some peace and think.”

And so it had been, Eva thought now, after Mrs. M had taken today’s crop of pets in need of medical care off to see Dr. Douglas. Eva grinned. There was nothing like cleaning out cages and restocking cat litter to make a person think

about her choices in life.

She glanced at her watch and winced. She had to run or she'd be late again, and Noel wasn't the type to appreciate lateness. Her manager at the bar was one of the most vile and disgusting human beings she'd come across in a while, and that was saying something, considering she'd always worked in bars.

Of course, she wasn't counting Scott and his friends the Dark Angels in that tally. They were beyond slime—they were pure evil.

But for a boss, Noel took *slimy* about six steps further than anybody Eva had ever worked for before. He was paying her cash under the table, and whenever employers paid cash, they knew they could get away with a lot. They didn't have to worry about taxes, they didn't have to worry about employee complaints, they didn't have to worry about unemployment compensation or sexual harassment lawsuits. Undocumented workers had no rights at all, and Eva couldn't afford to give anyone her legal ID because Scott had more ways to track her than just through magic.

No ID meant that anybody who hired her had *all* the power. All they had to do was say *hit the road*, and Eva couldn't protest because she didn't have a leg to stand on. Unfortunately, it was her legs that were the problem. Or her butt, breasts, or any other curved part of her body that made slimy, lecherous men like Noel lick their slimy, lecherous lips.

Noel was always trying to get her in a corner, put his hands on her, or get her to laugh at one of a thousand raunchy jokes he liked to tell just to see her blush. It was harassment of the worst kind, but Eva was desperate. She'd run out of money just before she got to the last town and had still been looking for work there when Scott's minions found her.

Again. When they'd found her *again*.

So she'd had to run—again—except this time with no money. This job in Early, Nevada, in the Copper Cantina Bar and Grill would have been a good one if not for Noel. Eva was making more money in the cantina than she'd made in the past five jobs before it. Tips were great in Early because it was a revitalized copper-mining town. The past decade had seen a dramatic rise in magic practitioners, ever since supernatural creatures, witches, and mages had allowed

the world to learn that they really existed outside horror novels and scary movies. The magic users, with their need for copper to fuel or assist in many of their spells and rites, had brought new money to Early, and the mines had started back up into production, much to the delight of Early's residents.

The only problem Eva anticipated was that where money came, the Dark Angels followed. She was only surprised there wasn't a local chapter here yet, but she'd checked before deciding to stay in Early and had been assured that no gangs operated in this part of the state. Scott couldn't possibly be here—not this fast—but if a branch of HDA came to town, it wouldn't be long before he found her again.

She only needed long enough to build up her stash of money and she'd be gone again. The next time she'd try to find someplace less successful. Less rich. The problem, though, was that poor towns didn't often have jobs for undocumented drifters. It was a dilemma that was never going to have a solution, at least not as long as Scott was alive. And no matter how much she hated him, she couldn't bring herself to wish for his death either.

She pushed thoughts of Scott aside, finished cleaning the cages and put away the cleaning materials, and then gave in to the urge to go and visit little Daisy. When she walked into the office, the pug was curled up asleep on a cushion. But as soon as Eva opened the door, Daisy woke up and barked excitedly, her fat little body quivering with joy as she climbed out of the bed. The amputation was still only two months old, and Daisy hadn't quite figured out a smooth gait with only three legs, but she wasn't about to let it stop her. Dogs lived in the moment, and they adapted. The little pug had the most indomitable spirit Eva had ever seen.

There was a lesson in there somewhere, but she firmly decided not to analyze it. Not today. She knew Noel would be on duty this evening, and she just had to get through the night. Deep introspection could only bring a girl down. She needed to be more like a pug.

"Come here, baby girl," she said, sinking to sit cross-legged on the floor. "Give me some cuddles, and then I've got to get to work."

The dog squirmed her plump little body into Eva's lap, wagging her donut-

shaped tail in ecstasy and trying to catch the tail of Eva's long red braid with her tiny puppy paw. Eva picked up the pug and kissed her cute, wrinkly forehead. "You're such a good girl, Daisy. If I could bring you home with me, I would. Maybe someday."

But Eva knew that *someday* never came for people like her. She was trapped, and she was never going to find a way out. Never going to be able to stop running. Never going to deserve any better.

After all, *she* was the one who'd started dating Scott in the first place. Even after Gramps and all her friends had warned her off, even after she'd found out that her new boyfriend was dabbling in black magic.

She'd been a fool, and now she had to pay the price.

Forever.

She sat on the floor, petting the happy little pug, never even noticing the tears that ran down her face until one plopped on Daisy's head, leaving a tiny dark splotch on the fawn-colored fur. "You'll find a wonderful family, Daisy. I'm just so sorry it can't be me."



"Noel is in rare form tonight," Missy whispered, tying on her black apron and then adjusting the fit of the short-shorts every waitress in the Copper Cantina had to wear. That and a tight, low-cut black T-shirt with COPPER CANTINA emblazoned across the chest constituted the waitress outfit.

As a bartender, Eva got off easier. She was allowed to wear jeans with her tight black T-shirt. She hadn't bothered complaining. She knew better by now.

"Already?" She glanced at the clock over the bar. "It's only six. He hasn't even had time to get into the tequila yet. What's up his butt this time? Did his wife give him a hard time about something again?"

Noel was married, much to the shock of everyone who'd ever met him. How a scumbag like Noel could find any woman who would put up with him, let alone marry him, was one of life's great mysteries, right up there with who built the pyramids and why the Zebra cakes at the grocery were called different things

depending on what time of year it was.

She didn't care; she was down with buying Valentine cakes, Easter cakes, Groundhog Day cakes, or whatever. It was just strange.

She shook out her bar apron, tied it on, and started doing inventory for supplies. Denny, the day bartender, was one of the laziest individuals she'd ever had the misfortune to meet. He regularly left her with empty bottles, empty fruit trays, and a filthy bar. He also thought himself to be above washing out a glass or two when the dishwasher was backed up.

Of course, it didn't hurt that he was Noel's cousin.

Nepotism. Nice work if you can get it.

"I don't know," Missy said, shaking her head. "But I've only been here ten minutes, and he's already yelled at me twice."

Eva smiled at her friend, still surprised that she even had a friend. Missy was one of those people you couldn't help but like though. With her copper skin and dark brown eyes, Missy was beautiful too, which normally would've made her a target of Noel's lecherous advances, but Missy was married to the local high school football coach. A former college football player himself, he stood about six feet, eight inches tall and was as broad as the side of a barn. Eva gave a mental shiver at the idea of being on the opposing team against Bryce.

Off the football field, Bryce was one of the nicest people she'd ever met. He definitely didn't have a violent bone in his body, except when it came to protecting Missy. Noel had tried on his pervert act with Missy exactly one time, she'd confided to Eva. The following night Bryce walked in, sat down on a stool at the end of the bar, reached over the shining wood surface, and picked Noel up by the shirtfront with one ham-sized hand.

Bryce hadn't said anything at all. He hadn't even scowled. He'd just sat there, looking calmly and pleasantly at Noel while he held the man a foot off the ground with one hand.

For several minutes.

By the time Noel had stopped squeaking and nearly passed out from lack of oxygen, Bryce set him back down and walked out of the bar. Missy had never had any trouble, at least in terms of sexual advances, with Noel ever since. And

Noel hadn't dared get his law enforcement cousins after Bryce in a town where high school football was a religion.

But he did yell at Missy as much as he yelled at everybody else, and she'd forbidden Bryce to do anything about it.

"If I can't handle a little yelling, then I don't deserve to work in a bar," she told Eva. "I can stick up for my own damn self."

But tonight Missy looked worried. "I haven't seen him like this in a while. He's acting almost like he's afraid, and I don't know what that's about. The sheriff is one of his eighteen cousins, after all. Anyway, look lively and stay out of his way if you can."

"Thanks."

Missy nodded and hurried off, beginning her prep work for the dinner rush that would be heading into the bar any minute.

The Copper Cantina had a small but serviceable kitchen, and the burgers and fries were truly first-rate. A lot of the folks who worked at the copper mine liked to stop in for a quick dinner and maybe a beer or two before they headed home for the rest of their evening, especially the single ones. And today was Friday, so that meant payday. More money to spend, more beer to drink, and more tips for the bartender, Eva hoped. She really wanted to build up her savings so her escape fund was replenished when she needed to move on.

She said hello to a couple of the most-familiar customers seated at their normal stools and already deep into what was probably their third or fourth drink of the afternoon. Every bar had them—the regulars.

The drunks, if you wanted to be less charitable. These were people who were never, ever going to climb out of the bottle, but they didn't hurt anybody. They just wanted a quiet drink in a quiet corner, and occasionally they needed Eva to pour them into a cab and send them home. In the years she'd been bartending, she'd heard two different philosophies on the subject of the regulars. She knew they were alcoholics, and for a long while she'd tried to get them into AA. But proselytizing, especially when she'd never known the pain of addiction, hadn't helped anybody, and it just left both them and her embarrassed and unhappy.

So her philosophy now was simply to watch out for them as best she could

and make sure they could get home safely when they were tired. She also made a point to be a bit slow refilling glasses or opening new beers for them. It was the most she could do, and she knew it was too little, but sometimes the best you could do had to be good enough.

Eva shook her head, trying to escape the gloom that had been dogging her all afternoon. She didn't have time for it, and if she didn't find a way to at least pretend to be cheerful, happy, and perky—*perky, God forbid*—then Noel would find yet another way to make her life a living hell. Speaking of the monster, he was clomping up the stairs from the cellar, and she could already hear him bellowing.

“Eva, get your ass down here,” he shouted. “If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a million times that we needed another ten cases of Heineken before the weekend. I’m tired of having to follow behind you and do your damn job.”

Eva sighed. *Here we go.* She headed toward the stairs as Noel came into view.

He was panting and gasping, his balding head sweaty just from his walk up the dozen steps from the basement. He wasn't overweight, he was under-fit, and he smoked probably three packs a day. A haze of cigarette smoke hung around him in a nasty cloud all the time, even though—much to his dismay—the Copper Cantina's owner had made the place nonsmoking about a year back. The owner just happened to be Noel's daddy and presumably wanted his only child and heir to outlive him.

Of course, that meant Noel took about twenty cigarette breaks a night, which were all excuses for him to spend fifteen or so minutes not working, so he probably didn't mind all that much. Frankly, he didn't do that much work when he *was* in the bar, and Eva and her coworkers were just as happy to have him outside on a cigarette break and out of their hair.

“Sorry, Noel,” Eva said automatically. “I left you a note. The usual driver had his daughter's wedding this weekend. The new guy probably hasn't quite figured out the route yet.”

Noel snorted. “Incompetence.”

She shrugged in a “what can you do?” gesture and turned to go.

“Eva!”

She turned back, only to find Noel leering at her, making sure he took his time staring at every inch of her body. Yet again, Eva wanted to hit him over the head with one of his precious beer bottles. It was a happy, frequent fantasy of hers, but one she could never act out, more's the pity. Women who were on the run and in hiding didn't do anything that got them the attention of the police, especially when the sheriff was related to the man she was fantasizing about assaulting.

She sighed instead. “I'm sure he'll be here soon, and we've got enough to last the night anyway.”

Noel scowled. “Oh, is that your opinion, Red? Your expert opinion based on your years and years of bar management, is it? Well, let me tell you this, Ms. Know-it-all. If even one person complains or we run out, I'm taking it out of your paycheck.”

He smiled when he said it, taunting her, but she knew better than to protest. The best way to deal with Noel was to be passive and never argue. That made him lose interest and give up sooner, so he could move on to pulling the wings off flies or whatever he did in his spare time. She put on a bland and brainless smile and nodded.

“I understand,” she murmured, and then she ran lightly back up the stairs to the relative safety of her bar, which was now filling up with people. Even slimy Noel had his limits as to what he'd do in front of other people.

Still, Eva was having a bad damn night.

And it was about to get worse.



Flynn watched, stunned, as the woman who'd turned his world upside down fled through a door behind the bar. He started to go after her but stopped himself. If she was trying to get away from him, he had to respect that even though every nerve cell in his body was screaming at him to find her, take her, possess her.

She'd said *"I might be the one doing the begging."*

And then she ran.

He wanted—needed—to go after her.

But he stayed right where he was. If she wanted to see him again, she'd come back out. If not, he'd wait until his cock wasn't so hard he wasn't sure he could walk and go back to Jake's table and figure out how to infiltrate the Dark Angels.

The mission.

Yes. He had to focus on the mission. Those girls were in danger, and whatever in the nine hells had just happened to him needed to go away.

One of the Dark Angels started walking toward the bar pass-through nearest where Eva had disappeared, and Flynn's interest sharpened as a realization sparked in the tiny bit of space in his brain that wasn't focused on the woman with the haunted hazel eyes and the beautiful red hair.

This one—the weaselly guy headed for the bar—he was new. He hadn't been

in the bar when Flynn and Jake had entered. Eva had glanced at something—or someone—over Flynn’s shoulder just before she fled. Was it this guy?

Flynn turned and casually—ever so casually—scanned the room. Jake was sprawled back in his chair, the picture of ease, half looking at his phone and half watching the action at the pool table. The guy was an idiot. He had the depth of a teaspoon, and Flynn would never trust him to have his back in a fight. It didn’t bode well for any of these missions that this was the kind of talent Denal was putting together.

On the other hand, one of the Dark Angels could have carved Jake up like a trussed fowl while Flynn had been ensnared by the heat in Eva’s eyes, and Flynn never would have noticed. So he added himself to the roster of “untrustworthy in a fight.”

The new guy had stopped advancing on the bar and now just stood, mouth hanging open, in the middle of the floor. Maybe waiting for something? The man didn’t appear to be a threat, but Flynn knew that people of any size or appearance could wield magic or have guns hidden on them. So the guy was incredibly nondescript, true. If it hadn’t been for the Dark Angel leathers, Flynn never would have given him a second glance. But, especially wearing leathers, he could be suspected of almost certainly carrying at least one gun.

Flynn glanced at the door Eva had fled through, trying not to draw any attention to himself, but more worried than he ought to be about what had happened to Eva.

The new guy, Eva’s stalker, was still standing in the middle of the floor, and he was avidly staring at the bar, his gaze flitting from one to the other of the two doors behind it. He was watching for the bartender. Flynn didn’t know how he knew it, but he was sure. Whatever the gang member wanted, it was something that had scared her to death.

The guys at the pool table were getting loud and rowdy. They were puffing up in the way bullies do, looking around for trouble they could start. Most of the people with any sense were packing it up and pulling out wallets and purses to pay the overworked waitress so they could leave.

Still no bartender. He looked at Jake, who caught his glance and raised an

eyebrow. Flynn tilted his head toward the door that the redhead had run through and then nodded. He had no idea if Mermaid Man would figure it out, but Jake was a big boy. He could take care of himself.

Flynn told himself he was only watching out for Eva, not stalking her himself, and then he turned around and took a step in the direction of the bar pass-through nearest the door where the bartender had gone. He made it all of two steps before the beer bottle hit him in the back of the head.

Not again.

He'd almost gone to jail maybe half a dozen times over bar fights. He had the typical Stupid Guy problem: he wasn't able to back down. Dumb as hell, but there you were. He turned around slowly, shook his head to lessen the ringing sensation in his ears, and looked around. The incipient violence that had been hanging in the air since he and Jake had walked in had exploded into a full-fledged brawl. Jake, looking happy as a kid playing in mud, was punching it out one-on-three with Dark Angels.

Another one of them, a big one with a yellow shirt, started lumbering toward Flynn, head moving back and forth like he was a surly bear just out of hibernation.

"What exactly did I ever do to you, friend?" Flynn tried, even knowing it was useless.

"You were talking to my woman," the bleary-eyed mountain of a man said.

Flynn doubted it. Severely. "*Your* woman?"

"As soon as she meets me," the idiot declared, raising a fist the size of a side of beef. "Here we go."

Here we go?

Flynn sighed. Sadly, they made idiots in all shapes and sizes. Human, shifter, vampire, Atlantean. He couldn't think of any species in which there wasn't a subgroup of morons who liked to pick fights in bars.

Lesson? Yeah. He probably needed to stay out of bars.

Brilliance in action there, Flynn.

He ducked under Yellow Shirt's clumsy swing, stepped inside and delivered an uppercut to the man's massive jaw, putting all the power of his built-up

frustration over the way his life was going into it.

Mountain man or not, the guy wasn't much for actually getting hit evidently. Maybe he normally scared people off with his yeti-like size. Too bad for him that Flynn didn't scare easy. Instead, Flynn stepped past the man and kicked him in the back of the knees, toppling him to the floor.

"What? What?" The guy sputtered for a few seconds, but after his head bounced off the floor a couple of times, his eyes rolled up in his head and he passed out.

Flynn looked down at the man, shaking his head. He wasn't quite arrogant enough to think that one punch had knocked him out. More likely Mountain Man had drunk a pitcher or seven of beer before the fight started.

He heard a whistling noise and ducked to the left, just in time to avoid another flying bottle. He scanned the room again, but nobody was looking at him. Jake was holding his own, and the little weaselly-looking guy was threading his way through the various groups of fighters and heading straight toward the bar.

"Right." Flynn stepped so abruptly in front of Eva's stalker that the man almost ran into Flynn's back.

Perfect.

Flynn promptly smashed an elbow into the guy's face. This time the unconscious man on the floor was *entirely* Flynn's doing, and he felt no little satisfaction about it. He turned and ducked a barstool swung by a six-foot-tall woman who looked to be about seventy years old, and he bowed to her, surprising the fight right out of her. She dropped the stool and stared at him, stupefied.

"Your pardon, madam," he said in his best palace-etiquette voice. Then he gently turned her toward a group of three guys hitting each over their respective heads with pool sticks and again made for the bar pass-through. With no further obstruction or delay, he made it to the door behind the bar, determined to find the bartender if she wasn't already halfway to Alaska.

At this point, who would blame her?



The man she'd wanted to jump just before Monkey walked in and destroyed any emotion but pure, screaming panic, strode into the small storage room and scanned it, immediately homing in on where she huddled in the corner on the floor, back to the wall. She was shaking so hard her teeth were clattering like the bones of a skeleton dancing in a dark wind.

Eva winced at the imagery, but didn't wonder why her brain had envisioned it. She'd be dead before she ever saw another summer. Hell, it was only January.

She'd be dead before she saw spring.

Flynn crossed the room, and she flinched when he reached her. In spite of—or perhaps because of—her incredible, mind-blowing attraction to this man, she was terrified. What if he was part of it? A Dark Angel without the leathers? She'd heard the head guy, who called himself a Marquis of hell, wore suits and ties most of the time. Still, she was sick to death of being afraid. Sick of being hurt, being found, being caught.

Now here she was again, huddling on the floor of a crowded kitchen-supplies storeroom, breathing in the scents of overripe produce and despair. The cook, no fool, had headed out the back exit when he heard the fight start, so she was alone, contemplating bad choices.

Should she run too?

Noel would fire her ass in a hot minute, and she needed the money.

Was Scott with his trusty thug? Was it some weird, one-in-a-million coincidence that Monkey was even here?

Ha. Like she'd ever believe in coincidence again.

When would it ever *end*?

Flynn stopped a couple of feet away and stood there silently, looking down at her.

“I need another man looming over me like I need a hole in the head,” she snapped and then was amazed at her own defiance.

He knelt down, keeping a careful distance between them, but distances could be crossed and his dark eyes were black with rage. This close, his beauty was

almost lethal and made her feel like the snake to his charmer, swaying helplessly in his thrall.

Monkey was out there.

The thought threw an icy sheet of terror over any charm Flynn was projecting.

He *was* out there. She'd seen him. Worse, she thought he'd seen her. Her gaze went helplessly to the door to the door leading to the bar.

"I'm sorry," she managed, her voice only shaking a little. "I'm sorry I ran away from you like that. I had to get out of there."

"Was it me?" His voice was so gentle that it might have helped her calm down if she could afford to be calm.

"No! Of course not. It was... it was someone I didn't want to see."

"Why are you so afraid?" Flynn's voice was smoky sensuality with a hint of a growl beneath it. Eva had learned—*oh, how she'd learned*—to beware of growls.

"It's nothing. I just... Nothing," she muttered, clutching her knees more tightly to her chest.

Flynn's eyes narrowed. "It is not nothing, and it's not no *one*. Who is it? I'd be happy to kill him for you. I have some time to spare."

"Just like that? You don't even know me, but you'd be happy to kill someone for me." She shook her head. "You're just like them."

His voice was soft and deadly when he answered. "I'm nothing like them."

She put her head down on her knees. "Just go away."

"It's the man. The ugly man with the face like a rodent," he ventured, startling a laugh out of her. It was only a small laugh though and quickly banished.

"You could probably take him," he added gravely.

Eva sighed and hunched herself into an even smaller ball, pulling her knees into her body. Of course he didn't understand. He was tall, dark, and dangerous—every inch of him screamed *Badass*. Men like him never had to be afraid of anything.

"You wouldn't understand, and it's none of your business anyway," she

whispered.

A trace of impatience crossed his face, but then he looked at her again—*really* looked at her—and concern replaced the impatience. He held out a hand.

“Let’s start again. My name is Flynn. I’m sorry I made a bad impression at the bar, but I’d like to get to know you.”

She didn’t take his hand. She knew it was rude, but she didn’t want to touch him. Even the most innocent touch could be taken the wrong way. Taken advantage of. Instead, she pushed her back farther into the corner between the wall and the shelving unit filled with canned goods, trying to make herself as small as possible.

Which was a metaphor, wasn’t it? Making herself as small as possible? Her entire *life* was small.

And she had no one to blame but herself.

A particularly loud crash sounded from the bar, and she flinched. The door to the storeroom slammed open, and Noel stormed in.

“There you are, you worthless bitch. What the hell are you doing hiding in here when you should be out there protecting my property?”

Great. Just what she needed. There came a point when no job was worth this kind of abuse. But before she could answer or tell him just where he could shove his job, Flynn stood in one smooth, graceful motion. He was at least eight or ten inches taller than Noel and pure muscle, unlike her slime ball boss, who was part beer belly and part forty years of sitting on his ass, telling other people to do his job for him.

“Who the hell are you?” Noel barked, pushing his shoulders back like he thought good posture could suddenly make him look tough and mean instead of like the blustering bully he was. “If you’re in here bothering my bartender, jerkoff, you better back off, because my cousin is the sheriff—”

Flynn took a step toward Noel, whose torrents of abuse came stuttering to a halt.

“Don’t think you can threaten me either,” Noel blustered, backing toward the door. “I’ll make sure they toss you in jail and throw away the key.”

Flynn glanced at Eva, and she was surprised to see amusement dancing in his gorgeous blue eyes. “Have you ever noticed how the truly vile people in life always speak in clichés? ‘Throw away the key’—really?” He turned his gaze back to Noel, but it no longer held any amusement. “I suggest you apologize to the lady.”

Noel’s mouth fell open. “The lady? Are you out of your mind? That’s no lady, that’s a—”

She’d probably never know what he’d been planning to call her though, because Flynn’s arm moved faster than she could see, and he punched Noel in the face. Her boss’s expression was almost comically surprised for a single heartbeat, and then he collapsed to the floor.

“Is that how you solve all your problems?” she asked wearily but then couldn’t believe her daring. The man had just knocked Noel out in one punch. Who was to say he wasn’t going to start on her next?

But even as she thought it, she knew—somehow she *knew*—that it wasn’t true. He held no sense of danger for her except to her equilibrium, judging by the astonishing way she’d reacted to him in the bar.

She’d honed her instincts to be very sharp over the past few years. Maybe she was kidding herself. Maybe she was a fool yet again. But she felt no threat from this man. In fact, she felt oddly appreciative of the way he’d taken care of Noel. She just didn’t think she could deal with her manager and his bullying on top of her terror over the fact that Monkey had shown up.

Where Monkey went, Scott—*Snake*—soon followed. It was always true, and it meant it was time to run.

Flynn held his hand out to her again, and this time, after a brief hesitation, she took it. It was like reaching out into an inferno and taking hold of pure fire. The sparks between them spiraled up into a conflagration, and she wanted nothing more than to hurl herself into his arms. Even in such a dire situation, her body wanted him.

She quickly stood, gasping, and yanked her hand away. When she dared to look at Flynn, he appeared to be as shocked as she was.

“What in the nine hells *is* this between us?” he began, but he took a step back

as if giving her a safe zone between them. She appreciated it more than she knew how to articulate, so she said nothing. Instead, she waited silently for her heart to slow down and stop thundering in her chest. Whether from fear or desire, adrenaline was pouring through her body, setting her nerve endings on high alert. Fight or flight, maybe.

Fight or flight or *fuck*, her mind said, using Flynn's word to inflame her even further.

This close to him, she was even more aware of Flynn. Hyperaware. He was all grace and danger, all leashed ferocity, like the most feral of the animals who'd ever approached her, attracted by her gift. Her pulse began to speed up again.

Flynn said nothing, just watched her for a long moment before he spoke. "Eva. The man?"

"Monkey." She sighed. "Yes, he's after me. He's my ex's chief flunky."

One of those dark silken brows winged upward. "Monkey the flunky?"

She blew out a tired breath. "Yeah, funny, except not so much. Look. This is not your problem and, really, none of your business."

Just then the door from the bar swung open again. This time the man who'd been with Flynn at his table walked in. He was grinning, his bright green eyes full of high good humor, and he had a scrape down the side of his face and a bruise that was already turning purple on his forehead.

"That was fun. But I think you'd better get her out of here, Flynn." He nodded at Eva and smiled. "I'm Jake. Nice to meet you, ma'am. But I'm guessing you're trying to avoid the little guy with the weirdly shaped head, and he just woke up and is looking around for you. Since he has a whole bunch of ugly, mean friends and I hear sirens on the way, now might be a good time to get out of here."

Flynn nodded and held out his hand again. He kept doing that. As if he had some right to touch her or, maybe, as if he wanted to help. It had been so long since Eva had let anyone see the violence following her that she didn't know how to react to the offer of a helping hand.

"I'm not sure," she began. "Since Noel is unconscious, maybe I should stay

and take care of the bar...”

“Forget the bar. Let the police take care of the bar. They can take care of the Dark Angels too,” Flynn said grimly. “We need to get out of here and figure out exactly what’s going on. We have a mutual enemy, it appears.”

Jake started toward the rear door that exited the kitchen to the alley behind. “We need to find those girls. I’ll contact Griffin and find out what he’s learned, but first I’m going to see if I can’t get myself arrested. It’ll buy me some instant street cred with those bastards.”

Eva felt dazed, almost as if she’d been the one punched in the face. “What girls? What’s going on? What are the two of you doing in town and why—”

But he was already gone.

The door swung open again. It was freaking Grand Central Station in the small kitchen storeroom tonight. This time, though, it was one of the Dark Angels. Eva made a choking noise in spite of herself and shrank back behind Flynn. Somehow she knew or at least hoped that he was the lesser of two evils right now.

“You’d better turn around and walk right back out of here, my friend,” Flynn said, his voice low and deadly. “I’ve taken down one of you already tonight, plus the idiot on the floor. I don’t mind going for another, but why don’t we just call it quits so I can get the lady out of here.”

The man, tall, dark-haired and broad-shouldered, had too much intelligence in his startlingly green eyes to be one of the rank-and-file Dark Angels. He shook his head impatiently but stopped where he was. “Listen, I don’t have much time. I’m not one of them. If you’re who I think you are, I might be your contact. My name is Zach, and I’ll find you again. Get her out of here now. Local law enforcement is in with the Dark Angels.”

With that, Zach turned and headed back into the bar.

“That was interesting, but we need to move. Now.” Flynn held out his hand again to Eva.

This time she took it even though part of her brain was screaming at her to run. Thankfully the electric pulse of desire, while still there, was less insistent now that her stupid hormones had gotten the message that her life was in actual

danger.

“Right,” he said, a trace of satisfaction glinting in his eyes. Now we find out what’s going on. First we get you out of here and to safety.”

“I don’t—” She studied his face again. Gazed for a moment into his eyes, but the crashing and shouting from the bar sped up her decision. She grabbed her purse and sweater. “Yes. Let’s get out of here. I don’t know you, but I know them. Anyway, how could things get any worse?”

Flynn groaned and started walking faster, pulling her along beside him toward the exit. “Please, for the love of all the gods, don’t ever, *ever*, ask that question again.”



Flynn shoved open the door and pulled Eva through it and then kept going down the alley and away from the bar. “Should I take you home?”

“I don’t want to go home yet,” Eva admitted, her voice reluctant. “I can just... I’m going to go get some coffee and think about all this. Thank you for everything you did for me. I’ll be on my way now.”

He tightened his grip on her hand, careful to keep his grasp gentle enough that she could pull away if she really wanted to. “Look, I don’t know why that guy was after you. I don’t know anything about you. But I can recognize the signs of a person in trouble, and I wish you’d at least let me try to help you. I need—I *need* to help. There’ve been too many times when I didn’t.”

She glanced up at him but didn’t try to pull her hand away. In the harsh light of the streetlamp, her skin was so pale, making the few freckles scattered over her nose stand out. He couldn’t see the green and gold of her enormous eyes in the dark, but they were luminous and seemed to be looking right through him.

It made him wonder what she saw, but he knew better than to ask. Some things were better left unknown.

She blew out a long breath and then nodded as if coming to some internal decision. “Okay. Okay. I guess it can’t hurt for you to at least come get coffee with me. I must be out of my mind, but I need to talk this out with somebody,

and a perfect stranger seems to be my best option. Thanks, Flynn, for what you did in there.”

“Believe me, it was my pleasure, Eva. Coffee sounds wonderful. Where should we go?” He smiled at her and she stared up at him, dazed.

“Eva?”

“Oh. Well.” Eva glanced back at the bar, shuddered, and then pointed down the street. “There’s a coffee shop here, but I think that’s too close for now. I don’t want to get involved with the police, and I certainly don’t want to... Well. Let’s go to the Early Café that’s just down on the end of Main Street. It’s at least a mile and a half from here, which might keep us out of the immediate fallout from whatever happened in the bar.”

“Do you want to walk?” The January night air had grown cold, and Eva was shivering in that flimsy T-shirt she must have to wear for work, even with the light sweater she’d thrown over it. He mentally smacked himself in the forehead and immediately shrugged out of his jacket. “You take this. Are you okay to walk? I only have my bike here.”

She started to protest taking his jacket but then closed her eyes and snuggled into its warmth with a blissful expression on her face. “Thanks. I didn’t realize how cold I was getting. I think part of it is shock. Anyway, I have my car here, and we should probably take it. If we want... if I want to get away quickly, I’d rather not have to walk back here to get my car.”

It was good sense, and he nodded. “I’m following you on my bike for the same reason. I’m not interested in having local law enforcement start to wonder who I am and check my plates.” Although there shouldn’t be any problem with the plates or the bike. Denal had set up the rental of the bikes and a small house outside town, or at least somebody efficient had done it. He didn’t really see Denal as the details type.

Plus, if Eva changed her mind and decided to speed out of the coffee shop and never come back to Early, he could follow her on the bike. He had twice the reasons to want to get to know her now, and one of them was even legit. Her reaction to that Dark Angel had told him that she knew more than she wanted to about the gang. Any scrap of information he could get would be helpful.

Even if you have to steamroll over this woman, who's obviously in trouble?

He told the tiny shard of conscience that was still left in his soul to shut up. While he was at it, he told his overly interested cock to calm the fuck down too. Mission goals, after all. One woman's emotional pain—or his almost-violent attraction to her—couldn't matter to him when there was a chance he could save even one of the nearly twenty teen girls who'd been kidnapped.

Eva led the way to a small employee parking lot and climbed into a very dilapidated car. From the looks of it, he was surprised it ran at all. He'd never been the type to care anything about human modes of transportation, but even to him this one looked like it was nearly dead. She turned the key. It stuttered and shook but started, amazingly enough. When Eva put the car in gear and pulled out of the back lot, the police were just arriving in the front. Perfect timing.

Flynn swung a leg over his bike, started it up, and followed Eva down the street.

The diner smelled familiar. He'd been in a lot of diners, in a lot of countries around the world, and they all shared that same scent of hot grill and hot grease and the feel of warm, comfortable conversation. Diners were not where you went to celebrate important events. Diners were where you went to talk about the weather, the news of the day, or your kids; or in order not to have to talk all. He'd sat alone in dozens of diners all over the planet, drinking coffee, eating pancakes, or beans and toast, or goat cheese and dates. Sometimes watching people, sometimes simply reading the paper and thinking whatever thoughts floated through his brain.

This one was much the same as all the others. The newspaper rack was in the corner, and you could buy a new one for a dollar or just read one of the papers that had been read and then neatly folded and stacked on a corner of the counter for the next customer to enjoy.

A middle-aged, dark-haired woman in comfortable shoes was pouring coffee for two tired-looking guys at a corner table, and an old guy near the front was shoveling in eggs and bacon as if he hadn't eaten for days. He didn't even glance up at them as they passed his table. The guys in the back gave them a quick glance and then returned to their conversation.

Threat assessment: very low.

The dark-haired waitress finished pouring the coffee, looked over at them, and smiled. “Hey, Eva. Figured you’d be at work tonight.”

Eva returned her smile and shrugged and then slid into a booth about halfway down the row. Flynn was glad to see she chose the seat that put her back to the door because he needed to watch the entrance. He never liked the itchy-shoulder-blades feeling of having his back to any entrance or exit. There was always a back door, something about humans and fire safety, but trouble was less likely to come in that way tonight. Neither Dark Angels nor law enforcement would ever consider stealthy entrances.

Both were more blow-your-door-down types.

“Coffee?” The waitress, Linda according to her name tag, was already flipping over their cups.

Eva nodded, offering a grateful smile. “And some fresh cream, please.”

“Cream for you, handsome?” Linda took a moment to study him, and a slow smile spread over her tired face. “You’ve been holding out on me, Eva. This is the best-looking man to walk through our door in months.”

After years Topside, Flynn was familiar with meaningless banter. He grinned at the waitress. “And I only have eyes for you, lovely Linda.”

She giggled and swatted at him with her order pad. “Aren’t you the smooth one? Okay, you two. Want food?”

Eva shook her head, but Flynn was having none of that. She was too pale and too thin. Anyway, interrogation went better over a meal. “Two of the specials, please, Linda. I think we need to get some food in our Eva here, don’t you?”

Resentment flared in Eva’s eyes at the “our Eva” bit, but she didn’t disagree. She just picked up her coffee and took a sip, grimacing at the taste.

“Yeah, it’s been on the burner for a while. I’ll get a new pot started and bring you that fresh cream.”

Eva thanked Linda, waited until the waitress had moved out of earshot, and then turned a measuring gaze on Flynn. “Okay. Your turn. You didn’t just randomly walk into that bar and then rescue me out of the goodness of your heart. You’re up to something. And that guy—Zach—what was he talking

about? Are you a cop?"

Flynn started laughing, but he kept it quiet. Of all the suspicions she might've had about him, *cop* was the last thing he would've expected. "No. Not a cop." He glanced around the diner, but nobody was paying them the slightest bit of attention. "I shouldn't be telling you this, but I am working with some cops. There's... a *situation*."

Eva also took a moment to look around herself before she leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Is it about the Dark Angels? Somebody needs to do something about them. Everywhere I go though, the cops are too afraid of them. Or worse, they have somebody inside the gang and are getting payoffs. I guess with all the smuggling, drugs, and the rest of it, the Angels have so much money they can just roll over and crush the good guys."

Linda brought the coffee, poured it, left the pot, and bustled off. Flynn watched in a kind of bemused horror as Eva proceeded to pour so much cream into her coffee that he could barely tell it *was* coffee.

She glanced up, caught him staring at her, and made a face at him. "I don't want to hear it. I don't even like the taste of coffee, but sometimes in self-defense I need to drink it. Once I add a few spoons of sugar to this, it'll be fine."

Flynn grinned at her. "Sounds like dessert more than coffee. Probably tastes better that way, but in a lot of the places I've been, there was no guarantee of fancy things like cream or sugar. Half the time there was no coffee to be found either."

His mood grew darker at the memory of the months in that cave with the people he'd thought were his friends. Flynn didn't do well with imprisonment or restraint of any kind, and the fact that Kian—his *friend*—had disappeared from sight and let the clan hold him captive only made him more resentful.

"Did a goose walk over your grave?" She tilted her head to watch him. Strands of her long, richly red hair had fallen out of her braid and framed her face. In the diner light, the green and gold of her huge, beautiful eyes sparkled at him, enticing him into dreams of sunlit forest pools and Eva, nude in the long grass.

He shifted in his seat and pushed the tantalizing image out of his mind.

When she bent her head to sip her coffee, he watched her, entranced. The curve of her cheek was so heartbreakingly lovely...

He was either losing it or his overactive protective instincts had gone amok. Probably both. Whatever it was, he didn't have time for it. He didn't have time for much, knowing the Dark Angels and what they probably planned for those girls. It wasn't human trafficking he was worried about, not with this particular gang.

It was human sacrifice.

Linda brought their food, and they made small talk with her for a few moments while she unloaded plates from her tray. When she was gone again, off to serve the table of chattering teenagers that had just arrived, Flynn took a deep breath, inhaling all that buttery goodness.

"Man, I love diner food. Fills a man up for a while."

Eva's lips quirked up at the corners. "Not a salad guy?"

Flynn laughed. "I eat plenty of salads. The vegetables back home—"

He stopped abruptly. He, Jake, and Griffin were undercover, but Denal had never said anything specifically about whether or not to admit they were from Atlantis. If they used any of their powers over water, however, it would be easy enough for people to tell. Especially in light of all the media coverage Atlantis's rising had gotten from the human press.

Besides, he needed something from this woman, and he'd found out over the course of his life that the easiest way to help someone trust you was to trust them first. Give something to get something.

"Okay. I'm gonna tell you something that I shouldn't be telling you, because I need help. And I think you could use our help too. I'm actually from Atlantis."

She stared at him for a long moment and then abruptly started laughing. "Oh, wow. That was awesome. I really needed a laugh after this week. Do you know you are the tenth man this month to tell me that he's from Atlantis? It's the new 'what's your sign?' around bars. I'm to the point where I want to put a sign up: *No, you are not from Atlantis. It's not going to work. No, you're not going to get laid.*"

Hearing *get laid* from Eva's sensual lips shredded the edges of Flynn's

tightly leashed control. She seemed to realize what she'd said after the words came tumbling out too, because she flushed, all that delicate creamy skin turning pink from the edge of the fairly low neckline of the Copper Cantina T-shirt clear up to her hairline.

A sudden fantasy of what she would look like in his bed, all that gorgeous red hair splayed across his pillows and her arms and legs splayed across his body, nudged at Flynn insistently, and he had to forcibly shove the idea away.

“That’s a thing? I can’t believe that’s a thing.” He shook his head and thought about it. “On the other hand, of course it’s a thing. Any line to get lucky.”

Eva nodded, using her fork to toy with a piece of egg.

“The thing is though, I really am from Atlantis.” He looked around again, but still nobody was paying any attention to them. Linda was back behind the counter, chatting with the cook over the pass-through window. Flynn put his hand flat on the table and then turned his palm over so it was facing up. With a slight motion of his fingertips, he called to his power and pulled a stream of water out of Eva’s water glass and sent it twirling in a long, spiraling ribbon across the table and up around the fork she was holding.

She flinched and dropped her fork, which clattered on the table. Flynn reached across the table to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, conveniently using that arm to block the sight of the water rippling back into the glass. Sure enough, when he glanced over, Linda’s sharp gaze was on them. He didn’t need her to see any magical water tricks and come over to start asking questions.

He didn’t know why in the nine hells he’d been showing off either. “So I’m from Atlantis, and I need your help.”

Eva picked up her fork and placed it carefully on the rim of her plate. Then she took a long sip of what might laughingly be referred to as the coffee in her cup, put the cup down, and finally nodded. “I don’t know why, but I believe you. Maybe the water trick, but a human magic user could do that too, I think. Maybe I’m desperate, but I’ve been desperate for a long time, and this feels different. Of course, trusting my instincts is probably the stupidest thing I could do since I’ve proven that my instincts are utter and complete crap. On the other hand—I feel

I'm up to the third or fourth hand by now—I need to talk to somebody. I need to decide what to do. At least you'd be objective. I can't bring Mrs. M into this. I don't want her to get hurt."

Flynn sat still and silent, waiting for Eva to talk herself into trusting him. He knew better than to interrupt because he could feel she was leaning his way. Anything he could do at this point would just ruin it.

Finally she took a deep breath and looked at him. "Okay. Okay. But not here. We need to talk somewhere where no one can hear us."

"We have a house—" he began, but she shook her head before he even finished the sentence.

"No. No, I don't want to be on your turf... Anyway. I feel safer at my place. Nobody knows where it is. At least not yet," she said bitterly. "He always finds me in the end."

"Who is he?" Flynn's protective instincts were already beating in triple time. Somebody had scared this woman. Somebody had put those dark shadows under her eyes and the haunted expression on her face. Someone had made her afraid, and if he had anything to do with it, that someone was going to pay.

"Not here. Let's go." She started to reach into her purse, but Flynn stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"No, please. I ordered all this food. Let me at least pay for it." He stood, tossed cash on the table, and held out his hand to Eva. She bit her lip again, but then she took his hand, said goodbye to Linda, and followed him out into the cold, clear night.

Once again, Flynn got on the bike to follow Eva across town. She pulled into the driveway of a surprisingly large and well-tended home. He wouldn't have expected from her job and her car that she owned a house like this.

But after he parked and got off the bike, he realized the house wasn't her destination. Instead, she beckoned him up a narrow set of stairs on the side of the two-story garage. At the top of the stairs, on a tiny landing, she unlocked the door and let him inside. He could hear her breathing, which had shortened and sharpened until she was almost panting with distress. As he watched, puzzled, she took a quick sweep through the small living area, into the kitchen and behind

the counter, and then into the bedroom, opening her closet door before pausing and then ducking into the bathroom to look behind the bathroom door. When she came out to the living area again, her breathing had slowed to almost normal.

“Sorry,” she muttered, a flush rising in her cheeks.” It’s a routine I started after the first time he found me. He was hiding... One of his thugs was hiding in my closet. Only after he’d knocked me down and tied me to a chair... Well. That’s when Scott showed up.”

Flynn realized he’d clenched his hands into fists while she was talking. *Scott*. Now he had a name to go with this anger.

“Scott’s in the Dark Angels?”

“Yes.” She laughed, and the bitterness in her laughter sliced through the air between them like a dagger strike. “Go ahead. Tell me what an idiot I am for dating one of them. Tell me I’m a fool. It’s not something I haven’t already told myself a thousand times. But he wasn’t in the gang, or at least I didn’t know he was in the gang, when we met. When we started dating. And once he did become active, it was only little things. He wanted to build up his magic, you see?”

Flynn crossed a few paces to the opposite wall and leaned against it to help him fight his instinct to grab her and shake her. Getting involved with the Dark Angels? On any level at all? It was something only a fool would do. Or someone so greedy for power and magic that he or she was willing to overlook the hideous things necessary to earn it. And if Oriax, a Grand Marquis demon of hell, really was the leader of the gang, then any humans involved were soon to be dead. One of the leading generals of hell might toy with humans—even magic users—for a while, but he’d soon tire of them, and then they’d all be food for his warrior demon clans before long.

It was like the old joke.

You ask any supernatural being: Do you like humans?

And they all say: Sure! Humans are great! They’re crunchy with ketchup.

He figured he’d spare Eva the joke. She didn’t seem like she was in the mood. Instead, she seemed lost in thought or in some awful memory, standing there in the middle of the small apartment.

She blinked and then focused on Flynn. “Do you want some coffee? I have

some, but it's really old and probably tastes terrible."

"I hate to pass on such a tempting offer," Flynn said dryly. "A glass of water would be great though."

She went into the tiny kitchen, opened the refrigerator door, and got bottles of water. After she came back out to the living room and handed him one, she set the other on the table and shrugged out of his jacket.

"Thank you. This helped." She sat down on the very end of the faded blue couch. He figured getting too close to her wouldn't help oil the conversational wheels any, so instead of sitting next to her on the couch, he took the chair. Facing her was better for this discussion anyway. He tried to think of clever ways to tell her what she needed to know, but in the end, he just went with the truth.

"I'm going to trust you with something that could get a lot of people hurt or killed if the information gets out." He studied her face, trying to gauge if she really understood the seriousness of what he was saying. He didn't know her well enough to decipher the flicker of emotion in her eyes, but she nodded, folding her hands in her lap.

"I understand. Well, I don't understand yet, but I promise I won't say a word of whatever you tell me to anybody. In exchange, I'm hoping you won't say a word about me to anyone either. I need to get out of town and fast."

Something in Flynn's chest flinched at the idea. "You're leaving? You're going to run?"

He'd tried to make his voice as nonjudgmental as possible, but Eva's mouth twisted in a grimace.

"Yes, I'm going to run. That's what I do. I run. I tried to fight back once, and he broke my arm. I tried staying in one place and calling the police, over and over, but— Do you know what a restraining order is?"

He shook his head. He had no idea. Sounded important though. He didn't understand anything about human legal systems, but if the king gave an order of restraint, you could bet your ass somebody would be restrained.

From the look on Eva's face, this was not the case Topside.

"It's a piece of paper," she said bitterly. "Nothing but a piece of paper. And

Scott laughed at it, and then he snatched it out of my hand and pinned it to my front door with a knife. He drove that knife so far into the door that I couldn't get it out, even before he smashed my face into the doorjamb."

Flynn's muscles were trembling with the need to find this Scott and kill him. Slowly. He forced himself to stay silent and listen—this story was definitely not about him.

"I had to call a repair person and ultimately wound up buying my landlord a whole new door. You can bet he wouldn't renew my lease after that. That was maybe four, no, five towns ago. So yes, I run, because running is the only thing that's going to keep me alive," she finished, her head held high.

She'd seemed like a mouse back in the bar. A terrified, trembling little mouse. But she'd shown flashes of defiance even then, and the woman he sat across from now was talking about running even while her body language said that she wanted to fight. He'd known a lot of fighters in his life, and she had many of the hallmarks of one. He just needed to push her along; help her realize that she didn't always have to be prey.

On the other hand, she was one small woman against a black-magic user and his buddies in the Dark Angels. What chance had she really had?

He studied her, sitting there curled up on the corner of the couch, and realized a single hard truth. Whatever happened, now or in the future, Eva was never again going to have to face this Scott or his Dark Angel pals alone.

Flynn was going to protect her from them. He was going to succeed this time, even though he never had before.

This time failure was not an option.

"I need to tell you about me. About us. Atlantis and Poseidon's Warriors. About how I accidentally wound up being one," he admitted, leaning forward, elbows on knees and hands loosely clasped. "Their—our—sworn duty is to protect humanity, and I need to wrap my head around that. I spent most of my life running, so I do understand you. I spent a lot of time being completely selfish in all ways too. But that ended when Poseidon himself marked me—when Denal told us about the girls."

She leaned forward. "Tell *me* about the girls."

So he did. He told her everything, honestly, even the truths that made him look bad. He told her about going home to find his brothers, about Denal and the warriors, and about the mission.

He didn't tell her about his childhood. Not yet. He figured both of them had made enough painful confessions for one day.

Eva listened intently and asked a few clarifying questions but mostly just took in everything he had to say. When he finally finished, she jumped up and started pacing.

"I think it's admirable what you're doing, and—hey—it's still hard to wrap my mind around the 'you met Poseidon' part of this." She flashed a smile at him. "But what I don't understand is what you expect from me. I don't know anything about this chapter of the Dark Angels. I just got into town a couple of months ago. Like I said, I understand what you're doing, but I don't see how I can help. So I'm still back at where I was: I need to run, and I need to run now."

Flynn, quite admirably, he thought, resisted the urge to pound his head into the wall in frustration. Instead, he stood and faced her. "I get it. Your situation is terrifying, and the best way you've found to cope is to run. It even makes sense. I did it for years. But here's the thing: these girls can't run. They're prisoners. And the things that the Dark Angels will do to them are worse than any torture you can imagine."

She spun around, turning her back as if she couldn't bear to look at him. "I know," she cried. "Don't you think I know? But what can I do that the police can't?"

"You can help me figure out a way in. You learned something about the hierarchy of the chapter back in Oregon that Scott was a member of, right?"

"Snake."

He blinked. "What?"

"Snake." She turned back to face him and blew out a sigh. "When Scott really got in with the gang, they started calling him Snake. Snake and Monkey: the dynamic duo."

Flynn rolled his eyes. "Poseidon's *balls*. I don't care if his name is Snake, Worm, or Lizard. You don't understand how bad these guys can get—"

She took a step toward him and poked him in the chest, her face almost incandescent with anger. “Of course I understand these men—”

“No. You don’t.” Flynn caught her chin in his hand, forcing her to look at him. “You don’t understand them because you’re still calling them *men*. The upper echelon of the Dark Angels—do you know why they call themselves that? Dark Angels? Because they’re demons. *Actual* demons. Oriax, who’s rumored to be the head of the entire operation, is one of hell’s most-trusted generals.”

She wrenched her face out of his hand and shoved him, or at least she tried to shove him. It would take more effort than she had to actually push Flynn back a step. He caught her hands and held them against his chest.

“Please listen to me. Tell me what you know, as much as you can, and *then* you can run. Help me find a way in so we can get these girls before it’s too late.”

She stared at him for a long moment and then sighed. Ever so briefly, she leaned forward and rested her forehead against his chest, giving him the oddest sensation. Almost as if he wanted to wrap his arms around her and hold her close for a very long time.

This time though, he was the one to back away. Tender emotions were vastly more terrifying than demons, and much harder to understand than even the insane sexual attraction between them that was silent now but pulsing just beneath the surface of his skin. He was afraid of what might happen if he touched her—really touched her—afraid he’d lose all control.

Better to stay away because he would never, ever take a chance on frightening this woman.

“I’ll help,” she told him. “I’ll tell you whatever you need to know. We need to save those girls, you’re right. I can’t live with this on my conscience.”

“Thank you.” He touched her face gently. “Thank you.”

He started to say more, but then he heard Griffin calling to him on the Atlantean mental communication pathway. A few seconds later, the knock sounded at the window.

Eva gasped, stumbling back a step. “They found me. No, wait. That was— What was that? That’s the window over the garage. There aren’t any steps there.”

Flynn crossed to the window and jerked the curtains open to reveal Griffin's face on the other side of the glass. He looked down and realized that Griffin was floating in midair outside the window.

Of *course* he was.

Mages. They were all a bunch of damn show-offs.

Flynn jerked his thumb to the side of the apartment where the door was, and Griffin nodded. He shut the curtains and turned to face Eva, whose face was pale. She was close to cracking, and he needed to tell Jake and Griffin: *no more weird shit for a while*.

Not that "no weirdness" would be easy to pull off with a mage and a mermaid rescuer for teammates.

He sighed.

"It's okay. He's with me. Sort of. He's a mage, before you ask, so he's odd, and he's got these freaky silver eyes and white hair, but he's definitely on my side. Not only is he sworn to Poseidon, but on top of that, mages despise demons."

Eva nodded. "Fine. Sure. Of course he's a mage. You're an Atlantean, he's a mage, and here we are. If a horse with a long face walks into my apartment next, we're going to have the makings of a really great joke. Or an apocalypse."

Flynn frowned at her. "Don't all horses have long faces?"

She was still laughing when he opened the door but wouldn't tell him why. He made the introductions and was perversely pleased when Eva made a point to stay closer to him than to Griffin.

"I've been all over town," Griffin said, nodding to Eva but talking to Flynn. "No luck. I haven't been able to locate the kind of magic signature that would signify the gathering of a large group of magic users, or demons, or both. I don't know if that means they're blocking it or if their location is somewhere outside town."

"Outside town would make a lot more sense," Flynn said.

"I don't know where they could be because I haven't seen any of the Dark Angels in town before tonight," Eva put in. "Are you sure they even have a base here?"

Griffin looked at Flynn, who shrugged and answered, “I don’t know if it’s a base or just a onetime deal, but the sources we have definitely traced the girls here. The problem is local law enforcement and even Nevada’s governor are blocking P-Ops from coming in. They’re making noise about jurisdiction, but we suspect that either they’ve got somebody in the Dark Angels, or they’re being paid off. Either and/or both are likely. The gang controls too much crime, magic, and money.”

“The head of the group that just came into town, probably for the human sacrifices, is a seriously bad actor named Narco,” Griffin told them. “The rumor is that he was a mage, too, before he turned to black magic.”

“There have been rumors that the governor has ties to the gang,” Eva told them before she started to pace again. “I don’t know much, but here’s what I do know. Every local chapter has a leader. They call him an archangel, which is blasphemous, which seems to make them happy. He reports up the chain to a regional leader they call a demigod, also a bad joke, and the regional leaders report up to one head guy.” She glanced at Flynn, and he hated the fear in her eyes. “Or head demon, I guess.”

“And how do they take in new members?” Flynn asked, forcing himself not to go to her and scoop her up in his arms. Take her away from here. Never let her be afraid again.

The mission. The girls.

Eva shook her head. “There’s not a chance you or your friend could get in that way. At least not quickly. You impress them by doing something bad, and they might invite you. Isn’t that what your friend the surfer boy is doing? Even so, there’s a long apprenticeship. You’d have to have something they really want in order to get inside quicker than that.”

Flynn traded glances with Griffin, who looked at Eva and then shook his head. “I don’t know what we could have that they want. Jake did his part though. When the cops came in, he took the heat and said he started it all. Kept the Angels out of jail as far as I could tell. They were already talking about taking up a collection to bail him out.”

“That’ll help. That’s the kind of stupid gesture that impresses them,” Eva

said, pacing back and forth in the small space. “I’m sorry. I’m rude. Have a seat and I’ll grab you some water.”

“Water would be welcome,” Griffin said, taking a seat on her couch. The mage was so thoroughly out of place in her living room; it was like watching a panther sit down at a tea party. She got him a bottle of water and then took a seat on her chair, and Flynn sat on the other end of the couch.

“Where were you?” Flynn stared at the mage. “I didn’t see you inside.”

“I was looking for their headquarters, and then I was on the roof of the building when you and Miss—” He inclined his head toward Eva.

“Calandar. Eva Calandar. Please, just call me Eva.”

“As I said, I was on the roof of the building when you and Miss Calandar exited. I stayed around long enough to listen to what was going on, and I saw local law enforcement haul Jake off in handcuffs.”

“Too bad there wasn’t a mermaid around to rescue him,” Flynn said, momentarily amused.

Griffin almost smiled—the equivalent of a belly laugh in anyone else—but Eva gave Flynn a funny look, and he shrugged. “Nothing. Something Poseidon said. There’s no such thing as mermaids anyway.”

“That’s too bad,” Eva said, looking wistful. “Now that we know demons and shapeshifters and vampires exist, and even Atlantis and mages, it would be nice if something as beautiful as mermaids existed too.”

Griffin’s eyes widened, but before he could scoff at Eva, Flynn jumped in. “Well, there are sea Fae. But they’d just as soon bite your face off as look at you. They are beautiful though. Maybe I’ll introduce you to one someday. There’s a princeling who owes me a favor.”

Griffin’s odd silver gaze snapped toward Flynn. “Sea Fae and dragon shifters. Nothing about you screams trustworthy, does it?”

“More so than mysterious mages who float in midair and bang on a woman’s window in the middle of the night, don’t you think?” Eva said pointedly, making Flynn very happy.

Except, no. Not that happy at all. Those girls were still prisoners. He and Griffin needed to be *moving*...

Flynn suddenly had an idea. A terrible, horrible idea. But it was the first one he'd thought of that had even a fraction of a chance of helping them find the girls before they were harmed beyond any possibility of rescue. He hated himself for even thinking it and hated himself even more because he knew he was going to tell the two of them about it.

It would put Eva in danger.

But he would be *damned* if he would ever let Eva come to any harm, even if she agreed to go along with this insanity of a plan. He stood, needing to move, and started pacing as much as he could in the tiny apartment.

"I have an idea," he finally told them, regret and self-disgust making his voice hoarse. "Eva, you're going to hate it. I hate it too. But it's all I can think of."

She looked at him, her eyes widening, and then she slowly started to back away from him. "You want to use me as bait. I told you that you can't get in unless you have something to offer them, and the something you want to offer them is me. Because of Scott."

Her eyes were wild, and he despised himself for terrifying her like this. But the girls...

"Because of *Snake*, and I swear to you I can keep you safe," he said, feeling his gut curdle at the risk in that statement. After all, look at his track record. "Nobody will harm one hair on your head unless I'm already dead."

"Well, *that's* reassuring," she hurled at him.

Griffin studied them both. "What are you talking about?"

Eva shot him a withering glance. "Isn't it obvious? Flynn wants to give me to Snake and the Dark Angels. He wants to trade my life for the girls."

"That's not it at all. I said I can protect you," Flynn said hotly. "I'd give my life—"

Eva cut him off. "I don't want your life. I'm fine with my own, thanks. And protect me against this Oriax, the high demon? I don't even know what being a high demon entails, and I still know you're either a liar or a fool."

"Eva," he pleaded, reaching for her hand, but she recoiled and gave him a look filled with so much accusation he actually flinched.

Griffin just watched them, anything he thought hidden behind that eerie silver gaze.

Eva threw her hands in the air. “Fine. I figured I wouldn’t live past spring anyway. Apparently I’m not even going to live past January.”



Eva closed her suitcase and looked around the tiny apartment. It never took her long to pack because she'd shed possessions like she'd shed lives while running from place to place across the country. She only rented furnished rooms. She didn't see the point of owning much in the way of clothes beyond a few pairs of jeans and a few different tops. A couple of sweaters and one jacket for the cold weather. Boots, sneakers, and sandals for shoes. What more did a girl need?

And now she had a dilemma. Should she go to the bar while Flynn and the others worked on finding where the girls were being held? Noel had already called her six times and left five voice mail messages. She hadn't listened to any of them because she could pretty much guess what he had to say and the decibel level at which he'd say it.

It didn't matter anyway. When she left this place, she'd smash her burner phone and leave it in a trash can at a highway rest area, or better yet, she'd do what she'd done the last time and use duct tape to affix it to the underside of the bumper of a semi truck heading in the opposite direction. If they were tracking her by technology, she wasn't going to make it easy for them.

She'd already made it too easy for Scott to find her by way of magic. When he'd ripped a handful of hair out of her scalp, he'd laughed at her. On that last night, just before she finally got the courage to run, he taunted her with it.

“I can find you anywhere with this. Locator spells are among the simplest magics. So don’t even think about running.”

But back then, he hadn’t been nearly as powerful at magic as he’d liked to think he was. Even Eva, who had none, had known that. And she’d had just enough courage left that he hadn’t yet beaten out of her to make a plan and carry it out. She’d crushed several sleeping pills into his tequila and coaxed him into getting very, very drunk. When he passed out, she packed up everything she owned and started running.

In hindsight, she supposed she was lucky that he hadn’t died from the combination of alcohol and pills. Scott was slime, but he wasn’t worth facing a murder charge or jail time. She wouldn’t shed a tear if he died, but she also wouldn’t be the one to kill him. She kept hoping that one day he would cross the line somewhere, somehow, and go to jail. Whatever kind of jail they could keep black-magic practitioners in these days. She’d read something about special cells that P-Ops had constructed with the help of white-magic practitioners and experts from the shifter, vampire, and magic communities, but she didn’t know exactly how they worked.

It was true, though, that most of the supernatural communities’ citizens were good people who just wanted to live their lives. They tended to react very badly when one of their own kind went rogue, because it looked so bad for all of them and probably brought back fears of mobs with torches.

Beauty and the Beast took on a whole new meaning once you knew shapeshifters existed.

She’d been in Phoenix when the local shifter population had delivered the dead bodies of three wolf shifters to the local police station after the three had turned feral and attacked a family who’d been out camping.

She remembered thinking how horribly ironic it was that the three wolf shifters had turned human in death, and yet two of their four victims—the only two who’d survived—had turned shifter at the next full moon.

When she had shifters in her bars, she made sure to keep any exposed part of her body away from their hands. She knew it was stupid of her, and probably prejudiced, because only a scratch from a shifter in animal form could deliver

the virus, but still. Better safe than sorry. She had enough to worry about without turning furry under the full moon.

She wasn't going to get any sleep now, so she decided to head to the shelter and help out. Mornings were usually pretty busy. Especially Saturday mornings when families liked to visit and bring the children to try to find a pet.

Anyway, the last thing she wanted to do was sit alone and think about Scott or what she was planning to do.

Or Flynn either.

Definitely not Flynn. How could they have shared that intensely erotic connection so hard and so fast, only to get swept away on the tide of duty and obligation? She'd hoped... Never mind what she'd hoped. She needed a donut. She picked up her keys and started out the door but then paused, staring at her suitcase.

"Just in case," she whispered to the empty room.

When she left the driveway, the suitcase was in the trunk of her car.

She took a slight detour to the bakery on the way to the shelter and picked up a couple of coffees and an entire box of donuts. Mrs. M had a terrible sweet tooth and liked to say she planned to indulge all she wanted from here on out.

"I've eaten healthy and exercised all my life," she'd told Eva. "And I promised myself that once I made it to eighty, I would do whatever I wanted. So if I want to eat donuts every morning for breakfast, then that's what I'll do."

Eva smiled at the thought as she pulled into the driveway at the shelter, but then her heart sank. *Mrs. M*. What if she'd seen Griffin floating around outside Eva's apartment last night? What if somebody came looking for Eva and found Mrs. M.?

Eva wouldn't put it past Monkey or any of Scott's other thugs to hurt a little old lady as a way to get information.

Her breath started to come faster and faster until she was practically hyperventilating. Her heart raced. This was a terrible plan. She couldn't take a chance on dying before she ever saw Gramps again. How could Flynn and his small band of allies really save her from a high demon?

She had to leave. She had to *run*.

She'd tell Mrs. M today that she was moving out and never go back to the apartment. She'd also explain just enough to convince her landlady to leave tonight, a few days early, for her annual two weeks at her sister's in California.

Then she'd go to the bar and tell slimy Noel that tonight was her last night. If she didn't work, he probably wouldn't pay her for the week since he usually paid her on Saturdays. She'd be better off not to tell him anything until after she had her pay in hand.

She'd also *loudly* say something about how she was headed to North Dakota or Montana. And then she'd get in her car and drive straight to Florida.

Except... except. How would she ever be able to live with herself if she ran?

She sat there in her car, staring into space for a very long time. And then a sense of peace settled over her. Yes. She'd leave. Just as soon she helped Flynn and his team find the girls and save them.

Or die trying, the nasty, scared part of her mind tried to say, but she stopped listening. Her decision was made, and that brought its own measure of calm. So she probably would never make it to Florida. She probably wasn't going to live long enough to get out of Nevada.

But hey. At least her death would mean something. How many people could say that?

Gramps.

She had to call him and somehow say goodbye without actually saying it. She didn't know what would be better—for him to know she'd died, or to always wonder what happened to her. Maybe she should write it out in a letter and mail it, but she didn't know how to tell the person she loved most in the world that she was headed off to her death, so she decided instead that it was better that he live with hope for whatever time he had left.

That's when the tears came. She pounded her fist on the dashboard and sobbed, crying out the pain—a mixture of anger and sorrow for what could've been if only she'd listened when Gramps and her friends had warned her away from Scott. But she didn't allow herself the luxury of self-pity for very long. She wiped her face, blew her nose, and got out of the car.

Time to say goodbye to Mrs. M and the dogs and cats.

Time to say goodbye to Daisy.

The thought brought a fresh wave of tears to her eyes, but she blinked hard and fast and forced them back. Mrs. M would make sure Daisy found a good home. Would make sure all the dogs and cats found good homes. She'd find someone else to volunteer, someone else to rent the little apartment in which Eva had felt so safe, if even for such a short while.

But only Eva could save those girls, she reminded herself, deciding to take it as a mantra.

Save the girls, save the girls, save the girls.

Just then Mrs. M stepped out on the porch of the office, her arms filled with two large bags of dog food. "Eva? What in the world are you doing standing out in the parking lot? We have so much to do! I've got at least five families coming in when we open at nine o'clock. Get your butt in gear, girl. We've got cages to clean and hungry dogs and cats to feed."

Eva laughed and surreptitiously wiped away her tears. "You got it. Let me just put your coffee and donuts on the counter."

"Did you say donuts?" Mrs. M's eyes lit up. "You're an angel among angels."

An angel. Well. She'd be "among angels" soon enough. For now she'd feed some puppies and try not to think about anything at all.



Flynn watched Eva drive away, and then he stood, stretched, and stepped off the edge of her roof. For such a short distance, it wasn't necessary to materialize into mist, one of his preferred modes of travel. He just called to the water molecules in the air to slow and then cushion his descent. Griffin, on the other hand, simply floated down and looked perfectly calm about doing so.

More mage tricks.

"I still don't understand why you insisted we stay here instead of going back to our quarters to rest," Griffin said, scowling. "From what you've explained to

me, it's not as if someone would find her here this fast anyway."

"And do you want to take that chance?" He'd told the mage they had to protect their asset, but he had the uncomfortable feeling that Griffin knew he was lying. Or at least not telling the whole truth.

She wasn't an asset. She was *Eva*. And he wanted to protect her for the sake of his own soul. He'd let too many he should have been protecting die on his watch. It wasn't going to happen again.

"Divide and conquer then?" Flynn pulled the bike key out of his pocket. "Jake communicated that he's fine, and they're releasing him this morning. We'll take him at his word that he's going to try to get in good with the Dark Angels who came to bail him out. In the daylight, we should be able to do a better sweep of the area and try to find where they have those girls."

Griffin nodded. "Agreed. You're going on wheels then?" He nodded toward Flynn's bike. "I renewed the spell that keeps humans from seeing your sword, by the way."

"Thanks. And yeah, I'll take the bike. I can cover a lot of ground on it."

"I'll take to the air then. Stay in touch and we will meet up the minute one of us finds them." With that, the mage shot up into the air, dissolving into sparkling mist as he flew.

Flynn liked that Griffin had said *when* we find them, not *if* we find them. Confidence was a good quality in a teammate.

Now all they had to do was find whatever rat hole the Dark Angels were using for their headquarters, pretend to offer to trade Eva to Snake in exchange for a place in the gang, keep Eva safe, destroy Snake, rescue the girls, and then fight their way out.

With or without one of hell's high demons fighting them.

Piece of cake.

Flynn shook his head and swung a leg over his bike. Him; Griffin—a fairly untrained mage from what he could tell; Jake, if he really *could* get out of jail; and possibly this human named Zach who claimed to be P-Ops. Everybody knew that the Dark Angels assigned covert operatives to infiltrate law enforcement. Was it possible that law enforcement had agents infiltrating the

gang?

And if so, just how many of them were double or even triple agents? It would have been helpful if Denal had spent less time sneering at them and more time giving them actual helpful information.

All of this analysis was making his head spin. He was definitely not cut out for a life of spying or espionage. He put a hand down to touch the sword resting in its special sheath affixed to the side of the bike. Griffin's magic made it invisible, or least extraordinarily hard to see, to anyone who wasn't from Atlantis. It wasn't a metal sword, after all. Or at least not a metal that humans knew.

Flynn's sword was made of orichalcum, a rare and precious Atlantean metal. Malleable enough to be heated and folded repeatedly into the shape of the sword, strong enough to survive years of battle. Flynn's grandfather had given him the sword when the old man had finally accepted that his son was a useless drunk and would never deserve to wield it, let alone own it. The sword had been in their family for generations, since before Atlantis sank beneath the sea.

It had come in handy more than once in Flynn's life, although humans weren't much for swordfights these days. But there were times when a gun just didn't work, and more and more demons and human magic-wielders had found new ways to detect metal in their proximity.

They weren't going to detect this.

Flynn suddenly realized that, for the first time in his life, his grandfather would be proud of him.

"I'm going to do my best, Grandfather," he whispered, and then he fired up the bike and took off.

It was past time to find those girls.



At six o'clock, Eva walked into the Copper Cantina for the last time. The first person she spotted was Noel, standing behind the bar yelling at some workers who were cleaning up bits of broken chairs and tables.

Tables too? What the heck happened in here last night?

Never mind. She didn't want to know.

This was her last night at the Copper Cantina. Her last night of putting up with Noel. Forever. And if he really pissed her off, she had a backup plan in her pocket.

He caught sight of her and threw his hands in the air. "Where the hell were you? My bar was getting trashed—"

"Your *daddy's* bar," she interrupted. "You just work here."

Noel's mouth fell open. The he started sputtering, and she laughed. How had she never realized before how much he looked like a frog with his balding head, bulging eyes, and jowly cheeks? She had been afraid of *this* pitiful excuse for a human being?

Ha.

Not anymore. Imminent death apparently made one unafraid of any petty annoyances like slime ball managers.

"You're fired!" he shouted.

She marched right up to the bar and held out her hand. “Fine. I didn’t want to work tonight anyway. Hand over my week’s pay and I’m out of here.”

Noel sneered at her. “If you think I’m giving you one cent, you’re out of your mind, you worthless piece of trash.”

Eva leaned on the bar and gave him a flat stare. “Oh, I think you will pay me. Or I’m going to pick up the phone and call your wife and tell her all about your roaming hands.”

The guys cleaning up the bar stopped even pretending to work and stood gaping at the spectacle. Noel turned a particularly virulent shade of purple, but he tried to bluff his way out of it. “Like she would believe a worthless loser like you.”

“I guess you can take your chances. Of course, from what Missy has to say, there’ve been enough incidents in the past that Mrs. Noel might believe me a lot more than you think.” She smiled, showing all her teeth and enjoying every second of this. Probably she should be more worried that Monkey or the other Dark Angels would come back, but Scott had mentioned time and time again that one of the rules was they could never go back to a place after law enforcement came after them there.

Was she taking a risk to believe that was still true? Would Snake’s desperate obsession with her force Monkey to keep searching and probably come back here tonight? Probably, but what the heck. Maybe it would be better to confront them tonight and get it over with, her suddenly fatalistic mind told her.

She returned her attention to her sorry excuse for a boss, but he was still gaping at her.

Noel opened his mouth, but nothing except strangled noises came out. He finally got himself under control, reached under the bar, grabbed an envelope, and slapped it into her outstretched hand. “Fine. But Missy called in sick, and when she called, she told me she was sure you’d be happy to pick up the slack since she did the same for you when you had the flu.”

Eva closed her eyes and mentally groaned. It was true. Missy had picked up the slack, and she’d brought a tureen of homemade chicken noodle soup to Eva’s little apartment too. If Eva walked out now, Noel was likely to fire Missy out of

petty spite, and Eva knew Missy needed the job. She and Bryce were saving up to buy a house so they could start a family. Eva wouldn't have her friend get hurt on her account.

"All right," she snapped, clearly surprising Noel. "I'll do it. But this is my last night. You pay me in advance for the hours, and I take all tips home with me. You don't put your slimy hands on any of them."

One of Noel's nasty habits was to try to make them hand over their tips so he could "fairly distribute them." What it really meant, they'd all discovered, was that he was stealing a percentage of their money.

Unfortunately, it was one of those things that she'd had to let slide because jobs in Early were few and far between unless you wanted to go work in the copper mine. And, of course, Eva couldn't easily find cash-paying businesses these days.

"Fine." Noel opened the cash register to get some more cash and thrust it at Eva. "Satisfied? I'm only letting you stay because I have nobody else and it's a Saturday night," he told her, always determined to get the final word.

She just shrugged. She didn't care about Noel's petty tactics or his final words either. She was trying to figure out what her *own* final words would be.

Probably: "*Scott! Please don't shove that ceremonial dagger into my heart!*"

The fact that she could still muster up some humor, even dark, dark humor, was oddly reassuring. It meant she must have *some* hope.

Her thoughts went to Flynn. Yes. She did have hope.

What a dangerous thing.



Eva put her money in her pocket and then set to work. Broken chairs or no broken chairs, the cantina was going to fill up. It was Saturday night, after all. She spent a relatively peaceful two or three hours pouring drinks and chatting with customers. Anytime she caught Noel looking at her, she bared her teeth at him, and he hurriedly looked away. Okay, so it might be a petty kind of revenge, but the important thing was she'd stood up for herself.

She'd faced down a bully, and it had felt fantastic. Almost like she was beginning to remember the real Eva—the Eva she'd been before Scott destroyed her life.

On the other hand, now he was about to destroy her life in an entirely different way.

No. No, she wasn't going to let him. She was going to help rescue those girls, and she'd trust herself and Flynn and his odd group of allies to get themselves and the girls away from anything that an actual demon might have in mind for them.

She shuddered at the thought and then went back to pouring draft beers for Noel's wife's cousin Becky, who'd come in to help.

Becky leaned in. "I hear you let Noel have what's what," she said, grinning.

"Finally," Eva said. "I hope it doesn't cause you any trouble."

"Nah. My cousin only puts up with him because his daddy's really, really rich and Noel's the only child. One day he's going to inherit everything, and Tina likes the idea of having some money for a change. But she's not above taking a broom to him once in a while when he gets out of hand."

Eva took a moment to enjoy the visual of some sturdy country woman going after Noel with a broom, and she caught herself smiling. "As a matter of fact, there's something I'd like to tell you. This is my last night, so don't worry about me, but if you could maybe make sure that he's good to Missy, I'd appreciate it."

Becky's gaze sharpened. "What do you mean, don't worry about you? Has he been getting handsy with you?"

Eva said nothing, but her face must've given it away, because Becky narrowed her eyes and turned to scan the bar. She saw Noel across the room and started to take a step but then stopped. "Oh, no. That's too easy. I have a better idea. I'm calling Tina."

Eva grinned. "Is it really wrong of me to say that I really, *really* hope I'm here to see it?"

About twenty minutes later, when Eva was turned around with her back to the bar, rearranging bottles and switching out a full vodka for an empty, the very air around her changed and grew charged. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck

shivered to attention, and she *knew*.

Flynn had arrived.

She looked into the mirrored panels on the wall and directly into his beautiful ocean-blue eyes.



Damn, but she was gorgeous. He wasn't sure why he thought so, but he did. She wasn't someone he'd necessarily notice walking down the street, except for that incredible red hair. She wasn't bold or brash, and she was too thin—too pale. But something about her—the force of her personality—infused her face with a quiet beauty.

Except when she smiled. When she smiled, she was vividly, *gloriously* radiant.

He'd found himself thinking about her all day long. Wanting to learn more about her. Wanting to feed her Atlantean delicacies until she lost that thin, haunted look. Wanting to show her the wonders of his home.

He even wanted her to meet his brothers and their new wives. Of course, *he* needed to meet their new wives too. They could have a great big family dinner and introduce everybody to everybody and—

Family dinner? Was he already thinking of her as his family?

Talk about ridiculously premature.

And yet...

She looked up and met his gaze in the mirror and smiled. Just for a moment, she smiled at him. A private smile, only for him. A warm smile that held welcome. That said she was glad to see him. But it only lasted for a heartbeat, and then the realization of what they were going to be walking into hit both of them all over again.

Eva whirled around. "Did you—"

Flynn held up a hand to stop her from saying anything in public. "No luck yet."

Her shoulders slumped, and Flynn again found himself wanting to pick her

up and carry her out of there. Carry her far away from any danger.

But first they had to find and rescue those girls. Damn the Dark Angels. Flynn wished they'd *all* fall into a pit and burn in hell.

Eva put her elbows on the bar and leaned toward Flynn. "I think we should ___"

The front door slammed open so hard that the glass in the little window shattered. Flynn spun around and reached behind his head for the hilt of the sword that wasn't there. It was still in its sheath on his bike.

Damn. He had his knives, but he suddenly, urgently wanted every weapon in his possession within reach so he could protect Eva from... three women in cotton dresses?

Was one of them carrying a broom? Maybe they were the cleaning staff?

What was happening?

"Noel!" the biggest of the three bellowed. Although, to be fair, they were all three big. At least six feet tall each, they all looked sturdy enough to pick up a cow. Or, at the very least, to deal with Noel the scumbag.

The steady drone of voices and laughter went completely silent. Flynn, Eva, and everybody else in the bar watched as the woman stomped over to Noel and poked him in the chest with the broom handle.

"I hear you're up to it again," she screamed in a voice that surely could be heard all the way to Atlantis. "I warned you. I *warned* you what I'd do."

"Now, honey," Noel began ingratiatingly, cringing away from the broom.

"Don't you 'honey' me." Mrs. Noel, for that's who she must be, looked around the bar and then pointed her broom handle in a sort of sweeping way that encompassed them all. "Okay, you're done. Bar's closed. Get out."

There was one or two mumbles of disagreement, but that quickly died out when the angry woman fixed her stare on any dissenters. The customers fled with varying degrees of haste, all of them openly staring at the drama as they went.

"Give me your wallet," Mrs. Noel ordered her husband, who hastily complied. Then she stomped across the bar toward Eva.

Flynn moved to stand between the two women, but Eva's hand on his

shoulder stopped him.

“I’ve got this,” she said, gently but firmly.

When Mrs. Noel reached the bar, she looked Eva up and down. “Are you Eva?”

Eva nodded. “I am, but you don’t have to worry. I quit. I was just filling in tonight because Missy’s sick.”

The woman frowned. “I was worried about *you*, honey. I want to apologize for that perverted little jackass. He swore he’d stopped bothering the help. If I’d known sooner, I’d have done something about it.”

She opened Noel’s wallet, took out all the cash inside, and thrust it at Eva. “It’s not much. Maybe a thousand bucks. And if you want to sue him, I totally understand. I’ll even testify about the crap he pulled in the past.”

Eva hesitated, but then she took the money and nodded at Noel’s wife. “I won’t be suing. I’m moving on. But maybe, on my behalf, you could make sure he never does this to anybody again.”

“Oh, that won’t be a problem,” Mrs. Noel said grimly. “Noel is out of the bar business now. I’m taking over the cantina. Noel is gonna be a farmer from here on out.”

Flynn looked across the room to see how Noel was taking this news, and he was unsurprised to see the asshole trying to sneak out the door.

Too bad for Noel that it was nearly impossible to sneak out a door when it was guarded by two more Amazons the size of his wife. They each grabbed one of his arms and held on tight. Noel wasn’t going anywhere except back to the farm.

Flynn laughed for the first time in a long, frustrating day.

Noel’s wife glared at him. “What are you laughing about?”

Flynn smiled at her, keeping an eye on the broomstick that was propped up against the bar. There were certain parts of his anatomy he preferred to protect. “I just love it when a good woman happens to a bad man, ma’am. And you seem to be a very good woman.”

She sniffed at him but seemed placated, which meant that she didn’t decide to ram her broomstick into his balls, which was good. She nodded to Eva, who

nodded back, and then Mrs. Noel stormed across the room, grabbed her wayward husband by the ear, and dragged him out of the bar. They stopped at the doorway, and she looked back. “Eva, do me the favor of locking up and just drop the keys back through the mail slot, if you would?”

Flynn thought it said something about the woman’s judgment—which had obviously improved in the years since she’d married Noel—that she trusted Eva to close up the bar. But clearly she did, and just as clearly Eva deserved that trust.

“Yes, I will. Thank you,” Eva added, glancing at Noel and then back at his wife. “Thank you.”

The woman nodded, took a firmer grip on her husband’s ear, and the four of them left the bar.

“I’m kind of glad I got here in time to see that,” Flynn admitted. Eva’s face was set in proud, stern lines, like the face of an avenging angel, and he wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms and kiss her until she couldn’t breathe. His warrior princess.

Instead, he tried for casual. “But now that you’re off duty, how about we go get some dinner? I’ve been driving all over this corner of the state, and I’m starving.”

“I could eat,” she said. Then, with brisk efficiency and a bit of help from Flynn, they got the bar closed up in no time. Just as they were walking out the door, however, Eva saw an older woman walking by on the sidewalk.

“Mrs. Arnold? Will you please do me a favor, ma’am?”

Mrs. Arnold, who looked to be in her sixties—not that Flynn was all that good at judging human ages—was walking a fluffy dog on a sparkly pink leash. She looked over at Eva and smiled.

“Oh, hello, dear. I haven’t seen you since I got my Muffin here from the shelter. Are you still volunteering there and helping out?”

“I am,” Eva said, but Flynn saw a flash of pain cross her face. “In fact, though, I have to leave town for a while, and I’m just closing up the bar for Noel. Will you please do me a favor and look inside and verify that everything looks the way it should before I lock up? I don’t mean to be paranoid, but you

know Noel...”

Mrs. Arnold nodded sharply. “I most certainly do.” Without another word, she walked in the bar and looked around a bit. When she came back out, Eva handed her a zippered bag.

“This is the night deposit, or what there is of it since we closed early. Will you also verify that there’s money in it and drop it at the bank for me? Just in case, you know.”

Mrs. Arnold patted Eva’s arm. Then she glanced curiously at Flynn, but evidently her manners were too good for her to ask any questions. “Of course I will. You take care, and I hope you come back soon. I know Mrs. M will be lost without you.”

Flynn locked the door, and Eva dropped the keys back through the old-fashioned mail slot. As they watched Mrs. Arnold and Muffin head off toward the bank on the corner, Flynn looked a question at Eva.

“She’s the mayor,” Eva told him. “Before that, she was sheriff for ten years. The town certainly would be lot better off with her still as sheriff rather one of Noel’s stupid family members. There’s nobody more reputable in town, just in case Noel’s wife has a change of heart about me later.”

“Makes sense. Where to for dinner?” They started toward the little parking lot for Eva’s car, but the sound of an approaching motorcycle made her flinch.

Flynn turned to look and immediately moved to block Eva with his body.

“It’s the monkey man,” he said tersely. “We need to get you to your car if they don’t already have someone flanking us. Stay close to me. I don’t know what he wants, but it can’t be anything good.”

The gang member, though, stopped his bike at a safe dozen paces away. Apparently he did not have fond memories of Flynn from the previous night.

“Eva, Snake is coming for you,” Monkey called out. “You should just come with me now and make it easy on everybody.”

“You should leave now, while you still have legs,” Flynn shot back, face and voice deadly calm.

Monkey flinched but stood his ground. Clearly he was more afraid of Snake than he was of Flynn. He bent and reached down into a pocket on his pants leg

that was too small to hold a gun—Flynn was paying very close attention—and pulled out a telephone. He tossed it at Flynn, who snatched it out of the air.

“That’s a burner phone. It only has one number on it, and there’s only one number that’s gonna call it. Snake’s gonna call you, pretty Eva. He wants to meet up.”

With that, he gunned his bike and took off.

“And we’re off,” Eva said lightly, her golden eyes more haunted than ever. “I guess I found out what else could go wrong.”



Eva suddenly wasn't very hungry anymore, but she knew she needed food. She'd eaten almost nothing all day. She needed to keep her strength up if she was to have any hope of outwitting Scott—*Snake*—and his demonic powers.

She glanced over at the very large Atlantean warrior crammed into the passenger seat of her very small car. "Are you okay if we just drive through someplace? I don't really feel like being around people right now. I know a place out in the desert, not very far, where we could eat and have some peace and quiet while we figure out what we're doing."

"Yes, I think that would be great. Do you want..." He sighed and looked out the window, his sentence trailing off.

"Do I want what?"

"Do you want me to get Griffin to join us so we can talk out the plans?"

"No." After she blurted out the word, she felt like she had to explain. She wasn't sure *how* to explain though. She just knew she wanted time alone with Flynn, time to relax and feel safe before whatever was going to happen, happened. The mage wasn't the type of person who was restful to be around.

"I just feel like enjoying some peace and quiet before my human sacrifice," she said, a weak attempt at a joke.

"Not funny," Flynn growled. He reached across the seat, took her hand,

squeezed it once, and then let go so she could put it back on the steering wheel.

“I’m not going to let him hurt you,” he said, and his words had the ring of a vow. Eva suddenly felt as if something sacred had passed between them in the dimly lit, intimate, cave-like space inside the speeding car.

Cave. Cave-like space. What was...

Before she could follow the thought to its end though, she arrived at the drive-through restaurant and lost her train of thought. She gave their order of burgers, fries, and milkshakes—hey, the condemned deserved a good last meal, to heck with the calories—and then headed out into the moonlit night toward the desert.

She loved it out here. The peace and the open space. She loved the mountains too, and the ocean. Anywhere in nature, preferably with a dog or five by her side, and she would be happy hiking all day long. She hadn’t had much time for it lately, what with always being on the run and trying to make enough money to stay ahead of the Dark Angels in the next place Snake chased her down.

Maybe, if she survived this, she’d make a point to go hiking at least once a week.

Flynn was quiet on the drive, glancing at her every once in a while but saying nothing. Instead of being tense, the silence between them felt almost peaceful, even though the low hum of constant sexual tension between them never went away in spite of the danger they were in. She felt as if she could find him in a dark room, even if she were blindfolded, by feeling her way along the electric current that sparkled and snapped between them.

She had so many questions she wanted to ask him, but they could wait a while. Just for now, in the car, she would enjoy this little bubble of peace and pretend nothing dangerous could ever find them.

When she arrived at the turnoff, she signaled and slowed down, and Flynn spoke up for the first time in about fifteen miles.

“Where are we?”

“There’s a hiking path trailhead at the end of this little road. Almost nobody ever uses it though, or at least not when I’ve been here. And certainly nobody

will be here in the dark. There's a picnic table. I thought we could get out, stretch our legs, and eat."

She suddenly felt shy. What if he thought it was a stupid idea? On the heels of that thought came another, stronger one.

Why should she care?

If he was the type of person who thought her idea of a picnic was stupid, he wasn't worth her time, was he?

She smiled at the feel of another piece of her damaged soul fitting itself back into the puzzle that was Eva. Pre-Scott Eva.

Authentic Eva.

"A picnic sounds wonderful," Flynn said, sighing with what sounded like contentment. "I've never been a fan of spending a lot of time in cities and towns. Towns are full of people, and people come with problems. And if you don't have any problems of your own, they'll be glad to foist theirs off on you."

She threw a wry glance at him, and he had the sense to look sheepish. After all, he'd foisted his problems on her. But no. Not his problems. Those girls were more than just problems. They *had* to find them soon.

She parked and locked the car, and they walked down a path to a place that opened up and contained a few benches and a couple of picnic tables. As she'd guessed, hers had been the only car in the lot. Nobody was here either. She picked up a newspaper that someone had left on a table and put in the recycling bin.

Flynn, meanwhile, was unwrapping their food. "This smells amazing," he said, groaning. "I had no idea how hungry I was until I smelled this food. It was torture not to just rip into it in the car."

She grinned at him. "Yeah, at first I thought my engine was making another new sound, and then I realized it was your stomach growling."

He laughed and handed her a milkshake. "Maybe. But I think two double cheeseburgers will take care of that for me."

Eva started to unwrap her chicken sandwich. "Sure, if it doesn't kill you—"

She froze, her words trailing off.

Flynn moved around to sit on Eva's side of the bench with her. "Stop it.

Nobody's killing you. Nobody's dying. You're going to stay alive and fight the good fight. We're going to get those girls out of there as soon as we find them, and we're pretty sure that Snake is the way to do it. So let's talk about something else for a while, at least until I hear from Griffin. He's doing another swing around the area, widening the perimeter of his search, and I told him to tail Monkey and see where he goes."

She sighed and sat down. "That's a good idea."

He took a big bite of his sandwich, chewed, and swallowed, then took a long drink of his milkshake. "Did you know hamburgers are originally from Atlantis?"

She paused just before taking a bite of her own sandwich. "No. Really?"

A wicked smile spread across Flynn's face, and she caught a glint of the whiteness of his teeth in the moonlight. "Sure. The only problem was, we had to wait for you humans to invent hamburger buns."

He burst out laughing, and she just stared at him. It took her a ridiculously long minute, but then she got it. She could feel the laughter fizzing in her belly, but she tried to fight it. The laughter was having none of that. It burst out, and she laughed and laughed until she couldn't even catch her breath.

"I appreciate it, but that joke was not that funny," Flynn finally said between stuffing french fries in his mouth. "You're either a really easy audience, or that was just stress relief."

"A bit of both," Eva confessed, hiccupping. "I think I needed that. I feel a lot better."

"Laughter will do that to you. Although I'd think seeing Mrs. Noel drag her husband out of the bar by the ear would have been the high point of your year."

She grinned at him. "You know what? You're right. This has been a banner day."

They finished their food, chatting about nothing, and then gathered up the trash and put it in the wastebasket. Impulsively, Eva looked up at Flynn. "I know it's dark, but are you up for a walk? The moon is so bright tonight that we can see perfectly well."

"Also, I have superior Atlantean vision," he smugly informed her, reaching

for her hand.

She laughed, but she let him take her hand, and they started down the path.

“So. Tell me about you,” he said, steering her around a fallen branch. “Tell me about you before Snake and Monkey and the rest of the demon zoo. Where is your family?”

Eva’s hand convulsively tightened on Flynn’s at the word *family*. She had to call Gramps. It wasn’t fair—it wouldn’t be fair for her to just disappear without talking to him one more time. She trusted Flynn, she did—or at least she was pretty sure she did—but when demons and black-magic users were involved, there was no guarantee she would make it out alive. And she couldn’t—she wouldn’t—walk into that situation without talking to her grandfather one more time. No matter how much it hurt.

“All I have is my grandfather. Gramps. He and Gran raised me after my parents died. I was a surly, awful teenager in a world of pain, and he made it better. Not all the way better, of course, but just enough. Just enough to help me realize that I could survive. Gran’s gone now, and Gramps is all I have left in the world.”

Flynn said nothing for about another twenty feet or so, and she kind of liked that he didn’t rush in to offer empty platitudes.

“You must miss him very much,” he finally said quietly.

“Yes. I do, but I can’t go back there until the situation with Scott is resolved. I can’t put him in any danger. He’s still in his own home, but he’s getting more and more frail, and I don’t know what the stress would do to him. The stress of my being gone is bad enough, but he thinks I’m having a grand adventure. I make sure to send him chatty postcards full of lies from wherever I go.”

Flynn was silent again for a little while, but he squeezed her hand in a gesture of reassurance. “My dad—my father was a drunk. He was a violent, abusive drunk, and my mom was a drunk too, but she was quieter about it. I escaped as soon as I could, and I never looked back. I left my brothers, both younger than me, because I just couldn’t take it anymore. I abandoned them, hoping that since he’d never beaten them before—only me—he wouldn’t begin when I left. Later though, I talked to my brother, the one who’s a ship captain,

and I found out just how bad it got for them. I abandoned them to that when I was their big brother. I was meant to protect them.”

She wanted to pull him into her arms and soothe the wounded child who’d had to leave a home filled with pain. The raw anguish in his voice told her that he was in no way past it.

“They’ll forgive you,” she said, instinctively knowing which part of it hurt him the most. “They’ll forgive you, and they’ll understand. You just need to reach out.”

Flynn stopped walking and turned to face her. “How could you know that? How could you know that reaching out is my biggest fear?”

“I have no idea,” she said honestly. “It was just a feeling—an overwhelming feeling—that I got from you suddenly. That never happens to me with people.”

“It never happens to you with *people*?” Flynn’s dark eyes shone in the moonlight, almost glowing, fascinating her. Instantly, the overwhelming attraction between them flooded back into her body, and she could feel herself straining toward him. She wanted to put her hands on him, touch him, hold him. She wanted him to wrap her up in his strong, muscular arms.

It didn’t make sense—it couldn’t make sense—but she wanted this man more than she’d ever wanted anyone in her life.

She was trying to figure out what she could possibly say or do at that moment when Flynn made a strange noise. She looked up at him, but he was staring intently over her shoulder. She started to turn around, but he caught her arms and held her still.

“Don’t make any sudden moves,” he warned her in a very quiet voice. “The local animal kingdom has decided to come visit, and I don’t know these animals. I don’t know their threat level.”

Eva sighed. Of all the inopportune times for her gift to raise its furry head. She slowly turned around, but Flynn kept her in the circle of his arms, protecting her from... a coyote family. It must have been following them down the path.

When she looked at them, they all sat down in a row. The father, mother, and three little ones all sat there calmly, watching Eva. She had to smile.

“No, they’re not dangerous to us, Flynn. Those are coyotes, and normally

they avoid people. They're shy little things."

Flynn tightened his arms around her waist and pulled her back against his chest. "Sure. Except they're very clearly not avoiding people right now. Do you think they might have some disease or be under some magic spell?"

She shook her head and gently removed his vise grip from around her waist, although she felt a slight pang of loss when she did it. "It's not exactly a magic spell; more like a magical gift. I have an affinity for animals, and sometimes when they feel it—feel me—they come to find me. Just to say hi, I think."

She knelt, one knee on the path, and smiled at the animals. "Go on your way and be well, little family. Keep those babies away from the eagles and hawks."

The boldest of the three babies started toward her, wriggling his little body in a way that reminded her so much of Daisy that she got a lump in her throat. But mama gently scooped up her wayward babe and, with a single glance back at Eva and Flynn, led her family off. Daddy Coyote took the rear guard, casting suspicious looks at Flynn as he herded his family away.

Eva stood and watched them go.

"They didn't like me much," Flynn said, wry amusement in his voice.

"Don't take it personally. Like I said, they mostly stay away from humans. Especially when they have young to protect."

"Even coyotes can tell I'm not someone to trust to protect their young," Flynn said roughly. His hands were clenched into fists at his side, and Eva took one between her hands and smoothed his fingers out until they lay flat.

"That wasn't about coyotes. Tell me."

They walked in silence for maybe ten minutes before Flynn finally let his head fall back and spoke, his gaze fixed on the stars. "I told you about my brothers. That was my first failure. But I've just had one far, far worse. I thought I'd made friends. Even thinking about making friends is always a stupid thing to do in this world, because it hurts that much more when they stab you in the back. I'm sure that's how Kian felt about me too."

She stayed silent. She didn't want to spook him any more than she did any other wild creature. For Flynn was almost certainly feral, and she had no illusions of being the woman who could finally tame him.

He tightened his hold on her hand as they walked around the small loop that turned into the path back to the parking area. “Kian and his family are dragon shifters who live on the coast of Ireland. They’re having a problem. Not his family—not only his family—but all their kind. The females—they can’t make the transition easily. When they’re about fourteen or fifteen, they make their first transition into dragon shape. Most of the females don’t survive it.”

Harsh, biting pain underscored each and every word, and she wanted so much to reach up and smooth the furrows of anguish from his forehead. “I’m so sorry. That’s a horrible, horrible thing. I haven’t heard anything about that in the news.”

Flynn shook his head. “No, dragons are very private. They keep their secrets and guard them as fiercely as they do their treasure hoards.”

“They really do have treasure hoards? That’s not just a myth?”

Flynn raised one dark eyebrow. “Yes. It’s just a myth. Like shifters, and dragons, and Atlantis.”

She tried to imagine what it would be like to actually see a dragon cave someday. And then laughed at herself for what her long-gone ordinary, normal life had become. Demons and dragons and Atlantean warriors.

Oh, my.

“Okay, okay. You’ve made your point. But I’m so terribly sorry to hear that about your friend and his people.”

“Thank you. He had a younger sister,” Flynn added, and then he had to clear his throat.

Eva’s heart sank at the verb tense. He *had* a younger sister. She knew what was coming, but she also knew he needed to talk about it, so she stayed silent and tried to send all her sympathy to him through the touch of their hands.

“Her name was Kyla. She was a little scamp.”

They walked past a row of rabbits lined up along the side of the path, watching Eva, but Flynn only spared them a brief glance through hooded eyes.

“She loved her big brother. And she had a huge heart, so she loved her big brother’s friend. Me. She followed us around everywhere. I never had a sister of my own, so it was nice. Nice to be part of the family in a way. I hung out there

for maybe a year.”

She could read the pain in the way his jaw was clenched, in the tight way he held his shoulders. In the tightness of his grip on her hand as she waited for him to continue.

He fell silent again, so after a moment, Eva ventured a question. “How old was she?”

“Exactly the right question,” Flynn said, so harshly that the rabbits, who’d been silently hopping along behind them, scattered in all directions. “She was thirteen when I met her. She was fourteen when she died.”

Eva didn’t even realize she was crying until a tear dripped off the end of her nose. She brushed it away and pulled on Flynn’s hand to get him to stop. Then she did what she’d been longing to do for a while, but she did it from compassion, not from desire.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her cheek against his chest. He stood stiffly, still as a statue, not returning her hug. But not pulling away from her either.

“Oh, Flynn. I’m so sorry for Kyla and for her family and for you.”

He took a deep breath and then stepped away from her and folded his arms across his chest, probably so she couldn’t hug him again. She tried not to let him see how much that hurt her.

“You don’t understand. I told her she would be okay. She was terrified of the transition because three of her best friends died. Only two of the little group she ran with survived it. I told her she would be okay.”

He buried his face in his hands and his big body started to shake. “I told her she would be okay, and she died in agony.”

She pushed his hands out of her way and hugged him again, so tightly that he couldn’t get free of her. He needed human contact just then, whether he thought he did or not. His heart beat wildly beneath her cheek, and he took deep, shuddering breaths. Suddenly, almost convulsively, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her even closer, bending down to rest his forehead on the top of her head.

“I told her she’d be okay,” he said brokenly. “And the last thing she said—

while she could still speak at all—was ‘Flynn, you lied to me.’”

Eva’s heart was breaking. For the man in her arms, whose guilt and pain and loss were destroying him, for the family who’d lost their daughter—their sister. And for little Kyla, who’d cried out in pain and terror and despair.

“It wasn’t your fault.” She whispered the words against the warm, bare skin where his collar opened, breathing in his scent. Trying to absorb his pain. “You must know that it wasn’t your fault. Of course you had to tell her that she would be okay. There’s nothing else to say in that situation. It’s a horrible, horrible thing—it’s hell itself. But there was nothing else you could’ve done but be there for her, and it sounds like you were.”

He nodded, swallowing convulsively.

“You were there for her in the best way you could be. It’s so awful, so unbelievably awful, that she died, but it’s not your fault. You need to forgive yourself, Flynn.”

Flynn put his hands on the sides of her face and tilted it up so he could look into her eyes. “How do you do that? How do you know exactly what to say? Is it part of your ‘soothing the savage beast’ gift?” His voice was rough and husky, the voice of a man who’d been screaming or sobbing, even though he’d done neither.

The voice of a man who needed comfort.

Eva pulled his head down until their lips met. She initiated the kiss, but Flynn instantly took charge. He captured the back of her head in one big hand, and then he tilted her head and took her mouth like a conqueror. Like a seducer. Like a pirate, ravishing her in his treasure cave...

She moaned, trying to climb his body, needing to get closer. She’d never been kissed like this, like the man kissing her would die if he couldn’t. She tangled her tongue with his and kissed him and kissed him until she had to stop, gasping for air, hanging on to his shoulders so she didn’t fall down.

His treasure cave... Why was that poking at the edge of her consciousness so much? Suddenly she knew.

She *knew*.

“Flynn. They’re holding the girls in the old copper mine.”

He got it immediately. “The copper in the mine would conceal any magic being done from somebody like Griffin who was trying to detect it.”

She nodded. “Of course. Why didn’t we think of this? Black-magic witches use copper in their summoning circles. It can keep demons in—”

“So it can keep nosy law enforcement out,” Flynn finished.

“You need to call your friend or teammate or whatever he is and get federal law enforcement in and set the takedown. Now.”

Flynn was quiet for a few moments with his eyes closed. When he opened them, he looked at Eva and shook his head. “Jake is with Zach, who says we’re brilliant and he’ll call it in, but it will still be no-go on the federal takedown. They’re afraid the Dark Angels will kill all the girls in the event of a raid because the demons will still want the magical power from the sacrifices. Our best chance to save them is still to get in there another way.”

Eva’s heart sank. “Using me.”

Flynn nodded, his shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry. I can’t think of any other way. But if you don’t want to do it, you should go. Now. I’ll die before I let anything happen to you, but that’s not a one hundred percent guarantee of your safety. As I’ve told you, I don’t have a good record of protecting people.”

“I’ll do it,” she said in a very small voice, trying to be brave.

He slashed a hand through the air. “No. It’s not fair of us to ask you to risk your life for this. We’ll figure something out.”

Eva started running for the car, shouting back at him over her shoulder. “But if not me, then who? Who will stand for those girls? I know you will, and your floating magic friend, and whoever else is on your side, but if you can’t get in there without setting some kind of alarm, the girls still wind up dead. I can’t do it. I can’t leave. I could never live with myself if I bought my own safety at the cost of their lives.”

She wasn’t the Eva from before, who’d cowered in the face of Snake’s threats and Noel’s bullying. This was the Eva she’d been before all that. Willing to stand up for what was right. And Flynn had said he’d die to protect her, so she was pretty sure he was the exact same kind of person deep down, underneath all that guilt and sadness he was carrying around.

They sped through the dark night, and when they reached her place, she was glad to see that Mrs. M had already left for California. One more innocent out of harm's way.

"I'll be on your roof again to watch over you—" Flynn began when they reached her door, but she stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Flynn. No. Come inside and stay with me. I don't want to be alone, sitting around waiting for Snake to call." Even as she said it, she realized she really did think of Scott as Snake now. The Scott she'd fallen for could never have put her through the past few years of pursuit and torture. The black magic had twisted him into something unrecognizable, and it was time she acknowledged it.

This time Flynn took the lead checking out the apartment. When he was sure it was safe, he beckoned her to come in.

"I'll be just a minute. I want to stand out here on the porch in the fresh air for a few minutes and call my grandfather." She suddenly was finding it hard to breathe, let alone get the words out, but she managed.

"I'll give you some privacy," he said quietly. Flynn, so big and tough and muscular, so hard and deadly, gently touched her cheek and then quietly closed the door between them.

The tears started falling the moment she dialed the phone.

"Eva?"

"Gramps. It's so good to hear your voice," she managed, trying her best to sound cheerful.

"Are you okay? You sound funny," he said, concern clear in his dear voice.

"I am okay, Gramps. I met a man from Atlantis. Well, two men from Atlantis, but one is actually a mage. Anyway, they're so interesting. Maybe sometime I can get them to talk to you about the history. I know you'd like that."

"You sound more cheerful than you have in a long time, honey, but like you have a cold. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm working on it, Gramps. I'm working on me. It sounds silly, but I think I'm finding the person I was before— No. I'm finding the person I was meant to be, and I kind of like her."

"I knew you would, sweetheart. Always remember that I love you, and come

see an old man pretty soon, okay?”

She had to agree. So, standing there, alone in the moonlight, knowing that there was a very high chance that she was going to die that very night, Eva promised her grandfather that she'd visit soon.

When she ended the call and collapsed in tears, the door opened and strong arms caught her before she could fall.



Flynn lifted Eva into his embrace and stepped back into her apartment, kicking the door shut behind him. Then he stood there with an armful of weeping woman and no idea of what to do with her. He thought kissing her might help, but her hands were covering her face, so she probably wasn't in the mood for that. *Dammit.*

He wasn't particularly good with women, at least the kind of relationships that lasted longer than a casual week or two. He definitely wasn't good with tears. He'd rather face a rogue vampire, unarmed, than a woman's tears. "Eva? Honey?" He bent and placed her ever so carefully on the edge of her couch and smoothed her hair away from her face. Eva looked up at him.

He'd seen women before who could cry and still look beautiful.

Eva wasn't one of them.

Her face had turned blotchy, her eyes were red, and her nose was swollen.

Right at that exact moment in time, Flynn felt—actually *felt*—his heart turn over in his chest.

"When our grandchildren ask how I knew you were the one, I'm going to tell them it's because you looked so bad when you were crying," he blurted out, and then he groaned. "I probably shouldn't have said that."

Eva slowly blinked, her eyes widening and her mouth falling open. "Are you out of your tiny little Atlantean mind? Also, it's not very nice to tell someone they look bad even if they do."

She defiantly turned away from him but then immediately ruined her tough-guy act by grabbing for a handful of tissues out of the box on the coffee table.

Flynn, who had either just learned a lesson or been hit over the head with a meteorite, knelt at her feet and put his hands on her knees. “Eva. I’m so sorry. I’m an idiot. Please, for the love of all the gods, stop crying. I’ll do anything. Anything at all. Just please stop crying.”

She wiped her face one last time and managed a shaky laugh. Then she took a deep breath and blew it out, sniffing. “I’m sorry about that. I’m usually a lot stronger than this. I’ve had to be. But talking to Gramps—that was tough

She blew her nose, loudly, and Flynn had to clench his teeth to keep from laughing. He knew that wouldn’t go over well.

“Part of this is just a reaction to the idea I’m probably going to die tonight,” she said, taking deep, shuddering breaths. “You don’t know what it’s like to live your life in fear.”

Flynn’s rage surged, cold and deadly. “Neither will you, ever again, even if I have to kill every single one of them to protect you.”

She inhaled sharply but said nothing. Didn’t reach out to him. His heart crashed inside his chest, but he had to let her take control. Of course she wouldn’t want any kind of intimacy now, not even a hug, not with what was coming next.

He glanced at the clock. “It’s midnight. Monkey said they’d call at three. You should try to get some sleep.”

“I know I’m not going to be able to sleep, and I don’t even want to try. There’s only one thing I want.” She put her hands on his face and drew his head toward her. “I want you. Now.”

He forced himself to resist the urge to pick her up and carry her immediately to her bed. “Eva, you don’t—”

She put her fingers on his lips. “There’s a chance that whatever happens in in the next three hours will be the last good memory I ever make in my life. Make love to me, Flynn. Make it my *best* memory.”



*H*e was driving her out of her mind.

Flynn had scooped her up off the couch, carried her to the small bedroom, and tossed her on the bed, instantly joining her there. Beside her, around her, beneath her, surrounding her. Touching, kissing, holding, stroking. He kissed her and touched her until she thought she'd go insane from wanting him, and they hadn't even undressed. She finally demanded that he take his clothes off, and he shed them in seconds but stopped her when she tried to remove her own.

"Oh no, *mi amara*. I want to unwrap you like the gift you are for me." Now, maybe half an hour later, she was down to her bra and panties. It was taking so long because he insisted on kissing every square inch of skin as he unveiled it. She lay trembling on the bed next to him, aching with desire, clutching his shoulders and moaning.

She was wetter and hotter than she'd ever been in her life, and every time his fingers skimmed the insides of her thighs, her hips bucked involuntarily against his hand.

"Please touch me," she begged. "Flynn. Touch me now."

He laughed, but his dark eyes were glowing with such stark, raw desire that she felt as if she were melting under the weight of his gaze. He finally slipped his fingers beneath the fabric of her panties, and she cried out. He took that as an invitation and stroked down her center, then pushed his fingers just a little way inside her, causing her to arch her body and moan.

"Please, please, please, please," she begged, tossing her head back and forth on the pillows.

"Is this what you want?" He stroked her with his fingers, smoothing her own hot wetness against her clit, and in seconds she was coming apart under his hand.

"That's it. Come for me," he said with dark, fierce triumph. "I'm going to make you come again and again, with my hands and with my mouth. You're going to come so hard you won't know which way is up and which is down, and then—*only* then—I'm going to fuck you so hard you shatter, screaming my name."

“Yes,” she answered. “Yes, yes, yes.”

Every touch was a revelation, every caress a rapture. He sent her soaring, skating, dancing down the silver knife’s edge of a desire so fierce it was almost pain. She wanted him more than she’d ever wanted anyone in her life, and she could tell from his words and his touches that he felt the same way.

He tore off her panties and slid her bra down her arms, and now she lay nude, writhing in the bed, clutching his shoulder with one hand and wrapping her other hand around the silken hardness of his very large erection. He kissed her again and then, in one quick motion, he slid down her body and put his mouth on her. His tongue swirled over her once, twice, and then he sucked hard on her clit and she shattered. Every nerve ending in her body lit up, a chain reaction of pure, electric sensation, and she screamed.

Before the spasms had even died down, he climbed up her body and shoved her thighs apart with his knee. He held himself over her, his arms trembling, and she could see the strain in his face. He’d held back and showed so much restraint, but now his heart thundered in time with her own, and the heat in his eyes promised her everything, if only he could give up that control.

He was so strong. Showed so very much control.

But now it was her turn to shatter him.

“I need you now,” he said roughly. “Please, please tell me yes.”

“Yes,” she said. “Yes. *Now.*”

With that, his control broke into a million pieces. She watched it happen. She watched his face as he leaned forward, driving into her so hard she felt him in her soul.

“Never going to let you go,” he said, over and over and over. “Never. Not ever.”

“I never want you to.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss, and on his next hard, deep thrust, she flew apart again, clenching and convulsing around him. She could feel his hardness deep inside her, so deep, and when he exploded in turn, she caught him when he went up and over.

This time it was Flynn who shouted *her* name.

And that's when she fell inside his soul.

"I see you," she whispered, awestruck and terrified at the same time. "I see you."

And she did. A whirling torrent of memory and emotion—his emotions—surrounded and enveloped her, filling her with the certain knowledge of his past...his present...his now.

She saw the childhood he'd fled and his fierce love for the brothers he feared had forgotten him. The wasted years—the friendship with the dragon shifter—the love ...

"Oh, Flynn," she murmured, tears streaming down her cheeks. "You love me, too?"

He inhaled sharply and his eyes began to glow a hot, fierce blue-green. "The soul-meld," he said, his voice rough and almost broken. "I see you, too, Eva. I see it *all*. All of you. And you are even more beautiful inside than you are on the surface."

The heat of his body and the touch of his skin to hers kept her grounded when she thought she might shatter, enough to allow her to speak. "The soul-meld? What does that mean?"

He rolled to his side, pulling her with him, and kissed her very thoroughly before he answered. "It's a gift that's very rare, even to us, *mi amara*. When our soul finds our true mate, we open up to that person in every way and actually see inside each other's soul."

She blinked away the tears and took a deep, shaky breath. "It *feels* like a gift. A knowing on such a deep level ... I feel like you couldn't possibly love me after you saw everything inside me, though. I've been--"

"Eva," he said fiercely. "I could do nothing *but* love you after seeing you."

He kissed her, then, and showed her every bit of his heart, too, and she realized there was no point in denial or disbelief. Flynn gave her all of himself and she welcomed him into her arms and her heart and her soul.

It felt like *everything*.

It felt like *forever*.



*A*t exactly three a.m., Snake called.



Flynn didn't know what to say, so he said nothing. They'd gotten dressed in silence, and all the while he was furiously thinking of how to stop this. He'd give anything for an idea—*any* idea—that would get him inside that copper mine without Eva. But Snake had agreed, almost too eagerly, to bring Flynn into the inner circle in exchange for Eva.

Now all that was left was to drive to the mine.

Eva was so pale that each individual freckle stood out like a scar on the porcelain of her face. She shoved her feet into her shoes and stood, looking around as if trying to memorize every inch of the tiny apartment.

As if she knew she'd never return.

“Eva—”

“No. There's no other way.” She brushed by him in the doorway and ran down the steps.

Flynn was a broken man. How could he allow her to go into danger?

How could he not?

They had a twenty-minute drive to the mine. Surely, please, gods, he could think of something—anything—in twenty minutes. He swallowed hard and then started down the steps after her.

“Flynn,” she said, but her voice sounded wrong. Terrified.

He realized he'd been a fool. They'd been ambushed.

He leapt over the side of the railing and landed just in front of Eva, between her and the threats ranged around them. Monkey, a big guy Flynn didn't recognize, and Zach were all there, lined up and ready for a fight. Zach leaned back against Flynn's bike, and Monkey stayed safely out of range, but the big guy rocked back and forth, rhythmically punching one massive fist into the palm of his other hand.

"Snake?" he asked, but he doubted it. This guy didn't look bright enough to interest Eva. Flynn studied the low-brow face and bulging eyes and reconsidered.

He didn't look like he was bright enough to tie his own shoes.

"No, I don't know who that is," Eva said, her voice shaking.

"I'm Rock, pretty lady," the thug said, showing them his blackened teeth.

Flynn flicked a contemptuous look at the moron. "As in 'dumb as a...'?"

It took Rock a minute, but then he snarled and started forward, exactly as Flynn had hoped. Fights were always easier when you divided and conquered.

"Cut it out, Rock," Monkey ordered. "Safety in numbers. All right, man. Hand over the woman. You're outnumbered."

Flynn smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. Monkey flinched at the sight of it.

"Not a chance, you bunch of losers. I said I'd give her to Snake, and only Snake. We had a deal. I get patched into the Dark Angels, and he gets the woman." Flynn didn't have to try to fake the rage in his voice. It was one of the hardest things he'd ever done in his life, calling Eva "the woman" less than an hour after she'd been coming apart in his arms.

He had to save her. How could he even be doing this to her? What kind of monster was he?

But Kyla's face, contorted in agony, flashed into his mind. They just had to rescue those girls, take down Snake and Narco, and get out alive. Then they'd have the rest of their lives to learn everything about each other. To spend night after night after night in each other's arms.

He forced his face into an expressionless mask, grabbing Eva too hard by the arm. He shoved her farther behind him. "If you want her, come and get her."

"Sure about that?" Monkey taunted him. "The odds aren't good."

Flynn shrugged. “Yeah, you’re right. You should’ve brought more men.”

With that, the Dark Angels attacked. Monkey and Rock closed on Flynn, and Zach circled behind him to catch Eva, who’d been trying to make a break for it and run to her car.

Flynn thought—he hoped—that Zach really was on his side. If so, Zach was the best one to capture Eva.

Just as the thought entered his mind, she screamed behind him. When he whipped his head to the left to see what was happening, Rock smashed his massive fist into the side of Flynn’s face. Flynn didn’t go down, not all the way, but he staggered back several steps and bounced off the outside wall of the garage.

Okay, that was gonna leave a mark.

“You can still back down, asshole, but this is your last chance,” Monkey said, dancing around just out of Flynn’s reach and tossing a blade from hand to hand. Who knew if the idiot actually knew how to use one? Better to assume he did.

Eva screamed again, this time from the shadows behind the tiny staircase to her apartment, and the sound galvanized Flynn into action despite the ringing in his skull. Just in time too. Rock pulled a pistol from his side holster and Flynn figured that meant his “last chance” was officially over. He launched himself at Rock, calling to the power of his water magic to propel him forward with superhuman speed. He knocked the gun out of Rock’s hand so hard he heard the man’s wrist bone crack. The gun went flying.

Flynn did a somersault over Rock’s head, hit the ground, and bounced back up into a spinning kick that took the man just under his left ear. That was the end of Rock.

He turned to Monkey, who was aiming a pistol directly at him.

“Enough fun and games,” Monkey snarled. “You’re dead now, and I bet Snake rewards me by letting me have some fun with your woman before he kills her.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” said a new voice from behind Flynn. “Down, now.”

It was Jake of course. Somehow he must’ve gotten away from the Dark

Angels long enough to follow Monkey to Eva's place.

Flynn hit the ground, and an ice spear shot through the air exactly where he'd been standing and struck Monkey in the shoulder, causing the pistol shot to go wide. Before he could take aim again, Flynn was up off the ground and on him, smashing his fist into the man's face with every ounce of power he had. Monkey flew backward through the air about six feet and landed hard, and his gun flew off through the air.

Flynn turned and started for Eva. She was perfectly fine though, standing next to Zach and rubbing her arm where Flynn had grabbed her too hard. He felt an overwhelming wave of shame that nearly knocked him to his knees.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I had to put on an act. They wouldn't believe I was keeping you if I—"

But Eva wasn't listening. She ran across the distance between them and jumped into his arms. "I thought you were dead. I thought they were going to shoot you, and I would have to watch you die right in front of my eyes. Never, ever do that to me again."

Flynn held on as tight as he could until Eva raised her head and smiled. "I do still have to breathe, big guy."

He stopped crushing her in his embrace but kept his arm around her waist and turned to face Zach, who'd claimed to be an undercover operative. Evidently it had been the truth. Jake was securing Monkey and Rock with zip ties and gags, which meant they must have both survived. Too bad.

"Okay, Zach, if that's really your name, what's the deal?"

Zach's eyes narrowed when he heard Flynn's harsh tone. "Yes," he said shortly. "Zach is my name. Zachary Ford, Special Agent, FBI, P-Ops division. I've been undercover with the Dark Angels for months, and they finally let me into the inner circle today. I think that's only because they needed more manpower for their nasty rites." He scanned the group. "Bottom line: I know where the girls are."

"They're inside the copper mine," Eva said. "We told you last night. The copper masks any magic being used, and what better place to hide people than in what's basically a hole in the ground?"

Zach shot her an admiring glance, and Flynn contemplated the wisdom of smashing a federal agent into the side of the building.

Maybe later.

“Perhaps you should join my team, Ms. Calandar,” Zach added, “because it took us a while to come to see that one. And, yes, your tip last night helped us find the right place. It’s not the mine in use either. That would be too easy.”

“Of course. It’s one of the old abandoned mines. One that’s played out, or at least people thought it was played out,” Flynn said, groaning. “Do you know where it is?”

“He had help,” an arrogant voice drawled from above their heads.

Flynn looked up to see Griffin materialize from mist and float gently to the ground. When he landed, he was already walking toward them.

“That’s really cool,” Eva said, and Griffin smiled at her.

Flynn hadn’t known the mage knew how to smile that widely. He glared at Griffin and made a growling noise in his throat. Maybe he could do a twofer and smash the FBI agent’s head *against* the mage’s.

He’d let Jake live. Jake was helpful.

“When are we going?” Everybody looked at Eva, who’d asked the question in a quiet but steady voice. “We know where they are. You have me. Zach’s on the inside. It’s time to go get those girls.”

Flynn thought he’d never been more in awe of any person—man or woman—ever in his life than he was of Eva and her incredible courage.

“We go now,” Zach said, his face grim. “They’re planning to start some of what they call the ‘lesser sacrifices’ an hour from now. They’ve kept the girls safe and sequestered until now. Innocents always make the best sacrifices, don’t you know?” He turned his head and spit on the ground as if trying to get a foul taste out of his mouth.

Considering the fact that the agent had been undercover with the Dark Angels for more than half a year, Flynn didn’t doubt it.

“The sooner we get there, the sooner we get them out before they’re harmed. Narco promised he’d let some of his minions have some fun,” Jake said, looking sick.

Flynn glanced at the thugs on the ground. “First, I propose we get rid of these two. And then, Zach, you can say you asked Jake to come along for backup just in case, and it was a good thing because I shot Rock and Monkey and they’re dead. You get all the credit for bringing us in. I have a feeling that, at this point, Snake will be happy to sacrifice me too.”

“My team will pick up these two,” Zach said. “They’re on the way. And yes, I agree that’s the best plan now.”

“But it’s a different plan,” Eva said staring at Flynn. “You’ll have to be in restraints. How can you fight? How can you help those girls?”

Jake smiled at her and pulled a pair of handcuffs out of one of the many pockets on the inside of his ratty-looking trench coat. “Special cuffs,” he said, grinning. “Watch.”

He snapped one of the cuffs on Flynn’s left wrist and then gave the chain a quick yank. The cuff, which was made of solid steel and looked extremely sturdy, snapped right open.

Zach’s eyes narrowed. “Where did you get those? Those would even fool me, and I’ve been at this for a long time.”

“I have my ways,” Jake said.

“Let’s talk about handcuffs later. Let’s go get those girls right now,” Eva said impatiently. “I’m not sure how much longer I can be brave.”



In the end, it was much easier to get inside the mine than Eva would have ever believed. Apparently, a huge part of any Dark Angel celebration involved barrels and barrels of demon rum, a beverage guaranteed to cause unconsciousness, liver failure, and blindness in humans, and that was only in the lucky ones.

Guards were scattered around like dying roaches when they drove up at four a.m. The last man standing waved them in, not bothering to check for ID.

“Who’d be damn fool enough to crash a demon party?” the man asked jovially.

“Who indeed?” Griffin said when he materialized inside the dark mine and joined their group.

“We won’t get the girls without a fight,” Zach warned them. “Don’t be fooled by how easy it is to get in. Getting out is going to be the battle. And the actual demons aren’t affected like this by their own rum.”

They headed steadily down, and down, and down, until they reached a vast open area that contained a giant pit filled with fire, exactly in the center of an enormous inlaid copper circle. Inside the circle, twenty nightgown-clad girls huddled together, terror and shock stark in their faces. They were surrounded by row after row of minor demons, the firelight playing on the deep liquid-vinyl red-and-black texture of their skin. Fangs and tusks abounded; demons with

giant drooling mouths stood next to demons with huge, bulbous eyes. Long, whip like tails next to razor-sharp tusks. So many of them. So very many that Eva could feel the pressure of their heartbeats in her bones.

“It’s too late,” Zach groaned. “They’re already in the circle. None of us can breach it; our magic isn’t strong enough.”

“Watch out!” Jake pulled a pair of daggers and headed into the fray when a demon who wasn’t in the circle started running toward them, claws out.

“I see Narco,” Griffin shouted at them, already halfway across the mine toward the sorcerer. The two met in a crash of light and sound, hurling magic at each other too fast and furiously for anyone else to follow.

Flynn whirled to fight off a couple of the human Dark Angels who’d managed to stay conscious, and while he was busy, Eva walked forward, step by step by step, feeling her determination and will swirl around her as if she were floating through a dimly remembered dream.

“I can walk right through it,” she told them dreamily. “I don’t have any magic at all. Not that kind of magic.”

Flynn grabbed at her arm, but he was too late. She was already at the circle. She simply stepped across and felt nothing more than a mild tingling sensation. Behind her, Flynn roared in frustration, and she saw him try to smash through the invisible magic barrier, but it kept him out. He was slicing and hacking at it with a sword he’d gotten somewhere, but it all seemed somehow distant to her because something was calling to her, calling so powerfully.

The girls surrounded her, weeping, and she touched as many of them as she could. “It’s all right, girls. I’ll get you out of here.”

At her words, the demons all turned toward her, moving as one in a shockingly coordinated motion. Scott—Snake—sauntered out from behind them.

“I always knew you’d come back to me, babe,” he said, and his eyes glowed red in the firelight. No. That was wrong. His eyes actually *were* red. He’d gone fully over to the demonic realm then.

She sorrowfully shook her head. “You made the wrong choice, Scott. So many wrong choices. I’m so sorry for you.”

He threw his head back and laughed, a long, hyena-like sound. “You’re sorry

for me, you stupid slut? Be sorry for yourself. I'm going to gut you for the power you'll bring."

He was so wrong, and he didn't even know it. She raised her hand, prepared to do the one thing she'd never wanted to do, but Snake must have suspected something because he hurled his dagger, end over end, across the stone floor at her. She watched, paralyzed by the sight of her death advancing on her, but then an object hurtled in front of her.

No, not an object. A man.

"Flynn," she screamed. "No!"

But it was too late. He'd somehow burst through the magic circle and thrown his body in front of the dagger to protect her. It struck true and sank deep in his chest, and blood bubbled up from his mouth as his body smashed down to the rocky ground.

She cried out and fell to her knees next to him.

"I protected you?" His eyes held an edge of desperation. "I saved you?"

"You saved me, my love," she told him, wrapping her arms around his head so it didn't touch the stone beneath him.

And then, as he gasped out what she thought must be his final breath, Eva looked around her at the hundreds of demons, reached deep, deep inside herself, and *pushed*. Every single one of them snapped to attention, frozen in place but with eyes locked on her. Waiting for an order to obey.

"Kill Snake," she told them. "Destroy him."

The demons shuddered with unholy glee and swarmed Snake, who screamed and screamed and screamed as he died. Eva, holding Flynn's dying body in her arms, found that the sound didn't bother her at all.

That realization, though, bothered her more than a little.

"You can control demons?" Griffin stood over her, and she thought she saw fear in his eyes, quickly masked.

She turned her head slowly to look at the demons, who were now dancing along the rim of the pit of fire. "It turns out it was no harder than offering a bit of hot dog."

"What?"

“Never mind,” she told him, cradling Flynn’s body. She *pushed* again and, as one, the demons all turned toward her again.

“Begone,” she ordered, and they bowed to her and then jumped, tens of them at a time, into the fire pit.

Jake ran over to her. “Flynn! Eva! Are you okay? You—” He stopped speaking when he saw Flynn.

Eva blinked up at him, feeling the world go hazy around her. “We saved the girls?”

Jake knelt beside her. “We saved the girls. And I happen to have a little bit of healing magic from my mother’s side of the family.”

She didn’t understand his words though, because by then the power that had swept through her from the demons had drained out of her body. She didn’t need it anymore anyway. Flynn was gone.

January was as good a time as any to die.



Atlantis, two days later
“He’s lucky to be alive, the idiot,” a man growled, and Flynn opened his eyes to find his brother Dare glaring down at him.

“Not feeling lucky so much right now,” Flynn muttered, trying to sit up but then falling back against the pillows in the— He looked around. Huh. Healing temple He must have been worse off than he’d thought after he’d jumped in the path of that knife to protect—

The memory smashed the breath out of his lungs. “Eva,” he shouted. “Eva! Where is she? What did you do to her? I’ll—”

“You won’t do much since you can’t even sit up,” another voice drawled. His brother Liam—Mr. Perfect—strolled into Flynn’s view. “Eva’s fine. She’ll be back in a minute. And nice tough talk, dumb ass, for somebody we thought was dead.”

“I almost was,” he admitted, wincing, but his entire body relaxed, muscle by muscle, at word that she was safe. And—back in a minute?

“She’s here? In Atlantis?”

“Where else would I be after you go and almost get yourself killed trying to protect me, you idiot?” Eva’s voice held fondness and relief, and when she appeared, gently easing her way between his brothers to get to him, Flynn’s entire world righted itself.

Flynn drank in the sight of his brothers as they stood at the side of his bed. Dare and Liam were both almost mirror images of Flynn, wild, dark hair and deep blue eyes, tall and strong, bold and confident—nothing like the scared boys they'd all been when his father was alive.

“You have a lot to answer for—” Dare began, and Eva rounded on him like a spitting cat.

“Don't you even think about blaming him for leaving Atlantis,” she said, poking his very large, very muscular, *pirate* brother in the chest, making Flynn blink and Liam gape at her. “Your horrible father would have *killed* him, and you know it. I've been talking to people, and there are a lot of long memories around here, and a lot of folks couldn't wait to fill me in about how many times your drunken father threatened to beat Flynn to death. So don't you do it!”

Flynn almost laughed at the expression on his brother's face as Dare backed up a step, holding his hands in the air.

“Hey. No. I was only going to say he had a lot of nerve not letting us know he was back. He could have, I don't know, told us he was alive before he went jetting off to save the world.”

“Save the girls,” Liam put in, always correct, before grinning at Eva. “We're going to love you, aren't we?”

Eva flushed and then backed toward the bed and grabbed Flynn's hand. “Oh. I mean, I hope you like me, if you—if we—if I—”

Flynn stopped her babbling quite satisfactorily by grabbing her and pulling her toward him for a hard, possessive kiss. “You're mine now,” he told her. “You're not going anywhere.”

She looked like she wanted to argue, but she glanced at his brothers and shook her head. “We'll talk later. I'm going to find you some food.”

“I'm sure somebody will bring me something,” Flynn began, but she kissed his forehead and ran off before he could stop her.

“I like her,” Liam said, raising an eyebrow at Flynn. “Are you going to run off and be too stupid to keep her?”

Flynn could feel a hot flush burning through him. “Never. She's mine. But we need to talk. I... I need to talk.”

He struggled to sit up again, but this time his brothers—one on each side of his bed—helped him. For a moment, it was like they were kids again, huddled in their shared bedroom, crouched against the drunken, angry words coming from the other room.

“Look. I... I’m so sorry I left you,” he managed to say past the boulder suddenly lodged in his throat. “I was wrong. I should have stayed and protected you from him. I should have—”

“Flynn,” Dare broke in. “No. Eva was right. If you’d stayed, he’d have killed you. From the moment Grandfather gave you that sword, you bore the brunt of his drunken rages. We managed. We got through it. We’re good.”

A kernel of something that felt almost like hope started to warm in Flynn’s heart, but then Liam scowled at them both and the hope shriveled and died.

“I disagree,” Liam said, frowning. “We’re not good at all.”

“I know,” Flynn said, his mouth dry. “I can never make it up to you. If you don’t want me to be part of the family, I understand.”

Completely out of the blue, Liam smacked him on the back of the head. “No, you moron. We’re not good because we haven’t had you around for so long. I want to get to know you and for you to meet Jaime, the most amazing woman in the world.”

“And Lyric,” Dare put in, smiling smugly. “The most amazing woman in the galaxy.”

“You forgive me then?” Flynn was dazed, and not just by his injuries. He could be part of a family—his family—again? A huge weight rolled off his shoulders—a weight he’d been carrying for so many long years. “Brothers?”

“Don’t be a girl,” Dare said, rolling his eyes. “I’ll kick your ass when we get out of here, and we’ll be good.” Then he put a hand on Flynn’s shoulder. “Brothers.”

“The first night out at the pub is on you,” Liam said, pinning Flynn with an amused stare before laying his hand on Flynn’s other shoulder. “Brothers.”

It had the weight of a promise—one Flynn would never, ever break again. He’d found Eva, and he’d reunited with his family. He was one of Poseidon’s newest warriors, and they’d saved every single one of those girls.

Life was good. *Really* good.

He looked up at his brothers and grinned. “Eva is the most amazing woman in the *universe*.”

They both growled and punched him in the arms at the same time.

Damn, it was great to be home.



*A*tlantis, two weeks later

Flynn walked into the room and yanked the sheets off his beautiful, dangerous, fascinating woman. “Wake up. I have another present for you.”

Eva peeked out from beneath the clouds of hair covering her face. “Another present? Oh, is Gramps here yet?”

“He arrives today. No, this is a much smaller present. Close your eyes.”

“Well.” She gave him a very naughty smile. “I wouldn’t say it’s *small*, Flynn.”

He shouted out a laugh. “Damn straight. But that present is for later today, you insatiable woman.”

She sat up, kissed him—a long, luxurious kiss that he found very hard to resist—and then pulled the sheet up and tucked it over her glorious breasts. “What is it this time? Atlantean blushberry pie?”

“Better.” He walked back out to the kitchen of the wonderful little cottage that was all theirs and picked up the surprise, who promptly slurped him in the face. “Close your eyes.”

She closed her eyes and held out her hands. “Gimme!”

He laughed, wondering yet again how he could have fallen so completely in love with such a wonderful woman who just happened to have an affinity for demons.

“Greedy girl. Okay, here you go.” With that, he very gently deposited her present in her lap, where it promptly began wiggling and making funny little squeaking noises.

“Daisy! Oh, Daisy!” Eva burst into tears and gathered up the little pug to

shower her with kisses. “Oh, Flynn, how did you know?”

He grinned at her. “Did I mention Mrs. M is coming for a visit too? In fact, she’s already here.”

“I love you, you know, you crazy Atlantean,” she said, beaming with radiant joy.

“I don’t deserve you,” he said, knowing it was true. Vowing to change so that someday, maybe, he would.

“Love isn’t about what you *deserve*, she said, turning her face up for his kiss..” Love is a gift, and I’m giving mine to you. And I’ve got a strict no-return policy.”

Flynn sat down next to them and tentatively petted the newest, three-legged member of their family. “Did I ever tell you that pugs were originally from Atlantis?”

“Shut up and kiss me,” Eva told him.

And so he did.



On the balcony outside the royal apartments, Queen Riley smiled at her husband. “I heard an interesting story today, my darling. About Flynn and his demon whisperer.”

Conlan froze. “You’ve got that look in your eyes, Riley. You promised, no more matchmaking.”

“And I had nothing to do with this one. But there are eleven more warriors in Denal’s Dozen, or so I hear...”

“Riley,” he said warningly.

She smiled at him. “It’s going to be an interesting year.”



an't wait to find out what happens when deceptively laid-back Jake meets the woman who challenges his every protective instinct? What happens when she's

threatened with a forced Transition to become a shifter? Buy [February in Atlantis](#), available now!



A **NOTE FROM ALYSSA DAY:**

I loved writing these books! A band of misfits who find strength in themselves and each other, and all find true love along the way? Magic! And Flynn and Eva finding their strength and salvation in each other? Totally my favorite kind of book.

I'm thrilled to announce that Poseidon's Warriors will continue A Year of Atlantis in all of 2018—a book per month—and you'll find out how Atlantis's independent, brave, strong warriors will cope with their matchmaking queen, who is determined to find them all true love. The next book is [February in Atlantis](#) and it's available for preorder now at select retailers and will be available to all on release day: February 26, 2018. Jake!! You'll love what happens to him when he meets the one woman who finally challenges his carefully cultivated laid-back exterior.

*If you want the scoop on all new releases, behind-the-scenes details, and the chance to win prizes, **Text ALYSSADAY to 66866** to sign up for my newsletter. I promise never to sell, fold, spindle, or mutilate your information so you will get no spam—ever—from me.*

You can also follow me on [BookBub](#) if you only want new release news.

Thanks again for reading—you rock!

Hugs,

Alyssa

THANK YOU!

Thanks so much for reading *January in Atlantis*. I hope you had as much fun reading it as I did writing it.

Want the scoop about new books? Text ALYSSADAY to 66866! Find out when my next book is available, get special bonus-only-for-subscribers, behind-the-scenes info, and win cool stuff! (No spam, because I would NEVER sell my mailing list!) And/or follow me on twitter at @alyssa_day, Instagram at @authoralyssaday, or like my Facebook page at <http://facebook.com/authoralyssaday>.

Review it. My family hides the chocolate if I don't mention that reviews help other readers find new books, so if you have the time, please consider leaving one. I appreciate all reviews, and thank you for your time.

Try my other books! You can find excerpts of all of my books at <http://alyssaday.com>. Read on for an excerpt from

BOOKS BY ALYSSA

THE TIGER'S EYE MYSTERY SERIES:

[Dead Eye](#)

[Private Eye](#)

[Travelling Eye](#) *(a short story)*

[Evil Eye](#)

[Eye of Danger](#)

[Eye of the Storm](#)

POSEIDON'S WARRIORS SERIES:

[Halloween in Atlantis](#)

[Christmas in Atlantis](#)

[January in Atlantis](#)

[February in Atlantis](#)

[March in Atlantis](#)

[April in Atlantis](#)

[May in Atlantis](#)

[June in Atlantis](#)

July in Atlantis

August in Atlantis

September in Atlantis

October in Atlantis

November in Atlantis

December in Atlantis

THE CARDINAL WITCHES SERIES:

[Alejandro's Sorceress](#) *(a novella)*

[William's Witch](#) *(a short story)*

[Damon's Enchantress](#) *(a novella)*

[Jake's Djinn](#) *(a short story)*

THE WARRIORS OF POSEIDON SERIES:

[Atlantis Rising](#)

[Wild Hearts in Atlantis](#) (a novella; originally in the *WILD THING* anthology)

[Atlantis Awakening](#)

[Shifter's Lady](#) (a novella; originally in the *SHIFTER* anthology)

[Atlantis Unleashed](#)

[Atlantis Unmasked](#)

[Atlantis Redeemed](#)

[Atlantis Betrayed](#)

[Vampire in Atlantis](#)

[Heart of Atlantis](#)

[Alejandro's Sorceress](#) (a related novella; begins the *Cardinal Witches* spinoff series)

SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

[Random](#)

[Second Chances](#)

NONFICTION

[Email to the Front](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Text ALYSSADAY to 66866 to sign up for my newsletter and get release day news, behind-the-scenes scoop, win prizes, find out where Alyssa will be making personal appearances, and more!

Q: “What is the reading order of your books?”

A: Here you go: —> <https://alyssaday.com/books>

Alyssa Day is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of more than forty novels filled with kissing, laughter, mystery and magic. Alyssa’s paranormal series include the Poseidon’s Warriors and Cardinal Witches paranormal romances and the Tiger’s Eye Mysteries paranormal mysteries. In an Alyssa Day book, the good guys (and gals!) always win and happily ever after always prevails!

Alyssa’s many awards include Romance Writers of America’s prestigious RITA award for outstanding romance fiction and the RT Reviewer’s Choice Award for Best Paranormal Romance novel of 2012. She’s a recovering trial lawyer who loves life outside of a courtroom. Her books have been translated into a zillion languages, but she’s still holding out for Klingon.

You can hang out with her on Facebook (www.facebook.com/AuthorAlyssaDay), Twitter ([@alyssa_day](https://twitter.com/alyssa_day)), where she talks about her rescue dogs and her future pug ranch, and her blog, where she talks openly about her struggles with depression and hosts Mental Health Check In Fridays (www.alyssaday.com/blog). Love talking about books? Be a DayDreamer! Join Alyssa’s VERY SPECIAL group for superfans for fun chatting, sneak peeks, prizes, and more: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/DayDreamersAlyssaDay>.

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and incidents in this book are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

January in Atlantis Copyright © 2018 by Alesia Holliday

Christmas in Atlantis Copyright © 2017 by Alesia Holliday

Cover design by Authors on a Dime—www.authorsonadime.com

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the author.

Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author. To obtain permission to excerpt portions of the text, or for foreign rights inquiries, please contact the author.

Author contact info:

Website: <http://alyssaday.com/home.html>

Email: authoralyssaday@gmail.com

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/authoralyssaday>

✿ Created with Vellum