

PROLOGUE

Senovia had been struck blind. She brought her fingertips to her eyes to confirm that they were open. Maybe it was temporary, something to do with being shot. She traced her hands lower, but she found no blood, no wound. She felt no pain.

She sat up from where she had been lying, and whipped her head around. Still she could see nothing. She reached out, grasping out for anything.

“Easy, easy. It’s okay.” A strong hand clasped her flailing arm.

She stilled. The deep voice spoke her native tongue. Russian. She wanted to weep with relief. “I can’t see.”

“None of us can. Your eyes are fine. Where we are has no light.”

The situation was as she had feared. Her belief had come too late. Her sacrifice at the end could not make up for all that had come before. “So I am in hell, then.”

“No, but we might as well be.”

Senovia began to shake. “I should have listened to Pyotr.”

“Ben, you’re scaring her.” Another voice entered the darkness. This one sounded somehow familiar, yet not familiar at the same time. He spoke Russian, too. Strange. Had he said the first man was named Ben? That was not a Russian name.

“How is it you all speak Russian?”

“I’m speaking English. So is Ben. It’s one of the nice perks of the afterlife, even here. Babel undone. It doesn’t matter what you speak, everyone understands.”

“And where is here, if not hell?”

“It is a place that should not exist. Sirin created it to hold hostage souls bound for heaven.”

“Sirin, is she the—the—” Senovia shuddered as she remembered that swirling pit of darkness Pyotr had so inadequately called The Blackbird.

The second voice laughed without humor. “I see you have met dear Irina. We figured as much. Kutkh himself brought you here.”

Senovia remembered her Russian folktales, but it didn’t help her understand any better. “The trickster raven god?”

“Huh, I always wondered where that name came from.” She recognized the first voice again, Ben. “No, this Kutkh is Sirin’s pet merlin, her favorite demon hawk. He doesn’t often bring souls, but if he does it’s usually because Sirin wanted to make damn sure they got here.”

“Well, unless she brings you here herself. Sometimes she prefers the personal touch,” the second man said. There was enough bitterness in his voice that Senovia didn’t have to guess how he had arrived.

A third voice spoke. “Madam, would you mind telling us what happened before you came to be here?” This third voice was familiar and yet not, as well. The other two fell silent when he spoke. This was the man in charge. “You see, you have us all curious. Not just because Kutkh brought you, but because since you arrived, no one else has come. For years there has been a non-stop stream of souls pouring in, and with them a brief shaft of light as the portal opens. But since you, there have been no others, and not even the tiniest light we were once granted.”

“I don’t know,” Senovia said. “I was at home. Alex was trying to get me to leave—”

The second voice spoke. “Alex? Not Sirin’s son Alex?”

“I didn’t know that at first, but yes, he was her son.”

“What was he like?” His voice had a pleading edge to it.

“He was very handsome, charming.”

“No, no. Is he a good man?”

Senovia thought for a minute. “I don’t know. I see now he was trying to save me, and he made sure my daughter Katja was safe. But before that he told me many lies about my other daughter. I think he did some bad things to her.” Senovia looked away from the voices even though they could not see her shame. “I did not stop him.”

“So he is not a good man.”

“Hey, Joseph, not everything she said was bad. Maybe he’s beginning to change.” Ben tried to assure the second voice that now had a name.

Senovia tried as well. “Yes, he was brave and stood up to Sirin. She struck him for it. I didn’t see any blood, though. I think he will be all right.”

Joseph wasn’t soothed. “I want him to be a better man, but then maybe I don’t. He stands up to her once, and she is already hurting him. He’ll only join us here.”

“Please, there is time enough later to worry over Alex. We have already been doing it for years, my friend. Let her finish the story.”

Senovia continued. “There is not much else to tell. Sirin came in, and then my daughter. She was beautiful. My husband told me she would become a prophet, a glorious firebird, but I never believed him. Sirin had a gun. I could see Sasha coming toward the house.” She paused. “Sasha Harris,” she clarified.

These three knew a lot more about this world than her, so surely they would know about the avenging angel with the blue eyes. “Sasha had a shotgun, but he would be too late. I pushed my daughter out of the way. I died instead.”

The third voice spoke again, and he was angry. “This woman lies. Her daughter is not the Gamayun, and my son cannot possibly still be alive.”

CHAPTER 1

“Are you out of your mind? I am not selling my car!” Alex roared from the living room of the beach house.

“Sell it, ditch it, put it in storage and visit it on Christmas for meaningful one-on-one chats—I don’t care. But it’s not coming with us, Alexei,” I could hear Sasha inform him in a cool voice.

“Stop calling me Alexei!”

“Fine. You need to sell your car, *Al*.”

“I’m going to kill you.”

Sasha snorted. “Good luck.”

“Katja, how much longer? We’re missing it.” I hovered in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room of the Carlisle beach house.

“Forty-five seconds,” Kat grumbled at me. She stood in front of the microwave, bouncing from foot to foot impatiently. Her shiny black hair waved back and forth with her. “You’re the one that wanted popcorn.”

“I thought we had a couple of minutes before Sasha confronted him. Besides, entertainment is always enhanced with refreshments. Imagine how much better it would be with Junior Mints.”

“I swear Galine, you see the world almost entirely in terms of food these days.”

“I’m hungry all the time. Deal with it.” I couldn’t help that I was working with bird metabolism. The microwave beeped, signaling that our popcorn was done. “C’mon, let’s go. It’s gone quiet. That means they might be having a physical altercation. You know how I enjoy watching Alex bleed.”

Katja and I scrambled into the living room, popcorn in hand, and plopped ourselves on the couch for a front row seat at the fight. While she didn’t watch the two of them with quite as much glee as I did, she was still holding a grudge against Alex for lying to her. Plus, the beach house didn’t have TV or Internet, and Kat was easily bored. Since Alex and Harper had made up, Alex and Sasha’s arguments were our only source of entertainment.

Sasha was sitting in an armchair, looking bored. I was a little disappointed he wasn’t at Alex’s throat. Alex, on the other hand, looked like he was ready to strangle Sasha. He was turning an interesting shade of purplish-red. He was going to explode, and soon. I shoveled a fistful of popcorn into my mouth and waited.

The profanity that poured out of Alex was impressively descriptive and imaginative. Thankfully, it was also in Russian.

“Aw, no fair,” Katja whined. “I was too little when we stopped speaking Russian. Now I don’t know what he’s saying. Translate for me.”

I gasped at a nasty one Alex uttered referring to both Sasha’s ancestry and some recreational activities Sasha could partake in. “Um, I’m not translating this. It’s best you don’t know what he’s saying,” I told her.

“You’re no fun.”

Sasha reached his breaking point after Alex uttered a string of curses about his mother. As much as I was loathe to bring attention to myself, I couldn’t help piping up. “Hey now, that was below the belt.”

“What did he say?” Kat demanded interpreting services again, but I wasn’t paying attention to her. Sasha had come unglued. His calm exterior was gone, and he was raving in Russian. I had

thought Alex was impressive, but Sasha was downright eloquent in his insults, like poetry. I was a little proud. Well, as proud as I could be discovering my boyfriend had a knack for the profane. Wow, he actually made me blush a little bit. The cursing coming out of his mouth was so blistering, it could have peeled paint off of walls.

“What is going on?” I turned around to see my best friend Harper entering the room. “It sounds like toddlers brawling down here.”

“You’re not wrong,” Katja told her, scooping up another handful of popcorn.

Harper looked at the men shouting at each other in the middle of the room, then turned to us, sharing refreshments on the couch. “This is a spectator sport for you, is it?” She narrowed her eyes at us.

I shrugged. “There’s no TV.”

Harper raised her eyebrows at my lame excuse. “What language are they speaking?”

“Russian,” Kat said with a sigh. “Galine won’t translate. I already asked. I think they’re mostly swearing at each other. I managed to pick up the words for ‘mother’ and ‘whore’, but that’s about it.”

“You know the word for ‘whore?’” I choked a little bit on my current mouthful of popcorn.

“Hey, I can’t help what sticks and what doesn’t.”

“Are you going to stop them?” Harper asked, looking at me.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” I said. “Sasha can hold his own.”

“Yes, of course, it’s your precious Sasha you’re concerned about.” Ouch. Before I had a chance to address the problem, Harper put two fingers in her mouth and let out an ear-piercing whistle.

I clapped my hands over my ears and Katja let out a surprised yelp. Sasha and Alex stopped hollering at each other and finally noticed that there were other people in the room. Sasha saw me and Kat on the couch and had the good grace to look sheepish. “Sorry, love,” he murmured in my direction. I gave him a quick nod to let him know we were good.

Sasha’s temper was like quicksilver—it came and went so fast it could give you whiplash. I was used to it, so I wasn’t surprised to see he was in control of himself already. Alex was another matter. He was still so upset he was shaking. Harper tried to approach him, but he put his arm out, holding her off. “Give me a minute.”

Harper turned to Sasha, her own temper flaring. “Would you like to tell me what this is all about?”

“I merely told him that he needed to get rid of the Ferrari. We need to get on the road and leave, today. We’ve already been here too long. The beach house is owned by your family, which makes it easy to trace. I’d be surprised if Sirin’s people aren’t already headed our way. Luckily, most of her flunkies aren’t near as good as she is. Still, we can’t exactly keep a low profile on the road in a bright red Ferrari and a silver Audi, either. I’m sorry, Harper, but you need to sell your car, too.” Having said his piece, Sasha returned to his seat in the armchair.

“Could we paint them?” Harper suggested.

“No,” I said. “Hopefully the demon hawk spies won’t be an issue until Sirin wakes up, since she’s the only one that can communicate with them. But her people have other ways of getting information. When I was in New York I realized how much power Sirin has. She has people in the FBI working for her, not to mention various police departments, and people in Washington. I’m sure they’ll be using those resources to try to track us down. Your vehicles are unique, especially Alex’s. People remember seeing a Ferrari. It doesn’t matter what color it is.”

“It’s more than the cars,” Sasha continued. “We can’t have ties to anything that could be traced back to us. That means we can’t hide out in any of your family’s properties, Harper. We can’t go to my cabin, either, or use my truck. All of our cell phones need to be trashed. We’ll need to alter our appearances, too.”

“What?” Sasha and I had talked this morning about most of what he had said, but the last part was new. I didn’t care about changing my look, but I was attached to his appearance.

Everyone began talking at once. Alex yelled in a mixture of English and Russian, most of it incoherent. Harper ignored his warnings to keep her distance, and tried to calm him down. I think I heard her say, “It’s okay, baby, it’s just a car.”

Kat peppered Sasha with questions. “What do you mean we’re not going back to Durham? What about Mom? We have to bury her. What about a funeral? I have school. What about school? I have to maintain a certain G.P.A. so I can get a scholarship to college. What about cheerleading? I have a game on Thursday. What about the house? Who’s going to take care of the house? What about my stuff?”

Sasha looked to me in desperation. I knew he was hoping that I’d help him with all of Kat’s inquiries, but I had concerns of my own.

“Are you going to have to cut your hair?” I asked him. I was fond of running my fingers through his thick black hair, which hung down to his shoulders. “You’re not going to dye it, are you?” I glanced at Alex, with his movie star blond highlights, and shuddered thinking of my Sasha as a blond. Then I thought of the worst possible scenario. “You will not get colored contacts!” I ordered, pointing a finger straight at his perfect blue eyes.

“They are his most recognizable feature,” Kat pointed out, taking a breath from her tirade to make my life more difficult.

“You stay out of it,” I snapped.

“Well, they are.”

“Some concessions will have to be made. Your eyes are staying blue, and that’s final,” I said to Sasha and Katja both.

Sasha was still looking at us a bit bewildered. “Galine, Katja has a point,” he began.

“Wear sunglasses!” He stopped talking and bit his lower lip to keep from laughing.

“Fine. I want a concession, too.” Kat said. “We have to go back for Mom’s funeral.”

“Not possible,” Sasha and I both said at the same time.

“Why not?” Kat placed both her hands on her hips and glared at us.

“Because my mother’s people will have undoubtedly thought of that,” Alex said, his voice carrying over all the shouting. “If you show up to the funeral, Kat, they’ll kill you. It’s that simple.” He appeared to be in control, but Harper still hovered. She had her right hand interlaced with his, and her left hand gripped his arm.

Kat ignored everything Alex said and glared at me. “Mom is dead. I’m going back. This isn’t negotiable.”

“You’re right, it isn’t negotiable. You heard Alex. We can’t do anything else for Mom. I refuse to put you or anyone else in danger to say some goodbyes.” I could feel the anger rolling off of Katja, but I didn’t budge.

“I don’t have to listen to you. You’re not my guardian anymore. I’m leaving.” Kat whirled around and started to make for the door.

“Sasha.” That was all I had to say. He jumped out of the chair placed a firm grip on one of Katja’s wrists. He didn’t hurt her, but she wasn’t going anywhere, either.

“Get your trained ape off of me,” she hissed.

Relations with Kat had been strained ever since I returned with the news that our mother was dead, and I knew Sasha restraining her was one more thing she was going to hate me for. It wouldn't help the animosity between the two of them, either. What was I supposed to do? Seeing my sister glare at me and the man I loved twisted my insides in knots, but keeping her safe was more important.

"Katja, why don't you go upstairs and lie down for a while?" Alex suggested. "I'm sure you're tired." His voice dropped lower and had a seductive purr to it. I was beginning to be able to distinguish that as his 'voodoo voice,' as I was calling it. He was using his ability to influence people to do whatever he desired. Usually it made me angry, but at the moment, I was grateful. His ability wasn't foolproof, though. Katja could resist if she wanted to. I held my breath waiting for her response.

Katja looked confused for a moment, but then she yawned. "Yeah, I am kind of sleepy. Maybe I'll rest for a little bit." Her eyelids already drooping, she headed in the direction of the stairs.

"Thank you," I told Alex. I felt ashamed for my earlier behavior. Harper was right to scold me.

"Why are you thanking Alex?" Harper asked. "A moment ago you brought popcorn to watch Sasha scream at him." Okay, so she was still mad at me.

"Popcorn?" Alex inquired, his voice back to normal. His eyes found my bag of microwave popcorn on the sofa. "Can I have some?" Well, at least Alex wasn't holding a grudge.

"Sure," I said as I handed him the bag. "I'm thanking him for using his voodoo on Kat," I explained to Harper.

"It's not voodoo," Alex protested around a mouthful of popcorn.

"Well, what are we supposed to call it? Your 'power to influence people' is too long," I pointed out.

"My awesomeness?" he suggested.

"How could she tell you were doing your voodoo voice?" Harper was interested now.

"Babe, I thought we talked about calling it that. You're encouraging everyone else."

"Well, Galine does have a point. There's not a good name for it, and I doubt you're going to get anyone to call it your 'awesomeness.' Now answer the question."

"It wasn't exactly hard to deduce. Kat was hell bent on going home, and then she wanted to take a nap. You connected the dots, right?" Alex looked to me for confirmation.

"No, I can tell when you're doing it."

"You can? Really? Huh. I didn't know that was possible." Alex looked both amazed and a little irritated at the same time.

"Yes. It's subtle. It's only after I knew to listen for it that I was able to pick up on it."

"Can you teach me?" Harper asked, her eyes alight with the possibility.

"Harper, I gave you my word I wouldn't use it on you, and I meant it." The hurt was plain in Alex's voice.

"Well then it shouldn't be a problem if I can tell you're doing it, should it?" Maybe everything with Alex wasn't forgiven and forgotten.

"He doesn't want Galine to teach you so he can lie to you, Harper," Sasha said. I had all but forgotten he was in the room. He was still sitting in that armchair, taking it all in. "I suspect he wants to hold it in reserve in case there's ever a time you're in danger and you refuse to leave. You can be as stubborn as Galine sometimes. It's what I would do. Heck, I wish I could do it. That's it, isn't it Alex?"

“Thanks for taking the element of surprise out of it, Sash,” Alex growled at him.

“You’re an idiot. In a real time of danger, it will likely work regardless of whether she knows it’s coming or not. But if Harper’s worried about you lying to her all the time, that’s the sort of thing that will eventually make her despise you. You should be thanking me.”

“Baby, is that true?” Harper asked. Her voice had gone soft, and the look she gave him was intimate enough that I looked away. And I continued to look away as they made up from their mini-fight in the manner they always did—with copious amounts of PDA.

“Eh-hem!” I cleared my throat after a couple of minutes. “People still in the room here.” If the noises were any indication, Alex and Harper were ignoring me. I wasn’t going to turn around and check.

“Allow me,” Sasha said, rising from his chair. He walked past me to the amorous couple and slapped Alex on the back of the head. “We still have matters to discuss.”

Alex was enraged, and just like that, the two of them were back to swearing at each other in Russian.

“Oh, that is it. I am done with this.” Harper said. She grabbed Alex with one arm and Sasha with the other, and towed the both of them to the nearest sofa. “Sit,” she commanded them. They sat, side-by-side, staring up at her in shock.

“You two are going to stop arguing immediately. Not only is it giving me a migraine, it’s not safe. You both claim to want to protect us, but when you two are screaming at each other, Sirin could come in and take all three of us and you wouldn’t even notice.” Harper glared at both of them, letting the indictment sink in. Alex opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off. “I’m not finished. Sasha, stop calling him Alexei, or Al, or idiot. Call him Alex.”

“Yeah,” Alex said, smirking at Sasha.

“Alex, stop calling him Sash. His name is Sasha. And both of you stop the Russian cursing matches. I don’t know what you’re saying, but it must be bad, because I’ve never seen Galine blush that deep a shade of red before.”

“Fine,” Alex agreed, and Sasha nodded.

“Alex, you’ve got to sell the car,” Harper continued. Alex sputtered, but she put one finger over his lips before he could get going again. “I’m going to sell mine, too. You’re just mad because Sasha’s telling you to do it. It’s the smart thing to do, and you know it. You’ve got to start listening to him.”

“I do know a thing or two about staying off the radar,” Sasha reminded Alex. “I’ve been doing it longer than you’ve been alive.”

“You’ve been doing it poorly,” Alex accused, no longer letting Harper silence him. “We knew where you were, didn’t we?”

“I stayed in the cabin because it was home. That doesn’t mean I didn’t know you had goons checking up on me. I’ll admit, the apartment in Durham was a boneheaded move, but I still know more about running than you do. You’ve had everything handed to you from day one. I remember even as a kid you were ordering people around.” Sasha pitched his voice higher and put his nose in the air in his impression of a child Alex: “Bring me cookies. I want that bicycle. Give it to me.”

“Stop it,” Harper ordered. “Alex does need to listen to you, but you need to stop treating him like he’s five. Quit antagonizing him. You too,” she said, whirling around and pointing her finger at me. “Alex has already apologized to you, and he said you accepted it. He said you two were good, so why are you taking so much delight in his misery?”

I looked at Harper and thought about Alex's apology. She was right. I had told him that if he kept Harper from his mother, we were square. He had held up his end of the bargain, and had kept my sister safe as well. Truthfully, while he annoyed me, I was never all that mad at him to begin with. I realized what had happened was as much my fault as his. If I had been honest with Harper and Kat to begin with and if I hadn't sent Sasha away, Alex's plotting wouldn't have succeeded. Plus, he had gone above and beyond to make it up to me. My real beef with him wasn't what he had done to me. I just didn't think he was good enough for Harper. I wasn't going to tell her that, though, not with him in the room.

"You're right. I'm being petty. Alex, you've more than made up for what you did to me." I was able to give him that much.

Harper acknowledged my comment with a nod, then turned back to the guys. "And you, Sasha, how long are you going to hold a grudge?"

"Harper, don't," Alex warned.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, puzzled. I looked to Sasha for clarification, but his attention was on Harper. His eyes had gone angry and cold. I hurried over to the couch, so I could stand next to Harper. He scared me a little bit when he looked like that.

Harper met his eyes, unflinching. "Alex feels terrible, you know. When you're around, you push all his buttons, and he pretends not to care, but he hasn't slept well since he came back from New York. He's up every night, walking the floor."

"Small penance. He should have a guilty conscience. You didn't see her when I found her, Harper. I can't forgive that. Not ever." Sasha said the words with enough finality that Harper backed off a little bit.

I was stunned. He had to be referring to when he found me starving and freezing in New York. Sure, it was Alex's lying and scheming that had landed me there, but it had never occurred to me that Sasha was holding a grudge on my behalf. I figured their back and forth bickering had more to do with personality differences or maybe family rivalry. I felt a little dumb. Harper had sized up the situation in less than 48 hours of observing them together.

"We aren't going to solve our problems holding hands and singing kumbaya. I can be civil to Alex, but we need to leave," Sasha said.

"And go where?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter. We just need to get on the road and start moving. We can figure out a destination later. Right now we're too easy to find. Now I suggest all of you go pack. We're leaving in an hour." Sasha stood up and stormed from the room.

I looked again at Alex, who had his head in his hands. "Is that true, what Harper said?" Alex was so cocky it was hard to picture him full of remorse.

Alex didn't look up immediately, but when he did, that crooked grin of his was back, showing off his toothpaste commercial teeth. "Naw, you know how she exaggerates." He winked for good measure. I might have bought his return to nonchalance, too, if he hadn't darted a pleading look at Harper, who was frowning at him in frustration.

"Alex, listen. I know I've given you a hard time, but don't let guilt over me keep you up at night. Really, we're cool."

Alex looked at me and I saw some of the smugness on his face slip a little bit. He took a deep breath and then said with his trademark arrogance, "Yeah, I figured we were. I mean, how could you resist my charm, right?"

Harper rolled her eyes, which gave me some comfort that she saw through his schmaltz. I directed my attention back to Alex. “We’re cool for now. You hurt my friend, and it’s a different story.”

“Galine!” Harper yelled at me.

“What? It’s the truth. I’m not mad at him, but most of the time he still acts like a jerk. He saved your life, so I’m willing to grant him a little leeway, but I need him to know that if he doesn’t treat you right, there will be consequences.” I tried my best to look menacing. Sasha was way better at it than I was. He was always telling me my mean face was adorable.

I could tell Harper was mad at me, but Alex put a hand on her arm to calm her. “That’s fair, Harper. She doesn’t have any reason to trust me, and she’s been gone for most of the time we’ve been together. She’ll see, won’t she, babe?” He pulled her close to him, and I could see there was about to be more kissing.

“I’m going to go pack,” I announced, then beat a hasty retreat.

CHAPTER 2

Sera Rodina tapped her leather high heeled boots on the tile floor of the woman's kitchen. With trembling fingers the woman reached for the clasp of her necklace, fumbling to undo it.

Sera had already eyed the gold chain with a single pearl pendant. "Don't bother. I'm sure it has great sentimental value to you, but it will be worth little to Ms. Rodina." She leaned forward, careful to keep her cream cashmere coat from touching the kitchen table. It looked sticky. "I don't think you understand. If you can't give me something amazing, I'm going have to take something."

"Take, please. I already said you can have whatever you want. Just let my husband go." The woman's chin fell to her chest and she began to sob again.

Sera sighed and straightened back up. She walked a few steps to the nearby bookcase and picked up a figurine of two children with cherubic faces. "If I have to take something from you, it's not going to be a dusty tchotchke." Sera opened her French manicured fingers and let the figurine shatter on the floor. She ignored the woman's gasp and moved toward the knife block on the kitchen counter.

She found the big chef's knife on the first try. Practice. It was usually in the same place in these generic knife sets, and the blade was usually dull. If they owned the block, they didn't know anything about good knives or keeping them sharp. The knife would suit her purposes well enough, though.

"What is that for?" The woman was already fumbling out of her seat, backing away from Sera, and the knife had barely cleared its slot.

"Exactly what you think. If I have to take something, it will be with this." Sera strode back to the table and stabbed the knife into the wooden surface. It barely stuck in, wobbling. Dull—she knew it.

The woman was as predictable as her cutlery. She was still blubbing, but now she was moving around the apartment with a purpose. It was a fourth floor walk-up in the Bronx. Logic said there would be nothing of value here. Sera had found an original Van Gogh in the Bronx last month. The woman stumbled in her hurry to get to Sera.

"Here. Here. Take it." She shoved a wrapped bundle into Sera's hands. "Ronald was good enough to me, I guess. But one year at Christmas I caught him kissing my sister, and I ain't never forgiven him for it. I wasn't going to give you this for him, but if you going to start choppin' on me, well..."

Sera only half listened to the explanation for the woman's change of heart. She already knew the reason. It always boiled down to self-preservation. She looked down at the small bundle in her hands, and as the grubby cloth fell away, she was able to get a good look at the prize that lay beneath. At the center of the pendant was an aquamarine gem, but the stone was of little consequence. Forming an intricate diamond around the stone were the turquoise bodies and sage green wings of dragonflies. Sera recognized the style as art nouveau, but could it possibly be...?

Her fingers shook as she turned the pendant over, searching for the signature. Yes, it was there. *Lalique*.

"Now I know that's worth somethin.' It belonged to my grandma," said the woman, "and my mother always told me if I ever got in a bad way that would see me through. Said not to take it to no pawn shop, though. I had to take it to one of those fancy auction houses."

“Your mother was correct. It has indeed seen you through.” Sera dropped the soiled and moth eaten cloth to the floor, then removed her own lace-trimmed Valentino scarf and placed the pendant in its folds. As she tucked it in her handbag, her phone chirped.

She placed the sleek silver rectangle to her ear and answered with a crisp, “Yes.”

The voice of her mother’s second in command, Astrid, filled her ear. “We have a problem.”

Sera turned to the woman one last time before she exited the apartment. “Sharpen your knives,” she said.

As she hit the street outside, she instinctively turned in the direction of the nearest subway, the phone still pressed to her ear. She was halfway down the steps of the station before she registered what Astrid was telling her. Her feet stuttered on the next step, almost missing it. She grabbed the railing for support, and took a deep breath.

“Astrid, are you telling me my mother is unconscious? Has been for hours? Might be for days?”

“I honestly don’t know, Sera. I’m bringing her back now. We should be there sometime this evening. I’ll know more once Dr. Carver has a chance to look at her.”

Sera closed her eyes, overwhelmed with the information. She made a mental inventory of the injuries her mother had sustained. She shook her head. Her mother wouldn’t wake in days. It would take months. She’d have to regenerate organs. Sasha had told her stories of regeneration. It was painful, slow.

“What about Alex? Is he coming home?” She couldn’t think about her mother now.

“He said he had a few things to wrap up in Durham, but should be home in the next couple of days,” Astrid said.

“Okay. Okay.” Dammit, she was rattled. “Text me when Mom gets in.” With that, she ended the call and walked back up the stairs of the station. She squinted in the sudden sunlight and took a couple gulps of air. A giddy laugh escaped her lips. She felt a bit delirious.

She walked to the curb and stuck her arm in the air to hail a cab. Imagine, a cab! She smiled. One pulled up, and she’d just wrapped her fingers around the handle of the door when she saw it.

The hawk was across the street, perched on the rain spout of an apartment building. The demon inhabiting it wasn’t even the ugliest she’d ever seen. It didn’t have quite as many roving eyes and teeth as the norm, but there was no question what it was. The hawk might not tell her mother she took a cab today, but when her mother woke up, would the hawk make note of this incident?

Sera backed away from the cab, waving the driver off. What was she doing? She knew that eventually her mother would wake up, and when she did, her awful little creatures would tell tales. She couldn’t take chances, couldn’t deviate from the carefully plotted movements she had been sticking to for years. She turned back to the subway and descended the stairs once more.

She stood on the platform, waiting for the train to take her back toward her apartment on Central Park West, but as a train heading to Tribeca pulled up, she felt a moment of panic, and stepped onto it instead.

When she put her key in the door to Alex’s apartment, she began to feel foolish. He said himself he was coming home in a day or two. He might have been talking nonsense on his last visit, but he must have come to his senses if he was helping Mom in an altercation with the Gamayun. He had even called Astrid, helped with clean up.

Sera stepped into the apartment, resolved to get it ready for him before he got home to make up for doubting him. She made a mental note to get him some groceries, too. He never had any food in the house, even when he was living there. He’d been gone for months. She went to the

fridge first to see if he had anything, or worse, something funky growing in the back she needed to throw out.

The fridge was bursting. Milk, eggs, meat, produce, leftovers. Sera yanked out a container and pried off the lid to reveal spaghetti and meatballs. A cursory sniff revealed that the food was still good. Alex's last visit had been a month ago. More importantly, her brother didn't cook. Ever.

Sera groaned and made a dash for the guest bedroom. The bed was made, but there were clothes she didn't recognize draped on a chair. She picked them up. Jeans and a t-shirt in an extra small. She might've been able to dismiss them as belonging to one of Alex's conquests, but that wasn't how they dressed. The clothes were too simple, not expensive enough, not flattering. She set them back down and opened the dresser. Gone was all the slinky lingerie he normally kept in there. Instead it was filled with practical, simple clothes. And Sera had a sinking feeling she might know who they belonged to.

She stomped into Alex's bedroom, and she didn't even need to look in the drawers there. That bed—made so tight you could bounce a quarter off it—told her what she had feared. She opened the closet anyway and ran a hand over one of Sasha's soft flannel shirts.

"Oh, Alex, what have you done?"

Sera sat on the bed and dialed her brother's number. She wasn't surprised when it went to voicemail. "Alex, I'm at your apartment." She took a moment to allow the ramifications of that to sink in. "I'm sure your building has camera footage, witnesses; I can't cover that up." She laughed. "But then, I'm guessing whatever happened in Durham is worse, huh?"

He hadn't shot their mother, had he? Sera was nearly sick at the thought. No. Alex didn't have it in him. Sasha had to have pulled the trigger, as Astrid said.

"You probably think it's over, that you can't come back. You're wrong. Don't run, Alex. You've got to get back here and make good before she wakes up. You can't hide from her. Please, Alex." She didn't know what else to say, so she hung up.