

# Kerri??

By xxnataxx

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*After getting kidnapped, girl finds herself in world where the supernatural exist and to find that she's not human, but a sorceress*

*I don't have a title for my story yet*

*Be harsh on the comments y'all cos i'm thinking of getting this published*

x

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<http://www.fanart-central.net/stories/user/xxnataxx/56098/Kerri>

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# 1 - Taken

Kerri was driving home when it happened. It was eight o'clock and she had stopped for a red light and was tapping her fingers impatiently against the wheel. She was in a hurry to get back home tonight, because it was Valentine's Day, and Ty was waiting for her with a surprise. Her phone rang, and the screen flashed "Tyler".

Kerri scrambled to pick up the phone and flipped it open. "Hey honey, I'm sorry I'm so late. It's all this damn traffic," she apologised.

"Don't worry about it, Ree. Everybody's hurrying back home for Valentine's day, just like you are."

Kerri grinned.

"I'll see you when you get back, okay?" he continued. "Oh, and one more thing, you may have to make it up to me for waiting so long when you come back," he said, and Kerri could almost hear him smirk over the phone. Luckily, she had prepared for such an occasion.

"Oh, I will," Kerri said, grinning slyly. "Look inside my top drawer by the bed."

She heard him walk into her room and open her drawer and heard him draw in a breath. "Ree, sweetie, I don't care how you're going to do it, but you better get back here in about five seconds," he breathed while Kerri laughed. "Where did you get these?"

"Victoria's secret." She looked at her rear view mirror and suddenly saw a sleek black car heading towards her. "shoot. Not again."

"What's wrong?"

"Oh," Kerri stuttered. "Um, it's nothing. I left my uh...my...I uh, left my phone—no, not my phone, I'm talking to you on it now, aren't I?" She mentally kicked herself. "My wallet! That's it. I left my wallet at work." She looked into the rear view mirror again and slunk down low in her seat. Please don't see me, she begged silently.

She could just see Tyler frowning. "Ree, sometimes you really—"

"Hey, sweetie, I have to go," she interrupted him as the car drew up behind her. "I'll see you in a while, okay?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Love you, bye." She snapped her phone shut.

Another car of the same make slid in next to her, engine purring. The driver was wearing black sunglasses, and even though she couldn't see past them, she knew he was looking straight at her. Damn. This was going to be hard.

Won't these guys give up? Not once, not twice, but probably like the sixth time now. Seriously. They

were pissing her off. And scaring her.

The light turned green and Kerri sped off, the tires screeching as she forced her car to take a sharp right turn and down a narrow street. At least she had lost the car that was next to her. She checked the rear view mirror again. Damn, that one was still behind her. How the hell was she going to shake that one off?

She raced down the road and yanked on her wheel hard, turning into the next street.

And slammed into the other black car that was waiting for her.

## 2 - Captor

Arik stared from his driver's seat as the girl in the car in front of him smashed into Joshua's car. Then he turned around to the other men sitting at the back of his car.

"What are you waiting for?" He snapped. "I haven't got all day. Get the girl out of the car."

The men hurried out of the car. One of them stuck his head back in again. "How about him, sir?" he asked, gesturing Joshua's car.

Arik glanced at his best friend of fifteen years and shrugged. "He'll live. Now go get the girl."

The man nodded dutifully and left to join the other. Arik got out and walked to Joshua's car. He pulled at the door, which creaked and fell off from the car almost instantly, and flung it onto the ground. He reached inside.

"Joshua. Answer me."

Joshua stirred and wiped the blood away from his mouth with the back of his hand. "Yes, sir," he croaked.

Arik didn't let the relief show. He looked at the blood running down Joshua's face. "It's just a scratch. You'll live."

"Yes, sir."

Arik withdrew himself from the mangled remains of Joshua's car. "Get into my car," he ordered his best friend, who complied in silence although his face contorted in agony and pain. Arik walked towards the two men, who had managed to lift the girl out from her car.

She had long, wavy lustrous black hair that was wild, tangled and seemingly everywhere, and she was pretty in a cute but also stunningly sexy way. She was unconscious, and her body lay limply in the men's arms, her arms and legs trailing lifelessly on the floor.

shoot. She had better not be dead. He lifted one of her arms and held his fingers against her wrist and was relieved to feel a faint pulse. He stalked back to his car. Joshua was sitting in the back seat.

"Up front, Joshua. The girl and the men sit at the back." Arik yanked the door to the backseat open while Joshua climbed out of the car, limping and staggering to the front seat. "Come on," Arik snapped impatiently. "I haven't got all day." He opened the door to the passenger seat and practically shoved Joshua inside before slamming the door close.

He jerked his thumb at the backseat. "Hurry up," he told the men, who were lifting the girl into the car. "It takes five hours to get back to the boss." He got into the driver's seat and waited for the men to get

into the car before gunning the engine and speeding off.

### 3 - End of Her World

When Kerri came around, she found that she was trapped in between two extremely well muscled men in a sleek black car that was driving through a place so dead it could just as well have been a graveyard. And she had a killer headache.

“What the hell?” she mumbled.

The person who was driving eyed her from his rear view mirror. He had jet-black hair that was just a bit on the long side and piercing green eyes, and was drop dead gorgeous. “What’s your name?” he asked her brusquely.

Kerri stopped ogling him and stared at him in disbelief instead. “You captured me and you don’t even know my name?”

He glared at her. “Your name.”

“Princess Snow White.”

“Do I look like I’m in a joking mood?”

“Oh, I’m perfectly serious.”

The man narrowed his eyes at her, and she returned the look and was about to tell him to remove the stick that was up his @\$\$ when she remembered the two freakily strong men sitting beside her.

The man’s gaze averted to the road. “shoot.” He braked suddenly, and stopped just in time at a red light before he slammed into a car. Watching car accidents happening weren’t too bad, but experiencing it firsthand was another matter.

Kerri and the two men beside her were thrown against the front seat while the man who was sitting in the passenger seat was thrown against the windshield and let out a hiss of pain.

“For God’s sake, Joshua, pull yourself together,” the man who driving hissed.

The man named Joshua looked out his side of the window, his jaw locked and his eyes screwed up in anguish. “Sorry sir.”

Kerri looked at Joshua. If she were him, she’d have kicked that guy’s balls off. “Where are you taking me?”

Everybody ignored her.

Kerri cleared her throat. “I said, where are you frackING TAKING ME?” she raised her voice to a



scream.

Everybody in the car winced.

“You know, that’s not the loudest I can scream,” she said when once more silence greeted her.

“Shut up, you insolent girl,” the driver snapped.

“I don’t even know why I’m here! At least tell me why you took me! I don’t know your name, I don’t know who you are, and...I’m going to be very late back home! And...I don’t even know what I’m doing here!”

“You’ll know why soon enough. And as for being late back home, I don’t think you’re going to be going home for quite some time,” the driver said dryly.

“Arik!” Joshua suddenly cried out, reaching over and yanking on the wheel. “Watch the road!”

“So it’s Arik, huh?” It was about time she knew his name; she was getting tired of referring to him as “the driver” or “the man who was driving”.

Arik glowered at Joshua. He was obviously upset that Kerri knew his name. “Shut up, McCarthy.”

Kerri frowned. “You know my name?”

“Of course I know your name. You didn’t think I’d kidnap someone without knowing their name, would you now, Kerrien?” he smirked at her through his rear view mirror.

Kerri gritted her teeth. She hated it when people called her by her full name. She decided to change tactics. “Look, please let me go. I don’t know what I’m doing here. If it’s because one of your mafia friends or whatever gangs that you’re involved in lost that case last Wednesday, then I’m not the one you should be kidnapping.

“I mean, I was the defender, I was trying to help. You should kidnap the judge, or the prosecutor, or whoever,” she begged them. “Please, just let me go. Or maybe come back tomorrow night, because it’s Valentine’s Day today and I have a feeling my boyfriend’s going to propose. And I really want to say yes. Please.”

Arik sighed. “You’re not going back home any time soon, so it wouldn’t do you any good to marry whatshisname anyway. And I don’t know why I’m abducting you either. We’re just following orders; so technically, we’re not doing anything wrong, so please stop punishing us by talking and make this trip more bearable for us by shutting up.”

Bastard. But then again, captors weren’t supposed to be warm and friendly, so Kerri forgave him. Kind of. She sulked at the back of the car next to the two men.

“Wait, you say you have a boyfriend?” he asked her after a while.

Kerri stared at him. “Uh, yeah.”

“Okay.” He handed her the phone. “Call him and break it off.”

Kerri stared at the phone in her hand. “Why the hell would I do that?”

“If he gets worried he’ll call the cops, and we don’t want that. It could complicate things.”

Kerri glared at him. “And why the hell should I care?”

Arik sighed. “Such a difficult girl. Because if you don’t, we’ll send a few...friends over to take him to his...paradise, or where ever people go after they erm, oh, I don’t know, die?”

Kerri gaped at him. “But...you wouldn’t...”

“Oh, we would. Believe me.”

Bastard. If looks could kill, he would have been speared on a stick and roasting on a fire now.

Arik tossed her the phone and looked at the two men. “If she calls the cops or anybody for help, you know what to do.”

She dialled Ty’s number. He picked up on the fifth ring.

“Hello?” He had been sleeping.

“Ty?”

“Ree, where on earth are you? It’s almost twelve! You should have been back by now. Was there an accident? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, honey,” she reassured him. “It’s just that...I realised that...I won’t be back for quite a while.”

“What do you mean?”

“I uh...” she racked her brains for something. “I’m on my way to the airport.”

Silence. “What? Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“I uh...my boss called me literally ten minutes ago and said I was going to London and she just talked nonstop and wouldn’t hang up. I called as soon as I could.”

“But...I don’t understand. Why?”

“Uh, it’s...you know. Lawyer...stuff.”

“Honey, they wouldn’t—”

“I’m seeing somebody, okay?” she interrupted him flatly, knowing that was the only way he was going to let her go. Her eyes welled up when she realised she was probably never going to see him again. “I’m going with him to London.”

There was a pause. “But...I thought...I thought we were—”

“I’m so sorry. I love you so much. You know I do.” She clicked off the line, tears streaming down her face. She handed the phone back to Arik wordlessly and buried her face in her hands, her tears dripping onto her skirt.

## 4 - Assigned

Arik waited impatiently outside the glass office until he was summoned in. He stepped inside. There was a beautiful woman sitting at the desk. Wasn't there always? Except for the fact that this one was old. Well, forty or fifty-ish.

"Arik." The woman nodded her head at him.

Arik bowed stiffly. "Mother." He straightened up. "I'm here to tell the master that we have the girl."

She nodded again. "Wait here." She left the room through a door at the back of the office. She came back in about three minutes later.

"The master wishes for you to take care of the girl in the meantime. You will arrange for her clothing, her food, her living quarters and you will train her. I assume you can do all that?" she raised an eyebrow at him.

Arik bit back a retort. "Yes."

"She will need two formal dresses along with her casual clothes, and she's allergic to seafood. Take extra care with this one. She's special. If you do well with this one, you will be awarded a gold badge."

Arik bit back a gasp of surprise. A gold badge. He'd been longing for that gold badge. He already had six. If he was able to obtain that one gold badge, he would be able to move on and be officially known as a collector. Arik brought himself back to reality. "I'll try my best. Thank you."

After bowing once more to his mother, who again accepted him with a graceful nod, Arik left.

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When Arik went to check on the girl, she was sleeping.

Well, not really. She was unconscious.

He had knocked her out because she wouldn't pull herself together. She wouldn't stop bawling and was driving him insane. What was so hard about breaking up with somebody? You call them, tell them it's over, and then hang up. But then again, considering his current girlfriend—and all his girlfriends, now that he thought about it, except for Sitara—was dumb, had big boobs and was always at his disposal, he probably didn't have the right to comment on the topic.

He walked over to the walk-in closet and, well, he walked into it. It was completely empty. He sighed. Shopping time. Well, not exactly shopping, since the place he was about to go didn't require him to pay for anything. He headed for the building's fashion department.

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After about two hours, Arik had finished choosing all of the girl's casual clothes and was choosing her dresses. He had narrowed it down to three.

The first one was a strapless black one that stopped just above the knees. Simple yet elegant. The second was a striking red, backless dress that trailed down to the floor, with slits that came up to mid-thigh. It would show off her legs. The third one was midnight blue halter dress that was decorated with diamonds and ended just above the knees.

Arik held the three dresses up respectively. Then he flung the back dress away. She didn't have the boobs to hold that one up anyway.

He draped the other two carefully across his arm along with the other clothes he had chosen for her and was about to leave the fashion department when he suddenly stopped and remembered that he still had one more thing to get her: lingerie.

## 5 - Awaken

When Kerri woke up, she was wearing an oversized t-shirt and boxer shorts, nothing else. There was also a massive bump on her head. She rubbed it gingerly, wincing. How the hell did that get there? Then it all came back to her. She gritted her teeth. Arik. The bastard.

She looked up to see the aforementioned sitting at the other side of the room in a chair. She scowled at him.

“So you’ve finally decided to wake up,” he said, standing. He was tall, dark and handsome, with a lean, athletic body. She would have swooned, but she reminded herself that her dignity was needed.

“Well, I would have never had to ‘sleep’ if you hadn’t clocked me on the head,” she snapped, emphasising on the word “sleep”.

Arik shrugged. “I told you to shut up. You didn’t. I had to do something; you were driving me insane.”

She refrained herself from hitting him. “Where am I?”

“In your room.”

“Buddy, I’ve been to my room before, and I can tell you one thing: this sure as hell isn’t it.”

Arik pursed his lips. “From now on, this is going to be your room. Now go take a shower, you look like shoot.”

Kerri hopped off her bed. “Just what every girl wants to hear,” she muttered, stomping into the bathroom.

She spent about five minutes trying to work out how to turn on the shower, and when she finally did, it came on so suddenly that she was completely taken by surprise and slipped. She yelped as she landed on the bathroom floor.

The door burst open and Arik came in. “What did you do now?” he demanded.

She shrieked and pulled the shower curtain around her.

Arik rolled his eyes. “It’s not like I haven’t seen them all before.”

“You took off my clothes when I was unconscious? Did you rape me? You...amoral bastard!” she screamed. “You animal! You...you...” she trailed off.

Arik raised an eyebrow. “Of course I took off your clothes. I had to help you change out of those rags that used to be clothes into the shirt and shorts you were wearing when you woke up. And no, I didn’t

rape you. Please. I had better things to do with my time. If I wanted to get laid, I'd have gone to my girlfriend."

She flushed bright red. He had a girlfriend. "Oh."

"So why did you scream?" he raised an eyebrow mockingly. "Did you see a spider?"

She swallowed a retort. "I slipped in the shower. I think I sprained my ankle."

Arik sighed. Such a careless girl. "I guess we better have a look at it, then." He walked over and knelt down next to her, waiting.

After hesitating, she stretched out her leg towards him cautiously, and he took it in his hands.

"Does this hurt?" he asked, squeezing her foot.

"No."

"How about this?"

"No."

"And how about—"

"God's sake," she yelped as pain streaked through her leg. She tried to withdraw her leg but he held it firmly, not letting go.

"Better get to the doctor." He stood up, got a towel and threw it to her. "Dry up and wrap it around you."

Kerri obliged reluctantly. She had barely wrapped the towel around her when he lifted her up so that he was carrying her.

"Hey! What the—"

"What, do you want to walk, or should I say, limp your way to the doctor's? It's only fifteen minutes if you run."

She scowled at him wordlessly while he carried her over to the doctor's.

"Hey, I don't like carrying you that much either, so stop looking at me like that."

She was about to say something when he beat her to it. "By the way, you may want to close your eyes right now."

She frowned at him while he pressed a button that was on the wall. "What do you mean lahhhh!" her question turned into a scream when the floor suddenly disappeared between them so that they were hurtling down a shaft so dark she couldn't even see Arik's face. She clutched to him, burrowing her

head against his chest.

She could hear Arik sigh. "I told you so."

She pursed her lips. If it weren't for the fact that they could be hurtling towards their death right now, she would have sucker punched him.

Suddenly, the lights came on and they stopped falling. Just like that. Kerri squinted and looked down. There was a huge cushion below them but they hadn't fallen down onto it, they had just simply stopped falling.

"What the hell—" she was about to ask Arik when they abruptly dropped onto the cushion.

"Nice to see gravity taking a break there," she muttered as Arik bounded up from the cushion and continued walking with her in his arms.

He snorted, smiling briefly. A blink-and-you'll-miss-it smile. Fortunately, Kerri didn't blink. She was momentarily dazed. He should smile more often, she thought dreamily. Stop it. He has a girlfriend.

Reluctantly, she dragged her gaze away from his face and looked ahead. There was a thick wooden door in front of them, with an electronic panel next to it. The door had no handle. She was about to ask him what that was about when he stepped in front of the panel and looked into it. The panel glowed.

Ah. One of those retina scan thingamajigs.

After a pause, the wooden door slid open with a silent whoosh and Arik stepped into the room that was behind it.



## 6 - Frustration and Desperation Can Do This to You

After the doctor had had a look at the girl's leg, he went over to the corner where Arik was leaning against a table.

"So, how is she?" Arik asked.

"Well, she's sprained it pretty badly, so definitely no sports for the next few days."

"So she won't be able to dance tonight?"

"I'm afraid not."

Arik sighed. Of all people, she was the one who had to make life hard for him. And she did a good job of it, too. He looked at his watch.

shoot. They were going to be late. He hated being late.

"Thank you, doctor. I'll bring her back in a week's time for a check up." He turned away abruptly and scooped Kerri into his arms again.

"Hey," she protested, pushing at him.

He closed his eyes. He was trying very hard not to scream right now. He could not afford to be late. "You will not argue with me. We are running late, and if we get into trouble because of it, you will get it," he managed to hiss venomously through gritted teeth. Of course, he added mentally, I'll get it, too.

Unsurprisingly, she shut up. He tended to have that effect on people when he was pissed off.

He practically flew over back to the girl's room and dumped her unceremoniously onto the bed, ignoring her muttered complaints, went into the closet and returned with the dark blue dress and a pair of high heels.

She eyed the high heels doubtfully. "You want me to wear these?"

He rolled his eyes. "No, I want you to hang them around your neck."

She picked up the dress, looking it up and down and dropped the heels onto the floor.

"Hey! Be careful, those are very expensive," Arik hurried to save the shoes. "And so is the dress." He received no response. He looked at her.

She was staring at the dress with so much horror one would've thought she was about to face her death.

“What now?”

She turned to him. “I can’t...I can’t wear this.”

“Why, are you allergic to blue dresses as well as seafood?”

“No...it’s just that...I’ll...I can’t.”

Arik leant against the bed. This was going to take a while. He hoped they wouldn’t be late. The boss would have his head. And he wouldn’t get the gold medal. “Why not?”

“It’s just that...whenever I wear expensive stuff or nice stuff, I’ll ruin it. I’d spill a drink on it or trip on it and rip it. And I bet I’d trip now, especially with my bad ankle.”

She looked so adorable that he wanted to hug her. But he didn’t. This was just as well too, because he would have regretted it.

She suddenly smiled wickedly. “Actually, scratch that. I just don’t want to wear it.”

He pursed his lips. “You either put this on, or I’ll help you put it on.”

She grinned at him. “You can try, but I bet it’ll get really roughed up in the process.”

Arik gritted his teeth. “You...” dog. “You will put on this dress, and we will go down to dinner. Now.”

“Or what?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yes.”

He sighed. “If you insist.” He clicked his fingers, and suddenly, the towel disappeared and she was completely naked.

“Hey!” she grabbed the blanket. Then she stopped. “How’d you do that?”

“Magic.”

“You...I don’t care what magician’s trick you pulled on me. Give back the towel.”

He thought about it. “No.”

After a pause, she dropped the blanket. “Oh well. You’ve seen it all before anyways. How’s one more time going to hurt?” She sat in the middle of the bed.

Arik didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. This girl had balls. Not literally, of course. “I thought you were

a dignified woman!" he cried, looking away.

"Well, I'm also a desperate woman. Desperate to get out of here. And desperate times call for desperate measures."

Arik pursed his lips. The only way to win was to play her at her own game. He smirked. "Well, since we're not going anywhere soon, I better get comfortable." He pulled off his shirt.

She shrieked. "Freak!" She threw one of her high heels at him.

He caught it with one hand, still smirking.

"You...bastard."

"You need to be more creative. You've already used that one three times or so."

"Bastard."

"dog."

"Get dressed, perv."

"Only if you do."

"Fine," she spat out.

He clicked his fingers again. "Your underwear." He handed them back to her.

She glared at them. "I don't have red underwear. Those aren't mine."

"Well, they are now."

"You..." she was fuming and at a loss for words.

"Bastard?" he offered.

"Bastard," she agreed, grabbing the underwear. "Wait a minute...a th—what the hell?!"

He smirked. "Thought you'd like it."

"You...arghhhhh!" she screamed.

He sighed. "I'm getting tired of this," he said. He clicked his fingers again, and suddenly she was wearing her underwear. The underwear that was actually hers, much to her relief.

"How do you do that?"

He frowned. "I told you. Magic."

"That's...that's...incredible." She was looking confused.

He shrugged. "You'll get used to it soon enough when you learn it."

Her eyes widened. "I'll learn how to use magic?"

He frowned again. Did this girl know nothing? "Well, not really. You already have the ability to use it. You just don't know how to."

"But...magic doesn't exist."

"Just like vampires, dragons, werewolves and other things like that?"

She looked at him as if he was crazy. "Uh, yeah."

"Well, let me tell you this: these non-existent things are going to make up tonight's dinner party's guests."

"Then what are you?"

"I'm a dragon."

She snorted. "If you say so."

He shook his head, frustrated. What would it take to get this girl to believe him? So he had to use his last resort, then. He opened his mouth and breathed fire. Just a little so that he wouldn't scorch her or blow up the building, but big enough for her to see and believe it.

Her eyes widened. "Wow. What the hell was that?"

"Magic. Can we go now?" He really didn't want to be late.

"So...you're saying that...magic really does exist?" she asked him, ignoring his question.

He pursed his lips impatiently. "Yes."

She thought about it. "Huh." Then she closed her eyes and muttered something.

"Now what are you doing?" he asked her irritably.

"Trying to make you explode, now shut up. I'm concentrating."

He laughed. Actually laughed. He hadn't done that in a long time. But he quickly regained his posture. "Enough of this," he snapped. He clicked his fingers and suddenly, she was wearing the dress. "Don't bother trying to take it off. It's not coming off until I say so."

She clawed at the dress, and after realising what he said was true, gave up. She carefully lodged on her high heels, using him for support.

“Can you walk in those?” he asked her.

“I can limp. Barely.” She tried to walk and immediately recoiled, hissing in pain.

Arik watched her. This was not good. But first things first, he clicked his fingers so that he was wearing a tux. Then after some hesitation, he put one arm around her waist, supporting her. “Can you walk better now?”

She tried it out. “Just a bit.”

“We better get going. We can’t be late.”

“Honestly, what is it with you and punctuality?”

Arik stared at her. That same question Sitara had asked him. He suppressed the feelings that were surging up inside him. “We have a mutual understanding,” he managed to choke out.

## 7 - Making Friends

Kerri frowned. “Honestly, what is it with you and punctuality?”

Arik stared at her for a moment. “We have a mutual understanding.”

She raised her eyebrows. Ohhhkay. “Let’s go, then.”

She managed to hobble out of her room, with Arik still supporting her—when he first put his arm around her, she thought she’d faint—but by the time she had done that, her leg hurt so much she thought it was going to fall off.

He sighed again. “We’ll never make it on time at this rate.” He paused. “Can I?” He held out his hands.

She nodded, not understanding. “Uh, sure.” Suddenly, she was in his arms again. “Oh.” While he carried her down the stairs, Kerri couldn’t help thinking how good he looked in a tux. Of course, he looked even better shirtless. Her mind flashed back to when he pulled off his shirt, and she mentally kicked herself. He has a girlfriend, and she has a boyfriend. Well, at least, she had one.

Arik stopped in front of a pair of grand, magnificent-looking doors. He slowly let Kerri down, and she wobbled slightly on her heels. What she didn’t want him to know was that the stuff she had said—about her not being able to wear nice stuff without ruining them—were actually true.

She clutched onto him tightly as they walked through the door. Or at the rate they were going, they could have been crawling through the door. She gasped. The room was full of guests, and every single one of them was looking at her.

She paled a little, and Arik, sensing her discomfort, looked down at her. “What’s wrong?” he whispered as they made their way through the guests.

She gulped. “I don’t mix very well with crowds,” she whispered back. Suddenly, she lost her footing and tripped.

Thank God for Arik. He held onto her tightly. “So the thing about you wrecking every single piece of decent clothing is true?”

Cover blown. “Sort of.”

He sighed. Suddenly, he straightened up. “That’s the boss of this entire company,” he whispered in her ear as an elderly looking man walked towards them. “Be polite, or else.”

She looked at him disdainfully. “Or else?” she mimicked him. “Really?”

He looked pleadingly at her. "Please."

Damn. She always gave in to puppy-dog eyes. And right now, his eyes were definitely puppy-dog eyes...and they belonged to a very, very hot puppy-dog. "Fine."

"Arik." The elderly man spoke. He had a hard, gravelly voice. Kerri didn't know about Arik, but this man scared the shoot out of her.

"Sir." Arik bowed stiffly—and awkwardly, considering his right arm was still supporting almost all of Kerri's weight.

The man turned to look at Kerri with his watery grey eyes. "Kerrien McCarthy, I assume?"

Kerri stole a glance at Arik, he had tensed up noticeably, and he was holding his breath. "Kerri. It's a pleasure to meet you at last, sir." She smiled warmly. It was probably the fakest smile she had ever smiled, but hey, there was a first for everything. Arik relaxed visibly, relief evident on his face. The arm that was around her waist squeezed her gently, as if to thank her.

"Welcome. I hope that you'll find your stay here very pleasant."

I'll find it much more pleasant if I knew why I was even here, she thought. "Thank you, sir."

The man, as if able to read her mind, raised an eyebrow. "You do know why you're here?"

Kerri blushed. "Not really, sir."

The man frowned at Arik. "Well, I'll leave Arik to tell you about it, then." He smiled again. "It was lovely to meet you, Kerri," he said before gliding off.

Kerri looked at Arik. His face was ashen. "Arik?" she asked. She received no response.

"Arik, you better not faint on me, or I swear to God..." she trailed off. "If you faint, then I won't be able to walk at all, so please don't faint, because I really don't wish to stand on the same spot until you come around again."

Arik finally focused on her, shaking his head slightly. "I'm sorry, you were saying?"

She stared at him. What is wrong with him? "Nothing."

A blonde woman strutted over. "Ricky, honey," she drawled, draping herself all over him. Her hair tickled Kerri's face and she coughed, her eyes watering at the overpowering smell of perfume. She looked at Arik, assuming this was his girlfriend.

Arik smiled tersely. "It's Arik, Mandy. I've told you that many times before." He hugged her then released his arms and stepped back.

"Honey, who's this tramp you've got your arm around?" Mandy asked suspiciously.

Kerri's eyes widened. She did not. She did not just call her a tramp. Her eyes narrowed. "If you want a tramp, sweetie," she hissed. "Go take a good look in the mirror."

Mandy wrinkled her nose but otherwise ignored her. "Honey, you really shouldn't be hanging out with lowlife trash like her."

"No," Kerri snapped. "Just hang out with dog shoot like her. It'd move your reputation. Downwards. Into the ashes." She smiled sweetly up at him.

Arik hurried to placate the girls. "This is Mandy, my girlfriend. Mandy, this is Kerri, my trainee, and my trainee only, nothing more, nothing less."

Unfortunately, Kerri thought bitterly. Mandy looked condescendingly at Kerri. "Well, if you say so," she said, pouting.

Kerri felt Arik sigh silently. Ha, won't be long till you get dumped, "lowlife trash" my @\$\$, she thought triumphantly. She also realised that this was the first time he had ever called her by her name. Well, he had called her by her name once in the car, but she hadn't really noticed because the fact that she was being kidnapped by four men was distracting her.

"I'm bringing Kerri over to meet the guys, okay? I'll see you later." Arik pulled Mandy in for a quick kiss on the cheek and practically dragged Kerri away.

"Ow. Stop it. Stop it. Stop. Now," Kerri hissed. Arik showed no signs of slowing down. "Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow." She glared up at him and kicked him in the knee with her high heels.

"Ah!" Arik yelped and tried his best to support both his and Kerri's weight instead of sinking down to the floor in pain. "That hurt."

"Well, so did getting dragged along on my twisted ankle."

Arik gritted his teeth. "These are my friends: Drake, Joshua and Carter," he said to her as three handsome men made their way through the crowd to stand in front of them.

Kerri looked at the one in the middle. "I know you, I think," she said to him. "Joshua, right? The dude that had blood pouring out of him like a tap?"

Joshua nodded. He was the only one in the group who had pitch-black hair, and it was a bit on the long side, shadowing his eyes a little. Kerri could just make out that he had bright blue eyes.

"Kerri, it's so nice to finally meet you. We've heard a lot about you from Arik. I'm Carter," the man on the right said, grinning and holding out his hand. Kerri shook it. Carter was your average blonde hair blue eyed playboy. Bet he hasn't had a steady girlfriend yet, Kerri thought.

The one on the left—Drake, she assumed—stepped forward and gave her a hug. Kerri's eyes widened, and had raised her knee and was just about to kick him in the balls when Arik hastened to explain.



“He’s gay.”

“Oh, well, that’s all right, then. Hi, Drake.” She pulled gently away from the hug. “So, Carter, what exactly has Arik told you about me?”

Carter grinned. “That you drove him insane, and he had to beat you unconscious to get you to shut up.”

Kerri scowled at Arik, who grinned and shifted his arm around her waist to give her better support, since she had lost her balance a bit when Drake had hugged her.

“Don’t tell me you’ve fallen for the chick,” Drake said, gesturing at the arm that was around Kerri’s waist.

“No, no,” Arik explained, tripping over his words. “She sprained her ankle and she can’t walk in heels.”

Carter looked Kerri up and down, as if he was seeing her for the first time. “If I were you, Arik, I’d be carrying her all the way.” He leered.

Kerri frowned at him. Then she leant forward and bopped him on the head. “Ow,” he complained. “I was just joking.”

“Well, I don’t appreciate your sense of humour.” She smiled her half smile that usually drove men crazy. Luckily, it had the same effect on immortal men.

“Dude, if you’re not taking her,” Carter told Arik. “I am.”

Arik rolled his eyes at them. “You’ll have to excuse them,” he said to Kerri. “They’re a bit out of control.”

“I’m enjoying myself, actually,” Kerri said. “Why don’t you go over and make out with your slut of a girlfriend while I stay here and talk to Drake, Joshua, and Carter?”

Arik frowned, and opened his mouth to say something but Kerri beat him to it. “You know you want to.”

He looked at her—probably wondering whether she was going to pull something when he was away—then looked uncertainly at his friends. “If she tries anything, stop her.”

Drake took over Arik’s place, placing his arm on Kerri’s waist. “Go French kiss your brains out, then.” He pushed Arik gently towards Mandy, smirking. Arik flipped him off, but disappeared into the crowd.

The rest of the night passed pretty quickly. Drake and Carter introduced her to tons of people, but Kerri had forgotten their names once they were out of their mouths. Joshua just kept quiet and never said anything. Freak. Still, an extremely good-looking freak nonetheless.

After a while, she made Drake bring her to the bathroom. She also made Drake swear not to look even though he was gay.

Drake had snorted. "Honey, the only way you'd be able to make me look is if you grew a dick and balls."

She took his word on that. She was washing her hands when Mandy came in to reapply her smudged lipstick.

"Hello, tramp," she said to Kerri, sniffing and drawing back as if she smelt something horrible.

"Greetings, slut."

Mandy threw Kerri a glare. "You better start showing me some respect."

"And why the hell would I do that?"

"Because I'm your boss' girlfriend."

"He's not my boss. And if you keep it up, you ain't gonna be his girlfriend for much longer. The dumb blondes with fake boobs are appealing for a while. But when they start to sag...not so much."

Mandy gasped. "I'll have you know that these are real."

Kerri snorted. "Yeah, and I'm Dr. Who."

Mandy looked confused. "Dr. Who?"

Kerri stared at her. "Yeah. Dr. Who."

"Who?"

"Yeah." Wow, she really was dumb. Beside her, Drake was convulsing in silent laughter.

"Dr. Who?" Mandy was frowning in confusion.

Kerri suppressed a sigh. "Brown. Dr. Brown."

Mandy wrinkled her nose condescendingly. "I've never heard of him."

"Well, he doesn't do silicone, so that's probably why."

"I don't do silicone. Only Botox."

"Well, he doesn't do that either."

Mandy was looking confused again. "Exactly how's he a doctor?"

"He...cuts people open, takes out their organs, ties a knot, then sticks it back in."

Mandy's eyes widened. "Why would he do that?"

"To make sure the monsters hiding under their beds don't creep in and eat them inside out."

Mandy thought about it, then nodded wisely. "I understand. Tell him he's making the world a better place."

Kerri kept her expression blank while Drake seemed to have stopped breathing and was very interested in his shoes. "I'll do that. Meanwhile, you can go suck face with your boyfriend and smudge your lipstick again. Oh, by the way, he just has the hottest body, doesn't he?"

Mandy nodded excitedly, then stopped and narrowed her eyes. "How would you know about that?"

"Well, the same way you would, of course." Kerri grinned slyly.

Mandy glowered at her, then stalked—well, tried to stalk, considering she had on stilettos that were six inches high (and she was still shorter than Kerri...was she short or short?).

She tapped on Drake's arm. "You can lead me out now, damage done."

Drake shook his head, still laughing. "Arik's going to kill you when he finds out," he said, leading her out.

"Well, that means he's going to kill me now, ain't he?" she remarked dryly as they both watched as Mandy walked up to Arik, who was waiting outside the bathroom, and slapped him in the face before storming away.

Arik was stunned. He rubbed his cheek, which was now going slightly red, and when he caught sight of Kerri and Drake walking towards him, and he scowled.

"I don't know how, and I don't know why, but I do know that this has got to be your fault," he hissed to Kerri, who burst out laughing. His face was comical.

"You should definitely hang on to this one, Arik." Drake was still chuckling. "She's a piece of work."

"I thought I told you to stop her if she tried anything," Arik snapped.

"Well, you didn't define 'anything'," Drake said, defending himself.

"In normal context, anything would mean uh, oh, I don't know, anything?"

"Well I hardly knew she would suddenly start making fun of your girlfriend and telling her that you had a great body!"

Arik raised his eyebrows at Kerri. "And you would know because...?"

Kerri rolled her eyes. Boys had such a short span of memory. "You took off your shirt today when you

wanted to rape me. Besides, I just needed to piss her off.”

“I didn’t try to rape you,” Arik protested. Kerri noticed he substituted the word “want” with “try”. “Besides,” Arik continued. “You’ve pissed me off, too.”

Kerri grinned. “Two birds, one stone.”

“Like I told you,” Drake said cheerfully as Arik’s face turned red with anger. “She’s a piece of work.”

Arik suddenly seemed to deflate. He sighed. “Come on then, let’s go. The guests are leaving. You should probably go sleep now, it’s almost twelve.” He held out his hand and Kerri hobbled over.

He scooped her up in his arms again, nodded his goodbye to Drake, clicked his fingers, and they were in her room. He helped her take off her heels and pushed her gently towards the bathroom. “Go get changed,” he said just as his phone rang.

As Kerri limped towards the bathroom, she heard Arik talking on the phone. She hadn’t meant to eavesdrop. Well, actually, she had, but that was a fact that could be easily overlooked.

“Sir, what a...no, sir. I’m sorry, sir, I—she...I understand sir, I’m sorry. It won’t happen again...yes, I’m sorry. No, sir.” Then suddenly his face paled. “But—I...yes sir.” The call had ended.

Kerri peeked out of the bathroom—she had left the door open on purpose—and saw Arik sit down heavily on her bed, running his hands over his face, tousling his hair. He sighed and buried his face in his hands. Then he stood up, walked towards the fridge that was in the corner of her room—she still couldn’t believe she had a fridge to her own—and took out a beer. Cracking it open, he walked towards the bathroom. Kerri hopped quickly to the centre of the bathroom and was about to undress when Arik came in.

She looked at his face. His expression was one between confusion, frustration, fury and devastation. “Uh, hi,” she said.

Arik looked at her wearily. Then he gestured towards her dress. “Do you need help with that?”

Kerri remembered that the zip was at the back so she nodded, and Arik went over to unzip her dress. She stepped out of it, blushing slightly when she felt Arik’s heated gaze raking her up and down as he sipped from his beer when she took off her bra. She hastily pulled on the too-big t-shirt and struggled to pull on the boxer shorts. She would have hit him and called him a perv, but he didn’t seem to be in a good mood, and she didn’t want to wake up and find herself...well, let’s say she didn’t want to not wake up.

## 8 - Temptation

Arik was just telling the girl to get changed when his phone rang. He took his phone out from his pocket and looked at the caller ID. It flashed "Sir". shoot. He was going to get it now.

"Sir," he said, trying to sound cheerful. "What a—"

"Channing," the boss barked down the phone, interrupting him. "Was she injured when you took her?"

Oh boy, here it goes. "No, sir."

"Did I not give specific orders to not hurt the girl?"

"I'm sorry, sir, I—she—" Arik struggled to explain, but his boss interrupted him again.

"If you harm one more hair on her head, your goose is cooked, understand?"

Goose? Seriously? "I understand sir, I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"Also, how can she not know what she's doing here? You better tell her fast."

It wasn't like he had a choice. "Yes, I'm sorry."

"I trust this won't happen again, Channing," his boss was saying.

Didn't he hear it when he said it less than ten seconds ago? "No, sir."

"One more mistake and I may have to take away all your badges and even kill your mother," his boss continued smoothly. "So you'll be a good boy from now on, right?"

shoot. Was this guy serious? She was just a girl. How important could she be? Very, apparently.

"But—I...yes sir."

"Oh, and stay with her at all times, and I mean at all times. Don't want to lose her." His boss hung up.

Arik sank down onto the bed, still stunned by what he had just heard. He had always known his boss was just using his mother, but to kill her? And take away his badges?

This was not good. He needed to calm down. He opened the door to the girl's fridge and took out a beer. After opening it, he went to the bathroom to check on the girl. She was standing in the middle of the bathroom, trying to take off her dress. She looked up when he entered.

"Uh, hi," she stammered.

He hesitated. “Do you need help with that?” he asked, gesticulated towards her dress.

She nodded, and he went over to unzip her. As she undressed in front of him, he wondered whether he should have sex with her. He definitely needed to get his mind off things, and getting laid usually did the trick. But then he remembered that the boss would have his head if he so as much harmed a hair on her pretty little head, so he decided against it.

The girl blushed when she saw him looking her up and down and hurriedly pulled on her shirt and shorts, and turned away from him to brush her teeth. Arik looked away himself, annoyed. He had a girlfriend, for God’s sake; he shouldn’t be eyeballing other girls.

Maybe he should break up with Mandy.

He hurried to help support the girl as she limped out to her bedroom and lifted her onto the bed. “Uh, my boss has given me specific instructions not to leave you. At all.”

“Oh.” She looked sleepily up at him with her honey coloured eyes that had tints of gold in them, her unruly black hair framing her face and tumbling down her back. He felt a familiar stirring. Damn.

“I’m just going to go...use the bathroom,” he stuttered.

He rushed off and slammed the door behind him. He checked in the cupboard for a spare toothbrush and as he brushed his teeth, he made a mental note to bring the rest of his things over tomorrow. He rinsed his mouth with water and after washing his face, he headed back to the bedroom.

The girl was already half asleep, slumped against her pillow. Arik gently—taking care not to wake her—slid her between the sheets and took his place on the couch after turning off the lights.

After many hours of tossing and turning, he still couldn’t fall asleep. His brain kept flashing him images of his boss killing his mother. As much as he hated his mother, he didn’t want to mourn over her in her funeral. Yet.

If only the girl wasn’t so difficult. He finally started to feel sleep, and he closed his eyes gratefully.

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When he woke up in the morning, Arik discovered he was tucked into a blanket, with a pillow under his head. He turned to look for the girl, and saw her sitting in the chair he was sitting the day he was waiting for her to come into her consciousness.

“So you’ve finally decided to wake up,” she taunted him, using his exact words.

He rolled his eyes, hiding a grin. A girl with looks, brains, compassion, and a sense of humour. She reminded him of Sitara. At this rate, he was definitely going to have to break up with Mandy.

Which was going to be hard, considering that she was his boss’ daughter. He knew he shouldn’t have had those last few drinks at the pub that night two months ago.

Damn. Somehow, these things always kept coming back to bite him in the @\$\$.

What was he thinking? He couldn't have a relationship with his trainee. It'd be unprofessional. Not that he was a professional yet, but still. He shook away all the inappropriate thoughts. "How long have you been up?" he asked the girl.

"Long enough to see you shivering with cold in your sleep," she replied.

It must've taken her a long time to drag the blanket from her bed to the couch, what with the bad ankle and all. "Um, thanks."

"So what are we going to do today?"

"I'm going to have to move my stuff from my room to yours, then I'm going to have to apologise to Mandy." He shot her a baleful look.

She grinned. "Hey, it isn't my fault she's so dumb that she doesn't even know who Dr. Who is."

Arik frowned. "What does that have to do with it?"

Kerri grinned and shrugged. "You're going to have to ask her then, won't you?"

Arik shook his head. This girl was crazy. "We'll start your training after lunch," he said. "For now, you're going to help me pack."

"Why the hell would I do that?"

"My orders."

"Oh, and I have to do your bidding now, is that it?"

"Oh, that reminds me," he walked over to her. "Bow your head."

She stared at him as if he'd grown another head. "What?"

He waited patiently. "I need to take a look at your neck."

She frowned. "Why—hey!" her question turned into a protest as Arik grabbed her head and yanked it down.

"You could have broken my neck, you jerk!"

"You're immortal. You can't die."

"Wait, that's so cool. I can't die?"

“Okay, I lied. You can. Now shut up.” He parted her hair so that the nape of her neck was showing. Then gently he placed his hand over it. “This is going to feel a bit weird, so stay still,” he warned her as his hand started to glow.



## 9 - Knowing Your Purpose

“What the hell are you doing?” Kerri asked him, as he held her head down. “You’re kind of freaking me out here.”

“I need to Mark you.”

“What the...Mark me? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Every trainee has to have the Mark of their trainer. Now shut up, I’m trying to concentrate.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Kerri saw a green light glow in Arik’s palm as he pressed it fingertips lightly to her neck.

Heat, warmth and cold coursed through her and focused onto her neck and for a moment white light surged up and out and lit up the entire room, nearly blinding her. She felt something hot—almost too hot—swirl on the back of her neck, and then suddenly, a blast of cold, as if to seal it over, and then it was gone.

Arik let go of her head, and Kerri spun around and slapped him.

“What the—” Arik staggered backwards. “What was that for?”

“You could have killed me!” she shrieked.

“No, I couldn’t have,” he said calmly.

“But you said you were lying when you said I was immortal!” she was still screaming.

“You can only die with a wooden stake driven into your heart, because you’re now a vampire.”

Kerri stared at him in horror. “shoot!” she panicked. This couldn’t possibly be happening. “I’m a vampire, I’m a vampire! Do I have fangs? Do I drink blood? Can I still see myself in the mirror?”

Arik dissolved into laughter. “I just had to see your reaction,” he managed to say. “You’re not a vampire.”

A few seconds later, he was no longer laughing and was clutching at his happy place—at least, that’s what Kerri called it—and rolling around on the floor.

“The next time, you won’t even have that to grab at,” she hissed.

Arik struggled to stand up. “Okay, okay. But I have to tell you something, you’re actually sort of immortal. There’s two ways to kill immortals.”

Kerri narrowed her eyes. "If this even remotely vampire-related..."

"The first way is that to have your heart ripped out of your body. You'll slowly start to lose your energy and your sanity—I don't know why, since the existence of your sanity depends on the brain, but anyway—and about five hours later, when those drop to a zero, you...fade away. That's the slow way."

Kerri frowned. "Why would someone want to die the slow way?"

"No one does, but people use this as torture, so that they can get answers."

"...Oh."

"The quick way is to just cut off your head."

"Lovely," Kerri muttered, feeling slightly nauseous.

"What's so bad about being a vampire anyway?" Arik wanted to know.

Kerri made a face. "I don't know...the idea of drinking blood for the rest of your life just doesn't sound very appealing."

"It's not so bad. Carter's a vampire, and according to him, everybody has their own unique...uh, taste."

Kerri frowned. "No wonder the creep kept sniffing my neck last night. Oh, you still have to tell me what I'm doing here."

"Right. Thanks for reminding me. Uh, basically, this company, well it's more like...an institute, and it's for people who have powers. They train here and live here."

"And then they leave? So it's like boarding school?"

"Well, not exactly. Most people work for us after they've finished their training. And some people leave, but those who leave have a bigger chance of dying, or getting killed."

"...why?"

Arik's face darkened. "You'll know later on."

"Oh. So everybody here's...something? Like, either a vampire, or a dragon or a ghost...or something like that?"

Arik grinned. "Pretty much. There are no ghosts, by the way. There are spirits, but no ghosts."

Kerri stared at him blankly. "To me, they're the same thing. So, Carter's a vampire, and I'm guessing Drake's a dragon, right?"

Arik nodded. "Drake's a fairly dragon-y name, so that's an easy one to guess"

Kerri frowned. "What am I? Am I human?"

"No, you're...you have all the qualities of a human, but you don't get old and you don't die...you're like a human plus."

"So...am I...weird?" Kerri gestured to herself. "Like, being human plus, am I abnormal?"

"No, you're...rare. You're a sorcerer. Well, a sorceress. Human pluses, as we call them, are dying out, so they are well protected by this company. That's why the boss needs me to be around you twenty-four-seven. You need to be protected."

"Huh. I'm an endangered species."

Arik grinned. "That's one way of saying it."

"So...what's Joshua? Is he like a werewolf?"

Arik's face darkened again. "No. We don't mix with werewolves. At all. Joshua's just...human."

"Then what the hell is he doing here?"

"Sometimes, the company needs humans to help them do their work. Joshua was an orphan when we first met—we were like nine or something, I think—and my mother and I had just joined the company. The company looked after him, nursed him back to health, taught him well, and to thank us, he now works for us."

"So...what exactly is there to teach him? I mean, if he doesn't have any magic powers, what is there to teach?"

Arik grinned. "When we found Joshua, he was an orphan and dangerously ill. Now, he's an expert in martial arts—karate, taekwondo, name it and he'll know it—and he's a trained assassin."

Kerri's eyes widened. "He's an assassin?"

"Well, he only kills off the people who intentionally try to harm the company. He works to protect the company."

"Who would want to harm the company?"

Arik glowered. "Other companies."

Kerri confused. "Exactly how many...companies are there?"

"I don't know...probably about fifty or something, but the two main ones are this one and our rival company."

Kerri snorted. “So what, you guys compete over uh, customers?”

Arik shook his head. “You don’t understand. Other companies use these people instead of helping them, and the people are untrained and are very dangerous because they cannot control their power. It’s not like that in our company. We help people, and then train them. After we train them, they have a choice. They can choose whether they want to work for us. Most people do, of course, but they can always choose to leave. In other companies—especially our rival company—people are forced to do things and are blackmailed. You should feel grateful we found you before they did.”

Kerri did feel grateful. In a way. “So...you’re trying to save these dragons and whatsits while the other companies...try to enslave them.”

“Yes.”

“And what about the werewolves? You said you don’t mix with them. So...who uh, trains them?”

Arik narrowed his eyes. “Werewolves are wild and tend to not like being trained. Even after they are trained, they tend to betray those who help them. We used to train werewolves, but they all ran off afterwards to our rival company, so we stopped. The problem is, we’re all immortal, so when our rival companies attack, they tend to send in the werewolves—especially the ones we trained—because they do the most damage.”

Kerri frowned. “But...if werewolves betray people, then why would our rival company still want to use them?”

Arik looked at her in disdain. “You don’t pay much attention, do you? Do you recall how other companies get people with powers to work for them?”

“Oh...so they blackmail them?”

“Yes. Everybody has a secret, or more than one secret that cannot be known to others, and somehow, our rival company always manages to find out those secrets.”

“So in a way, our company and their company, we...take in different...uh, species.”

“Well, not really. We take in dragons, vampires, fairies, sorcerers, spirits and demons, which are, by the way, actually extremely loyal. Our rival company takes what we don’t take, for example werewolves, witches and goblins and people like that, but they also take in people that we take in, and they’re especially interested in sorceresses since they found out that you guys are dying out.”

“Oh. So...does our company have a name?”

“The Sterling Silver.”

Kerri made a face. “Seriously? ‘The Sterling Silver’?”

“Well, the name has to blend in to other companies in this world. We can’t exactly have a company that says ‘Institute for supernatural beings’ in the human world while other companies have names like ‘paperclip making’ or ‘gold mining’ or shoot like that, now can we?”

“Human world? So you mean there’s another world?”

“Yes. You’ll see for yourself when we start out training. Training is usually done in our world—the inhuman world, or whatever you would like to call it—because it’s safer, and no human would find out. But the inhuman world itself is much more dangerous.”

“So what do you guys call this inhuman world?”

“The O.R., short for the Other Realm.”

“Oh. And what’s the name of our rival company? The ‘Landfill and Waste’?”

Arik laughed. A short laugh, but it was still a laugh, and Kerri was momentarily dazed by it. “Actually, you might know this one. It’s called ‘The Chocolate Express’.”

Kerri’s mouth dropped. “No. I cannot believe this. My favourite chocolate bar is the product of our rival company? Does that mean I won’t be able to eat them anymore?”

Arik grinned. “Well, you can still eat them, but I doubt you will ever want to after you see what they can do.” His face darkened again.

“So when...our rival company—sorry, I can’t call it ‘The Chocolate Express’ just yet—attacks, they’re trying...to take our people?”

“Yes. As much as they can find. Doesn’t matter what they are. Unless they’re human, then they just kill them off. That’s why our humans here are so incredibly well trained. Of course, now, sorcerers—and sorceresses—are top of their priority list.” He sneaked a look at her. “Which is why we’re expecting an attack sometime soon.”

Kerri gaped at him. “So you guys are...going to war because of me?”

Arik rolled his eyes. “Don’t flatter yourself, but yeah, sort of. You have no idea how incredibly uh, ‘rare’ you are. And just how powerful you can be.”

“Wow. Okay, one question.”

“Shoot.”

“If you’re a dragon...and I’m a sorceress—at least, that’s what I’ll be—how can you train me? I mean, doesn’t it take people—well, not people, but you know what I mean—of the same kind to train them?”

“Well, for one thing, there are no expertly trained sorcerers or sorceresses just yet,” Arik said dryly. “All our recently found sorcerers have disappeared in the middle of the night a few weeks ago, never to be

seen again. Obviously the work of your chocolate bar.” He smirked at her, and she batted him on the arm. “Besides, the way we use our powers are more or less the same. The dragon and the sorcerers are the most well associated, and their ways of magic are the most similar, which is why I’m stuck with you.”

Kerri stuck her tongue out at him. “Are there any other sorceresses here I can meet? I don’t want to feel like I’m the only sorceress going through this.”

Arik bit his lip. “The thing is, you may just be the only sorceress going through this. Alive. Rival company—and all other companies, actually—included.”

Kerri stared at him. “Please laugh now and say you’re joking and had to see my reaction. Please.”

Arik shook his head.

“Aw, crap,” Kerri whimpered.

“You’re the first sorceress we’ve seen—or anybody’s seen—since the nineteenth century. All the sorceresses were killed because they were mistaken for witches,” he said. “The witches, of course, got away with it,” he added bitterly.

“This is not good. For me, that is. I’m sure it’s doing the company who hell lot of good and I’m sorry if I’m not bathing in glory or something, but this doesn’t sound good for me.”

Arik smiled grimly. “You’re right. It isn’t that good for you. You’re going to have to work extra hard to protect yourself, and you’re going to have to live up to the hopes and expectations people have pinned on you when you first arrived at the company.”

Whoa. What? “Hopes and expectations? What hope and expectations?”

“Well,” Arik said slowly. “Rumours are that sorceresses can take down a company—and sorceresses only, not even sorcerers are powerful to do this, because apparently, it’s the hormones.” Arik smirked. “And well...need I say what expectations people in our company—especially our boss has fixed on you?”

Kerri buried her head in her hands and muttered a series of incoherent dire threats to the people who had hopes and expectations for her.

“Don’t worry,” Arik reassured her. “It’ll be years till you finish your training yet. Then you still have to do field work and all that other stuff. By the time you’re powerful enough, you’ll have the confidence.”

“Oh, and one more question,” she blurted out before she could stop herself.

“Yes?”

Kerri hesitated. “What’s Mandy?”

Arik raised an eyebrow. “She’s half fairy, half demon.”

“A lethal combination,” Kerri muttered. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Arik hide his grin. “So let me guess, it’s the father who is the demon, right?”

“Did you not know that our boss is a demon?”

Kerri’s eyes widened. “She’s the daughter of the boss?”

“Yeah.”

“Aw, crap.” Things are just looking way, way down for her. Mandy had probably told daddy what a horrible girly Kerri was and how mean she was to his daddy’s little girl.

Arik, as if sensing her worry, said “don’t worry, though. She hasn’t spoken to him in years. They had this stupid fight, and they’ve both forgiven each other, but their pride gets in the way.”

“Oh.” That’s okay, then.

Arik looked down at his watch. “I was going to move my things over here by myself, but I think I’m going to have to use magic now.”

“Why do you do everything yourself when you can use magic?”

“Well, for one, whenever you use magic, you lose a bit of your energy. Of course, manual labour does that to you as well, but it drains energy from you physically. After using a lot of magic, you feel tired mentally, which of course also affects you physically. Oh, and when you’re tired physically, you can’t do magic either. It’s like it’s all connected, somehow. And for another, doing everything by myself keeps me fit.” He smirked at her, and she rolled her eyes, but she was forced to agree with it. Mentally, of course.

## 10 - A Plan Backfired

Arik saw a daze look come across the girl's face after he told her that moving things by hand instead of magic kept him fit.

"She couldn't possibly be thinking anything, could she?" He wondered. He concentrated on her and saw images of him with his shirt off in her head. Apparently, she could. He grinned. He was going to enjoy this.

"Oh, by the way, I can read minds," he said lightly, smirking again.

Kerri flushed. "Uh...I..."

He grinned. "Don't worry about it. You're not the only one."

Kerri rolled her eyes and glowered. "Narcissistic maniac. So," she said, desperately changing the topic. "How do you uh...charge yourself up mentally? You know, after you've used your magic."

Arik shrugged. "Sleep." He looked at his watch again. "And at this rate, I'm going to need at least five hours of it, because I'm going to be using a whole lot of magic. And I don't want that to happen, because you have a lot to catch up on."

"I'll help you," Kerri said sweetly, obviously eager to learn.

Arik grinned. That's what he thought. "That's what I thought. Come on, let's go." He took her hand.

She looked down at their hands, and then up at him. "Uh, not that I'm not interested, but you are still dating Mandy."

Arik stifled a laugh and grinned instead. "In order for us to shift together—shift meaning 'move to another place', by the way, just in case you didn't know—there has to be some form of contact," he said, watching her face go red. "Not that I'm not interested," he teased.

"Shut up," she muttered. "You shifting or what?"

He grinned and clicked his fingers, and they appeared in the middle of his room, which was a typical guy's room: messy.

"shoot, man, this is going to take ages," she complained.

"Well, not really." Arik closed his eyes—he did that whenever what he was about to do was going to take up quite some magic. Suddenly, his fingers twitched—a movement he had gotten used to, over a period of time, whenever he had to summon a specific amount of magic. When he opened his eyes again, his room was almost empty and all that was left was the bed the wardrobe, the cabinets and other big



pieces of furniture.

The girl gave a low whistle. "I can see how magic comes in handy."

Arik grinned. "In more ways than one." He flashed a picture of him clicking fingers and her losing her clothes through her brain, and she scowled and blushed at the same time.

"Not funny," she muttered.

"No," he agreed. "It's not funny." He paused. "It's hilarious. Thank you for being stubborn."

"Don't make it sound like I wanted you to look at me without my clothes on," she protested. "Can we please get moving? And why didn't you move the heavy things with your magic?"

"If I just move those heavy things like that, they're going to end up in all corners of your room. However, if I have a map of your room and where everything is exactly, I can decide where to put everything." His eyes glowed bright green as he put his words into action, calling up a map of the girl's room. His fingers twitched again, and when the map faded away and his sight returned to normal, his room was now completely empty except for the fact that they were still standing in it.

"I don't know whether to say 'wow' or say 'you really freaked me out just now when your eyes went bright green'," the girl said after a pause.

"Just stick with 'wow'," he said.

"Can we go to lunch?"

Arik took the girl's hand again, clicked his fingers, and they appeared in the dining room.

The girl's eyes widened. "Wow," she breathed as she looked around the dining room. "It's like...a massive dinner buffet...party...kind of thing."

"You'll get used to it soon enough."

"Hello, Kerri, hello Arik." It was Drake. "You showed up a later than usual," he said to Arik.

"Well, it's because someone kept bombarding me with questions instead of helping me pack." Arik shot Kerri a look. "I'm going to need a nap after lunch."

"And what am I going to do when you're sleeping?" Kerri asked him.

"I'm sure you can think of something," Arik said ruefully. "You always do."

"Maybe I can tell Mandy more about Dr. Who!" the girl piped up. Drake grinned while Arik glowered at her. "That'd be fun, wouldn't it, Drake? Come on!" she grabbed Drake and limped surprisingly quickly for an injured girl over to Mandy, who was at one of the buffet tables.

“McCarthy!” Arik called, frustrated. “You...” dog. “Come back here!”

It was too late. He watched helplessly as the girl struck up a conversation with Mandy. He shook his head, grabbed a sandwich and a beer from the bar and headed to one of the tables, sat down, and began eating his lunch. A few minutes later, he felt someone tap his shoulder. He turned around to see Mandy.

“Whatever that girl told you isn’t—” Arik started to defend himself but Mandy interrupted him.

“It’s okay, honey. I understand. Kerri told me all about it,” Mandy soothed.

Arik frowned. “She did?” he asked suspiciously, looking over at Kerri, who smiled sweetly and waved at him from across the room.

“Yes, I totally understand if you have the pervert syndrome. Why didn’t you tell me about it before?”

Arik’s eyes widened and he choked on his beer. “That’s probably because I didn’t even know about it, Mandy,” he said after he recovered.

“Kerri said that you definitely have a case of it, and you have it bad.”

Arik restrained himself from screaming. “Uh, I don’t think I have it, Mandy. I don’t even know what it is.”

“Oh, how can you not know what you have? Silly.”

Arik smiled patiently. “Why don’t you explain to me what this uh, pervert syndrome is?”

“Well, according to Kerri, it’s when a guy ‘can’t help groping and trying to have sex with other women, especially when he’s horny’ and that it’s a ‘psychological thing’ and usually only happens to people with the name of Arik. Isn’t it unfortunate you just happened to be called Arik?”

Arik gritted his teeth. “Yes, it is very unfortunate indeed.”

“Oh, don’t worry, honey, I’ll stick by you.”

Arik looked at her. “Uh, thanks, Mandy. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to talk to Kerri.”

“Why?”

“I uh...need to ask her about this syndrome. It’s so rare I didn’t even know it existed,” he said through clenched teeth. He stalked towards where Kerri and Drake were standing.

“Oh, look,” he heard Kerri exclaim as she saw him coming and she looked at her wrist. “It’s time for my hourly bathroom break. Let’s go.”

Drake frowned. “You don’t have a watch.”

Kerri looked at him, annoyed. “I may not have a watch, but I have a full bladder that needs emptying.” She looked up to see Arik quickening his stride. “Go, man, GO! This bladder needs a-emptying!”

Drake hurried her off to the bathroom just when Arik was about to get there.

dog. He was going to get her back for that.

“Honey,” Mandy called.

Arik pursed his lips and turned around. “Yes, Mandy?”

“Why don’t you uh, pervert-syndrome me in the girl’s bathroom?” she smiled slyly.

“That would be great, Mandy, but I just have to take care of one small...” he trailed off. “Actually, I changed my mind. Come on, Mandy, let’s go.”

Once they were in a bathroom cubicle—Arik made sure that it was the one next to Kerri’s—he began kissing Mandy enthusiastically, and she responded.

“Hello, can you please get a room?” he heard Kerri yell.

Arik was about to reply when Mandy beat him to it. “No thanks, we already have a cubicle,” she called.

He heard Kerri’s gasp of recognition and then felt rather than heard her muffled fit of laughter. He shook his head and groaned silently.

“Mandy, maybe we’ll do this somewhere else...later on, okay?” Arik smiled wearily at her, and ushered her out. “Go on, I have to uh...check my hair.”

“Are you sure, honey? I can wait for you.”

Arik smiled at her. “I’m pretty sure I can manage, Mandy, but thanks anyway.”

“Okay, honey. Bye.”

“Bye, Mandy.”

## 11 - First Lesson

When Kerri came out of the bathroom, Arik was leaning against the wall, glaring at her.

She grinned. "If that was supposed to be some sort of revenge, well...it turned out horribly wrong. That was just...entertainment. Kind of gross, but still entertainment."

Arik scowled. "I'm not going to waste my time playing stupid games with you."

Kerri's grin got even wider. "Honey," she drawled, imitating Mandy, "I'm not playing stupid games, what I'm playing is your stupid girlfriend."

Arik pursed his lips. "She's not that stupid. She can be quite smart sometimes."

Kerri snorted. "Yeah, when she uses the bags of silicone that are inside her boobs to think instead of the poor excuse you call her brain."

"Hey," Arik defended his girlfriend. "Those are real."

"Yeah, and pigs can fly."

Arik gritted his teeth. "We have training to do."

"I thought you had to take a nap."

"I can't afford to. If I do, by the time I wake up, you'd have probably told Mandy that I'm actually her brother."

Kerri considered that one. "Huh, that's not bad, actually."

Arik narrowed his eyes. "You have no idea how easy it is for me to strip off all your clothes in the middle of the dining hall right now without even touching you, do you?"

Kerri shut up immediately. Letting Arik see it was one thing—besides, she was unconscious at that time—but letting everybody else see it—when she was conscious—was another.

Arik smirked. "Come on, you have a lot to learn." He led the way out of the dining hall.

"Why don't you just uh, shift us back?"

"Because if I do, I wouldn't have enough magic to last me for the whole day, and I need as much magic as I can get."

He led her to a white room that was brightly lit. Kerri had to literally follow Arik's footsteps, because the

white light partially blinded her and she couldn't see anything—except for Arik, of course—in the sea of white.

“Right now we're crossing into the O.R.,” Arik explained to her.

“So we're like...in between?”

“No, but we will be after we go through this door.” Arik spread his arms wide and his outstretched fingers twitched outwards as he whispered something and suddenly, a part of the wall disappeared, revealing complete blackness behind it.

“That is so freaky. Do we have to go through that?”

“Yes, come on, otherwise it'll close again.” Arik grabbed Kerri's wrist and led her through into the darkness.

Behind her, the white light disappeared and they were engulfed in blackness. “Hey, I can't see anything,” Kerri complained. To be honest, she was a bit freaked out. She'd never been a fan of the dark.

“Stop moaning.” Arik led her forwards, still holding on to her wrist, and Kerri followed him blindly, tripping after him.

After about three minutes of walking, Kerri was about to ask Arik how long did she have to walk for because her ankle was starting to hurt when the blackness suddenly disappeared, and Kerri found herself standing in the middle of some kind of tropical jungle with him. However, it was like the jungle was built in a soundless world, because all Kerri could hear was a dead silence. Not even a freaking chirping bird.

“What...where is this?” she asked him as she followed him as they trekked deeper into the jungle.

“Welcome to the Other Realm.”

“Oh, wow. Okay, one question. How do we get back?”

“We've just got here and you're already asking how we get back?”

“No offense, but this world is a little...surreal. And also a little freaky.”

Arik ignored her comment. “Remember that the O.R. is extremely dangerous. I'm serious, this cannot be taken lightly. It's even more dangerous than...being trapped in a room full of murderers.” He frowned at his simile while Kerri managed to both stifle a laugh and look at him like he had grown another head. Arik waved away her look impatiently. “You will only go where I tell you to go, and will only do what I tell you to do, or otherwise...well, you'll find out for yourself, won't you?”

Kerri would have answered Arik's question, but she was distracted by the fact that the Mark on her neck was glowing and felt really weird, like it was burning hot, but also freezing cold at the same time. “Uh,

Arik?"

"What?"

Kerri shot him a look. "I'll give you a hint." She spun around, lifted her hair and pointed to her glowing tattoo. "Is that obvious enough, or is that still too subtle for you?" she asked him.

Arik ignored the jibe. "You'll get used to it. Your Mark will glow whenever you enter the O.R., because the power uses it as a source to travel through your body."

"I don't...I don't really understand."

Arik frowned, trying to explain. "It's like...you know how your heart pumps the blood around your body? Your mark pumps the magic around your body."

"Oh. So it's like...a battery giving electrons strength to go around the circuit?" Great. She sounded like a science freak.

Arik smirked. "Something like that."

"It feels...really, really weird."

"As I said, you'll get used to it. Now shut up, because your lesson has started, and we can't be here for too long at a time."

"Why not?"

Arik sighed impatiently. "We just can't. It's dangerous here."

"Okay then, teach me how to zap people dead."

"Yeah, it doesn't really work that way. Let's begin with something small, shall we?" Arik held out his hand, and there was a globe of green in his hand.

"Wow. Okay. Uh, how do I do that?"

"Close your eyes and listen really carefully. Do you hear your magic running through you?"

Kerri frowned.

"Close your eyes and listen, you idiot."

Kerri closed her eyes and listened hard. She could feel rather than hear her magic coursing through her. "I can sort of...feel it," she said.

"Yes, but you need to really hear it."

Kerri focused again, closing her eyes hard, and after a second or two, she could hear it. It was a flash at first, but gradually, she could hear it properly. A silent, whispering rush. "I can hear it, I can hear it," she said softly, not wanting to lose it.

"Now try pulling all of that energy into the palm of your hand. Like...pulling a bucket of water up from the bottom of the well. At least, that's how I imagine it."

Kerri raised her eyebrows. This guy really needed to work on his similes. Eyes still closed, she tried her best to pull in the soft rushing. It was like herding sheep. But the sheep were actually water, or some kind of liquid. She grimaced when she found out that her simile wasn't exactly food either, and then pushed the thought away. It took some concentration—and a lot of frustration and impatience—but finally, she could feel it draining from her four limbs and leaking into the palm of her hand. She opened her eyes and saw that her hand was glowing a dull yellow.

"Pull it in even more. Pack it into a tight little ball," Arik said.

Kerri sucked in another breath and with all her might, imagined packing the magic into "a tight little ball", as Arik had described it. She could feel something surging through her hand. She opened her eyes, and saw a small globe of gold hovering above her palm. "Wow," she breathed. "Wait a minute, why's mine a different colour?"

"Depends on the colour of your eyes. My eyes are green, so well...my magic comes in the colour of an eerie green-ish colour. Your eyes are honey coloured, so your magic comes in that colour."

"That's...incredible. It feels so...magical." Kerri was at a loss for words.

"Okay, now let go."

Kerri obliged, and as the gold orb faded, she felt the magic flow back inside her.

"You have to speed up the whole process. Do it again, but faster."

"Again?"

"Yes, but faster. If it takes you five years to summon up the power that you have, then it'd take you ten years before you could do anything else."

Kerri scowled.

"You wouldn't be able to hear your magic unless you're absolutely calm, so getting pissed off really doesn't help."

Kerri was getting more pissed off by the minute, but she didn't say anything and tried to repress her anger. She listened carefully, then reined it in and packed it into a tight ball. When she opened her eyes, she had done it again.

Arik made her repeat it for two more times before he let her rest.

“What does that golden globe thingy do anyway?”

“It just shows you how much magic you’ve got in your body.”

“But that...isn’t a lot.”

“That’s only because you just started using magic. I have more magic in me because I practise it literally every day. The more you use magic, the more magic you’ll have.”

“Oh, and Arik?”

“Yes?”

“Every time I try to uh...pull in the magic into my hand, my tattoo—”

“Mark.”

“Whatever. My Mark just sort of...tingles.”

“Yeah. Your Mark will uh, ‘tingle’ every time you use a lot of magic. However, since this is the first time you’ve used magic, well, to the Mark, it’s a lot of magic.”

“What does the Mark do anyway?”

“Well, it links you to your trainer, that is, me.”

“What do you mean, link?”

“Well, we can sort of...communicate telepathically. And if necessary, I can order you to do my bidding, and you’ll have to do it.” He smirked. He was obviously looking forward to a situation when it was necessary.

“What do you mean I’ll have to do what you tell me to do?” Kerri asked him, putting one hand on her waist.

“It means that if you refuse an order I give you, your head will start to hurt so much that you’ll probably die from the pain unless you go do what I told you to or I cancel the order.”

Bastard. “Bastard.”

Arik smirked. “It’s all for your own good, McCarthy.” He then looked at his watch. “We have a few minutes left. Do you want to end early, or do you want to learn something new?”

As tired as she was, Kerri couldn’t help being curious. “What are we going to learn?”

Arik shrugged. “I don’t know, probably summoning up fire and ice...that’s pretty basic.”



She definitely wanted to know how to do that. "I'll stay."

"If you close your eyes, you'll be able to concentrate better. Of course, once you get used to doing some of the stuff, you can do it just like that." Arik held out his hand and a small flame erupted from his fingers.

"Stop showing off." Kerri closed her eyes. "Now what?"

"Focus on your Mark. What do you feel?"

"Intense heat and cold at the same time."

"Okay...this is sort of similar to what you have been doing. Pull in the heat, but this time, pull it in to the tip of your fingers. Feel the heat building up against all five tips of your fingers."

Kerri held out her hand, and slowly, she could feel the heat seep into it. She forced the heat towards her fingertips. The heat kept trying to leak back downwards. She stopped it as much as she could. "Then?"

"Push."

Kerri gave the heat a push, and suddenly, her fingers twitched outwards, and she could feel the magic surging through again. She opened her eyes and looked at her hand, which now governed a small flame. "That is so cool."

Arik grinned. "Do you want to throw a fireball?"

Kerri looked at him hopefully. "Can I?"

"Knock yourself out."

"How?"

"Just...let go of it when you throw."

Kerri aimed carefully and chucked her fireball at one of the trees. Instead of burning the tree down, the fireball disappeared into smoke once it hit the tree. Kerri frowned, confused.

"Didn't I tell you that the O.R. is different to the human world? You can't just expect things to happen here. Anything can happen. That's why it's so dangerous." Arik nodded. "Do you want to move on to ice?"

"Is it the same, but I pull in the cold instead of the heat from my tatt—I mean, my Mark?"

"Yes. But be careful. The cold won't stop at your fingertips and wait for you to push it out. It'll just come pouring out."

Kerri rubbed the back of her neck, and her Mark tingled. She pulled in as much cold as she could and forced it through her fingers, but instead of ice shards shooting out, water poured through the tip of her fingers. She stared at it. "It's like...peeing through my fingers. It's so gross."

Arik gave a small laugh. "You need to keep the heat out."

Kerri closed her eyes and tried again, but somehow, one way or the other, the heat always seeped in. She was on the verge of giving up when suddenly, she felt Arik's fingers press gently against her Mark, and magic surged through his fingertips.

"Let me show you. Just...remember the feeling, what it feels like."

Kerri opened her eyes, let go and relaxed while Arik divided the heat from the cold easily in slow motion and drove the icy cold through her veins and up into the tips of her fingers. Suddenly, ice thrust through her fingers and onto the ground, freezing the grass. It was magical. "Wow," she breathed as Arik removed his fingers from her neck. "Now why is the grass freezing instead of disappearing or melting the ice or something like that?"

"In the O.R., everything has its own powers. We have the ability to attack and defend, and so do animals—that is, if they ever get the chance to learn them properly—but plants can only defend themselves. They cannot attack. Their power only gives them to a certain amount of protection. When you threw your fireball, you were still weak, and your attack was weaker than its defence, so the tree was able to extinguish your fire, however, my attack was stronger than its defence when I did it for you, so it has to do...what you would expect it to do, if you know what I mean."

In a strange way, it all made sense. "Yeah. I think I do."

"Now it's your turn."

For the next few minutes, Kerri tried to imitate Arik's actions, separating the heat from the cold. When she finally succeeded, she let out an exclamation of joy.

Arik nodded approvingly. "Not bad, McCarthy."

Kerri cocked her head to one side. "Do you know that this is the first near-compliment you've given me since the start of the lesson?"

Arik raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware that you were attention-seeking." Then he stopped. "Actually..." he trailed off, smirking.

"I am not attention seeking," Kerri snapped, annoyed. "All I'm saying is everybody deserves some encouragement or praise every now and then."

Arik smirked again. "Yes, they do deserve it every now and then. But the question is, do you?"

Bastard.

Arik seemed to regret his words, because he hesitated, then he smiled softly. "You did a good job, McCarthy."

Aw, he was actually blushing. Kerri was about to thank him when he straightened up abruptly.

"We should go now," he said. "It's going to get dark, and the O.R. is even more dangerous when it's dark."

Kerri snorted. "Come on, what will happen? Will a vine strangle me in an act of self defence when I accidentally step on it?"

"Actually, that can happen. The grass can also get very vengeful." He looked pointedly down where they were standing: in the middle of a very grassy meadow.

"Let's go," Kerri said quickly.

## 12 - Exhausted

The girl snorted. “Come on, what will happen? Will a vine strangle me in an act of self defence when I accidentally step on it?”

She had so much to learn. “Actually, that can happen. The grass can also get very vengeful.” He looked pointedly down on the grass they were standing on.

“Let’s go,” she said quickly, and Arik grinned. She’ll learn not to make so many sarcastic remarks in the future.

He led the way back to where they came in. He whispered the password, and a door appeared between the two trees that were in front of them.

“Do we have to go in there again?” she complained. “It’s so freaking dark. I can’t see a thing. Isn’t there a light we can switch on, or something?”

“Is there a light you can switch on in space when people go from Earth to the moon?”

“Okay, stupid question.”

“You should know,” Arik said, pulling her into the darkness. “You keep asking them.”

“Ow, careful! My ankle still hurts, you know.”

He forgot about that. “Right. Sorry.” He slowed down. “Do you need some help with that?”

“Hey, I was fine when you dragged me over here, so I think I’m going to manage okay with you dragging me back there. Just...slow down a little.”

“The doctor said no vigorous exercise.”

“Glad you know about it, since you’re the one making me exercise vigorously.” They were walking at a pace of a turtle.

Arik was getting impatient. He was tired both physically and mentally—the girl should be, too—and he was hungry. He only had half of a sandwich for lunch. He was always in a bad mood when he was hungry.

“At this rate, we’re not going to get back to the human world until next year,” he snapped. He slid his hand from her wrist up to her back and placed his other hand behind the back of her knees and lifted her up again, ignoring her protests.

They had been walking for about five minutes when the blackness suddenly disappeared, and they were in the bright white room again. He looked down, surprised at how the girl didn’t complain about the light. She was asleep, her wavy black hair curling around her face.

She was probably exhausted by the amount of magic she had used. Arik clicked his fingers and they appeared in her room. He placed her gently in her bed between the sheets and turned off the lights, and then he left for dinner.

\*\*\*

He was sitting with Drake, Joshua and Carter, and was halfway through his dinner when he checked up on her again. He frowned, concentrating. It was always harder when she was further away. After a moment or two, he found—or rather, heard her.

“What the—Oh, I’m in my room. Where the hell is Arik? Oh God, I’m so tired. And so hungry. How do you get out of here? God, when’s Arik when I need him?”

*I’m right here*, he thought to her, raising his eyebrows slightly, wondering since exactly when she started needing him.

There was a pause. *What the hell?*

Arik sighed. *Telepathy, remember?*

*Oh. You freaked me out there for a minute. Where are you?*

*In the dining hall.*

*Oh, is it dinner time?*

*Yes. How was your sleep?*

*Fine. Can I come down now?*

*Yes. Well, actually, dinner’s almost over.*

*Can I come join you anyways? I’m starving.*

*Are you dressed properly?*

*Uh, yes. Why do you ask?*

## 13 - A Plan for Revenge

Arik clicked his fingers and Kerri was suddenly sitting between him and Drake.

“What the hell?” she complained. “Next time you want to uh, ‘shift’ me, tell me.”

“Sorry,” he said, not sounding sorry at all.

“Hey, Kerri. How was training?” Drake greeted Kerri with a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Tiring. I can’t believe I fell asleep.”

“I’ll go get you something,” Drake offered, standing up. “Pasta?”

“That’d be great.”

Carter slid over so that he was sitting next to her. “Hey Kerri.”

“Hey Carter.”

“Did you think training was exhausting?”

“Extremely.”

Carter smirked. “I can think of more enjoyable activities that will exhaust you. We can indulge in them, if you want.”

Kerri bopped him on the head while Arik choked on his water. “Sick-minded creep,” she admonished.

Carter grinned and held up a bottle of water and a beer. “Which one?”

Kerri grabbed the water and gulped down half a bottle of it while Carter looked at the beer longingly.

“I’d give anything to be able to drink this again,” he said, giving the beer a final loving look before tossing it to Drake, who caught it singlehandedly and cracked it open.

“So what have you been doing all day?” Kerri asked him.

“Training.”

“Oh, so you have a trainee, too?”

“No, I have a trainer. I’m having my finals next week.”

“Wow, so you’re...a student? Like me?”

Carter chuckled. “Technically, yes. Just...a lot more skilled than you are.”

Kerri chose to ignore the jibe. “So what do you have to do to graduate?”

“You have to take an exam—or the finals, as everybody calls them—and if you pass, you graduate. It’s not one of those written ones, of course.”

Kerri groaned. “Just like school.” She turned to Drake, who had just come back with her pasta. “Thanks.” She dug in. She was freaking starving. “So, Drake,” she said through a mouthful of pasta. “How about you? What have you been doing?”

Drake grinned. “Boy-hunting,” he said, and everybody laughed.

“Maybe I can join you some time,” Kerri joked.

Drake raised an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t if I were you,” he said sotto voce. “Someone might get jealous.” He wagged his eyebrows at Arik, who rolled his eyes and took another gulp of water.

Kerri observed Arik. “Is that blushing I see?” she thought as she finished off her meal. “Yes,” she concluded after a moment. “Yes, it is.” She looked away, finished her water and threw it into the bin. She held up her empty plate. “Uh, where do I put this?”

“Just give it to me, honey,” Carter drawled, holding out his hand. “I’ll do it for you.”

Kerri handed him the plate. “Drake can get away with calling me ‘honey’. So can you. But only just this once. If you call me that again, you’ll be on the floor doing what Arik was doing this morning.” Kerri raised an eyebrow at Arik, who scowled.

“She basically means she’ll kick your balls,” Arik explained.

Carter winced. “Did it hurt?”

Arik shot him a look. “Do birds fly?”

Carter cocked his head to one side. “Well, the Dodo didn’t fly, and ostriches don’t fly either.”

Arik raised an eyebrow. “Sometimes I question your sanity.” He stood up. “Are you ready to go?” he asked Kerri.

“Yes. Bye, Drake, bye Carter,” she called cheerfully. “Bye Joshua,” she added just a second later, since she had completely forgotten that he was sitting there. He nodded and turned back to his beer.

“Why is Joshua so quiet?” she asked Arik on their way back to her room.

“It’s just...part of his personality. He’s a quiet guy.”

“Is he now?” she murmured softly as Arik opened the door for her to her room. “I’m going to take a shower,” she announced, walking towards the bathroom. She suddenly remembered about her ankle, and turned around. “One question. Do you...heal faster here?”

“What do you mean?”

“My ankle. Usually if you twist your ankle, it’d get better in about a few weeks time. Here...it’s better already.”

Arik grinned. “One of the few perks of not being entirely human.”

Kerri turned and went into the bathroom. She was extremely careful when she turned on the water. She wasn’t about to twist her ankle again any time soon.

\*\*\*

After her long, hot shower, Kerri was feeling completely relaxed. And also very annoyed, because Arik had been banging on her door for the last fifteen minutes.

“What?” she demanded, throwing open the door and nearly hitting him in the face.

“You’ve been in there for forty-five minutes, that’s what!” Arik snapped back, clearly annoyed. “I have to take a shower, too.”

“Why didn’t you take a shower in your old room?”

“Because they’ve given it to another guy, now move.” Arik slipped past her and slammed the door shut in her face.

Did he just slam the door in her face? Rude bastard. She stalked over to her dressing table. The company had provided her with the most expensive and the best cosmetics she’d ever seen. She looked around her room. It was more of an apartment or maybe a condo, with its separate bedroom, living room, bathroom, kitchen and dining room. It wasn’t huge, but it was big enough to make it seem both spacious and comfy at the same time.

Arik walked out with only a towel wrapped around his waist just as she’d finished drying her hair. She put down the blow-dryer and looked away from him—she had to, or she wouldn’t be able to look away. “You took at least thirty minutes for your shower,” she accused.

“Yes, but only because I knew that no one was going to use it after me. And I’ve already brushed my teeth.”

“Oh, goodie for you,” she said sarcastically, walking into the bathroom. She rubbed furiously at the steam-covered mirror so that she could see herself, and began washing her face and brushing her teeth, muttering dire threats.



When she came out, Arik had already turned off the lights, and she was engulfed in complete darkness. How inconsiderate was that? She stumbled forward with her hands out in front of her, silently cursing him. Then her hands touched wood and a mattress above it.

“Huh,” she thought. “That’s funny. I don’t recall the bed being this close to the bathroom. Oh well.” She climbed into the bed. “Again, I could have sworn, that my bed was queen-sized. And what the hell, why is my wall so warm? Do they have battery operated walls now? This place is so—”

A click of fingers interrupted her train of thought, and a ball of fire appeared between the fingers, which had appeared magically next to her. Fingers that belonged to Arik. Kerri froze. Arik stared at her, then down at her hand—which she realised was on his chest. “May I ask what you are doing?”

shoot. Kerri reddened. “Sorry. Wrong bed. Uh, goodnight.” She scrambled off the bed, tripping over herself.

Arik smirked. “You don’t need to make excuses. It’s perfectly understandable. Besides, you’re not the first one.”

Narcissistic bastard. “Shut up,” she muttered.

\*\*\*

The next morning, when Kerri went down for breakfast, Carter, Drake and Arik’s smirking faces greeted her. Joshua was of course silent.

Kerri pursed her lips. “It was an accident.”

“Suuuure,” Drake drawled. “Isn’t that what they all say?”

“Honey, don’t come on to your trainer. It’s so unprofessional. I, on the other hand, am totally available.” Carter held out his hands, still grinning.

Kerri looked at them stonily, and then whipped around to glare at Arik. “You...you...” she trailed off, resisting the urge to scream in front of everybody in the dining hall. She pressed her lips together and stormed off. She stopped when she saw Mandy, and grinned. Revenge. Sweet, sweet revenge.

“Mandy,” she called sweetly.

“Kerri. Good morning. Judging by the size of the bags under your eyes, you must be very tired indeed.”

“I am very tired, thank you.” She faked a yawn. “I couldn’t sleep at all last night.”

“Why?”

Kerri sighed. “It’s a long story. At first, I thought Arik’s pervert syndrome was acting up again, because he wouldn’t leave me alone.” She paused dramatically for effect. “Then he told me he actually didn’t have the pervert syndrome.” She widened her eyes. “He’s cheating on you, Mandy.”

Mandy's eyes widened, and her hand flew up to cover her mouth. "What?" Tears filled her eyes. "Why would he do this to me?"

Kerri patted her arm sympathetically. "Don't worry, Mandy. Don't cry, he's not worth the tears. In fact, you have to stay strong. Show him what he's missing out on. Guys like him never know what they have until they have until the girlfriend leaves him."

Mandy nodded, sniffing. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Get back at him, of course!" Kerri exclaimed as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. Which it probably was, but then again, she was talking to a person who didn't know who Dr. Who was.

Mandy smiled. "You're right. I should. I mean, he cheated on me. What should I do?"

Kerri pretended to think about it. As if she needed to think about it, ideas had already been bubbling out of her when she first spotted Mandy. "Well, you two still...he still stays over at nights, right?"

"Yes. Sometimes."

"You use...well, not you, but he...he does use...protection, right?"

"Of course."

"Well, you could always put in some itching powder." Kerri grinned evilly. "Or, you could always eat something really spicy before you uh...you know. You know."

"That's a great idea," Mandy said, delighted. "He's coming over tonight."

Kerri grinned again. "Is he now?"

"Yes. I can't wait."

Kerri smiled. "You're going to do a great job, Mandy. Let me know how it goes, okay?"

"Sure."

"I have to go now, training."

"Bye," Mandy called after her as she turned and left. "Oh, Kerri?"

"Yes, Mandy?"

"Does that mean I don't break up with him?"

Kerri smiled patiently. "Yes. You don't break up with him. Get him back slowly. Torture him. And then you break up with him. The man will be a mess when you leave him."

Mandy smiled. "Thank you, Kerri."

No, thank you, Kerri thought to herself, grinning as she walked back to the table and seated herself next to Drake.

"I saw you talking with Mandy just now, naughty girl," Drake whispered in Kerri's ear. "Is it something I can tell Arik?"

"No!" Kerri exclaimed, and then she immediately lowered her voice. "It's...a surprise."

"Oh, I love surprises!" Drake clapped his hands gleefully. "What's it going to be?"

Kerri grinned. "I'm sure you'll hear about it soon enough."

"Hear about what?" Arik asked them from across the table.

Kerri exchanged a look with Drake. "Uh, I meant hear from him soon enough," she said quickly. "Drake has a crush on this...guy, and Drake gave him his number, so I'm just telling him that he'll hear from him soon enough."

"Oh."

"That was a good save if I do say so myself," Kerri whispered to Drake, relieved.

"Fast thinking, girl."

Kerri winked at him before standing up. "Arik, don't we have training?"

"Uh, sure. Let's go."

## 14 - Strong

“What are we going to learn about today?” the girl asked him as they crossed through into the other realm.

“Moving things.”

“Wow, so will I be able to move...myself? Like, shift?”

“In time, yes.” He led her to the clearing they had been standing in yesterday. “Now show me your powers.”

The girl frowned.

Arik sighed. “You know, it’s that ball of light that floats in your hand?”

“Oh.” The girl held her hand out uncertainly and closed her eyes. A moment later, a golden globe appeared in her outstretched hand.

“Now show me fire.” The fire had barely appeared in the girl’s hand when he gave another command. “Throw it at the tree,” he said, pointing to a tree nearby.

The girl aimed at the tree and hurled it onto the tree. The tree set alight. Arik’s eyes widened in alarm. This had never happened before. How did her powers get so strong so quickly? Usually it took about a week or so, at least. He quickly doused the tree with water before it started a forest fire. He frowned, not understanding, but not asking any questions. He shook his head. She was a sorceress. That was probably why. He decided to try it out again.

“Freeze the grass,” he ordered.

A look of doubt crossed the girl’s face, and she bit her lip nervously.

Maybe she needed a little bit of encouragement. That usually did the trick. Girls always needed encouragement. They practically live on them. That and compliments. “Come on,” he encouraged her softly. “You can do it.”

The girl closed her eyes and frowned furiously, concentrating. Suddenly, ice burst through her extended fingers, onto the grass and froze the entire meadow.

Arik’s eyes widened again. He clicked his fingers, and the ice melted. “Show me your powers again,” he ordered.

The girl held out her hand, and Arik scrutinised the orb that was hovered above her palm. It sparkled and glowed much brighter than yesterday, and it had increased in size, too. Arik frowned. Was this normal

for a sorceress? He didn't know, and if he guessed correctly, neither did anyone else.

"Is something wrong?" the girl asked him.

"No." He straightened up and pointed to a branch that was on the meadow. "Now, you're going to move that branch from beside your feet, to in front of me." He threw the branch down so that it lay next to her feet.

"How do I do that?"

This was going to be hard to explain. How? Moving things had become so easy for Arik that he could do it without even thinking about it. He thought for a while. "Close your eyes." The girl complied. "Now imagine the meadow. Imagine every single blade of grass, and the branch that's next to you. Imagine me standing in front of you. Can you see it?"

The girl nodded.

"Okay, now open your eyes, but keep that image in your head. Keep looking at it."

The girl frowned, but slowly, her eyelids flickered open and Arik could see her honey-coloured eyes glowing bright gold.

"Mentally pick up the stick and place it next to me." He paused. "Have you done it?"

"Yes."

Arik looked down and saw the branch was now next to his feet. "Now you can...stop imagining."

The girl closed her eyes and opened her eyes again, and she shrieked with joy. "Oh, I did it!"

Arik raised an eyebrow, half annoyed and half amused. She was just like a child. "Yes," he said calmly. "You did. Now move the branch back to your side, but faster. You need to work on speed."

The girl pursed her lips, but closed her eyes. Arik looked as the stick raised from the ground. Then he yelped as the stick began to whack him on the head.

"What the—" he yelped as he dodged away from the attacking stick. The stick dropped and the girl opened her eyes, laughing. Arik narrowed his eyes.

The girl sighed. "You're too serious all the time, it's so boring. It's like you're seventy, not...twenty-however-old-you-are."

Arik smirked. "Actually, I'm a hundred and thirteen years old. And as for me being boring and serious..." he leapt and started tickling her, and she shrieked with laughter.

"Stop, please stop, please..." she begged through fits of laughter, rolling around on the floor.

"I can't, I'm too busy reliving my childhood."

Kerri suddenly rolled away. "So you attacked defenceless girls in your childhood?" she asked him, putting her hands on her hips and narrowing his eyes at him.

Arik shrugged. "Yeah." He stood up again, slightly embarrassed by what he just did. Did he just tickle his trainee? He couldn't believe he did something that was so highly unprofessional. "Okay, now you're going to shift," he muttered, looking away so that the girl couldn't see his reddened face.

The girl frowned slightly, but got up on her feet. "And how do you do that?"

"The same way you moved that branch, but you're moving yourself. This is hard, so it'll probably take you a few tries."

The girl closed her eyes, and when she opened them again her eyes were glowing gold. Then she took a step forwards, but Arik shook his head.

"No, you wouldn't have to move physically. At all," he explained. "Try again."

After a few tries, the girl let the gold in her eyes die down. "I can't do it," she announced.

Arik pursed his lips. How could he show her? If he moved her, then all she would see is him moving an object, which she already knew how to do. If he moved himself...then well, she wouldn't know what it felt like, because she wouldn't be included in the process. "Maybe this is too advanced for you," he concluded after a while. "Let's try something easier."

"No, I want to learn how to shift." The girl stood adamantly. "Finish what you started."

Arik looked at her. "It's not my fault you're not powerful enough."

"That's not how I see it."

"Well, that's how everybody else sees it."

"You're just going to give up like that? You won't even bother to try?"

Arik thought about it. "Nope."

"You...bastard." Her eyes glowed gold and suddenly she was right behind him.

Arik turned around to stare at her, and she stared down at herself. "Oh," she exclaimed. "I did it." Then she looked up and narrowed her eyes. "And now, as I was saying..." she leapt towards him.

Arik raised an eyebrow and held up one hand just as the girl was about to land on him, and the girl froze in mid-air. She looked around him. "Damn."

Arik smirked. "You have so much to learn. A tip: never make rash decisions." He let her down back onto

the ground gently.

The girl pursed her lips. "Can you please teach me how to shift? Please?" She looked pleadingly up at him. She looked so adorable. And so unbelievably sexy.

"Uh, sure," he answered her, half-dazed. "Well...in order for you to shift, you have to..." Well, in order for him to concentrate, he had to focus and stop gawking at her. He looked away from her abruptly and thought of ways to teach her. "You have to..." He frowned. "Wait a minute; didn't you shift when you came over to beat me up?"

"Yeah, but I was too angry to know what was going on."

"Try doing it again...my way. Maybe now that you've actually shifted once, your body will know what to do."

The girl switched into her second vision, and then suddenly, she was gone. Arik looked around him, but she was nowhere in sight. "McCarthy?" he called, still looking around.

He received no response. "McCarthy! Come out here. Right now." He frowned and checked for Kerri telepathically.

*Arik?*

*Kerri, where on earth are you?*

*Um, I don't know.*

Arik sighed impatiently. *How can you not know?*

*I don't know! It...It smells like chocolate in here.*

Arik frowned again, closed his eyes and shared her vision so that he could see what she was seeing. shoot. Was she serious? Arik opened his eyes quickly, shifted over to where she was, grabbed Kerri, and shifted them back to the other realm.

"Kerri, what were you thinking shifting yourself to the C.E.?"

"The what?"

Arik sighed impatiently. "The Chocolate Express."

The girl paled at the name of the company. "I didn't...I wasn't...I didn't."

"Thank God no one was there, or you wouldn't be able to get out of there alive unless you were blackmailed by them."

"But...I didn't..."

"What were you thinking about when you shifted?"

She reddened. “Ty.”

Who the hell was he? “Who the hell—” he stopped and frowned. “Ty? Your boyfriend?”

“Ex-boyfriend, thanks to you.”

He ignored the jibe. “Why were you thinking about him?”

“Because...he smells like the woods here. Like, all...woody.”

Arik raised an eyebrow at the word “woody” but otherwise ignored it. Girls these days had the weirdest range of vocabulary. “And you were thinking about him when you just appeared there?”

“Yes.”

Arik’s jaw hardened. “You do understand what that means, right?”



## 15 - Betrayed

“Try doing it again...my way. Maybe now that you’ve actually shifted once, your body will know what to do,” Arik said.

This better work this time. She had never been known as a patient person. Kerri closed her eyes and pictured the map of the forest again. Just as she opened her eyes, there was a breeze rustled through the trees, and the smell of Ty suddenly rushed into her brain. God, she missed him so mu—there was a whoosh of wind, and when Kerri opened her eyes, she found herself in the middle of a place she had never seen before.

“What’s this place? Where’s Arik?” she looked around frantically. She looked around. It was like a factory, there was machinery everywhere. “What the hell?” She thought of calling for help, but there didn’t look like there’d be anybody to answer her anyway, so she kept quiet. She suddenly remembered that she could use that telepathy thing.

Arik?

Kerri, where on earth are you? Arik’s voice was urgent.

Kerri looked around. She had no idea where she was. Um, I don’t know.

He sighed. How can you not know?

I don’t know! Kerri looked around frantically. Then she frowned. Why did it...did it smell like...she sniffed. Yep. Definitely. It...It smells like chocolate in here.

She felt something weird going on behind her eyes, as if someone had gone to her brain and they were seeing what she was seeing together. Which was sort of weird, if not very.

Then suddenly, Arik appeared next to her, grabbed her and shifted them back to the other realm.

“Kerri, what the hell were you thinking shifting yourself to the C.E.?”

Kerri frowned. “The what?”

He sighed. “The Chocolate Express.”

Kerri paled. She was there? In that horrible...chocolate factory? “I didn’t...I wasn’t...I didn’t.”

“Thank God no one was there, or you wouldn’t be able to get out of there alive unless you were blackmailed by them.”

“But...I didn’t...”

“What were you thinking about when you shifted?”

Kerri blushed. “Ty.”

“Who the hell—” he stopped and frowned. “Ty? Your boyfriend?”

Kerri glared at him. “Ex-boyfriend, thanks to you.”

“Why were you thinking about him?”

Kerri blushed again. “Because...he smells like the woods here. Like, all...woody.”

“And you were thinking about him when you just appeared there?”

“Yes.”

Arik’s jaw hardened. “You do understand what that means, right?”

Kerri stared at him. “Uh, not really.”

Arik looked at her. “Your boyfriend works for the C.E.,” he said slowly, as if teaching a three-year-old how to read.

Kerri’s eyes widened. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“But...but that means...he...” Kerri trailed off. “What does that mean?”

Arik rolled his eyes. “It means that he was trying to get close to you so that he could bring you back to the C.E.”

The pieces finally began to fit together. “So...you mean that our...we, that we were ...never...real?”

Arik shrugged. “Pretty much.”

The realisation hit her like a twenty-ton truck, and tears filled her eyes. The fact that Ty never loved her made her want to break down and cry until she died.

It also made her so freaking angry.

How could he do this to her? How could he just...use her? She thought that he was different than other men. But obviously, all men were the same. Kerri could feel anger build up in her.

“Kerri?” Arik looked at her. “Kerri, you may...want to calm down a little.”

Kerri glared at him. “Why would I want to do that? That bastard...used me!” Suddenly, magic whirled through her and thunder struck through the sky. She looked up. “Huh, talk about pathetic fallacy.”

Arik stared at her. “Uh, Kerri, I don’t think it’s pathetic fallacy. You caused the thunder.”

Kerri raised an eyebrow. “I know I’m a sorceress and all, but I don’t think I’m that powerful.”

Arik shook his head. “Kerri, you caused the thunder.”

And he knew that how? “Prove it.”

“Well, for instance, when I told you to calm down, your eyes weren’t their usual colour—”

“What do you mean their usual colour?”

“You know how your eyes are an amber-y kind of colour? Well, when you were freaking out, they were pure, solid black. And after the thunder came, the black just...disappeared.”

Whoa. She looked down at herself. It sort of scared her that she was so powerful. “Wow.”

“Let’s go, it’s starting to rain.” Arik grabbed her by the arm and led her back to the human realm.

Kerri followed Arik back to their flat, still in a daze. First she found out that Ty never loved her, and then she found out that she was powerful enough to control the weather. She needed to calm down a little. Maybe drink a soda.

Or maybe some cyanide.

And she thought he was going to propose to her. How stupid was she? He was probably waiting to whisk her off and make her one of them. She was so grateful that Arik had decided to capture her just in time before Ty did.

“Wait,” Arik said, frowning as he turned around. “Did you say your boyfriend smelled...’woody’?”

Kerri glared at him. “Ex-boyfriend. And yes.”

Arik bit his lip. “I...uh...don’t know how to tell you this.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Just tell me.”

“But...you won’t like it.”

“Oh for God’s sake, Arik, just spit it out.” Maybe then after that he would leave her alone to sulk in peace.

“Your boyfriend...uh, I mean ex-boyfriend...is...well, he’s a werewolf.”

Kerri stared at him. This was too much. She couldn't even muster up the energy to say "What?!" She was just...she couldn't cope. She'd been in love with a werewolf? She'd...live with him, she'd made out with him, she'd...she shuddered. She'd slept with him. Ew. She had slept with...an animal. Was he even qualified to be an animal? She sat down on the floor to where she had been standing. She couldn't...it was just...she couldn't deal with this. This was too much. Way, way too much. How was she supposed to—

Arik spoke softly, interrupting her train of thought. "Kerri, maybe you should...lie down for a bit."

She barely heard him. She had been living with a werewolf which was about to abduct her to make her a slave in a chocolate factory. If someone had told her that a month ago, she'd have laughed her head off. She certainly didn't feel like laughing now.

Arik knelt down beside her. "Kerri, I know it's hard for you to take, but..." he trailed off. "I think we both know that there's nothing for me to say that can possibly make you feel better. It hurts, I know. But try to get over it." He paused. "Just like I am," he added quietly, his voice breaking on the last word. He stood up abruptly and disappeared into the bathroom.

That got Kerri's attention. Try to get over it, just like he was? Was his ex-girlfriend a werewolf who was about to enslave him? She got up quietly and sneaked to the bathroom, and she could hear him crying silently. Well, not exactly hear, because if he was crying silently, she wouldn't be able to hear him. She wished there was another word to describe what he was doing. The words crying, sobbing or weeping made him sound like a wimp. Which he wasn't. Even men could cry sometimes. It was nothing to be ashamed of.

She could see him, his back to the door, his shoulders heaving and him gasping for breath. Huh, it was nice to know that he actually had a soft side.

Well, he certainly didn't seem like he'd gotten over it. But hey, who was she to judge? She wondered whether she should go over and give him a hug. Hell, he needed one more than she did. But he'd probably look at her like she was some kind of weird bug.

Oh, what the hell, the worst thing he could do was kill her.

She slipped into the bathroom to where he was standing. His back was still to her, and he had stopped crying, but his breathing was still jagged.

Here goes. She pressed the side of her face against his back gently, her arms reaching around his lean, taut body—she almost fainted, she was so nervous—and hugged him gently.

He didn't respond, and she was just about to pull away when he placed a hand on her forearm and sighed quietly. So she stayed where she was. Hell, she wasn't going to be the one to break this moment.

## 16 - The Point

Arik was surprised when the girl came up behind him and hugged him. Did she see him crying? He could sense her starting to pull away, so he put a hand on her arm. It was comforting to share their sorrows together. Kind of sappy, but still comforting. He never saw the point when his previous girlfriends kept telling him to tell them more about himself, what he was thinking, what he did that day, what was bugging him. It annoyed the hell out of him, even when Sitara did it. But now he could sort of see the point, even though technically, they weren't sharing anything because they weren't talking.

They stayed there in that position for a while, neither of them saying anything. Eventually, he pulled away reluctantly.

"Thank you," he said softly, turning around to look at her. "I needed that."

"I know," she said, walking up to the sink and filling her cup with water and squeezing toothpaste onto her toothbrush.

Just like that. "I know"? Why did she have to say that? Not "you're welcome", or "no problem", or "don't worry about it", but "I know". He shook his head. She was one of the most confusing and mysterious females he had ever met. It made her more alluring than ever. He joined her at the sink to brush his teeth.

"Arik?" she had finished brushing her teeth now, and was about to wash her face.

"Yeah?"

She wet a face towel. "Where's Drake's place?"

"Right down the corridor. Why?"

"Nothing. Just curious." She rubbed at her face vigorously with the face towel and flung it down onto the counter afterwards. "See you in the bedroom," she said before vanishing into the next room.

Arik pushed away the thoughts that appeared in his mind when she said that last sentence. How could he even think about things like that? Especially when just less than ten minutes ago he was thinking about Sitara. His jaw hardened and he forced himself to take deep breaths. She was gone. She had been for the past three years. Get over it. He splashed cold water onto his face before turning off the light and closing the bathroom door behind him.

## 17 - Knowledge

Kerri waited till Arik was asleep before she snuck out of her room. She wandered down the corridor, wondering which flat was Drake's. It was a good thing they were at the very end, otherwise she'd have to check both ends of the corridor. She stopped at the end of the hall. There were two doors. Which one was Drake's? Dammit. She usually chose the wrong door. She looked at the two doors, wondering which one to choose. She chose the left one. Then she turned and knocked on the door on the right. She received no response.

She twisted the doorknob to see that it was unlocked. She crept in, and she was about to enter the bedroom when she heard creaking bedsprings.

And other noises.

Oops, and ew. She just walked in on people...trying to make new people. That means that Drake was in the other apartment then. She was about to leave when she thought of something. The man in the bedroom could be Drake. Then she remembered that if the man in the bedroom was Drake, then the other person in the room also had to be a man. Which in this case, it definitely wasn't. Right, okay. Leaving. Now. She closed the front door behind her quietly, went across the corridor and knocked on the other door.

Drake answered it. "Kerri? What are you doing here?"

"Hey, are you alone?" She certainly didn't want to interrupt Drake if he was trying to make new people. Not that he'd be able to, unless he or his partner suddenly grew a womb.

"Uh, yeah. Do you want to come in?"

"Yes, please."

Drake led her into his condo. It was quite similar to hers, but the colours, the patterns, the materials and the positions of the furniture were all different while the shape and size of the rooms were the same. "How did you know that this was my place?" he asked her, offering her a soda, which she accepted gratefully.

"Well, Arik told me where it was. And to be honest, your door wasn't the first door I knocked on."

Drake raised his eyebrow. "Across the hall?"

"Yep."

Drake burst out laughing. "But...you know they were...you know, right?"

Kerri sighed. "Well, I did after that. They didn't hear me and the door was unlocked, so I just went in."

Thank God I was quiet. Anyway, I was just about to walk into the bedroom when I heard them uh...when I heard them, so I left.”

Drake grinned. “You should have gone and joined in.”

“I’ll leave that for you to do,” she replied drily.

Drake waved the remark away and cracked open a can of beer. “Not really my kind of thing. Anyway, what are you doing here?” He sat down on the bed, and motioned for Kerri to sit next to him.

She obliged, kicking off her shoes. “Well, I was just wondering...did Arik have a girlfriend?”

Drake snorted. “Try asking whether he had about five thousand.”

“No, I mean...a serious one.” Kerri changed her position so that she was sitting cross-legged and balanced her soda on her knee. “Like, one he really cared about. One he loved.”

Drake looked down into his beer. “Yeah, there was one. Why do you want to know?”

“Well, because...I just want to know more about her.”

Drake frowned at her. “Why?”

“Because I saw Arik crying over her in the bathroom before bed.”

Drake sighed. “The poor guy.”

“So? Can you tell me about her, or is she like, a banned topic?”

“Her name’s Sitara, and she’s half Indian. An exotic beauty, they say. I think you’re prettier, though.”

Kerri grinned. “Thanks.”

“Anyway, she was...they were good together, and I guess everybody just thought that they’d end up...well, everybody just thought they’d stay together, y’know?”

“But they didn’t.”

“Well, obviously.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know whether they were any problems with them...personally, but she turned to...another company.”

“The C.E.? Arik told me about them,” she explained when Drake looked surprised.

“Well, yes. She turned to the C.E.”

“So she turned willingly? She wasn’t captured or enslaved or something like that?”

“Silver was involved. Werewolves can’t resist silver.”

Kerri’s mouth dropped. “Sitara was a...werewolf?”

“She *is* a werewolf.”

“So do they all...go weak at the knees at the sight of silver?”

“Well, not exactly.” Drake lowered his voice. “Rumours are that one of the other werewolves from the C.E. seduced Shyam and tricked her into joining them.”

“Does Arik know about these rumours?”

Drake looked at her. “Why do you think he was crying?”

“Oh.” So that was what Arik was talking about when he said it hurt. The realisation of betrayal.

“Sitara was...stubborn, though. She was also fiercely loyal—that is, as loyal as a werewolf ever could be. It was so obvious that she and Arik were perfect for each other, and she could resist silver if she tried, so nobody will ever know why she actually turned to the C.E. Maybe it’s true that werewolves can’t resist temptations, that they’ll never be faithful.”

Kerri sipped at her soda, deep in thought. “So did Sitara train here at the Sterling Silver?”

“Yes.”

“So she was one of the first werewolves to ever be trained here?”

“Yes. It’s actually because of Sitara that the boss noticed that all of the werewolves that trained here betray the Sterling in the end. And so werewolves were banned.”

“Oh, wow.” Kerri let out a low whistle. “That must have...really hurt Arik.”

Drake finished his beer and tossed it into the nearby bin. “Yep.”

“Was...was she generally a good person?”

“Sitara? Oh, yeah. She was nice, funny, caring, all that stuff. She was Arik’s one true love, apparently, according to him.”

“One true love?” Kerri raised an eyebrow.

“Love works...differently with us immortals. Well, maybe it doesn’t work differently, but no one will ever



know. Anyway, with us immortals, we all have one true love. And usually, if they're our one true love, then we're their one true love too. Usually."

"So it was different in Arik's case."

"Either that, or Sitara wasn't Arik's one true love. Kerri, just because we have that one true love doesn't mean we can't fall in love with someone else. We can, but only before we meet our true love. When we meet that one true love, then it's impossible to fall in love with anyone else, because your love for her—or him, in my case—will be...so deep. Deeper than anybody you've fallen in love with."

"So you're saying Arik's love for Sitara may not be...that what he felt for Sitara wasn't actually true love?"

"It's a possibility. But if it's true, then I really don't want to know what happens if Arik's true love leaves him."

"Do you know that the person's your true love when you meet them?"

"It's obvious...for some."

"Oh."

"I'll tell you something, but only if you promise me not to hit me or hurt me afterwards."

"Why would I do that?"

"Just promise, woman."

Kerri sighed. "Fine, I promise."

Drake looked away. "We...we all think that...maybe...you're Arik's one true love."

Kerri stared at him. Then she burst out laughing. "I wish," she said, thinking that she really did wish. "Who's 'we'?"

"Carter, Joshua and I."

She raised an eyebrow. "Joshua thinks that?"

"Well, Carter and I."

"And why do you think that?"

"Because...Arik's so different than he was before. He behaves differently."

"What do you mean differently?"

“Like when he’s with you, it’s like it was when he was...with Sitara. But not really. In a different way, but a good different.”

Kerri stared at him. She couldn’t believe this. “You’re comparing me to Sitara.”

Drake’s eyes widened slightly in alarm when he sensed that he was in hot water. Kerri had to admit that he was quite good at sensing these things. Then again, he was gay, so that’s probably why. “No, of course not. Why would any man with the right mind compare you to another woman?” Drake hurried to explain. “You’re all...unique and different...and special...” he trailed off.

Kerri narrowed her eyes. “Keep going.”

“And...so one of a kind and...” clearly getting no where, Drake decided to try something else. “I mean, if one of my boyfriends compared me to another guy, I’d get pissed off too.”

“Huh. I’m curious. Would you?”

Drake wrinkled his nose. “Hell yeah. I mean, who’s he to judge me?”

Kerri grinned. “Now you’re getting it.”

Drake sighed in relief. “So...you’re not going to kill me?”

“Not today, buddy.” Kerri’s stomach growled.

Drake grinned. “Are you hungry? You and Arik skipped dinner.”

“Yeah.”

“Wait, I’ll pop something in the microwave for you.”

“Thanks, Drake,” she called after him as he went into the kitchen and rooted around the fridge.

“So, why did you guys skip dinner?” Drake asked when he came back with Kerri’s food.

Kerri dug in. “Well...I don’t know, but I think it’s because I accidentally shifted over to the C.E. this afternoon...”

Silence. “Are you kidding me, woman?”

“No.”

“Why would you do something like that? Do you know how flipping dangerous it is?”

“I said I accidentally shifted, didn’t I?”

“Oh God, what happened then? Was Arik with you?”

“No. But he suddenly appeared next to me, grabbed me then shifted me back.”

“Just like that?”

“Yep. I didn’t even tell him that I was over there. Probably because even I didn’t know that I was over there, but still.”

“Did you feel any kind of...weird sensation before Arik shifted over to the C.E. to save you?”

Kerri frowned. “Well, something weird happened to my eyes before he appeared but that’s all.”

“Like someone’s watching what you’re watching?”

“Yeah. That’s it. How do you know?”

“Arik shared your vision to see what you were seeing so that he would know where you were, so that he could go and save you.”

“Oh wow. Is that like...a really high level of magic?”

“Not really. Only people with a special bond can do it, like between friends, or trainers and trainees...or true loves.” Drake yawned.

“Oh, sorry, am I disturbing you?”

“No, it’s just been a long day. Carter’s a dog to train.”

Kerri frowned. “You’re Carter’s trainer?” she asked, polishing off the last of her late-night meal.

“Yep.”

She laughed. “That I’d like to see. Is it fun, having a friend as a trainee or a trainer?”

“Hell no.” Drake shook his head. “When it comes to training, everything’s strictly professional. It’s probably the hardest kind of training to do. Ever. Well, I guess it’d be harder to train if your trainer was your one true love.” He shot Kerri a meaningful look, which she ignored. He yawned again.

“Wow. You’re really beat. I’ll leave now so that you can get some sleep.”

“Thanks. You’re welcome any time, you know that, right? Well, except when I’m...busy doing what the couple across the hall are doing.”

Kerri grinned. “Yeah, I know. I’ll show myself out. ‘Night, Drake.”

“Bye, K.”

Kerri stopped in her tracks when she heard her new nickname. Then she continued out the door. Any nickname other than Ree would do just fine.

“Oh, and Drake?”

“Yeah?”

“What we talk about at nights...they’re between us only, yeah?”

“Of course.”

Kerri left her plate in the kitchen sink on the way out.

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Kerri had just climbed onto the bed when she suddenly heard a click of fingers and a flame lit up the room.

“Where were you?” Arik asked coldly.

She gave a small shriek and almost fell off the bed. “That’s none of your business,” she replied after regaining her composure, her tone matching his.

“Do you know how I worried when I woke up and found you were gone? Do you know how much trouble I’ll be in if the C.E. takes you?”

Kerri snorted. “As if they’re going to come in the middle of the night and just grab me.”

Arik looked at her. “Are you stupid?” he asked. “Of course they’d do that.”

That’s right. They would. “Oh. Sorry.”

“Where were you?”

“Not off to the C.E. getting the full tour, if that’s what you were worried about.”

Arik cocked his head sideways. “Either you tell me where you were, or I’ll read your mind and go over every single detail of what you’ve been doing for the past two or so hours.”

“I was over at Drake’s,” she replied quickly. “We were talking.”

“About what?”

“All kinds of things.”

Arik narrowed his eyes. “Were you two talking about me?”

Kerri shrugged. "We could have been."

"Tell me."

"No."

"You know that I can always read your mind for the information, right?"

"You even try invading my privacy, and I'll kick your balls so hard they'll fall off," she promised him.

He backed off immediately.

Then Kerri suddenly remembered something. "Wait a minute, don't you have to go over to Mandy's tonight?"

"shoot. That's right." Arik narrowed his eyes. "Wait, how do you know about that?"

She shrugged. "Girls talk. Now go."

Arik frowned. "You actually want me to?"

"Oh yes."

"Why?"

Kerri tried to come up with an excuse. "Well...all men have to get laid every once in a while. Now go."

She could tell that he was tempted. "But...I can't just leave you here."

"Just make it quick. I'll be fine. I just remembered that I haven't showered anyways."

"At one in the morning?"

"Shut up and go get laid." She kicked him off the bed and headed towards the bathroom for her shower.

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Arik came back half an hour later, bursting into the bathroom, where Kerri was clad in only a towel. He was grabbing at his crotch, his breathing ragged. Kerri grinned. "So are you feeling a little itchy? Or was her mouth a bit too spicy for you?"

Arik glared at her. "I knew something was up." He pulled off his shirt and jeans.

Kerri grinned evilly. "So which one, itching powder or did she eat something really spicy?"

Arik pushed past her and into the shower. "Itching powder, dog."

Kerri burst out laughing.

## 18 - Agony

That dog. The itching was unbearable. The water did nothing to cool it down. That dog. That insufferable dog.

Oh, the pain, the agonising pain. He resisted the urge to itch, burrowing his hands under his pillow, clenching and unclenching his fists. Just don't think about it, and it'll go away, he said to himself.

The girl laughing hysterically in the bed next to him really didn't help.

"Shut up," he muttered. "It's not funny."

"You're right, it's not funny. It's freaking hilarious."

The itching was really bothering him now. He sighed and swung himself off the bed.

"Where're you going?"

"To the bathroom."

"Why?"

"So I can sit under the tap, turn on ice-cold water and numb myself for the next few hours."

The girl burst into fits of laughter again.

"You're going to pay for this, McCarthy," he said.

"I hope not," she called after him. "I already paid twenty bucks for the itching powder, you'd be surprised that powdered snake venom cost so much."

Arik choked. "Snake ven—" He slammed the bathroom door.

## 19 - Discovery

When Kerri woke up, Arik was fast asleep on his bed. Bet he didn't get much sleep last night, she thought. After changing, brushing her teeth and washing her face, she went down to breakfast.

"Hey, K," Drake greeted her as she sat herself beside him and Carter. "Where's Arik?"

"Sleeping."

"Really? He's more of a the-early-bird-catches-the-early-worm kind of guy."

"Yeah, um, we didn't get much sleep last night."

Drake waggled his eyebrows. "Ooh."

"Oh, no, no, nothing like that," Kerri hurried to reassure him.

"Then what is it?" Carter asked.

"Well, he went off to Mandy's to get laid last night. Turns out somehow, someone got Mandy to put itching powder in his condom."

Carter cringed. "Oh, not good, not good." Then he looked at Drake. "Dude, you should be having the same reaction. You are a guy, after all."

"Yes, but I'm also gay, and I don't have to worry about knocking up anybody anytime soon."

"Got it."

"Yeah," Kerri continued. "So he was up all night trying not to itch."

"The poor guy," Carter muttered.

"Oh, don't worry, he found a solution to the itching problem."

"How?"

"By numbing himself with ice-cold water while sitting under the tap." They all cracked up.

"But K, you said you didn't get that much sleep either. Were you helping him?" Drake asked her.

"Oh, hell no. I just couldn't stop laughing."

"Speak of the devil." Carter grinned and slapped Arik's back. "Morning, Rick."



“I take it you all know?” he asked dully.

“Oh, something that good can’t possibly stay hidden,” Drake said grinning.

“I think I’ve scratched myself raw,” he said in the same dull voice.

Everybody at the table cringed. Even Joshua.

“Dude, way too much information,” Drake said, pushing away his plate of food. “I think I just lost my appetite.”

“Would you need bandages for that?” Kerri asked innocently. “You know, like wrap it up like a mummy until it recovers.”

Drake and Carter roared with laughter while Arik groaned and slowly banged his head repeatedly on the table. “I can’t even walk properly,” he moaned.

“Someone get him a wheelchair,” called Kerri cheerfully, bringing another round of laughter.

“I really pity your ex-boyfriend,” Arik said, lifting his head from the table. “How the hell he managed to put up with you for so long, I do not know.”

There was an ominous silence at the table. “If you ever talk about my ex-boyfriend in any other way again,” Kerri said in one of those sweet-but-actually-fatally-dangerous voices, “I will put you in such a bad condition you’ll have to use a wheelchair in which you’ll have to steer with your tongue.”

“Uh, Arik, I’ll take her word on that,” Drake said. “She looks really scary right now.”

“I don’t care. I may never be able to pee again—never mind about the sex—how do you expect me to care about her ex-boyfriend?”

Drake and Carter shook their heads at the same time. “Wrong answer, dude,” they answered simultaneously as Kerri threw an empty beer can at Arik’s head.

“Next time it’s a brick,” she hissed.

“Good luck finding one.”

She looked around her and picked up a chair and shrugged. “Next best thing,” she said, raising the chair.

“Okay, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Arik said, sliding away from her on the bench. “Just...put down the chair. Please.”

Kerri smiled sweetly and the chair clattered back onto the ground.

“Uh, I don’t think we’re going to have a lesson today,” Arik said. “I can’t...I really can’t do this today. Just...practise on shifting. And please don’t think of your ex-boyfriend when you’re doing it, because this time, there won’t be anybody to go and save you.”

“I’ll help,” Drake volunteered.

“Don’t you have training with Carter today?”

“Yeah, but she can watch.”

“You don’t understand how powerful she is. She may be able to do it once she’s actually seen it.”

“Then she’ll be powerful enough to fight for her own when they come for her.”

Kerri noticed Drake said “when” instead of “if”. “Is the C.E. coming?”

“Yes,” Carter said shortly.

“When?”

“We don’t know. They could come today, or they could wait a couple of years until you’re fully trained to take you, which would be harder to do.”

Kerri shivered. “They’re going to come...for me?”

“Yes.”

“Oh God.”

“Don’t worry, I’m pretty sure you’ve learnt enough to protect yourself,” Drake reassured her.

Kerri stared at him. “Drake, the most harmful thing I can do right now is throwing a fireball.”

Drake looked at her. “Okay, forget I said anything.”

“Why don’t you have someone guard her for the day?” Carter suggested.

“Who?” Arik asked. “You’re going to have to practise a lot for your finals next week, and Drake’s going to help you. I’ll probably have to go to the medical centre to...recover.”

Carter nudged Arik gently and looked at Joshua, who was still eating silently at the table.

Understanding dawned on Arik. “Oh. That’s right. I’ve forgotten that he was here.”

Kerri stared at Arik. That bastard. Such a horrible thing to say. Weren’t they supposed to be best friends?

“Joshua, can you look after Kerri for today?” Arik asked, completely unaware of his rudeness.

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you.” Arik stood up. Then he groaned. “I can’t even freaking walk to the medical centre.” He snapped his fingers, and he was gone.

Drake and Carter stood up next. “Bye, K. Have fun.” Drake kissed her on the cheek, Carter gave her a quick hug, and they were gone as well.

Kerri looked at Joshua, who was looking at her with the bluest eyes she had ever seen. “So, I guess it’s just you and me,” she said, smiling weakly.

Joshua stood up from his table. “Do you want to go to the other realm now?”

“Uh, sure.” This guy sure didn’t waste his time, Kerri thought as she followed Joshua into the bright white room.

When they had stepped out of the blackness, Kerri noticed something different about Joshua. He was...faded. Not looking ill or sickly, just...the whole of him. His face, his hands, his clothes, his hair. It was as if someone had draped a veil on him.

“Uh, Joshua, what’s wrong with you?” she asked him.

“I’m human, and I’m in an inhuman realm. I don’t belong here. Technically, I’m not even here.”

“Oh.” Whatever that means.

“So Arik said to practise on your shifting. Shift.”

Kerri raised an eyebrow. “You really are a man of few words, aren’t you?”

“I don’t like wasting my time.”

“How did you and Arik meet?”

Joshua looked at her then, his blue eyes still piercing even though he was faded. “Why don’t you practise your shifting, and we’ll talk afterwards? It’s best to get things out of the way.”

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An hour later, Kerri had finally mastered the art of short-distanced shifting. Well, hopefully, she had. She had concentrated extra-hard, hoping that she’d finish quickly so that she could talk to Joshua. There was so much to know about him. Every now and then, she would sneak a look at him, and he’d look emotionlessly back at her. He was quick for a human. But he was a professional ninja or something, so he had to be.

Just once, she'd looked at him when he wasn't looking at her, and there was a longing in his eyes, as if he longed to be able to join her, to do what she was doing. But the look had disappeared immediately once he'd caught her staring.

"I'm done," she said to Joshua, relieved. "I'm so tired."

"Do you want to sleep it off?"

"No. I want to talk."

"Go on, then."

"So, how did you and Arik meet?" Kerri sat down on the grass.

"I thought you said you wanted to talk."

"Please," Kerri looked pleadingly up at him. "I want to know more about you. You're always so...quiet all the time."

Joshua looked at her with his blue eyes. "Arik found me when we were kids. I was dangerously ill, and he found me and brought me to this company in time before I died."

"And so you two became best friends?"

"I'll always be grateful towards to him."

"How about Drake and Carter?" Kerri wanted to know. "Do you ever talk to them?"

Joshua shrugged. "Sometimes."

"Why don't you talk more?"

"There's no need for unnecessary words."

Riiiiight. "How long have you been in this company?"

"For about a hundred years or so. A hundred and four years, to be exact."

"But...if you're human, and you're...mortal, then...how? I don't understand."

"The scientists found or invented a medicine that would stop me from aging. As long as I take my shots once a year, I won't get old."

"Wow. That's pretty great."

"Is it?" Joshua stood up abruptly again. "Let's go. One thing I learnt is never to stay in this realm for long."

“That’s what Arik said as well...why?”

“Because it’s dangerous.”

“How?”

“You never know what’s out there.” He murmured the password, and the blackness appeared in front of them.

“What’s the password?” Kerri asked him.

Joshua turned to look at her. “You’ll know the password once you’re fully trained.” He disappeared into the darkness and Kerri scrambled after him.

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“Tell me more about you,” Kerri said to Joshua once they were at her place.

“What do you want to know?”

“Anything. Uh, do you have any siblings?”

“I had a younger sister.”

“How old is she?”

“She was five when she died.”

Kerri’s eyes widened a little. She should have noticed when he used past tense. “I’m sorry.”

Joshua shrugged.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking, but...how?”

“Remember when Arik found me, I was dangerously ill? Well, I caught the disease from my sister. When Arik found me, Christine had just died and I was...I was holding her.”

“How about your parents?”

“My mom died from the same disease.”

“That’s horrible. Was it hard for you and Christine to take?”

“She was very ill but she didn’t want to die in front of us, so she made me promise to take care of Christine. She left, but she didn’t get very far. I found her in a ditch nearby two days later when I was looking for food.”

Kerri cringed. "I'm sorry."

Joshua shrugged again and looked away, his hair falling in front of his eyes.

"I have a younger sister too, but we never talk," Kerri admitted.

Joshua looked up at her, but didn't say anything.

"We never got along," Kerri continued. "It doesn't matter now anyway, does it? I'll probably never see her again. Anyway, why were you living out in the streets?"

"My father kicked us out when he found a girlfriend. He left us with nothing."

"That's...I'm sorry. I should stop asking questions like that. She shook her head. "Anyway, let's talk about something else. Uh, any ideas?"

Joshua shrugged again and finished off the beer Kerri had offered him.

"Can you show me your place?" she asked him as he got up to throw away the empty can.

"Let's go, then."

Kerri followed Joshua down to the end of corridor, where he opened the door to the fire escape which led to another building. He went down a spiral of stairs and pushed open the door to a narrow, dimly lit hallway.

"What is this place?" Kerri asked him, wrinkling her nose. "It looks like a dump."

"This is where the humans live."

Kerri bit her lip. Her and her big mouth. "Oh. Sorry."

Joshua led her down to the furthest room in the corridor and opened the door.

"Isn't there a lock?"

"Yes, but it's broken. They all are." Joshua led her into a small bare room with only a bed, a small wardrobe, and a chair and a table. The only other room was a bathroom, which was so small and cramped Kerri wondered how he managed to shower in it.

"Wow," Kerri said after she had looked it through. "This is certainly...cosy."

The corners of Joshua's mouth turned up, but Kerri couldn't really call it a smile, because she had never seen such a bitter one. "Do you want to get back to your place now? I'm sure yours is more preferable."

Kerri frowned. "No, actually. Would you mind if I stayed?"

Joshua shrugged. "Make yourself comfortable." He looked around the room. "You can take the bed," he said as he sat down on the chair back to front so that the back of the chair was in front of him. He crossed his arms and rested them on top.

"Thanks." Kerri sat down on the bed. It creaked under her weight, and the mattress was so limp and matted that it could just as well have not been there. "So...how many humans are there at the Sterling?"

"About a hundred or so."

"And they all live in places...like this?"

"Oh, no." Joshua shook his head. "This is one of the best rooms. Only the humans who've been here the longest get one of these rooms."

Kerri wondered whether he was being sarcastic, and Joshua raised an eyebrow at her, as if asking what you don't believe me?

"The humans who've only been here a year or so have to share a room of this size between the three of them, and their whole floor, which is about ten rooms, have to share one bathroom," Joshua said, his eyebrow still raised.

Kerri bit her lip. Why were the humans treated so...cruelly? It was as if they didn't matter, when they worked the hardest for the company, putting their own lives at stake. She decided to change the topic. So far, all the topics she chose had been unpleasant for him. "So, when did you and Arik first meet Drake and Carter?"

"Arik met Drake about seventy years ago, and he met Carter eight years ago."

"When did he meet Sitara?" she suddenly blurted out. Whoa. How did that question come to mind?

Surprised fled across Joshua's face and he turned away. "Three, maybe four years ago."

"How did they meet?"

"He was her trainer," he said in a strained voice.

shoot. Did she choose the wrong topic again? Kerri wondered whether she should back off, but she really wanted to know more about this Sitara. "So...were they perfect for each other?"

Joshua looked at her, his sharp blue eyes burning with unfathomable intensity. "They were good together."

"Did you like her?"

Joshua narrowed his eyes. "Why are you asking about Sitara?"

“Nothing, I’m just curious.”

Joshua just looked at her guardedly.

“I swear that’s the only reason I’m asking,” Kerri reassured him. “If you feel uncomfortable talking about her, we can change the topic.”

He continued to regard her warily. “Why would I feel uncomfortable talking about this topic?”

Whoa. Talk about self-defence. This guy was definitely on his guard. “I don’t know. You know what, let’s just change the topic.”

“No,” Joshua said. “You wanted to know about Sitara, so ask me about her.”

Ohhkay. “Um, did you know Sitara well?”

Joshua looked down at his arms which were still resting on the back of his chair. “Yes.”

“Did you...like her?”

He looked up abruptly then. “What do you mean?”

Kerri had a feeling that she was treading in deep water. “I mean...was she a nice person? Was she your friend?”

He looked down again. “Yes.”

“Where is she now?” Kerri asked him, although she already knew the answer, she wanted to make sure.

“She’s...at the C.E.,” he answered quietly.

“Really?” Kerri feigned surprise. “Why?”

Joshua shrugged. “She’s a werewolf,” he said simply. “Werewolves betray.” He looked at her with his cold blue eyes for a moment, and then he looked away.

A tingle ran through Kerri’s spine. She really didn’t like where this conversation was going. “Uh, so,” she said. “It’s your turn.”

“My turn to what?”

“Ask me questions.”

“Why?”



“Don’t you want to know more about me?”

“I hope I won’t offend you by saying this, but not particularly.”

“At least try to pretend.”

Joshua shifted a little in his chair. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-two. How old are you? Like, not literally, but how old do you look like? That is, if you know what I mean.”

“Late twenties, probably.”

“Same as Arik?”

“Same as any other immortal.”

“Oh, so I’ll still continue to age until I’m in my late twenties?”

“Most likely.”

“Okay.” Kerri decided to stop asking questions. “Right, next question.”

Joshua tilted his head to one side. “You and your boyfriend...what was his name again? Ty, right? Were you two good together?”

Kerri couldn’t believe he remembered Ty’s name. “Ex-boyfriend,” she corrected him. “We were...we were okay. I guess.”

“He must’ve been a hell of a boyfriend,” Joshua muttered dryly.

“It’s not like that. I mean, it was never great, and it was definitely not perfect, you know? Every relationship has its ups and downs. Our relationship...it was sort of casual, although we were living together and everything, it wasn’t very...serious, if you know what I mean.” She looked up to see Joshua’s reaction, and she was greeted with another blue-eyed gaze. “We’d been together for so long. Almost two years now. And then...well, I assumed he was going to propose on Valentine’s Day—the night Arik captured me.” She gave a short laugh. “He was probably waiting to whisk me off to the C.E.” She shook her head. “I was so blind.”

“Ty...short for Tyler?”

“Yes. Tyler Woodland.”

Joshua paled visibly. “Woodland,” he murmured, staring past her. He shook his head fiercely. “Does Arik know Tyler’s full name?”

“No. Why?”

“Nothing, nothing.” He looked around the room, and then focused on her. “Promise me you’ll never tell him that Tyler’s name. Not his last name, anyway.”

“Why?”

“Please, Kerri. I’ve answered all your questions willingly, and I haven’t asked for anything else. I’m not going to either, except for this one.”

Kerri looked at him for a moment, and then she nodded. “All right. I promise.”

“Thank you.” He looked at his watch. “Do you want lunch?”

“What time is it?”

“One thirty.”

“Yes please.”

Joshua rose from his chair and stepped over it. “Let’s go then.”

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“K,” Drake greeted her. “How was your morning with Joshua?”

“It was pretty great, actually,” Kerri sat next to him with her plate of cheeseburger and fries. She popped a fry into her mouth.

“You know,” Carter piped up from next to Drake. “The girls usually head for the salad bar.”

“Well, I’m not your usual girl.” She turned to see Joshua heading for the far end of the table. “Joshua, do you want to sit here? I saved you a seat.”

He nodded his head once gratefully and sat down next to her and started eating silently.

Drake cocked his head to one side and shot her a look that said you actually got him to sit next to you...what have you guys been doing for the last few hours?

Kerri winked at him and bit into her burger. An upside to this place was that the food here was good. She was about to swallow when suddenly Arik appeared in front of her. She half shrieked and half choked on her burger. Drake patted her on the back.

“You’ll get used to it in time,” Drake said sympathetically.

Kerri gulped down her water, wiping away the tears that had sprung into her eyes when she choked. “That bastard’s going to make me choke to death one day.”

“You can’t die, remember?” Arik smirked and slid in next to Carter. “How’s your shifting coming?”

“Great. I can shift short distances really easily now.”

“Short distances?”

“Yeah. Like from this end of the table to the other.”

“How about long distances?”

“I don’t know. Haven’t tried yet.”

“Well, practise it after lunch. “

“Yes, sir,” Kerri saluted him mockingly. “And what are you going to do when I work my @\$ off?”

“Probably lie back, have a beer or two and wait until my…” he trailed off. “Until I recover.” Arik glared at her.

“Can I please take the rest of the day off?” she begged him. “I worked so hard this morning.”

Arik snorted. “I bet.”

“No, really. Promise. Ask Joshua if you don’t believe me?”

“Joshua?”

“Yes. He was with me this morning, remember?”

“Oh, right.” Arik waved away her question. “Of course I remember. So tell me, Joshua, is Kerri lying?”

“No, sir.” Joshua lifted his head briefly to answer Arik’s question before concentrating on his meal again.

## 20 - Persuasive

“See?” The girl said to him smugly. “I’ve been a good girl.”

Arik resisted the urge to say something that he shouldn’t say. He reached over and stole some of her fries. “Fine. Take the rest of the day off,” he relented. “But once I get better, we’re going to work extra hard to catch up.”

“Arik, really, you shouldn’t be so soft on her,” Drake admonished him. “She’s your trainee, after all.”

Arik lowered his voice so that the girl wouldn’t hear. “Drake, you play for the other team, so you have no idea how incredibly persuasive that girl can be.”

“Persuasive or bed-appealing?” Drake murmured back to him.

“Both,” Arik admitted.

Drake waggled his eyebrows at him.

“Nothing’s going to happen!” Arik protested loudly. A bit too loudly. He looked at the girl and lowered his voice again. “Nothing’s going to happen. I have to keep things strictly professional, remember?”

“You better not have more than a can of beer a day, buddy, or your resolution to keep things strictly professional will fracking fly out of the window.” Drake smirked.

Arik rolled his eyes. “Whatever. I’ll be in my room if you need me,” he told Kerri, receiving another smirk from Drake. “Joshua will take care of you for the rest of the day.” He snapped his fingers, and he was gone.

## 21 - Invasion

“Can we leave now?” she asked Joshua, who was drinking coffee.

“I’ll be done in a few minutes,” he replied, stirring milk into his coffee.

Drake nudged her. “You two must be really getting along,” he whispered to her. “He never stands up to anyone.”

“Not even Arik?” She whispered.

“Definitely not Arik.”

“How about Sitara?”

Drake frowned. “Why do you ask that?”

Kerri immediately realised that Joshua’s friendship with Sitara had been a secret. “I don’t know,” she said hastily. “Just asking. How about to you and Carter?”

Drake shrugged. “He doesn’t talk to us much.”

Kerri nodded and turned back to Joshua, who had just finished his coffee. “Now can we go?”

He stood up and stepped over the bench they were sitting on. “Where are we going?”

“I don’t know. Do you prefer my place, or yours?”

Joshua looked at her. “Have you been anywhere in this place except for your room, my room, and the dining hall?”

Kerri thought about it. “I’ve been in Arik’s old room once when we were moving his stuff to my room, and I’ve also been to the medical centre. Oh, and I’ve been to Drake’s room.”

Joshua raised an eyebrow, one side of his mouth gently tugging upwards. “How about I take you to the garden?”

“Wow, there’s a garden?”

Joshua shrugged. “It’s more like a botanical garden. They keep the plants there for scientific research and all that shoot.”

“Wow,” Kerri thought. “He just swore. Oh well, I guess you learn something new every day.” She followed him, and he led her to a maze—she was hopeless when it came to directions—and finally they

came in front of a pair of big, tall, glass door. The glass was shaded so that only people from the inside could see what was outside, but people from the outside couldn't see in.

"Wow," Kerri said, looking out the glass. "It's so beautiful."

"It gets better," Joshua said, pushing open the glass door. "Come on."

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"This garden has a flipping waterfall?" Kerri exclaimed. "That is amazing."

"It's man-made."

Kerri shot him a look that said duh. "I know. But it looks so real."

"Come on, I want to show you something." Joshua led her towards the waterfall. It was beautiful, so big, towering above her, with its water rushing down to a pool which led to a small river that ran all the way around the garden.

Kerri smiled. Joshua had opened up so much more once they were alone and once they were in the garden. It was obvious that he loved this place.

"When this waterfall was finished," Joshua was saying, "people just kind of thought that that was it. Like, oh, that's the waterfall in the corner of the garden. However, what they didn't know was that the people who had built this waterfall actually built something behind it."

"Oh wow."

Joshua turned to look at her. "You've said 'wow' at least three times in the last half hour."

"Well, I'm sorry, Mr. Observant." She pushed him playfully on the shoulder. "Come on, I want to see what's behind this wall of water."

Joshua led her down to the bottom of the waterfall, where green leaves and vines climbed around the rocks that made up the cliff for the waterfall. He pushed away a couple of vines, and there, between two large rocks, was a gaping black hole.

"Is that a cave?" Kerri asked him.

"No, it's a tunnel. Come on," he climbed in, and Kerri hurried after him.

When they had finally walked out of the tunnel, they were greeted with warm sunlight and what was paradise to Kerri. Meadows, trees and flowers were everywhere. There was also a pond with fish and tortoises, and butterflies and birds fluttered about everywhere.

"Oh my God, it's...beautiful. It's...paradise. It's like the perfect place."

"I come here almost every day," he replied, sitting down on the grass. Kerri sat down as well.

"Why? Don't you have training to do?"

"Once humans have been taught how to fight, and they've mastered the art of it, they have nothing else to do. Except to practise for an hour or two everyday to make sure you don't go rusty or to go help out at the factory. Other than that, they can do whatever they want."

"What do you mean, help out at the factory?"

"Well, our company is a factory, and we need people to work in it to produce...goods. That's where all the money comes from."

"Oh, okay. So...you'd come here alone while all the others are training when you don't have to meld silver or something?"

"Yes." Joshua paused. "I used to come here with Sitara."

"Oh." Kerri racked her brains for something else to say. "Uh, did she not have any training to do?"

"She was never fully trained, because there was a limited amount of werewolves, and only one or two fully trained ones, so she had lessons once every few weeks."

"So...what did you guys do here?"

Joshua shrugged. "Mostly just lay down on the grass and talked."

"About what?"

"Anything."

Wow. Joshua must have been really good friends with Sitara to be able to talk to her about anything. Kerri bit her lip. "Were...were you sad when she left?"

Joshua turned his head to look at her with his piercing blue eyes. "Yes." He was sitting in front of a tree, and he leant against it now, one leg relaxed and straight in front of him while the other was bent at the knee with his arm resting on top.

"Was she your best friend?"

Joshua paused. "She was the only person I could trust and talk to," he said carefully.

Kerri paused before she asked the next question. "Am I your friend?"

Joshua looked at her wordlessly. After a while, he shrugged. "If you want to be."

"Would I be as good a friend to you as Sitara was?"

A shadow passed his face. "I hope not. I don't think you can be."

Kerri frowned. The words he had used were insulting, but somehow, they didn't offend her in the least. In fact, they made her worry about him. What was so...different or special about their friendship that couldn't be replaced? Then it made sense to her.

"You loved her, didn't you?" she asked him softly.

His head snapped up from where he was looking at the ground. "What?"

"You heard me."

He looked away, not say anything.

"Don't worry," Kerri reassured him. "I'm not going to tell Arik. I promise."

"That is...I can't..." he trailed off. "I can't talk to you about it right now." He paused. "Maybe when we get to know each other better."

Kerri nodded. "I understand." And she did. Sort of. She lay down on the grass and closed her eyes, bathing in the warmth of the sun. "Now I know why you guys would lie down in the sun," she murmured. "It's so...warm." She yawned. "Sorry, I'm a bit tired."

"You can sleep here for a while, if you want. I'll wait."

Kerri laughed. "You'd wait while I sleep?"

"Yes. I can do some thinking here anyway."

"Well...if you don't mind..."

"Sleep."

And so Kerri did, and it was one of the best naps she had ever had. That is, until Arik woke her with that creepy telepathy thing.

*McCarthy!*

Kerri gasped and woke up, half dazed. *What the hell?! You have got to stop doing that.*

He ignored her. *Where are you?*

*I'm out in the gardens with Joshua.* She looked around and saw Joshua staring at her. She smiled at him to let him know that everything was okay.

*What the hell are you two doing out there?*



*Well, I was sleeping before a certain someone woke me up extremely rudely.*

*Did you not hear the alarms?*

*What alarms?*

*The alarms telling us that there's been A frackING INVASION!!*

"What?!" Kerri yelled. She turned to Joshua. "Did you not hear the alarms telling us there was an invasion?" she asked him.

He shrugged. "Think of it like this. If the people who've actually lived here for more than a hundred years don't know about this place, then the enemies who haven't set foot in here for about thirty years wouldn't know about it either."

*Joshua thinks that nobody would be able to find us, she thought to Arik.*

*Where exactly are you?*

She looked at Joshua. "Should I tell him where exactly we are in the gardens?" she asked him quietly, shutting off the conversation she was having with Arik in her brain so that he wouldn't hear.

Joshua shook his head.

She switched back to her conversation with Arik. *Erm, I don't know. Just...somewhere in the garden.*

*Oh, for...The boss will have my head for this if they manage to take you.* Arik groaned. *Stay put and tell Joshua to stay on his guard,* he snapped, and with that, he ended the conversation.

Kerri looked sympathetically over at Joshua. "You're going to have to stay on your guard."

Joshua nodded.

"Do you have any kind of weapons at all?" she asked him. "You know, just in case they do find us."

Joshua nodded again.

"What do you have?"

"Two fully loaded guns, two knives, and a sword."

Whoa. "And uh, where are they individually?"

"A gun in my back pocket, a gun in the inside of my jacket, two knives in my front pockets, and a sword...well, you can see the sword." He motioned to the sword, which was encased in the scabbard and hung from his hip.

“So it’s either cut out their hearts, or cut off their heads, right?”

“Yes.” He stopped. “Are you scared?”

“Yes,” Kerri admitted. “Can you die?”

“Yes.”

Kerri thought he was going to ask her a question, because they were onto a pattern, but he didn’t. “But I thought the medicine made you immortal.”

“Not really. It stops me from ageing, but it doesn’t mean that it makes me immune to death.”

Kerri shuddered. “Aren’t you scared that you’ll die?”

“Not particularly. If I die, then I die protecting the company, which means I didn’t die without reason.” He drew out his sword, checked it and blew on it. “I better warm up a little; I haven’t practised in a while.” He looked at her. “You may want to take a few steps back.”

Kerri practically flew to the other end of the...what should she call this place? The secret garden? Whatever it is, she flew from one side of it to the other.

Joshua, when he was fighting—or rather, practising—was an amazing sight to see. He was extremely quick, but graceful and elegant at the same time. He did back flips, somersaults and all sorts of other things that Kerri would kill to be able to do, his sword gleaming in the air as he sliced through it. He wasn’t even out of breath when he finished.

Kerri gave a low whistle. “That’s...something.”

Joshua smiled. He actually smiled. Kerri thought she would faint, because he looked so flipping hot when he smiled. But he didn’t look nearly as hot as Arik. Kerri was still dazed over Joshua’s smile when he flicked the tip of his sword towards her with his wrist, and suddenly a flower landed in her lap. “A flower to thank the lady for her compliment.”

Kerri frowned. “I thought you couldn’t do magic.”

Joshua tilted his head to one side. “I didn’t know that cutting off a flower’s stem and flicking it towards you was magic.”

“Oh. I didn’t see that. You were...very quick.”

“I have to be.” Joshua was just about to sit down again when suddenly a loud explosion came from the building, and he jumped up to his feet again.

“shoot!” Kerri exclaimed, leaping up next to him. “What was that?”

"The C.E.," Joshua replied grimly. "Bombing's their trademark initial attack. They like to start off with a big bang, so as to speak."

"Why?"

"So that there's fire, smoke, confusion, and chaos."

Kerri nodded. "They're pretty clever."

"To be able to start an attack against us, they have to be."

There was another explosion, and immediately after that, shots could be heard. There was also quite a lot of slashing noises, and Kerri assumed that the men were fighting with swords.

"Why don't the immortals use their powers?" Kerri asked Joshua, who had tilted one side of his head upwards, as if listening for someone.

"These are humans. Humans always have to fight first. We're the first layer of soldiers, if you know what I mean. The immortals are next. You'll hear them soon enough."

Indeed, in about a few minutes, curses and spells could be heard muttered, and water, wind, fire, smoke and all kinds of other things whirled through the sky.

"Wow. That looks...really scary," Kerri said, staring up at the sky, where a bolt of lightning had just struck.

"Yeah, and it's going to get worse."

Suddenly, Kerri could hear men shouting nearby. Next to her, Joshua froze for about a second, and then motioned for her to be quiet. He drew out his sword.

"Check the whole place!" a man yelled. "We need the girl."

"Yes, sir," came a chorus.

"Are they looking for me?" Kerri whispered.

Joshua nodded, and Kerri groaned and hid her face in her hands.

There was a lot of rustling and shouting going on, and as the noises got louder and louder, Kerri backed into the furthest corner of the garden so that her body was partially hidden by the rocks that were behind the pond.

"Sir, there's a hole here," a man close by shouted.

Kerri froze while Joshua swore under his breath and slipped into a fighting position.

“Sir, can you hear me?” the man was yelling. “Sir? Hello?”

Joshua motioned for Kerri to shut up and stay put, and he disappeared into the tunnel that led into the garden.

Was he out of his mind? “Joshua,” she hissed. “Get back here. Joshua! Joshua?” She received no response.

“Sir,” the man outside was still calling for his commander. “Sir, can you hear—” his call trailed off into a gargled yelp as a sword’s metallic slash could be heard, and after a thud as something heavy fell onto the ground, there was complete silence. Seconds later, Joshua came in dragging a headless body, his sword covered with blood and gore.

Kerri cringed and moved away from it. “Ew.”

Joshua raised an eyebrow at her. “It’s either him looking like that or us looking like that. Take your pick.”

Kerri chose to ignore the jibe. “What do we do with him?”

“I think he’s more of an ‘it’ right now.”

She shuddered and looked away. “Please don’t remind me. My lunch is threatening to come out the wrong way: up.”

“Sorry. Wait here, I have to hide the body.” He disappeared out the garden with the body again, and she heard some rustling as Joshua covered up the headless soldier.

“Where’d you put the head?” Kerri asked him when he came back.

“Once you cut off the head, it disappears. Well, not disappear. It evaporates. Sort of.”

Kerri wrinkled her nose. “That’s just...wrong.”

Joshua shrugged. “It protects the identity of the dead. Sort of like a kind of respect.”

“They have a weird way of showing respect here. You see, back when I was a human, we did funerals,” drawled Kerri sarcastically.

Joshua rolled his eyes. “Keep quiet, we don’t want to them to hear us.”

Kerri was tempted to imitate an opera singer but she remembered that her life—and Joshua’s, for that matter—was in danger, so she thought better of it and shut up.

*McCarthy, are you there?* Arik’s voice rang in her head.

Kerri muffled a shriek, and then recomposed herself. *Did I not tell you to stop doing that?* she snapped

at him, annoyed.

*Just checking to see that you're still alive.*

*Are they gone?*

*No, but I managed to get away from them for a while.*

*Why?*

*I'm coming to look for you.*

*Why?*

*Because the attackers are a lot more powerful than they were last time this happened and Joshua might not be able to save you when one of them comes to take you.*

Kerri looked urgently at Joshua. "Arik says he's going to come look for us," she said, blocking out the conversation in her head again.

"Damn it," he muttered. "Come on, let's go."

"What should I tell him?"

"That we're in the east side of the garden." He grabbed her arm and led her out the tunnel.

*We're in the east side of the garden, Kerri thought to Arik. Where are you?*

Arik groaned. *The west side of the garden. Coming.* He ended the conversation.

"He's coming all the way from the other side," she whispered to Joshua.

"Good, come on." Crouching slightly, he hurried Kerri over to a bush, where they kneeled down immediately when they heard footsteps approaching.

"Where's Henderson?" A man barked.

"I don't know, sir," one of the men replied. "He strayed off a while ago."

"The idiot. Spread out and look for him."

Uh oh. Spreading out was not a good thing, Kerri thought. She looked at Joshua, who had blanched visibly.

"Come on, let's go, let's go, let's go," he hissed to her, grabbing her by the arm again and bolting towards a big rock.

Kerri had just gotten behind the rock when she accidentally stepped on a twig, cracking it. Joshua winced as a soldier whipped his head around.

“Sir? I think I heard something,” he called out.

“Then go see what it is, moron,” came a gruff reply. “The others, did you not hear me telling you to spread out to look for Henderson?”

“Sorry, sir” chorused the bunch of soldiers. Footsteps faded into the distance until there was only Joshua, Kerri and the soldier in the area.

“Henderson?” the soldier called nervously. “Is that you?”

“No,” came a reply from behind him. “It’s your old friend Channing.” The soldier, Kerri and Joshua turned to see who it was.

Arik emerged from behind a tree, smiling.

The soldier slipped into a fighting position and growled, but Kerri could see that it was trembling. Aw, the poor guy was probably a newbie.

Arik smiled. “Is that all you can do? I hope your bite is worse than your bark.”

The soldier replied with another growl, and suddenly, to Kerri’s astonishment, he began to grow, and he dropped to the ground, his clothes bursting and fur taking its place. He was a werewolf.

Arik hissed and jumped up into the air out of sight. When he landed again, he wasn’t human anymore. He was a dragon, with scales that gleamed and shimmered so that Kerri couldn’t make out what colour he was. Long, slim, elegant, and powerful. He was beautiful. He tossed his head, his eyes sparkling, as if to beckon the werewolf over.

Kerri could almost hear the poor werewolf whimper, but he growled and leapt forward, snapping at Arik, who ducked and dodged, his body whisking and winding gracefully between the trees. Suddenly, he swept up into the air, disappearing into sight and leaving the werewolf looking around bewilderedly.

Kerri squinted from the glare of the sun, putting a hand over her eyes and tried to look for Arik. All she could hear was a sudden whoosh as the dragon plunged down on its prey. She buried her head in Joshua’s shoulder and tried to block out the tearing noises she heard. Joshua seemed surprised at first, but after a while, he put his hand on her back. He stood up as soon as the ripping noise had stopped, pulling Kerri gently up with him.

“Sir,” he said to Arik, who was human again and was wiping his hands on his shirt.

“A new guy,” Arik said, shaking his head. “Shame. I was looking forward to a real fight.” He looked up. “Where were you two hiding?”

“Behind that big rock, sir,” Joshua replied.

Arik frowned. "And that's where you two thought you wouldn't be found? Are you crazy?"

Joshua and Kerri shared a look. Oops.

"Erm, that's where we were hiding when you found us, but we were...moving around constantly," Kerri hastened to explain.

Arik raised an eyebrow, still frowning and turned away. "Let's go somewhere safer," he said, squinting up at the sky. "I don't like the look of this battle."

Out of the corner of her eye, Kerri saw Joshua shoot her a grateful look and she smiled quickly before dragging him off to follow Arik deeper into the garden.

He led them to a wall, where he waved his hand over it and a hole drew open and gaped at them. "Get in. Hurry."

Kerri grimaced. She was going to have to get used to black holes appearing out of seemingly nowhere. She put her foot in and realised there was no solid ground and was about to ask Arik whether he expected her to fly or something when he pushed her in. She shrieked as she fell down and the opening of the hole got further and further away. She hit the bottom with a splash, splattering water everywhere. Ew. There were two quiet sloshes as Arik and Joshua landed lightly next to her, Arik with his magic and Joshua with his graceful form.

Kerri struggled to stand up, the water coming up to her knees. It was so dark she couldn't see anything. She held her arms out so that she wouldn't crash into anything.

"McCarthy, stop poking me in the eye," Arik's voice snapped at her in the dark, and he grabbed her wrist. He clicked his fingers and a flame erupted from his hand, lighting up the entire room.

Kerri bit back a retort, clenching and unclenching her fists and looked for a topic to distract her from punching him. "Did you just call yourself Channing when you were fighting?" she asked him sceptically.

Arik shot her a look for the randomness of the question. "Yes."

"You were pretending to be Channing Tatum?" Kerri asked disbelievingly.

"Channing Tatum?" Arik repeated, frowning. "Channing's my last name. Who's Channing Tatum?"

Kerri waved away the question. "Nothing. Forget it."

"At last even you realise the importance of your question."

"Shut up." She looked around the blackness. "Are we just going to stand here in this hellhole? It stinks in here."

"You can sit if you want."

“Don’t shoot with me. Where is this place?”

“This is the sewer.”

Was he serious? “Are you serious?”

“Do I look like I’m kidding?”

“Well, we all know you have a sick, twisted sense of humour.”

Arik pursed his lips. “This is the only safe place right now. They’d never look for us here.”

“That’s probably because the smell would drive them away.”

“Be grateful, McCarthy. You would get killed up there.”

“At least I’d smell good.”

“You may want to rearrange the priorities that are on your list right now. Somehow, I don’t think smelling good should be on top.”

“Whatever. Can’t you just shift us back into our room or something?”

“The rooms have probably all been broken into.”

“But we can’t just stay here...it stinks!”

“Again, you might want to reconsider whether the smell matters that much—if not at all—when your life is in danger.”

“Whatever. I’m getting out of here.” Kerri closed her eyes and shifted.



## 22 - Chased

"But we can't just stay here!" the girl cried. "It stinks!"

Arik looked at her condescendingly. Girls. "Again, you might want to reconsider whether the smell matters that much when you life is in danger."

"Whatever. I'm getting out of here." She closed her eyes and disappeared.

shoot. Was she for real? "McCarthy!" He shouted, hoping fervently that she had mastered the art of becoming invisible. "McCarthy! Damn."

"I'll go look for her, sir." Joshua spoke for the first time since he had come down into the sewer.

"No," Arik waved a hand above him and a hole appeared above them. "I'll go. Stay here until this is over." He had no intention of letting Joshua die looking for that girl. He splayed his fingers and let the air boost him up and out of the hole, leaving Joshua alone in the dark sewer.

He looked around him, saw that there was nobody else and hid himself behind a bush. That girl was going to be the death of him. He closed his eyes, let the magic swirl in him and shared her vision. She was in a residential building, and she was running.

"Where are you?" He murmured, feeling slightly dizzy as she twisted and turned into another corridor, still running. "Why are you running?" There was no way he could find her, all the corridors looked quite the same. He sighed irritably and read her mind.

Must ... keep ... running. Is ... that man ... still chasing ... me? Yes, yes he is. I can...hear him. shoot, what am I ... supposed to ... do? Maybe ... shouldn't have ... shifted. Oh God, he's catching up.

Arik groaned. There was a man chasing her, and she's tired, panting, and she's running slower while he's gaining on her. He was extremely tempted to let her keep running and teach her a lesson, but he didn't want to die young.

McCarthy, where are you?

I'm...fine. Leave...me...alone, she panted.

You're a fantastically horrible liar. Where are you?

Don't...know. Honest.

So you shifted to a random residential building without knowing where this building was?

I'm...in a...residential...building?

This girl was insane. Yes. Can you shift yourself back into the garden?

Can't...stop to...calm...down. Someone's...chasing me.

You know he's going to catch up to you, right?

Can't you just...shift here...and kill him...or something?

I can't do that if I don't know where you are exactly.

She swore violently. I just...ran past...a...coffee machine...if that helps.

Oh, you have no idea, he thought sarcastically, thinking back to all the coffee machines in the different residential buildings. Each floor in each residential building had a coffee machine, that is, except for the human residential building. Do you know which floor you're on?

The...fourth, I think. And I just ran past...a toilet. And it stinks.

Am I supposed to know which toilet stinks? Arik demanded impatiently, but he reckoned that she was in the trainee residential building. The toilets in the humans' living quarters weren't as fancy while the toilets in the trainers' living quarters were fancier. He closed his eyes and shifted to the toilet, wishing fervently that he was in the right one.

There were two sets of running footsteps: one was getting further away and one getting closer. Bingo. He slipped out of the toilet, and ran before the man could see him.

He had always been a fast runner, and with the girl getting tired, he caught up to her easily. "You're insane, you know that?" He spat at her.

"I'll argue...that point when...my life's...not in...danger."

He grabbed her arm. "Stop panting so I can concentrate enough to shift."

"So...you're saying...that I should...stop breathing...so that you...can save...my life. The irony."

He pursed his lips and stopped just after a turn, still gripping her arm so that she almost fell onto the floor.

"What are you doing?" she whispered to him fiercely.

He shrugged. "We can't run forever. If I can't shift us, then we'll just have to fight him."

"Correction," she snapped at him, still panting a little. "You're going...to fight him. I...don't know how...to fight."

"This guy must be powerful to be given the job of capturing a sorceress." He looked her up and down.

With sweat dripping off her face and her hair all over the place, she certainly didn't look like a sorceress. "Of course, I'm powerful too," he continued, receiving an eye roll from the girl. "But I used up some magic while looking for you, so..." he trailed off while the running footsteps got louder and louder. He held the girl against the wall and motioned for her to be quiet.

## 23 - Barely Saved

Kerri listened to the man getting closer and closer and as a boot protruded from the corner, she saw Arik stretch out his fingers. Sparks and electricity leapt out from his extended fingers and onto the man's leg as he came around the corner. The man yelled in pain and turned to Arik, hissing. Arik put one arm in front of Kerri and gently pushed her behind him so that the man would have to get past him in order to get her.

The man roared in anger jumped up into the air. Arik followed him up, and they came down as dragons, slim, elegant, beautiful, and deadly.

Unlike Arik, the other dragon was inky black, its gleaming scales reflecting the light. It threw its head back, roared and shot towards Kerri. She stood there, unable to move, frozen with fear. Just as she was cursing herself for not renewing her will—since she had left quite some stuff to Ty—the dragon was thrown back against the wall. Arik slid in front of her, snarling at its opponent. He looked back at Kerri, who still stood there, frozen to the spot.

*Are you okay?* his voice appeared suddenly in her head.

*Um, yeah. Yeah, I think so. Yes.* She shook her head and tried to focus, blinking and pushing her hair out of her eyes as the black dragon slithered up against Arik, and they started snapping at each other.

*Have I told you that you're a fantastically horrible liar?*

*No, really?* Kerri thought sarcastically. She could almost see Arik grinning as it rounded up on his opponent. He was winning—at least, that's what Kerri thought when she saw that Arik was on top of the other dragon. Too late she saw that the black dragon had its tail wrapped around under Arik's wings, just above its legs.

Kerri's eyes widened. "Arik," she cried. "Look out, he's going to—"

The black dragon finished her sentence for her in action by flinging Arik away with its tail so that he crashed into the wall and collapsed down next to her, unconscious.

shoot. This was not good. Kerri turned to Arik frantically.

*Arik, wake up. Please, please, wake up. I can't do this. I don't know how to do this. Please. She received no response. Oh dammit.*

She turned around to face the dragon that was coming for her. He slinked slowly towards her, a smug smile on its face. It knew it had her. Or was it a he? It? He? It? Whatever. That thing.

"Stay away from me!" she yelled at him. "Don't come any closer."

The dragon hissed, his forked tongue flickering in and out of sight. It drew up so that it towered at least five feet over her and plunged down towards her, its jaws wide open, ready for her.

She screamed and jumped out of the way as it crashed onto the ground. It roared and reared up again, stretching its long body towards her. Her eyes widened. She couldn't outrun it. It was too fast.

"Get away from me!" she shouted at him, striking out an arm as if to ward it off. Instead, air and energy pushed from and out of her hand and a gust of wind blew the dragon off its feet. Its feet? Its claws? Its talons? Whatever.

*Oh my God, Arik, did you see that? That was amazing.* Kerri turned to look at Arik, but he still lay unconscious. She sighed. *The only time I actually accomplish something on my own, you're unconscious. I think I might actually hate you for that. But then I guess, if you haven't fainted, then I wouldn't be able to do this. So I'm thankful. Kind of.*

She ducked as the black dragon snapped at her and stuck her finger at its eye, grimacing as she did so. "Sorry," she said. "Just trying to survive here."

The dragon roared in pain, reared back, hissed and aimed for Kerri again. She tried to knock it over with wind again, but this time, the dragon was ready. It ducked her blow and headed straight for her, trapping her into a corner.

She shrieked for help, and just as the dragon was about to reach for her with its claw—or foot, or hand, or talon, whatever—she felt something snake around her waist and pull her out of the corner, so she stopped shrieking and started screaming instead. When she looked up and saw that the thing around her waist was Arik's tail—or was it body?—wrapped around her, she stopped screaming and sagged in relief. But when she saw that he was heading out the big glass wall—well, technically, it was a window, but it substituted for a wall—at the end of the corridor and when she saw that beyond the wall was a fall of at least a hundred feet that would bring them to their death she started screaming again.

*Would you please shut up?* Arik's voice sounded in her mind. *I just regained my consciousness and you're giving me a headache.*

Kerri gasped. *This must be the only time I'm actually glad to hear your voice in my head.*

He chuckled, a deep sound resonating from his throat. *Hold on tight.*

*Why do I—yeeeaarrrrghhhhh!* Kerri's question turned into a scream that caught in her throat as Arik burst through the glass door, and plummeted down towards the ground outside.

Arik sighed. *Did I not tell you to shut up? I can't concentrate with you screaming into my head like that.*

Kerri slapped his tail. *Stop falling and start flying,* she snapped at him. *That thing's still behind us.*

Arik swooped upwards, his wings spreading out. He turned to look at her. *Did you just slap me? And no, he's not. And did you just slap me?*

*Yes, he is.*

*No, he isn't. Did you just slap me?*

Kerri turned around to see the black dragon glaring at them ferociously, its head poking out of the ruined glass wall—or window. *Fine, he isn't.*

*Did you just slap me? You just slapped me.*

*Yes, I slapped you.*

*You slapped me. He was in awe.*

*Oh, cry me a river, build me a bridge, then get over it, she snapped.*

Arik shook his head. *You slapped me.*

Kerri sighed. *Yes, I slapped you.*

*Nobody slaps me.*

*Well, I just did.*

*Why?*

*Because you told me to shut up and you wouldn't fly even though we were falling to our death.*  
He snorted. *We were not falling to our death.*

*To me, we were.*

*Never slap me again.*

*Try telling me that when I'm actually listening. Maybe I'll consider it then.*

Arik sighed as he swept and landed into the garden into a hidden spot behind a cluster of trees, next to the waterfall. Sitting cross-legged under the trees next to Arik, Kerri shivered, rubbing her arms up and down with her hands that were already starting to numb. She hated the cold. Flying made her cold, and a brewing thunderstorm with gusts of wind blowing really didn't help.

*What's wrong?* Arik cocked his giant—and dragon-y—head to look at her.

*I'm cold, hence the shivering.* Kerri shot him a look that said *duh, can it be any more obvious?*

He ignored the look, uncurled himself from where he'd been coiled up like a snake, moved closer to her and slid around her waist, wrapping himself around her until there was no more of him left and then rested his head on her lap.

Kerri giggled. It was a weird sensation, having a dragon wrapped around her. He was warm, which was surprising since dragons were supposed to be reptiles. *Thanks. Uh, good dragon, good boy.*

Arik tossed his head indignantly. *I will not be spoken to like a dog.*

Kerri grinned, slipped a hand out from under Arik's body that was wrapped around her, and reached out to scratch the top of his head. *Good boy.*

Arik half-growled and half-purred, obviously enjoying the head scratch but still annoyed. He lay down his head on her lap again, his eyes half closed.

*Aw, you look like a cute little puppy.* Kerri rubbed his head, grinning.

He opened his eyes and growled at her—but only softly, just in case some of the C.E. people were still there.

Kerri sighed. *Fine then, I'll stop.*

Arik growled softly again, nudging at her withdrawn hand until she laughed and resumed his head scratching. *Why do you have burn marks?*

*Oh, I got that when I broke through the glass window. Dragons are allergic to glass.*

Suddenly, the trees rustled, and they could hear footsteps. Arik was up in front of her in a protective stance before she could even get up. She got up slowly as the rustling got louder and louder.

Drake's head poked out through the trees. "Hey, guys, the boss told us to tell everybody it was safe now."

Kerri sighed in relief and ran over to hug Drake as Arik relaxed.

"Hey, love, are you okay?" Drake hugged her tightly. "Must've been awful for you."

"It was. Where's Carter?"

"He's just coming."

Kerri pulled away and looked around. "Where's Joshua?" she asked Arik, who had changed back into human form.

He frowned. "No idea. No, wait. I think I do. I'm going to get him." He disappeared into the cluster of trees. He came back with Joshua about five minutes later.

Kerri ran over to Joshua and hugged him. But for only a second. "You stink," she told him.

He smiled briefly. "Thanks. Compliments like these always brighten up my day."

Kerri grinned at him, and then turned to go hug Carter, who had just emerged from the trees.

“Hey, K,” Carter said, grinning as he hugged her. “Are you okay? No bones broken?”

“No, I think I chipped a fingernail, though.”

“Ah, I guess you can always arrange a manicure session with Drake. He loves helping people—well, mostly girls—do stuff like that.”

Kerri wrinkled her nose. “Really?”

Drake stuck his chin out indignantly. “Painting nails is an art. It requires concentration and skill.”

Kerri laughed as quietly as she could into Carter’s chest. When she finally pulled away from him, she found herself face to face with Arik.

She gasped in surprise. “Oh, uh, hey.”

“Are you okay?”

She smiled. “Yeah, I am. Thanks. For saving me today. And for keeping me warm.”

He returned her smile with one of his own. “I had fun doing the second one.” He frowned. “I still resent you treating me like a dog, and that you slapped me.”

Kerri sighed. “I swear, if you say anything about me slapping you ever again, I’ll put those words into action. Five times. At least.”

He pursed his lips before turning away. “Let’s go see the damage in our room.”

“Shouldn’t you say ‘let’s go see whether our room has been damaged’?”

“Why would I say that when I already know that it has?”

“How do you know that?”

Arik turned around. “Do you care to make a bet?” he asked her, and eyebrow raised, the beginnings of a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Uh, not really. For one, I don’t have any money on me.”

Arik waited for her to continue.

Kerri sighed. “Fine. And for another, you’re probably right.”

Arik’s grin stretched across his lips. “I usually am,” he said, reaching for her hand. “Shall we?”



## 24 - Living with the Guilt

Kerri looked at the t-shirt and burst into laughter.

Arik frowned. "What's so funny?"

Kerri tried to stifle her laughter and pointed to the t-shirt. Arik twisted the shirt around and flushed bright red. There was an extremely warped version of Santa Claus, and next to it were the words "Where's my Ho at?"

"Um, Drake gave me that last Christmas as a joke." He threw the shirt away to the far end of the corner.

"You know," Kerri told him as she took his button up shirt, "you should put it somewhere clean. That's probably the shirt you're going to be wearing tomorrow."

She grinned when she saw the look on Arik's face.

"Oh, and uh, my toothbrush isn't here either," she told him. "I think all my things have been taken."

"Um, you can...use mine, if you want."

"If you don't mind."

"No. And...do you need something to wear...down there? You know, short, anything?"

Kerri blushed. "Uh, well..."

Arik looked around frantically. "Wait, here's a pair of your shorts!" He practically leapt into the closet. "You can wear these."

The both breathed a sigh of relief and grinned at each other's expression.

"Thanks." She reached out and took her favourite purple shorts—thank God those weren't taken as well—and shut the door to change.

The button up shirt Arik lent her was long-sleeved about two sizes too big so that her shorts were hidden underneath. She rolled the sleeves up to her elbows and piled her hair messily up on top of head and secured it with her scrunchie. She hadn't done that for a while because Ty hadn't liked it.

Well, screw him, she thought as she brushed her teeth and washed her face. Screw him down to hell and back. Well, maybe not back. Just screw him down to hell and let him stay—or preferably, rot—there.

When she went into the bedroom she found Arik on the phone. He looked up and his mouth dropped in surprise when he saw her. He blinked a few times, and then turned away to resume talking to the other

person on the phone.

“Yes, sir. Friday night, sir. See you then.” He snapped the phone shut and turned to her. “Hey. Wow, that shower must’ve been really...refreshing. You look...” he trailed off.

Kerri grinned. “Clean?”

“Uh, yeah, clean. Clean. And great.”

“Thanks.” She was really enjoying the blush on his face. “You can use the bathroom now.”

“Right. Okay.”

She grinned as he made his way to the bathroom. She couldn’t believe that he, who looked like a Greek god, just looked at her like she was a...well, Greek goddess. Or something like that. He was cute. And hot. Both. At the same time.

The hot part was definitely confirmed when she was towelling her hair dry—with the torn t-shirt—and he stepped out of the bathroom with only his boxer shorts on. Her breath caught in her throat and she forced herself to turn away and take deep breaths before she started to hyperventilate.

“You don’t mind, do you?” he asked her, his voice smooth as silk.

“Uh, mind what?” she tried to keep her voice calm and steady, turning back to him.

“Me...not wearing much.” He smirked. Damn. He must’ve seen the look on her face before she turned away.

“No, of course not. I mean, it’s not like I’m wearing that much myself.” She smiled slyly. She’d show him. Two could play at this game.

He was immediately distracted. “Yes, yes,” he murmured, looking elsewhere.

She followed his gaze. He was looking at what used to be furniture but now could only be known as garbage and absolute shoot. And it was all her fault. She sighed.

“I’m tired. I’m going to bed.”

“Right.” He focused on her again. “Goodnight.” He started to head towards his bed—well, at least, where it used to be—when he remembered that there was only one bed.

Kerri had forgotten as well until he stopped and looked up at her. “Right. We uh...only have one bed,” she said, stating the obvious.

“Always the observant one.”

“Shut up.”

He looked around the room. "I'll...sleep on the...floor."

"Don't be ridiculous. That floor is covered with shoot. It's dusty and dirty and...probably going to break as well." She looked at the bed. "This...this is a big bed. It can fit two." Very snugly together.

Arik looked doubtfully at the bed. Then at the floor he was about to sleep on. He obviously found the bed more appealing and comfortable than the dusty cold and hard floor. "Uh, yeah," he said unconvincingly after some staring. "The bed can fit two."

*I see I'm not the only who's a fantastically horrible liar,* Kerri chided him as he got into the single bed.

A corner of his mouth went up as he rolled his eyes. "Are you sure you don't mind us...don't mind me being in your bed?" he asked hesitantly. They were both in a sitting position, and were looking nervously at each other. The bed suddenly seemed so much smaller.

"Uh, no, I don't mind," she breathed. She slid down the sheet so that she was lying down."Uh, goodnight."

"Goodnight." He clicked his fingers and the lights went off. He lay down next to her, their shoulders and arms touching. Was it just her, or was the room suddenly hotter?

Arik seemed equally uncomfortable because he opened his mouth at the same time she did.

"This is—"

"It's really—" they both trailed off.

"Uh, let's just each...turn to on our sides," Kerri stuttered. "We'll...get more space."

Arik agreed, and as they turned to roll on her side, she rolled off the bed instead.

She shrieked as she landed in a pile of—well, she didn't know what she landed in because it was too dark to see.

Arik clicked his fingers and the light came back on again. He turned over in bed. "What on earth—" he stopped when he saw her sitting on a broken drawer on the floor and gave a short laugh. He opened his mouth to say something when Kerri beat him to it.

"Don't say anything," she growled, pushing herself up, rubbing her butt. "Just don't." She gave her butt one last rub before climbing into bed again. "Don't move," she warned him.

"Why not?"

"Because I'll probably end up on the floor again and if it's because you moved, I'm taking you down with me."

Arik didn't move. She climbed in next to him again and lay down on her side so that she was facing him. She looked up and almost collided head on with him. They stared at each other, both aware of the discomfoting closeness. She sat up.

"I think I'm going to face the other side," she told him.

"Good idea."

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Kerri stuck her hand out from underneath her and looked at her watch, its fluorescent hands glowing bright green in the dark. It was almost two in the morning. She'd been awake for almost three hours and she couldn't sleep. Normally, she'd twist and turn, but she couldn't do that tonight, because she didn't want another trip to the floor again. She never knew that staying in one position could be so uncomfortable.

She stared at the blackness, tucking her hand beneath her again. She was aware of Arik sleeping behind her, his chest falling and rising rhythmically to his breathing.

She shivered. With the heater broken, the room was cold. Not freezing cold, but cold enough to keep her awake. She pulled the blanket tightly around her but they didn't really help much. She shivered.

"Are you cold again?" he asked her suddenly.

She gasped in surprise. "Uh, yeah. Did I wake you?"

"No."

"Oh. Right. Okay." There was an awkward pause. "Right then," she said. "Goodnight." She gave another shiver.

He shifted closer to her. "You're cold."

"Gee, you think?"

"No sarcastic comments for now, please." He hesitated before sliding his arm around her waist and pulling her closer to him. "Is that...warmer?"

Warmer? Warmer? It was suddenly so flipping hot she thought she had a fever. "Uh, yeah, thanks," she said breathlessly. "Why aren't you cold?"

"Dragons are...less sensitive to the cold."

Less sensitive? He must be immune to it to be that hot—pun intended. A few minutes later, Kerri could already feel the circulation back in her hands and feet. Behind her, he had seemingly fallen asleep again. Kerri sighed inwardly and stared at the darkness in front of her.

She thought of the destruction she had made—indirectly, that is. The people put their lives at stake just to save her. Every single one of them. Joshua, Arik, Drake, Carter, and the people she didn't even know properly. And probably even Mandy. All of them risked their lives to protect hers.

Look at the mess she'd made. It would take at least millions of dollars to repair the damages to the company. But no amount of money can bring back the dead. The wounded, maybe, but never the dead.

She rolled back a little so that she was leaning against Arik more. He shifted a little and the arm around her tightened, but he didn't wake up. The arm was kind of comforting. It made her feel like she wasn't alone in this.

But she was.

She was the one who caused this mess. Maybe if she just handed herself over to the C.E., then she'd stop causing so much pain and destruction to the company, to the people she loved, because although she'd only known them for a few days, she'd learn to love them because they were her family.

*If you hand yourself over to the C.E., then we'll fight like hell to get you back,* Arik's voice sounded in her head, his tone gentle.

*Hey, this is my head. Don't I get some sort of privacy?*

*Not here, you don't.* He leaned in closer to her and pulled her even tighter against him. *This isn't your fault. You can't blame yourself like this.*

*This is my fault, and I can blame myself. If I wasn't here, then there would be no invasion.*

Arik was determined. *Say we didn't take you that night. Your boyfriend would've taken you to the C.E. then. And don't you think that we won't fight for you then?*

Kerri shook her head. *I caused this mess. People could've died because of me. They probably already have.*

*You can't say—*

Kerri spun around and looked him the eye, anger sparking inside her. *Tell me that no one died today. Tell me that no one got hurt. Go on.*

He looked at her silently, his green eyes glowing with a deep intensity. *I would, but—*

*You'd be lying,* Kerri finished for him, her eyes filling with tears.

*Stop interrupting me.* He caught her as she was about to turn her back against him again. *It's rude.*

She snorted. *You're one to talk.*

*I am never rude. Arrogant, but not rude.*

*The difference being?*

*Being arrogant means you can actually afford to be rude.*

She paused to process his words. *You know you're not making sense, right?*

## 25 - Finding a Babysitter

He smirked. *That's because your intelligence is of no match to mine.*

She pursed her lips—a habit that she'd obviously taken up from him. Then she jammed her elbow down. Hard.

The pain was excruciating. He hunched up over in pain and rolled to the side, accidentally pushing the girl off the bed. She crashed onto the floor, probably landing on the broken drawer again.

When she climbed back onto the bed, even a blind person could've seen smoke steaming out of her ears. He had to laugh at the look on her face. *You brought it on yourself*, he choked out when the laughter subsided and the pain took over.

*Move over. You're hogging the bed.*

Arik pursed his lips. *No one orders me—*

She kicked him in the stomach. *I said, move over.*

*I'll be gracious.* He relented, finally curling up over and giving in to the pain.

She snorted. *Like that's going to happen.* She climbed into bed next to him, yawning. *Well, what do you know? That made me tired.*

He groaned, still clutching at where it hurt. *And that made me suffer.*

She grinned and pulled the blankets around her. *Goodnight.*

He shook his head. This girl was impossible.

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When he woke up in the morning, the space next to him was empty. He stretched his arms, yawned, and headed towards the bathroom. When he opened the door, he saw that the girl was brushing her teeth.

“Morning,” she greeted him through a mouthful of toothpaste and foam.

“Morning.” He joined her up at the sink.

She started to say something to him, but then realised that she didn't make sense talking through a mouthful of foam so she spat into the sink. “How's your...uh...” she trailed off, smirking and gesturing his crotch area.

He scowled at her. "It's fine. Fine enough to not talk about it."

"Really? Because if you do want to talk about it, I can always—"

"I do not want to talk about it," he said through gritted teeth.

She shrugged. "Okay." She rinsed her mouth. "What are we going to do today?"

"I'm going to help rebuild the buildings that have been destroyed. With magic. You're going to spend the day with the other trainees."

"How about the humans?"

"Oh, they'll help us as well."

"So...I'm going to spend the day with Carter?"

Arik raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure he'd be more than glad to have your company."

The girl nodded thoughtfully, gargling her mouth with water one more time and wiping her mouth with a face towel. "I need something to wear," she said.

"Unfortunately, the fashion department has been destroyed, so you'll have to wear what you have on now." When he saw the look on her face, he had to hide his smile. "Don't worry," he comforted her. "A lot of people will be wearing similar things. Besides, you should feel lucky. You're not the one who has to wear the t-shirt."

The girl broke into a smile. "Are you seriously going to wear it?"

"What choice do I have? Unless you want to switch shirts with me..." He looked at her pleadingly.

"Hell no."

"Didn't think so." He headed out into the bedroom and started pulling the jeans he was wearing the day before and after a grimace, he put the t-shirt on.

The girl dissolved into laughter when she came out and saw him in it. "I bet they kept that shirt in one piece just for you to wear," she said.

He rolled his eyes. "Come on, I'll take you to Carter's."

He took her hand and shifted over to the trainee's building, where the trainees could be seen everywhere relaxing and finally having a day off.

"Why don't they need to help?" the girl asked him.

"Because if they're not fully trained, then they might cause accidents. Besides, they deserve a day off



every now and then.” He caught sight of Carter. “Hey, Carter!” he called.

Carter turned and strode towards them, a grin on his face. “Hey Kerri, hey Rick. What are you two doing here?”

“Well,” Arik said while the girl was looking around her new surroundings. “I need to help reconstruct the buildings, so I was hoping that you might be able to take care of this one for a day.”

The girl spun around. “Take care? Take care? I don’t need a babysitter.”

He smirked. “You could’ve fooled me.”

He shifted away before she could get her hands on him.

## 26 - Information

“You don’t need to take care of me,” Kerri told Carter once she realised that Arik was gone and that she’d have to wait a while before she could kill him.

Carter grinned. “Come on, it’ll be fun. Besides, we haven’t had the chance to spend some time together alone.” He held up his hands when he saw Kerri narrowing her eyes. “No, no, no,” he rushed to explain. “I meant you and Drake spent some quality time together, and so did you and Joshua, so it’s our turn now.”

Kerri crossed her arms. “Fine, then. So what are we going to do today?”

“Oh, I don’t know, but I think we should call it Carter and Kerrien’s Day of Fun.”

Kerri shot him a look. “One, never, and I mean never, call me that again. Two, what on earth are you on about?”

Carter sighed. “It’s a Friends thing. Don’t you watch Friends?”

Kerri looked at him disdainfully. “I’m a lawyer. I don’t have time for this kind of thing.” Then she added thoughtfully. “Though I do enjoy watching Law and Order.”

Carter rolled his eyes. “Whatever.” He winked at a couple of girls as they walked past him and they giggled.

Kerri raised an eyebrow. “Your future conquests?”

“Nope. My past conquests.”

“Wow, you maintain a very...friendly relationship with them.”

Carter smirked. “You want to know how?”

Kerri smiled despite herself. “I think I’ll pass.”

For the next few hours, Carter showed her around the trainee’s building—she didn’t even know that the trainers, trainees and humans had their own residency buildings. Well, she knew the humans did, but that didn’t really count.

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Carter handed Kerri a sandwich. “Lunch. Enjoy.”

Kerri held the soggy sandwich gingerly at an arm’s length and wrinkled her nose. “Really?”

“Stop fussing.” He sat down on the grass. “We only have to eat these for a few days.”

Kerri’s eyes widened. “A few days?” she complained as she sat down, still holding the sandwich as if it were a skunk.

“Just eat the damn sandwich, woman.”

She tried not to gag as she peeled off the plastic wrap from the sandwich. Using her index finger, she gently pulled down a corner of the bottom piece of bread and peered inside. Damn. She hated ham and egg sandwiches. Especially when the egg looked like it was a month old.

“You want to trade?” Carter asked her, looking at her with an eyebrow raised. “You don’t look very pleased with yours.”

“I’m not,” she replied, still eyeing her sandwich with distaste. “What do you have?”

“Tuna and mayonnaise.”

She pursed her lips. “Hm, ham and month old egg sandwich or tuna and expired mayonnaise. Decisions, decisions.”

Carter laughed she traded her sandwich with his. “I guess I can see why Arik’s attracted to you,” he said afterwards. “Although I normally kind of go for the girls that are your exact opposite.”

“You mean the girls Arik have been dating for the past few years?”

“Yep.”

She shook her head. “There can’t possibly be that many dumb blondes to go around.”

He smirked. “Oh, you’d be surprised,” he said as Kerri swatted him on the arm. “Although I don’t really care what colour their hair is. Brunettes, blondes, redheads...”

Kerri bit her lip. “Carter?”

“Yeah?”

“When...when you said you could see why Arik was attracted to me, well, what are the reasons? I mean, is he actually attracted to me?”

Carter cocked his head to one side and looked at her. “To answer your first question, you’re stunningly beautiful, you’re funny and you’re smart. To answer your second question, yes, he is. Very. Isn’t it kind of obvious?”

Kerri shrugged, trying to seem casual. “I don’t know.”

Carter raised an eyebrow. “Kerri, I think you do know. Deep down, you both know. You’re just in denial. Both of you.” He shook his head. “It’s kind of obvious that you two were meant for each other.”

Kerri blushed but after a moment she frowned. “How about Sitara? Wasn’t she and Arik kind of ‘meant to be’ as well?”

“She was...good with him. But compared to you, she’s nothing.” He looked away. “Besides, she wasn’t Arik’s true love.”

Kerri narrowed her eyes. “What aren’t you telling me?” she asked, trying to catch his gaze.

He toyed with his sandwich with his long fingers. “Nothing.”

She reached out and cupped his chin with her hand and forced him to look into her eyes. “Tell me who it is. Tell me what you saw,” she pleaded.

Carter removed himself gently from her grasp and mumbled a name.

Joshua.

Kerri’s eyes widened in alarm. She grabbed his arm. “Tell me you didn’t tell anyone—especially Arik—about this,” she hissed.

He whipped his head around. “Of course I didn’t,” he hissed back. Then he straightened up. “What’s it to you anyway?”

She shrugged.

He narrowed his eyes. “You knew, didn’t you?”

She sighed. “Kind of.”

“What do you mean ‘kind of’? You either know, or you don’t.”

She shot him a look. “Don’t give me that shoot. Tell me what you know. Now.”

“No!”

She looked at him in a way that usually drove men crazy. “Tell me,” she demanded.

He looked away. “Don’t look at me like that. Look away. Look away.”

“Please?”

He sighed and looked at her warily. “I saw them together. In the garden.”

“Kissing?”

He grimaced. "And other things."

She made a face. "Oh, no."

"Well, not exactly, but the train was definitely heading towards that station."

She held up one hand. "Stop. That's all I need to know. Actually, that's more than I need to know."

He shrugged. "You wanted to know. Now tell me what you know."

She looked at him as if he was crazy. "What? No!"

His mouth dropped open in surprise. "But I told you what I saw."

"So?"

"It's only fair."

"Honey, life isn't fair." She leaned in to kiss him on the cheek and patted his head before leaving for the toilet.

## 27 - Painting Fun

“So, how’re things with your Cinderella?” Drake asked him, bored, as he flicked his wrists and a couple of bricks flew over to repair a hole that was in the wall.

Arik raised an eyebrow as he made circling motions with his fingers and cement poured into the cracks in the ground. “Mandy’s fine.”

Drake threw a brick at him and Arik ducked as the brick crashed through a window. Their heads snapped up at the sound of breaking glasses and exchanged a look before smothering their laughter.

“What was that for?” Arik asked Drake as he held up a hand and the brick flew back into his hand. “It could’ve hit me.”

“That was the idea,” Drake replied dryly as he flicked his fingers upwards and the glass reconstructed itself.

“Why?”

“Because I wasn’t asking about the dumb sister. I was asking about Cinderella.”

“And who’s that?” Arik asked him, dreading the answer.

Drake flicked him on the head. “Don’t give me that shoot.”

Arik sighed. “Nothing, okay? Nothing happened. I don’t know why you’re making such a big deal out of it.”

“Because you two are true loves! Duh.”

Arik dropped the brick at the word “true loves” and the brick crashed onto his foot. He gave out a yelp. “We are not true—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’ve heard all that before.” Drake dismissed Arik’s protests.

Arik shot him a look. “Yeah, about Sitara. And look how that turned out.”

Drake raised his hands in mock surrender and the pile of bricks he was shifting fell at his feet. “Ooh, someone’s getting defensive.”

Arik raised a hand and the pile of bricks rose up into the air. “Defend this, smartass.” He flicked his wrist and the bricks hurtled towards Drake, who laughed and snapped his fingers. The bricks crashed down onto the floor.

A general came around the corner to see what was going on, and Drake and Arik immediately started to recover a nearby hole in the wall, trying not to laugh.

“Come on,” Drake hissed. “You’ve got to give me something.”

“No, I don’t.” Arik waved his hand over a part of the wall and the cracks closed up.

“Yes, you do. Or I’ll dye all your underwear pink.” Drake clicked his fingers and the brush dipped itself into white paint and started repainting the walls. “You know I can do it. And you know I will.”

Arik sighed. “We shared a bed, okay?”

The brush dropped from the wall and fell into the can of paint, spraying white paint over the two of them, although Drake didn’t seem to care.

“And?” he asked Arik, who was busy wiping paint from his mouth.

“And nothing,” Arik spluttered, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “This paint tastes like shoot.”

“Nothing my left @\$\$\$. Tell me.”

“Nothing, I swear.”

“Come on, you guys hugged when you were crying about your ex-girlfriend, but you didn’t do anything when you shared a bed together?”

Arik shushed him. “Not so loud. I’d get in trouble with the boss. And you know how the walls have ears around here,” he hissed, darting a look at the general, who glared back at him. “And no, nothing happened.” He made a fluid motion with his hands, rebuilding the wall. “Well, I hugged her. But only to keep her warm, because she was shivering.”

“And?”

“And she jammed her elbow into my family jewels.”

Drake winced. “Ouch. Why?”

“Because I said she was stupid.”

“I’m gay, and even I know that the best way to get into a girl’s pants is to…” he paused to throw a brick at Arik, “NEVER CALL HER STUPID!” he screamed at him.

“Well then that’s fine then, because I’m NOT trying to get into her pants!” Arik shouted back at him.

They both stopped and quietly resumed their work when they realised everybody around them was staring at them.

“Why did you shout so loud? Now everybody heard,” Arik hissed at him.

“Excuse me, but you weren’t exactly whispering yourself.”

Arik smirked. “This is the trouble with having a gay friend.”

Drake, with a deadpan look on his face, picked up the bucket of paint, walked calmly over to Arik, then suddenly growled and dumped the bucket of paint onto his head.

Arik cursed and flipped him off before shifting off to check on Kerri.



## 28 - Playing Hairdresser

Kerri was about to leave with Carter to go see his room when suddenly a guy appeared next to them with a paint bucket over his head.

Carter burst out laughing.

Kerri swatted his arm. "It's not funny! Don't laugh at the poor guy," she hissed.

The guy reached up and took off the bucket, revealing his face. It was Arik, and his entire head was completely covered with white paint.

Kerri looked at Carter. "Forget what I said," she said before they both burst into laughter again.

Arik growled, took off his shirt and used it as a towel to wipe off his face and hair. "Don't say anything. Just don't."

"What happened to you?" she asked him, still in fits of laughter.

"Drake," he growled.

Kerri howled with laughter in a very unladylike manner. "I'm going to give the guy a medal."

Arik gave her a look, and before she knew it, the shirt he was using to wipe his face was suddenly forced down over her head and shoulders so that she looked like she was wearing a straitjacket. He pushed her against the wall and whipped out a camera.

"Behold," he rasped in a fake accent while Carter laughed in the background. "The beauty of the Polaroid." The shutter clicked three times and three black photos slid out.

"Ha," Kerri scoffed, pointing—at least, trying to point—at the black photos. "It doesn't work."

Arik smirked and shook the photos so that they became clear. "Look, I fixed it."

Kerri narrowed her eyes. "I hate you," she hissed. Then she remembered she'd need his help taking the shirt off. "Can you please take this shirt off of me?" she asked him hopefully.

Arik raised an eyebrow. "No."

She gave him the same look she had given Carter a few hours ago.

"Look away, man," Carter warned Arik. "Look away."

"Please?" she begged Arik. "Please."

He sighed and pulled the t-shirt up and over her head. She shook her head, momentarily dazed. Then she slapped him.

“I hate you,” she hissed.

Arik’s hand reached up to touch where she’d hit him. He looked at her, an unfathomable look in his eyes, and then he turned to Carter.

“I’m going to go take care of something. Can you stay with her for a little while longer?” Without waiting for a reply, he shifted away.

Carter shook his head. “Kerri, you really shouldn’t have said that.”

“Why not?”

“Let’s say that Arik just told you he hated you. He thought he was joking around, but you didn’t. How would you feel?”

Kerri shrugged.

Carter shot her a look.

She sighed. “Fine, I’ll feel hurt, but only a little.”

“Yes, well, ‘I hate you’ is kind of the worst thing to say to your true love.”

“He is *not*—”

“Shut up. You are, and you both know it.”

Kerri narrowed her eyes. “Did you just tell me to shut up?”

Carter’s eyes widened. “I meant for you to...I just...”

“Did you just interrupt me while I was talking to tell me to shut up?”

Carter backed away. “Please don’t kill me.”

Kerri grinned. “Fine.”

“Okay, now I’m going to ask you for a favour.”

Kerri frowned. “*Ohhkay.*”

“Can you promise me you’ll do it?”

She snorted. "I don't have to promise you anything."

"Please?" He looked at her in a way that Kerri assumed girls always found irresistible.

"Yeah, I don't think the look works the other way round, honey."

"Dammit. Please? Just promise."

She looked at him grudgingly. "Fine, I promise."

"Say sorry to Arik."

"What? No!"

"You promised."

"But...you...no! Why?"

"It'll make him feel better. You know it would."

"But...I don't want to."

"Grow up, Kerri."

"Shut up, Carter."

"You promised," Carter hissed to her as Arik walked towards them.

"Fine, but I'm not doing it in front of you."

Carter shrugged. "I'll be hearing it from him anyway."

"Hearing what from whom?" Arik asked them as he joined them.

Carter and Kerri exchanged a look.

"It's difficult to answer your question properly when you look like that," Kerri said, smirking.

He rolled his eyes. "Come on, we're going back to our room."

"Why?"

"Because I got the rest of the day off because of this," he said, pointing to his paint-covered head. "And also because you need to be in even more high protection than before, thus it would be less safe for you to be in the protection of a trainee than a trainer."

Kerri sighed and hugged Carter. "I'll see you tomorrow," she said glumly.

“Don’t worry, K,” Carter said cheerfully. “We had fun, right?” He leaned into her. “You promised,” he whispered before dropping a kiss on your cheek.

She drew back from him. “Only Drake’s allowed to do that. Next time you try to kiss me, I will kill you.”

He chuckled. “Is Arik allowed to do that as well?”

She half glared and half blushed, and then turned away. “Let’s go.”

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“How about now?” Arik asked, emerging from the bathroom.

Kerri giggled. “You still have a lot of white in your hair.”

“Dammit,” he muttered, running his hands through his hair. Flakes of white drifted down.

“Ew, it looks like dandruff now.”

Arik grimaced. “God.”

“I think you should take a shower. Wiping it off with a towel isn’t exactly hygienic, if you know what I mean.”

“Have you forgotten that I showered before trying to wipe off the paint?”

“Oh, that’s right.”

He groaned. “We’ve been doing this for at least three hours now.”

“Correction. You’ve been doing this for three hours. Not me.” She grinned and then hesitated. “I could help you, or try to help you. That is, if you want.”

“Would you?”

She shrugged. “I can try.” She got up from where she was sitting on the bed. “Come on, let’s go to the bathroom. I want to try to wash your paint off your hair in the sink.”

He followed her into the bathroom and knelt down in front of the sink.

“I told them I’d find a reason for expanding the size of the toilet sinks,” he muttered.

She stood right behind him, one foot on either side of his legs, her hands on his shoulders. “Head down.”

He obeyed, and she turned on the water and squeezed soap onto her hand.

“I’ll try not to smash your head onto the tap,” she told him and he winced.

“Please try. Try very hard.”

She grinned and gently pushed his head under the tap. “The water too hot for you?”

“No.”

She ran her hand—the one without soap—through his hair to make sure it was completely saturated before rubbing the soap into his hair, trying her best to get the white paint out.

## 29 - The Kiss

Arik had never been a fan of massages, but he had to admit, that felt good.

“Am I hurting you?” she asked him. She was standing right behind him, her legs pressing against his shoulders.

“No,” he replied. “In fact, you’re...you’re pretty good at this.”

There was a pause before she resumed massaging his head. “Thanks.” She ran her fingers through his hair once more before pushing his head under the tap again. “You have really nice hair,” she added thoughtfully.

He grinned as she rinsed him off, and then closed his eyes and mouth when the water started running down his face. They repeated the process for about three times until he heard her turn the tap off. She gently reached down with a towel and wiped the water from his face, and then she towelled his hair dry.

“All done,” she said, obviously proud of herself.

“Thank you.”

“Oh, you better thank me,” she said, grinning and snapping her towel at him and making him laugh. “My hands are so wrinkled they look like prunes.”

“In my opinion,” Arik said with a straight face, “prunes look so much better.”

She narrowed her eyes and was about to walk away from him when she slipped on some water that was on the floor. Arik got to her just in time, careful to avoid the water puddle.

“Thank you,” she breathed. “I didn’t know you could move so quickly.”

He didn’t either. “No problem.” They didn’t move. His eyes strayed from her eyes to her lips and back again. Her eyes, the colour of gold and honey. Her lips, so full and luscious. He licked his lips subconsciously.

She swallowed visibly. “You...still have some paint here.” She reached up to his forehead and flicked the piece of paint away.

He moved so quickly and so suddenly he surprised even himself. He bent down swiftly and pressed his lips to hers gently.

He felt her gasp softly but other than that she didn’t move. And neither did he. Her lips were soft and warm, and they felt good on his. He looked at her and saw that her eyes were closed, and when she finally opened them to look at him, he saw that they were glowing a warm golden colour. Desires stirred

in him against his will, and he pulled away reluctantly, pulling her up with him so that they were standing upright again.

“Well,” she breathed. “That was...unnecessary.”

“Unnecessary,” he agreed. “And unprofessional.”

“Very unprofessional.” She turned away from him. “Uh...we should probably get down to dinner.”

“We should.” He thought about shifting her to the dining room, but was uncomfortable with the thought of touching her again. “Let’s go.”

“Right.”

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“Hey, K, hey, Arik,” Drake greeted them. “Why are you two blushing?”

Arik felt himself getting hot in the face. “We’re not...we...kind of...it was really hot in the room.”

“Yeah,” the girl said smoothly. “Arik had to take a lot of hot showers to wash off all the paint, and the air conditioner wasn’t working.”

Her voice appeared in his head. *You really are a fantastically horrible liar.*

*They caught me off guard.*

*Oh, so ol’ lighting wit strikes again.*

He sighed. “I...I’m going to go get something to eat. Do you want something?”

“Okay. Thanks.”

When he got to the buffet table, he looked over at his table, where Carter and Drake were interrogating—that was the only appropriate word for it—the girl. They had a look of wicked glee on their faces while she was blushing. Hard.

Without even looking, he grabbed something for both of them and headed back to the table.

“Thanks.” She took her plate, still blushing slightly while Carter and Drake sat back in their chairs and looked at him, a mixture of amusement and mischievousness on their faces.

He ignored them and ate quickly and quietly.

“I’m done,” the girl announced.

“I’ll put back your stuff,” Carter offered, and he took the plate she handed him.

“Uh...” she looked around almost desperately. “Joshua, can I talk to you for a bit?”

All four men at the table raised their eyebrows in surprised, but said nothing. Joshua nodded, got up and followed the girl out of the dining room, leaving Arik with the fearsome twosome.

“So, what happened?” Drake asked him. The gleam was back in his eyes.

“Did she not tell you?” Arik asked him wearily.

“No. She just blushed and said nothing happened, which means something happened. Now spill.”

“Why do I have to be the one to tell you?” he asked them somewhat childishly.

“Because only two of you know what happened, and she didn’t tell us, so you’re going to tell us.”

Arik sighed. “Leave me alone.”

“You know we’re just going to keep bothering you until you tell us what happened.”

“She dunked my head in the sink.”

“Don’t give me that shoot.”

“I’m serious.”

“Fine. Then what happened next?”

“She washed my hair.”

Drake squealed like...well, like a girl. “And then?”

Arik bit into his apple and chewed absentmindedly. “And then I kissed her.”

“You what?!” Carter and Drake yelled simultaneously.

“I think you heard me.”

Drake was practically hyperventilating. “And then? And then?”

“We agreed that it was unnecessary and extremely unprofessional and decided to come down to dinner.”

“You’re lying.”

“I am not.”



“He’s not lying,” Carter told Drake. “You know I can tell these things.”

Drake sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. “You oldies really need to act your age and screw each other like bunnies.”

Arik snorted. “That is not acting my age.”

Drake scoffed. “Whatever. Carter, let’s leave this old fuddy-duddy to play with himself.”

Carter laughed and patted Arik sympathetically on the shoulder before leaving.

## 30 - The Truth About The Ex-girlfriend

“He kissed you?” Joshua asked Kerri, surprised. They were sitting in their secret spot in the garden.

“Yeah, I can’t believe it.”

“Me neither. Arik never kisses anyone first. Not even Sitara.”

“What?” Kerri stared at him. “Why not?”

He shrugged. “He says that if the girl likes him enough, she’ll do it first. Otherwise it isn’t worth it.”

“So what does this mean?” Kerri asked him, mentally adding “that he likes me enough?”

Joshua shrugged. “That he must’ve gone crazy.”

Kerri glared at him.

“Or,” Joshua added hastily, “that you two are True Loves.”

Kerri looked at him, frustrated. “We are not True Loves!”

Joshua looked at her and shrugged. “You may be right. One can never tell whether they’ve found their True Love until they Join.”

Kerri choked although she wasn’t eating anything. “What?”

Joshua shrugged. “You heard me.”

“Join?” Kerri struggled to say. “What do you mean, Join?”

“To join physically and mentally. You know, to take part in sexual intercourse, to have sex, to make love?”

Kerri swallowed. Then she frowned. “Wait a minute. You don’t join mentally when you have sex.”

“You do when you’re True Loves.”

Kerri narrowed her eyes. “And you’d know how?”

Joshua looked away. “Someone I knew told me about it.”

Kerri forced him to look at her. “So you have no personal experience whatsoever in the area?”

Joshua looked straight at her, his arctic blue eyes piercing through her and making her shiver, but she held on.

“I might have,” he said eventually. “What’s it to you?”

She let go of him. “Sitara,” she said quietly. “Sitara was your True Love.”

For the first time, Kerri saw Joshua blush.

Aw, that’s so sweet, Kerri thought. It must’ve killed him when she left them.

“Did Arik know?” she asked him, and his head snapped up immediately. He searched her, his blue eyes probing.

“I’m not going to tell him, I promise. We’re friends, right? I’d never do that to you.”

He licked his lips. “He didn’t know.”

“Did it absolutely kill you when she left?”

He gave a bitter smile. “Almost. I survived. Barely.” He said that as if it were a bad thing.

“Do you know why she left? And don’t give me that ‘werewolves betray’ shoot.”

Joshua licked his lips again. “I…” he trailed off, plucking a blade of grass and wrapping it around his long fingers.

Kerri considered doing something that always made the members of the opposite sex feel guilty, but then she remembered Joshua had already found his True Love and wasn’t going to fall for it. She sighed.

“You don’t have to tell me. I understand.”

He searched her with his eyes again, looking at her for an immeasurable length of time.

“I’ll tell you,” he said finally. “Under one condition. You will tell no one, and I mean no one, about this.”

“I promise. I swear on my life.”

“When Sitara first came to the Sterling, I was away on mission, and when I came back, she and Arik were already together.” He shredded the blade of grass in half.

“When I first saw her, she was with Arik and she didn’t see me. But straightaway, I knew. I didn’t know what I felt for her exactly, but I knew I had to stay away from her.” He shredded the blade of grass into quarters.

“For the next few days, I ate my meals earlier or later, and I completely avoided them. Then one day

Arik told me he wanted me to meet his new girlfriend. What choice did I have? When we saw each other, I knew I was—we were—in trouble. Deep trouble.” He ripped the blade of grass until the pieces were so small they looked like green powder. He dropped the pieces onto the ground and started on another, pausing momentarily to look up at her.

“It was like...” he trailed off, struggling to find the right words. “She completed me. Like the moment I saw her, I felt whole. Like I realised that for the first hundred and four years in my life, I was incomplete, and she...she completed me.”

“If Arik and I are True Loves, then why doesn’t it feel that way for us?”

“It does feel like that. You just...don’t recognise it. Or you just won’t accept it. For some reason, some women don’t feel that way at first, but afterwards, the feeling just kind of grows onto them.”

“I see. Go on.”

He wetted his lips before starting again. “I...we both knew how we felt. And I can speak for her, because the moment she saw me, she had the same look on her face I had on when I first saw her. We tried to avoid each other as much as possible for the next few days, until I found her in my favourite spot one day.” He smiled a quick soft smile and gestured to their secret place. “We started talking and...well, it just happened.”

“What just happened?”

Joshua looked at her.

“Oh. Right. And how did that feel?” she asked him. “Not that I want any of those...details,” she added hastily. “I meant, how did you know you were True Loves when you two uh, joined?”

He smiled warily at her. “It’s...kind of hard to explain. You know how you and Arik have a telepathic bond? Well, it’s like that...but not really. You just feel...connected to them. Like something’s holding you together.”

“And did it feel good?”

He shot her a look. “Do you really need me to tell you something so obvious?”

“No, I meant, did it feel better than when you did it with...someone else?”

“Everything was better with her than when it was with someone else. It could be a kiss or even a mere touch, and it would still feel so much better.”

Arik’s kiss appeared and lingered in Kerri’s mind. She pushed it away. “What happened then?”

“We kept it a secret. Then one day, a person from the C.E. showed up and somehow got hold of Sitara and tried to persuade her to join the C.E. Of course, she knew what the C.E. was and didn’t join, but he threatened her. He knew about Sitara and me. He told Sitara that if she didn’t join the C.E., he’d tell

Arik about us. Sitara knew how important the relationship between and Arik and I was, so she went.”

“What? Just like that? You didn’t even try to stop her?”

“Of course I tried to stop her. But she wouldn’t listen. Werewolves are stubborn, and she wasn’t an exception. Well, actually, she was. She was exceptionally stubborn.” He shook his head. “When I woke up one morning, she had gone. She left this.” He reached in his shirt, felt around the back of his neck and took out a necklace.

It was a silver necklace. The chain was thin and fine and looked fragile but Kerri knew it was strong and secure and that it’d take a lot to break it. Hanging from the chain was a clear, circular glass tube that was about an inch long.

“What’s that in it?” she asked him, pointing at the drop of silver inside.

“Liquid mercury.”

“It’s beautiful.” She flipped the glass tube from one end to the other. The ball of mercury dropped followed, bouncing slightly when it reached the bottom. “It’s like a solid little ball.”

“Mercury’s very dense.”

“Um, so was there a particular reason why she left you...mercury?”

“It was her favourite necklace. Her father gave it to her.”

“Does it hurt to talk about her?”

He blinked a few times. “A little, but I kind of got over it. It was hell for the first few weeks though. I had to hear all these ridiculous rumours of why she left and I had to bear the weight of her leaving because of me. Arik was devastated.”

Kerri reached over and hugged him. “I’m so sorry. It must be so hard for you.”

After a moment’s hesitation, he hugged her back. “Thank you.”

“Did you feel guilty at all?” she asked, pulling away from him.

“Of course I did. I wanted to stop. I said that...if Arik found out, the consequences would be...horrible. And I didn’t want that. I wanted her to be happy.”

“And what did she say?”

He blushed slightly. “She said that she’d only be happy if she was with me.”

Kerri smiled gently. “Do you miss her?”

"I miss her every waking second of my life. I even miss her when I'm not awake. I dream about her sometimes."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Were they sweet dreams, or you know, nightmares?"

"Neither. Both. It would be like she was communicating with me through my dream. Like she was trying to tell me something, like..."

"Like you two are connected," Kerri finished for him.

He nodded, smiling gently. "Like we're connected."

She looked at him. "Can I ask you for a favour?"

He looked suspiciously at her and nodded after a moment.

"Kiss me."

He looked at her incredulously. "What?"

"I want to see something. Kiss me. Please."

He continued to look at her in disbelief. "...no."

"I swear it has nothing to do with you. I'll tell you afterwards."

He looked warily at her. She looked pleadingly back at him, even though she knew that the look wouldn't work on him.

He sighed. "Close your eyes," he said at last.

She obliged, and after a moment, she felt his lips brush against hers for a second before he leant away from her.

She opened her eyes and nodded.

"Why did you want me to do that?" he asked her, still looking at her cagily.

"I just wanted to see whether it really was better with Arik. Don't worry," she assured. "It was."

He sat back and licked his lips. "May I say that what happened just now should never be mentioned ever again in front of anybody, present company included?"

She nodded. "So...no weirdness between us?"

"No weirdness." He lay back so that he was resting against a rock and let silence claim them.

"Well," Kerri said after a while. "This is awkward."

"One may even," Joshua commented dryly, "call it weirdness."

Kerri rolled her eyes but couldn't help laughing. "Did it feel better when you were with Sitara?"

He bit his lip. "No offence, but it was so much better with her."

"Same. It must really suck for the people who've found their True Love and then for their True Love to die."

Joshua shook his head. "No. Sure, it hurts, and they mourn for a while, but they get over it soon enough knowing that their True Love died and are safe. But for people who've found their True Love and to have them separated from them and not knowing whether they're safe or not, whether they're hurt, whether they're happy...that is hell. Pure torture."

She patted him on the shoulder sympathetically.

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When she got back to the room—which had now been cleaned up, Arik had just come out from the shower, a towel wrapped around his waist. She stopped herself from drooling over his abs and looked away.

"Did you shower again?" she asked him.

"I felt unclean," he muttered. "Are you sure that there's no more white paint in my hair?"

"I'm absolutely positive. We checked for like five times, remember?"

He ran his hand through his unruly black hair. "My hair feels really stiff."

"It's probably the soap. Sorry."

"Sorry? You don't have to be sorry. You were the one who got the paint out, remember?"

Kerri bit her lip. "No, I meant...I'm sorry. For saying that I hated you." She twisted the ring that was on her finger. It was a simple silver band, and it fit her middle finger perfectly. "Because I didn't hate you. I don't hate you." She looked up at him.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

He sat down on the bed next to her.

“Can I try something?” she asked him a while.

“Sure.”

“Close your eyes.”

He raised an eyebrow, looking at her suspiciously, but complied after a moment’s hesitation.

She leaned in and brushed her lips to his. She heard his breath catch in his throat, but his eyes remained closed, and after a moment, hers closed as well. His hands went up to cup her face, and then he pulled roughly away from her, his hands still on either side of her face.

“What,” he asked her in a strained voice, “are you doing?”

She looked at him tentatively. “Trying something?”

He sighed and looked down. “I...have to go change,” he said when he realised he was clad in nothing but a towel. He went into the bathroom and came out again wearing clean boxer shorts.

“The boss had a couple of us go to the nearest department store today for clean clothes,” he explained when Kerri looked questioningly at his new clothes. He gestured towards a large plastic bag. “Those are yours.”



## 31 - Giving in to Temptation

Arik shook his head but smiled despite himself as a gleam entered the girl's eyes and she leapt towards the bag of clothes. Girls.

He watched her as she sorted through the clothes, giving off squeals of delight whenever she saw something she liked and making a face whenever she saw something she didn't.

"I'm going to go take a shower," she announced, pulling a t-shirt, a pair of shorts and clean underwear out of the bag. She bounded happily towards the bathroom. She poked her head out of the bathroom five seconds later.

"I don't usually act like a hyper puppy," she said with a straight face. "It's just that I've got beautiful new clothes!" She disappearing into the bathroom and cheered before slamming the door shut.

Arik cracked up laughing.

The door opened and the girl stuck her head out again. "If you laugh at me one more time, I will kill you," she rasped with a fake accent and cackled before slamming the door shut.

Arik slapped a hand over his mouth stop himself from bursting out in laughter, because he wasn't too sure whether she meant it, and he really didn't want to test it.

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The girl held up a skirt.

"Isn't this gorgeous?" she asked, twirling around the room with it. "This must be the prettiest—" she trailed off when something caught her eye.

"Oh. My. God." She dropped the skirt onto the floor and rushed over to where he was sitting on the bed. He had set out the dress on the bed as a surprise for her when she was in the shower. The dress was a dark emerald green, with sequins and beads decorated all over them. It came down to about her knees. She held it up by its thin straps.

"This is beautiful," she breathed. She held it up against her and turned to him. "Isn't this beautiful?"

"Beautiful," he murmured. She really was so very beautiful.

A gold blaze flared up in her eyes when she realised he wasn't talking about the dress and she turned away from him to hang the dress up in the closet.

He stopped himself from going after her. *It would be extremely unprofessional*, he chided himself.

She laughed derisively from in the closet. *I'd say.*

*Damn. What are you doing in here?*

*I don't know. It was like a broadcast.*

*A broadcast?*

*Yeah. Like you were talking to me with the telepathic bond thing.*

He switched off from the conversation. "Right. I'm going to brush my teeth. Are you coming?"

"I already brushed my teeth."

He closed the bathroom door behind him.

Drake, Arik called while filling his glass with water and squeezing toothpaste onto his toothbrush.

*Hey, Rick. Well?*

*Well what?*

*Did you guys...you know.*

No. Arik started brushing his teeth vigorously.

*Don't lie to me.*

*I'm not.*

*Fine. Then what's up?*

*I just...the girl just heard what I was thinking. Without me wanting her to.*

*You're going to have to learn to control your thoughts around your True Love.*

Arik choked. *She is not my...* he broke off from his sentence to spit into the sink and sighed. *So maybe she is. But still. Why can she hear me?*

*I bet it's the kiss that did it. You guys kind of joined when you kissed, so she has access to parts of your mind, and vice versa. And did you just admit that she's your True Love?*

*I said she may be my True Love, not that she was.*

*Well, that's one step closer to the obvious and one step further away from your delusion.*

Arik pursed his lips before spitting into the sink again and rinsed his mouth with water. *If you were*

*standing next to me right now, I would kill you.*

*Well, that's why I'm not, Drake announced cheerfully. Good luck with your lady. Tell me if anything...intimate happens. He rang off.*

Arik muttered dire threats to Drake before heading into the bedroom.

The girl had let down her hair so that it fell in waves across her shoulders and down her back, curls framing her face. She turned at the sound of the bathroom door opening to look at him and she grinned.

"Were you inside doing something extremely unprofessional, then?" she asked, smirking as he walked up towards her.

"No, but I'm about to." He took her face in his hands and kissed her.

She gasped, put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back. "What are you doing?" she asked him, narrowing her eyes.

"I think it's called giving in to temptation." He pulled away. "I'm sorry if—"

"Come back here."

## 32 - Seriously Cheesy Nicknames

Kerri turned her head to find Arik staring at her silently. "What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

She poked him in the arm. "I know you're thinking something. Tell me what it is."

He smirked. "If you insist." He fed her images of exactly what he was thinking, and she blushed.

"I thought we agreed to take it slow and not to do...that yet," she said afterwards.

His smirk grew. "Doesn't mean I can't think about it."

She rolled her eyes but smiled despite herself as his arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her towards him so that her back was against his chest and he dropped a kiss at the nape of her neck.

"We're going to have to be professional in public," Kerri told him as he kissed a line down to her collarbone.

"Mm."

She grinned. "I'm serious," she said as she held a finger against his lips to stop him.

He sighed and the arm that was around her suddenly constricted and rolled her on top of him so that she was resting on his chest and staring down at him. "Name your conditions."

"No public displays of affection. And by public I mean whenever we're not alone."

"Not even Drake, Carter and Joshua?"

"Do you want teasing and 'I told you so's?'"

"You have a point. Next?"

She bit her lip. "You're going to have to dump Mandy."

Underneath her, she could feel Arik stiffen. She raised an eyebrow. "How is that a problem?" she asked.

"Well, for one, she's the boss' daughter."

"Oh, that's right."

He reached up to play with a strand of her hair. "I'll come up with something."

"Really?"

"You have your conditions, I have mine."

"And what conditions do you have?"

He cocked his head to one side. "I'll tell you when I come up with something." Then he smirked. "Just remember that there will be quite a long list."

She rolled her eyes and rolled off him, yawning. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Kerri." His arms slid around her.

She turned around. "Do you know you actually called me by my name?"

"How is that surprising?"

"Well, you usually just refer to me as 'she' or 'the girl', even when in your head."

He frowned. "You hear my thoughts?"

"Not all of them. Just the ones about me. They kind of...leak into my head."

"What do you mean thoughts about you?"

She shot him a look. "She really was so very beautiful," she quoted from his thoughts, smirking.

He rolled his eyes and tried to ignore the fact that he was blushing.

She yawned again.

"You should sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day."

"Don't you have to repair the buildings or whatever it was that you had to do today?"

"All done."

"Wow. Really? Already?"

"The convenience of magic." He kissed the base of her throat as she yawned again. "Sweet dreams."

*Oh, you bet they're going to be sweet, you hunky stud-muffin,* her voice sounded faintly in his head.

Arik raised an eyebrow. "*Hunky stud-muffin*"?

*Dammit! Stay out of my head!*

He laughed. *It was like a broadcast*, he mimicked.

She snorted. *If only you knew how gay you sound when you do that.*

He dropped a quick kiss on her lips. *Goodnight, you foxy little cheesecake.*

She turned around to glare at him as he laughed.

Of course, five seconds later, he wasn't the one laughing anymore.

### 33 - Sorry Carter

“Hey K,” Drake greeted Kerri cheerfully the next morning as she came in, followed by Arik. “Anything interesting happen last night?”

Kerri’s eyes widened. *Arik, you bastard.* She reached behind and pinched him.

He sucked in a breath. *He doesn’t know, I promise.*

“No, Drake,” Kerri said, smiling sweetly. “Why do you ask?”

Drake shrugged. “Just wondering.” He looked meaningfully at Arik.

Kerri pursed her lips. *Arik, you bastard.* She reached behind and pinched him again. Hard.

“Yow!” Arik yelped. “Stop that, it hurts.”

“That’s the idea,” Kerri replied dryly.

“What’d you do that for?” Drake asked her.

Kerri and Arik exchanged a look, and she saw a wicked gleam enter his eyes.

*You tell him, and I will kill you,* she threatened him.

“She did it because she thought I told you we made out last night.”

“What?” Carter and Drake shot up from their chairs, the latter squealing in excitement.

Kerri glared at Arik. He smirked.

“See,” he said, adapting a face of innocence. “I told you he didn’t know.”

“You...bastard.”

“You know, you’ve used that word so many times, it’s starting to become an endearment.”

Kerri gritted her teeth. “I’d give you a split lip right now, but—”

“But she still wants to make out with you tonight,” Drake cut in.

Kerri spun around. “Are you tired of life?”

Drake backed off immediately. “Whoa, hormone alert.”

"I bet she has her period right now," Carter said. "Girls are always so moody at that time of the month."

"I am not going to talk to you about...my time of the month." Kerri picked up an apple that was on the table and bounced it off Carter's head before sitting down next to Drake, who offered her his food.

"Thank you." She took a banana and started eating it.

"We're going to have to resume practise today, Kerri," Arik said from where he was sitting across from her.

"Since when did you start calling her by her first name?" Carter asked him.

Drake gasped. "Does that mean you guys really made out?"

Kerri draped her banana peel over his face. "Yes. Shut up."

Drake squealed. He took the banana peel at his face. "You," he said pointing the banana peel at her face, "made out with *him*?" he asked, pointing the banana peel at Arik. Unfortunately, he seemed to lose grip and the banana peel went flying into Arik's face.

Kerri laughed at the look of Arik choking on his food and trying to spit out the banana peel that was in his mouth. "Yes. And vice versa. But don't throw anything at me."

"I told you that you two were True Loves," Carter said, smirking.

"Just because we kissed doesn't mean we're True Loves."

"Arik must've loved Sitara a lot to think that she was his True Love. If he still made out with you after Sitara left that means he must love you a lot more. Which probably means you're his True Love," Carter said all in one breath, ignoring Arik's glare.

"He doesn't...love me," Kerri said. "Does he?" she mentally added.

"Well, we'll see," Carter said, standing up and walking over to her. "Bear with me for a moment," he told her. And kissed her.

Then suddenly, he wasn't kissing her anymore. He was flying across the room. He crashed into a table of food, which crashed into the wall, cracking it. With a groan he slid down to the floor, touching his forehead gingerly and wincing in pain.

Open-mouthed, Kerri turned to stare at Arik. The hand he held out in front of him was still twitching. He was breathing heavily, and he had a look of shock on his face as he stared at his hand. Everybody in the dining hall had the same look of shock on their faces as they stared at him. He leapt off the table and shifted so that he was next to Carter.

"I'm sorry," he said, apologising profusely. "I don't know what came over me. I was just...I couldn't...I



don't know what came over me.”

Carter smiled weakly. “Congratulations,” he croaked. “You two are True Loves.”

Drake took Kerri's hand and shifted over to Carter as well.

“Carter,” he admonished. “You should know better than to kiss Arik's—or anyone else's, for that matter—True Love.”

“Well, at least now they actually know they're True Loves.”

Kerri crouched down next to Carter. “Oh my God, are you okay?” she parted his blonde hair gently. “You're bleeding. Oh God, somebody take him to the medical centre.” *God, Arik, I can't believe you just did that.*

*Me neither.* He was still looking at his hand with an expression that was a mixture of shock and suspicion.

“I...I'm so sorry,” Arik told Carter. “I'll...I'll bring you to the medical centre.”

“No,” Drake said, helping Carter up. “You're staying with Cinderella. I believe you two have some talking to do.” He put an arm around Carter to support his weight and shifted off.

Kerri turned to stare at him. “You...that was...totally unnecessary.”

He bit his lip. “I don't know what came over me.”

She was about to say something when she realised that everybody in the dining hall was still staring at them. “Nothing to look at,” she called to them. “Get back to eating your breakfast. It's none of your freaking business.”

They turned back to their food, muttering between themselves.

“I know I said no public display of affection,” Kerri said to Arik. “But that doesn't mean you have to show public display of...violence!”

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I just...I still can't believe I did that.”

“Well, neither can I.” She crossed her arms, biting her lips. “This is going to get to the boss, isn't it,” she said after a pause.

Arik sighed and nodded heavily. “Sorry.” He walked over so that he was standing right in front of her. “Are we allowed to publicly display our affections now?” he asked meekly.

She half sighed, half laughed as he pulled her into a hug. “We really need to clear this up.”

Arik clicked his fingers. “Done.”

Just then, Mandy walked into the dining room. "Ricky!" she called.

Kerri and Arik exchanged a look.

*Okay, okay, I'll do it. But why now?*

*Things can't possibly get any worse.*

*You wanna bet? He led Mandy out of the dining hall, saying that he needed to talk to her. I'll be back in about five minutes. Don't be surprised if I have a slap mark on my face when I come back.*

She wasn't surprised when he had a slap mark on his face when he came back.

*I was wrong when I said that things couldn't possibly get any worse, wasn't I?*

*Pretty much.*

*Sorry.*

*You should be.* He grabbed her hand and shifted.

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"We have to be professional now," Arik warned her.

She smirked. "I don't think I'm going to have that problem. You, on the other hand..."

He sighed. "Just drop it. Please?"

"Okay, okay. What are you teaching me today?"

"Show me your powers first."

She held her hand out in front of her and a ball of golden light that was about the size of a football hovered over it.

Arik's eyes widened.

"What? What's wrong?"

"It seems to have...grown quite a lot." Arik pointed at her power. "Only people who've lived for at least a hundred and fifty years old can have that much power."

Kerri stared down at her hand. "Oh wow."

"Okay, now show me fire."

She held out her hand, felt her Mark glow and divided the head from the cold. Fire erupted from her hand and towards a couple of trees nearby and set them ablaze. They both gasped.

“Hurry,” Arik said. “Put the fire out.”

Kerri bit her lip and held her hand out against the trees and ice blasted out, freezing the trees completely. “Oops.”

“It’ll melt.” Arik blinked a couple of times. “Shift.”

“To where?”

“Anywhere within my eyesight.”

She closed her eyes and drew up a map of the meadow they were in. She smirked and shifted.

“Kerri?” Arik looked around him. “Kerri? Where are you?”

She waved to him from on top of a tree.

He sighed. “Get back here.”

“If you insist.” She shifted and landed right in front of him so that he gasped in surprise.

“Have you practised at all during these few days except for with Joshua?” he asked her once he regained his composure.

“No.”

Arik gave a low whistle.

“What? What’s wrong? Tell me what’s wrong.”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Uh okay, today I’m going to teach you how to...control your fire and water. We’ll start with fire.” He clicked his fingers and a flame appeared between his fingers. Kerri watched as he drew it out with his other hand and the fire got bigger and bigger and danced around them both.

“That’s so cool.”

“You try.”

She frowned. “Don’t you have to teach me how?”

He waited patiently. “Just try. I have a feeling you’ll be able to do it.”

She summoned up fire and hesitantly drew it out into a long shape. Then she drew it so that it was long and thin and looked like a whip. She smirked at Arik, who paled.

“No, don’t—” he stopped talking and jumped to avoid the fire whip. “Are you crazy? Stop!” Ice thrust out of his hand and only just froze the whip, the ice melting into water almost immediately.

## 34 - Powerful

Arik stared at the puddle of water on the grass. She was powerful. Normally, it would've frozen the whip, but it had barely turned it to water. He worked his jaw a few times. "Never do that again," he said in a strained voice.

The girl didn't seem to notice anything wrong. "Fine. Sorry."

He stood there and looked at her. Looked at the second most powerful person he had ever seen in his life. The most powerful being his father, but he wasn't in his life anymore, so that didn't really count.

"Okay," he said after a while. "We're going to do the same with water."

"Um, how much heat do I have to put into it?"

Arik shrugged. "As much as you want. As long as it melts the ice but doesn't turn into a flame." He held his hand over the puddle and the water snaked its way up into the air. He held it so that it hovered between his two hands and drew it into a series of different shape, whipping them across the trees. The trees split into half and crashed down onto the ground. "Try that." He dropped the water and flicked his wrist so that the trees reattached and repaired itself.

After some hesitation, she mirrored his actions and did the exact same thing.

Arik nodded and flicked his wrist once more so that the trees would repair themselves.

But she wasn't done yet. She drew the water out so that they looked like long streamers and wound it around both of them, swirling.

Suddenly, Arik realised that the water was coiled and hovered around him and him alone. He looked up as realisation dawned on him. "Don't—"

Smirking, the girl constricted her hand into a fist, and the water splashed all over him.

He gritted his teeth. "—do it." He closed his eyes and willed himself to keep calm. "Never do that again either."

"I really like that the vein's that bulging on your forehead," she said cheerfully.

"Do something like that again and I'll strangle you with it." He opened his eyes again and clicked his fingers so that the water from his clothes and body evaporated. "You know how to produce fire and water, but do you know how to extract it from somewhere or something else like I just did?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

Arik summoned up a puddle of water and let it drop next to his feet. "Pick that up."

She picked it up and threw it at him. Luckily, he saw that one coming and ducked. That was the last straw. He straightened up, clicked his fingers, and a gust of wind circled her and blew her off. When the wind died down, the girl was hanging by her hair from a tree.

He grinned. "Are you going to be good?"

"Yes," she replied sulkily.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Swear on your life?"

"Get me off this tree, retard."

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"Mother." Arik bowed.

"Arik."

"I want to...I want an appointment with the chief."

His mother's eyes bored into him. "Is there a reason for this...appointment?"

Arik gritted his teeth. No, I just want to invite him out for a cup of tea. "Yes. It's about the girl."

She looked at him speculatively for a while before picking up the phone. "Sir, Arik Channing is here to see you. He says it's about the girl. Yes. Of course, sir." She put down the phone. "You may go in to Room Number One."

"Thank you, Mother."

She nodded graciously at him before he walked past her desk and into the room.

"Channing?" The boss entered the room from a secret door.

"Sir," Arik said, standing up. "It's a pleasure to be able to talk to you...in person."

"Yes, well, the girl's important." He sat down opposite to Arik and motioned for him to sit down. "What seems to be the problem?"

"The thing is, Sir...she's very powerful. She's more powerful than anybody I've ever seen. Other than my father."

The boss scowled at the mention of Arik's father. "We all know the sorceress is powerful. So what seems to be the problem?"

"She's almost as powerful as I am. Maybe even more powerful than any of us. I'm not sure whether I can teach her all the skills properly."

"Channing, I chose you because I thought you were one of the best trainers in this company." He narrowed his eyes. "Do you doubt me? Do you doubt my decisions?"

"No, Sir," Arik hastened to explain. "It's not that. Of course not. Never. Ever. No."

The boss leant back in his chair. "So is there still a problem?"

Arik faltered. "No, Sir," he stuttered.

The boss raised an eyebrow slightly, picking up on Arik's hesitation. "You can leave now."

"Thank you for your time, Sir." Arik stood up and bowed to him before leaving.

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"Hey," she said as he climbed into bed next to her and kissed her. "Where were you? You disappeared after lunch."

"I had to go see the boss."

"Really? Why?"

He shrugged. "There was something we needed to talk about."

## 35 - Breakup and Makeup

She narrowed her eyes. *There's something you're not telling me.*

He feigned innocence. "Like what?"

"What did you talk to the boss about?"

"About..." he trailed off, but she heard it first from his head.

*You.*

She raised an eyebrow. "Why were you two talking about me?"

Arik worked his jaw a few times. "Nothing. It was like...a progress report thing."

*You must be the crappiest liar I have ever seen in my life.*

*It's hard to lie to you.*

Kerri looked into his eyes. "Why were you two talking about me?" she asked again, a little forcefully.

He licked his lips. "Uh...we were...I wanted to...see whether he'd give you...another trainer."

Her mouth dropped. "What? Why?"

"I..." he bit his lip. "I can't take the responsibility, the burden."

Kerri's jaw hardened. "Is that what I am to you? Responsibility? Burden?"

Arik obviously realised that he was in deep water. Deep, boiling hot water. "No, of course not," he hastily explained. "It's not like that. I just...I can't—"

She shook her head lightly. "I'm...a burden to you." *I cannot believe you just said that to my face. I think I prefer you when you're lying.* She turned away from him.

*Kerri...you know I didn't mean it like that.*

She didn't reply. "How could he do this to me?" she thought, careful to shield her thoughts from him. "I know I haven't known him for very long, maybe like a week or two, but still...how could he do this to me?"

*Kerri...please.* He slid an arm around her, and she tried to wriggle her way free, but he held on tight. She considered jamming her elbow down again, but he must have seen that coming, because the arm that



was holding her to him shifted so that she couldn't move her arm at all. He pressed a kiss into her hair, smelling the sweet scent of her shampoo.

He kissed a sensitive spot that she didn't know she had behind her ear. *You're a responsibility to me because I have to control myself around you and I have to act responsible and stop myself from jumping you every chance I get.* She stopped herself from grinning at the word jumping.

He dropped a kiss on the side of her neck. *You're a burden to me because I can't think straight when I'm around you. You've seen what you can make me do this morning in the dining hall. I'm going to have to carry that around for...well, forever.*

He brushed his lips up and down her jaw line. *I wanted to get you a new trainer because I'm afraid that I won't be able to act professionally around you when we train, and I don't want to be the reason why you can't receive the best training, because I want the best for you.*

He suddenly shifted so that he was on top of her, making her gasp, putting most of his weight onto his arms so that he wouldn't squish her. Kerri looked into his eyes and was momentarily lost in a raging sea of sparkling emerald.

"Well," Kerri said grudgingly, putting her arms around his neck. "Since you put it that way..."

He chuckled and lowered himself down to kiss her gently before burying his head into her neck and making her laugh.

"Do you forgive me?" he murmured, his warm breath tickling her neck.

She slid her hands from his neck and ran her hands through his jet-black hair. "You're on probation."

## 36 - Trouble...With a Capital T

Arik looked at Kerri, who was sleeping peacefully in his arms. So beautiful. So gorgeous. So perfect. So...well, his. And he wasn't going to take no for an answer.

*Well, Channing, long time no see,* a snide voice that Arik dreaded sounded in his head.

Arik gritted his teeth. *What do you want?*

*Oh, I think you know who I want.*

Arik's tightened instantly around Kerri. *You're not getting her. Never.*

*Why not? Are you going to mourn another loss over another True Love?*

*Stay away from her. Stay away from me. Stay away from all of us. It's your funeral if you don't.*

*I'll be the judge of that,* the voice said coolly. *The only reason I'm calling is so that I could give you a chance to wake your little lovely up to say goodbye.*

Arik fought the urge to kill something. *You know, it really surprises me how extreme hate can link someone together telepathically.*

*I must be special.*

*frack off.*

*Or what? Are you going to cry until the next one comes along?*

*frack. Off.*

The voice laughed. *Remember, this may be your last chance to ever talk to her again. Say your goodbyes, Channing.*

*You'll never have her. Not even after hell freezes over.*

*Enjoy those last few moments with your lady love.* The voice rang off.

Arik closed his eyes and rested his head against the wall. This wasn't happening. Not again. He couldn't let it happen again. With Sitara, he just about survived her loss. With Kerri...well, he'd kill himself if he lost her.

*Drake!*

*Jesus, Arik, it's three in the morning.*

*It's... Woodland.*

*There was a pause. Not again.*

*Oh yes.*

*I'll get Carter. Where's Kerri?*

*Asleep. He says he's going to come for her.*

Drake shifted into the room, followed by Carter.

"What are we going to do?" Arik asked them, his arms around Kerri, who was still sleeping peacefully. "I can't...I can't lose her." He kissed her hair. "I can't."

"Well, we could tell the boss," suggested Carter.

"No," Drake and Arik answered simultaneously. "This is personal," Arik added.

"Then we should probably wake her," Carter said. "After all, this is about her."

Arik looked down at Kerri. She stirred and nestled closer to him. He bit his lip. He couldn't lose her. Not now, not ever.

## 37 - Oh Crap.

“Kerri, wake up.” Someone shook her shoulder. “Kerri.” It was Arik.

Kerri stirred. “Five more minutes,” she mumbled.

“Kerri, love,” Drake’s voice appeared suddenly. “You’re going to have to wake up.”

Kerri sighed and sat up reluctantly, rubbing her eyes. “What is it, and what the hell are you doing in here?”

“Kerri, there’s something we need to...talk to you about.” Beside her, Arik looked concerned and worried.

“But it’s like three in the morning! Are you sure this can’t wait?”

“Pretty sure.”

She yawned. “Okay. Hit me.”

“The people from the C.E. are coming. To take you.”

Her eyes snapped open. “What?”

“Well, not people. Person. He’s very powerful.”

“Why him?”

“Because he’s one of the best fighters in the C.E. and he’s one of the werewolves that were actually trained.”

“You mean he’s one of the ones you trained before he left for the C.E.?”

“Yes.”

“Who...who’s he?”

Arik waved away her question impatiently. “His name’s Woodland. But it doesn’t matter. That’s not important. The important thing is that he’s coming for you.”

Kerri paled. “What...what did you say his name was?”

“Woodland. Why?”

Kerri opened her mouth to tell him who exactly Woodland was when she remembered her promise to Joshua. “Oh, nobody. I just...I couldn’t hear it the first time round. Uh, how do you know he’s that powerful?”

Arik’s jaw hardened. “He...he took Sitara away from the Sterling.”

Kerri made sure that her thoughts were shielded from Arik before mentally freaking out. No wonder Joshua didn’t want her to tell Arik Ty’s full name. shoot. Ty was coming for her? Was that a good thing or a bad thing? A bad thing, she told herself. A very, very bad thing. Very bad.

She sat up even more. “Oh. So...what are we going to do?”

“We...don’t actually know yet.”

“Wait. How do you even know he’s coming for me? I mean, was that guy so stupid that he told you he was coming?”

“He told us he was coming not because he was stupid, but because he was good enough,” Arik said grimly. “He’s a bit of a show-off, but I guess he’s allowed to be, because he really is one of the best fighters in werewolf history.”

Eep. She’d been living with a werewolf warrior kind of thing.

Kerri swore. “So uh, does everyone know about this? Or is it something we keep strictly to ourselves?”

“Definitely something we keep strictly to ourselves,” they said simultaneously.

“Oh great. Did he say when he was coming?”

“He’s not that good. Yet.”

Something suddenly occurred to Kerri, and her eyes widened. “What day is it today?” she asked them.

Drake frowned. “Why would you—”

“Just tell me what the damn day is, Drake,” she snapped.

“Friday.”

“shoot. shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot. It’s Friday today.”

Arik raised an eyebrow. “Yes, we know.”

Kerri hit him on the arm. “Tomorrow night, he’s coming tomorrow night!”

“What?” They all turned to look at her. “Why?”

Kerri shot them a look. “Guys really are dumber, aren’t they? Tomorrow night’s a full moon.”

All three men exchanged a look and jumped into action, yelling out what they were supposed to do next.

“SHUT UP!” Kerri yelled. “You’re giving me a headache.”

They all stopped to look at her.

“We need a plan. Like a good one. Which we’re not going to think of at three in the flipping morning. How about tonight?” she asked them.

Arik held up a finger. “We have that dinner tonight.”

Kerri frowned. “What dinner?”

Arik licked his lips. “Uh, the boss has arranged an important dinner after the attack to discuss...tactics, and to introduce you to everyone formally.”

“And we all have to go?”

“Well, yes. And you definitely have to.”

“Dammit. Why did I not know about this until now?”

Arik shrugged. “I guess I...kind of forgot to tell you about it.”

“You forgot? You forgot?”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not that good at this...commitment thing. Besides, don’t girls love surprises?”

“Yeah, pleasant surprises.”

“Okay, okay, you two, cut it out.” Drake waved his arms in front of them. “We’re wasting time.”

Kerri sat with her back resting on Arik’s chest and his arms slid around her.

“How powerful exactly is Ty—I mean, this werewolf guy?” she asked Drake.

“Very. He’s highly trained. He managed to last longer than the others before betraying us. Rumours are that he was a spy for the C.E. and came here to train so that he’d be a better fighter and he’d be able to familiarise himself with our company and where everything was.”

“Arik, didn’t you use to be good friends with the guy?” Carter suddenly asked.

Kerri turned to look at Arik, whose face was so emotionless it could’ve been a plank of wood.

“We used to be close friends,” Arik said finally. “And then he betrayed us for the C.E. Then he took

Sitara. And now he's trying to take you."

"How exactly did he tell you that he was coming for me?" Kerri asked him. "Did he leave a note? Write a letter? Text you? Phone you?"

Arik bit his lip. "Telepathic bond."

Kerri raised an eyebrow.

"Close friends have telepathic bonds. Once he betrayed us, I cut off my bond to him so that I'd never be able to find him, but unfortunately, he never cut his bond to me, which means he can talk to me, and I'd be able to reply. It's just that I can't start a conversation first." Arik sighed and ran his hand through his hair.

Kerri tried to comfort him mentally, soothing his nerves. It worked. After a while, he relaxed a little, and his arms around her tightened momentarily as if to thank her.

"So he told you he was coming for me," Kerri said. "And we're pretty sure that he's coming tomorrow night. Arik, are you sure he didn't give any hints about when he was coming or where he was coming to?"

Arik shook his head. "The only hint he gave me was...was that I'd never be able to see or talk to you ever again."

Something in Kerri's stomach dropped. *That's not going to happen. It's not.*

*Are you reassuring me, or yourself?*

*You. Me. Both.*

His arms tightened around her and he dropped a kiss on the side of her neck. *We'll be okay. I'll make sure of that. I promise.*

*Never make promises you can't keep.* Kerri gently pried off his arms around her and stood up. "I'm going to go wash my face. That ought to wake me up properly."

## 38 - Comforting

“What are we going to do?” Arik asked Drake and Carter once Kerri had gone into the bathroom.

Drake shrugged. “We’ll fight.”

“Even Carter?”

Carter raised an eyebrow. “What, am I not good enough for you?”

“No, I’m just saying. You haven’t had your exams yet, and you may need—”

“The fight would be good practise for my exams,” Carter interrupted him cheerfully.

Arik looked at him doubtfully. “I don’t want you to get hurt because you’re not fully trained...”

“I am fully trained; I just don’t have the certificate to prove it yet.”

Arik sighed. “If you insist.”

“Can I bring Mel as well?”

Arik and Drake turned to look at him, and Arik asked the question that they both wanted to know the answer to.

“Who the hell is Mel?”

Carter shrugged. “My girlfriend.”

Arik raised an eyebrow. “Carter, your relationships end even more quickly than mine. I don’t think those girls can qualify as your girlfriends. They’re more like, what’s the word for it? Oh yeah, one-night-stands.”

Carter rolled his eyes at the comment, but then he was immediately serious again. “No, Mel...she’s different.”

Arik and Drake exchanged a look. “Are you two True Loves?” Drake asked.

Carter shrugged. “We don’t know for sure.”

“How can you not know for sure when...” Drake’s eyes widened. “You guys have done it, right?”

Carter blushed. “Hey, Arik hasn’t done it either.”



Drake rolled his eyes. “What is wrong with you two? If I found my True Love, we’d be—”

“Screwing each other like bunnies,” Arik interrupted dryly. “Yes, we know.”

Drake shrugged and held out his hands. “It’s the natural thing to do. It’s human nature.”

Arik rolled his eyes but otherwise ignored Drake’s comment. “Right, Carter, you can bring Mel. But I swear, if she tells one word to anyone about this...”

“She won’t tell.”

“Good. We’re going to need all the help we can get. We’ll call in Joshua as well.”

Kerri came out of the toilet, having washed her face and brushed her teeth. “Okay, do we have a plan yet?” she asked after Arik gave her a kiss.

“Yes,” Drake replied. “We fight.”

Kerri’s eyes widened. “We fight?”

“No,” Drake said. “We fight.”

“Then what the hell am I supposed to do?”

“Sit safely in a place where Woodland won’t be able to find you.”

Kerri was about to tell him where he could stick that idea but Arik spoke first.

“Don’t we need someone staying with her? You know, just in case.”

Drake nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

Arik looked at Kerri. “I’ll do it.”

Kerri looked right back at him. “No.”

“What?”

“Look, as much as I’d love to have you protect me and stay with me, this is partly your fight. It’s kind of obvious how much you want to take T—Woodland down. So I’m not letting you stay with me. Just don’t die on me.”

He gave her a quick smile. “Thanks, and I’ll try.”

*Seriously, don’t die.*

*I’ll try.*

*Don't just try.*

*I'll try very hard. Extremely hard.* He slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her close to him.

She wrapped his arms around him. *Promise?*

He chuckled. *Promise.*

"Whatever mental conversation you two are having, stop," Drake said. "We need to work on the details of the plan."

"Wait," Carter said. "Don't we need to call in Mel and Joshua?"

Arik nodded. "Good idea."

*Joshua.*

*Yes, sir.*

*Come to my room now.*

*Yes, sir.*

Kerri looked questioningly at Arik. "Do you and Joshua have a telepathic bond?"

"Yes."

"But he's human."

"But I'm not. Besides, I saved his life."

*Oh, and one more thing,* Kerri's voice appeared in his head.

*Yes?*

*Be nice to Joshua. Please. Treat him as if he were one of you. Don't discriminate against him just because he's human.*

*I don't discriminate—*

She looked at him, and he sighed.

*Fine, I'll try.*

*Thank you.*

A pixie-like female who was about five feet tall with purple-streaked black hair that was cut into a sleek bob showed up in the room suddenly.

Kerri raised an eyebrow. *Who on earth?*

Carter held out a hand as he introduced her. "Everybody, this is Mel. Mel, this is Drake, Arik and Kerri. Mel's...my girlfriend."

Mel smiled up at Carter, and then smiled at them. "Hi guys."

"Hey Mel," they chorused. Drake gave her a hug while Arik shook her hand.

Kerri stepped forward to shake the girl's hand. "Wow, Carter's girlfriend, huh? I've heard so much about you."

Arik snorted. *You hadn't heard of her until five seconds ago.*

*Shut up.*

"Hi, Kerri. I've heard so much about you as well. You're the sorceress, right?"

"Well...I'm a sorceress."

She waved away her words. "You're *the* sorceress, Kerri."

"Right. Thanks, I think. Um, I hope you don't mind me asking...but...what exactly are you? I mean, you don't look like a dragon or a vampire."

"I'm a fairy," she said. Only now did Kerri notice the wings Mel had on her back.

"Uh, right."

Mel grinned. "I know it's kind of hard to believe that fairies exist."

Kerri grinned back. "Sorry, I'm just not that used to...well, everything yet."

"It's okay." Mel bounded back so that she was standing next to Carter and reached up to give him a kiss on the cheek. "So, honey, why did you want me here? You finally want to introduce me to your friends?"

Carter smiled down at her. "Well, we kind of have an emergency."

"I kind of figured that out since it's four in the morning. What's wrong?"

"Let's wait for Joshua," Arik said. "I don't want to have to say everything twice."

Just then, the door opened and Joshua walked in.

“Did you want me, sir?”

“Yes, Joshua. Come and sit.”

Joshua obliged.

“Okay,” Arik said. “We have a problem.” He took a deep breath. “Woodland is back.”

Mel gasped and Joshua, who was sitting next to Kerri, paled visibly. Kerri squeezed his arm sympathetically.

“He wants to take Kerri away with him to the C.E.,” Arik continued. “And we’re guessing that he’s coming tomorrow night, because tomorrow night’s the full moon.”

Mel shook her head. “That’s bad. That’s very bad.”

“We know, and that’s why we were kind of hoping that you’d help us.”

Mel nodded. “Of course. I’m assuming this is confidential.”

“Very confidential. We’re not telling the boss because...well, this is kind of personal.”

Mel nodded again. “Oh, I know all about it, Arik. Everybody does.”

Arik could feel the heat creep up his cheeks, but he ignored it.

“So, what’s the plan?” Joshua asked suddenly and abruptly.

“Well, basically, we fight,” Drake said. “The problem is how.”

“Of course,” Carter cut in. “We also need to know when and where.”

“Well, we kind of know it’s going to be at around midnight, don’t we?” Kerri piped up. “It’s just a matter of where, really.”

*Hello, Channing, Woodland’s voice appeared in his head again, and Arik stiffened. Said your goodbyes yet?*

*No, and I’m not going to have to.*

*Oh, I’m pretty sure you will. I’m not coming alone.*

Arik stiffened even more. *Why are you telling me this?*

*I want it to be a fair fight. At this rate, you have at least three percent chance of winning. He laughed. Send my love to Kerri for me.*

*I won't have your love even if you gift-wrapped it along with a million dollars,* Kerri's voice appeared suddenly his head, her tone vicious.

*Ah, Ree.*

*Leave Arik alone.*

*Don't worry, Ree. I will...after I have you back by my side.*

*Over my dead body. I was never on your effing side.*

*I'd much prefer it if you were alive, Ree.*

*Don't call me that.* She rang off and turned to kiss Arik on the cheek. We're going to be fine. *Don't believe a single word that asshat says.*

Arik smiled unconvincingly. *I don't.*

"What just happened?" Mel asked them.

"We just had another call from Woodland," Arik said through gritted teeth.

"What did he say?" Joshua asked.

"Oh, just that he's going to take me and that Arik should say goodbye to me before it's too late," Kerri said, and Arik's arm tightened around her.

"Don't worry, Kerri," Mel reached over to reassure her. "We're not going to let that jerk take you."

"Thanks."

Mel yawned. "I have an idea. Why don't we go back to bed, and meet up in breakfast at say, around nine? I can't think straight in the morning."

Carter and Drake mirrored her yawn. "I'm beat, man," Carter said.

"We are worried about you, K," Drake said through another yawn. "It's just that—"

"Go back to bed, guys," Kerri said. "Arik and I need some sleep as well. We all do."

Drake, Carter and even Mel gave her a hug before leaving, and Joshua nodded his goodbyes.

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"Tell me about Sitara, Arik," murmured Kerri, who was lying on his chest, lazily tracing random patterns on it with her fingers.

Arik bit his lip, and was surprised to feel that the pain that usually lanced through him whenever Sitara was mentioned had disappeared. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

Arik sat up. "I'll tell you everything about Sitara if you tell me how you know Woodland."

"What?" Kerri turned to look at him, surprised.

Arik raised an eyebrow. "Kerri, he called you Ree. Obviously, you two know each other quite well."

She worked her jaw a few times. "Woodland...was...is Ty."

Arik frowned. "Ty?" Ty. Short for Tyler. Tyler Woodland. Of course. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?" he asked flatly.

"Because...because I promised I wouldn't tell you, because it'd hurt you. I only did it because I didn't want to hurt you."

"It's hurting me more now."

"Arik." She climbed over so that she was kneeling over him, and she reached over to cup his chin so that he would look at her. "I know you're upset. But please believe me when I tell you that I only did it because I wanted to protect you."

"Protect me? *Protect me?* I don't need protecting, Kerri."

"That's what you want everyone to think," Kerri said, looking into his eyes. "When deep down, you know that you may just be one of the weakest ones because of your emotional ties."

Arik glared at her. Then after a while he sighed. *You're right. I'm sorry.*

She crawled up so that she could hug him. *I'm sorry for not telling you earlier.*

He wrapped his arms around her. *Do you want to know about Sitara?*

*Yes please.*

*Well...I was her trainer.*

She looked up at him. *This is sounding awfully familiar. What does she look like?*

*She had long, straight, black hair and brown eyes. She was very pretty. Like an exotic beauty. Of course, he added hastily, her beauty was nothing compared to yours.*

*She snorted. Nice save.*

*I'm pretty much an expert in the area.*

*Don't push it. What else?*

*I don't know...we were getting pretty good together, I guess.*

*And then?*

*About a week before she left, she started going out in the middle of the night when she thought I was asleep. She'd always come back in the morning before I woke up. I tried following her a couple of times once, but I'd always lose her. And then one night, before she left, she kissed me on the forehead. She never came back.*

Kerri rested her head on his chest and hugged him. *I'm sorry.*

He kissed the top of her head. *It's okay. I've got you now, right? So I'm good.*

She reached up and kissed him gently. *Go to sleep, Arik.*

His arms tightened around her. *No.*

*You need sleep.*

*What if he comes to take you while I'm sleeping?*

*That wouldn't happen. It's only Friday, remember? We've got time.*

He was unconvinced. He could never be sure around Woodland. Even when they were friends. But—

*Arik, go to sleep. Please. If you don't sleep, then you won't have the chance to um...charge your battery, or whatever. You need sleep to help with your magic, remember?*

He looked at her grudgingly. *Fine. But when I wake up and you're not there...*

*You'll come to get me and then you're welcome to whip my @\$@ any time.*

An eyebrow went up and he smirked at the word "whip". *Really?*

*You have a filthy mind.*

*Only when I'm around you.*

She rolled her eyes but smiled, kissing a line down his jaw. *Sleep.*

*Fine.*

## 39 - The Kind-Of Plan

Kerri was woken up when she felt a kiss on her cheek.

*Wake up, sleepyhead. It's eight thirty.*

She groaned. *Five more minutes.*

*Up. Now. Come on.*

Kerri groaned again before rubbing her hands over her eyes and opening them. Arik loosened his grip around her waist and gently pushed her so that she was sitting upwards. She got out of the bed, stretched and yawned before going to the bathroom.

When she came out, Arik was fully dressed. She changed while Arik brushed his teeth, washed his face and shaved.

"Ready?" He asked her when he came out.

"As I'll ever be."

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"Hey guys," Mel greeted them from where she was sitting next to Carter.

"Hi," Kerri mumbled before sitting down next to Drake.

"Coffee?" he asked her.

"Please."

He left to get her coffee while Arik sat down on the other side of her, next to Joshua.

"Morning, Joshua," he greeted him.

Joshua looked surprise. "Good morning, sir."

*See? I'm trying.*

*Try harder.*

*I can only do stuff like this one thing at a time. Men can't multitask.*

"Here you go, K." Drake placed a cup of coffee in front of her.



She lifted her head off the table. "Thanks." She blew on it before drinking.

"So, guys," Mel piped up. "We still need a plan. A detailed one."

"Mel, how long have you been a fully-trained fairy?" Drake asked her.

"About eighty years or so."

"Good. Then maybe you can stay with Kerri. You know, in case anything bad happens."

"Are you sure you guys don't need me out there?"

"No, we'll be fine," Carter assured her. "It's way too dangerous out there."

Mel raised an eyebrow. "Too dangerous?"

"I don't want you to get hurt, Mel. Werewolves are dangerous. Especially a highly trained one like Woodland."

"Aw," Drake said. "That's so sweet. But right now we kind of have more important things to do. But still, guys, really sweet. Okay, so Mel's going to stay with Kerri. Any idea where they can stay?"

"Can Joshua stay with me as well?" Kerri asked. She knew what the chances of Joshua getting killed were, and she didn't want to see one of her best friends die.

Arik nodded. "Yeah, he should. It's too dangerous for him out there."

The look on Joshua's face was one of frustration and gratitude. "Thank you, sir."

"So where do you think Woodland will go to find Kerri?" Arik asked them.

"Probably your room," Drake said after there was silence at the table. "I mean, that's where she'd probably be at around midnight, right?"

"Okay. That means Kerri will have to be far away from there. Where will she hide?"

Joshua and Kerri exchanged a look. "We've got a place in mind."

"Where is it?"

Kerri worked her jaw a few times. "I can't tell you."

Arik raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Why not?"

"Because...because if Ty reads your mind he'll know where I am."

“She has a point,” said Drake thoughtfully.

“What? So you mean I won’t know where she is?”

“Yes,” they all said simultaneously.

Arik bit his lip, worried.

*Don’t worry, she thought, trying to comfort him. We’ll be fine. I mean, I have a fully-trained fairy and a ninja protecting me. You can’t get any safer than that.*

*I don’t like not knowing where you are.*

*It’s for the best. It’s to protect me.*

*That’s the only reason why I’m going along with it.*

Kerri reached over and kissed him on the cheek. *We’ll be fine. I promise. I’m more worried about you.*

*I’ll be fine.*

“So,” Drake was saying. “After the dinner tomorrow night, Kerri, Mel and Joshua will sneak off to their little hiding place, and we’ll all go over to Arik’s place and get ready.”

“Okay,” Mel agreed. “Arik and Carter will call Kerri and me telepathically when it’s over so that we know when it’s safe.” She held up a hand. “There’s one thing you need to remember though. During the fight, you must not think about me, Kerri or Joshua. Not even once. Or Woodland will be able to find out where we are.”

Arik nodded and stood up. “Come on, Kerri. Let’s go.”

“Where’re we going?”

Arik shrugged.

Kerri raised an eyebrow. “Uh, okay. I’ll see you guys later.”

“Bye guys.”

“Bye,” Arik called over his shoulder as he dragged Kerri out of the dining room by her wrist.

“Hey! That hurts!” She wrenched her arm away from him. “Where are we going?”

Arik pushed her against the wall and kissed her roughly. She was surprised, and quite pleased, but she ignored the latter thought.

“What was that for?” she asked gently, pulling away from him. She looked up at him and noticed that

his green eyes had darkened and was now deep forest green in colour.

*I...I can't lose you.* He looked away, blushing slightly. *I can't.*

She cupped him by the chin and made him look at her. *You won't.*

He lowered his head to kiss her, softly this time. *You know, we're supposed to Join to see whether we're really True Loves.*

She grinned. *Just say you want sex.*

*I do, but that's not the point. Not really.*

*Tell you what, we'll uh, Join after we get rid of Ty, okay? That'll give you something to look forward to.*

He smiled and started kissing her neck. She pushed him away, laughing.

"Not here! It's a public place, remember?"

"No public displays of affection, yeah, yeah," he mumbled into her neck.

Kerri's eyes widened suddenly when she saw who was walking towards them and tried to push Arik away again, but she slipped and fell.

Arik raised an eyebrow. "Kerri?" He bent down to help her.

*No, she screamed in his head. Don't even come near me. Make a snide comment or something.*

He was about to ask what on earth was happening when a voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Channing."

He whipped around. "Yes, sir. Nice seeing you here."

Kerri clambered up from the floor. "Hello, sir."

"What were you two doing before McCarthy slipped?" he asked them.

"I was feeling really unsteady, sir. I was having a headache," Kerri explained. "Arik was trying to hold on to me but I fell anyway."

The boss nodded. "I'll see you at dinner tonight."

"Of course, sir," they chorused as he turned and walked away from them.

*Thanks. I'd have gotten into a lot of trouble.*

*I know. There's a reason for no public display of affection.*

*Fine. You win this time.*

*Arik, really. I win every time.* She turned away from him, and he grabbed her from behind.

*We have to keep a low profile. You know, act casual.*

She looked down at his hands which were on her waist. *Right, just like we are now?*

His hands dropped to his side and he smiled sheepishly. *Maybe we should go back to our room.*

*Where you can keep harassing me?* She grinned. *Hey, I've got an idea. Why don't you teach me some magic? You know, something really powerful. Just in case Ty finds me.*

He bit his lip, but nodded after a while and grabbed her hand to shift to the O.R.

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"You're really powerful, and I don't know whether it's because you're a sorceress. You're one of the most powerful people I've ever seen in my life, actually."

"Is that a compliment?"

He shrugged. "Kind of. So first, I want to teach you how to control earth and air. They're kind of like the basics. After that you can do spells and all that kind of stuff."

"Spells? Really? Like magic potions and curses and stuff like that?"

Arik frowned. "Something like that. It's something like..." he trails off. "Like Harry Potter. Except this is so much better."

"So will I need a wand?"

Arik snorted. "No." He pressed his palms together. "Try this." His hands flared outwards and the earth beneath them cracked open.

Kerri jumped backwards to avoid stepping on the cracks. She imitated him, and another crack ran through the meadow. Arik was about to close the ground up when she held up a hand.

"Wait. Let me try." She slowly eased her hands so that the palms were pressing together again, and the cracks in the ground joined up and disappeared.

Arik nodded approvingly. "If you make different motions with your hands, different things will happen to the earth. For example, if you make this circling motion..." he paused to demonstrate, "a hole will open up."

“Cool.” Kerri looked long and hard at the earth, then she splayed her hands palm down. Then she flicked her wrists upwards. Suddenly, a tidal wave of mud and earth shot up from the ground. She had formed a mountain.

Arik was staring at the mountain open-mouthed. She shrugged and smiled weakly.

“I’m powerful.”

“Very,” he agreed. “Okay, now for air. Palms must be faced upwards.”

She mirrored his actions.

“Do you feel the air above your hands? Suck it in, let it absorb into your skin and flow towards your Mark.”

Kerri did so, subconsciously taking in a deep breath. When she exhaled, she let go of all the air she had absorbed, and aimed it at a tree. The wind shot out of her hands and the group of trees cracked and fell, the leaves floating down everywhere.

Arik nodded thoughtfully, waving his hand so that the trees repaired themselves. “When you’re in that hiding place of yours, try out new actions on fire, water, air and earth, but tone it down a little so that things happen on a smaller scale.”

Kerri smirked. “Arik?”

“Yes?”

“Think fast.” Her fingers twitched and the earth beneath him gave away. He cursed and jumped, but just when he was about to land, she twitched her fingers again, and the spot he was about to land on gave away as well.

Arik pushed one hand downwards and a gust of wind shot out and propelled him up and into the trees overhead out of sight.

“Arik?” She looked up, squinting in the bright light.

“Did you really think something like that would catch me out?” he asked suddenly from behind her.

She gasped in surprise and whipped around. “How did you do that?”

“I’m an air dragon. Air is my element. Of course, when you live long enough, you can master the other elements as well, but air will always be my forte.”

“Can you fly?”

Arik was amused. “Kind of. But only when I’m a dragon.”

“Oh,” Kerri breathed. “Can I ride you?”

A corner of his mouth went up, and she whacked him on the arm.

“You know what I mean,” she said, grinning despite herself.

“Didn’t you uh, ride me once when we were flying out the trainees’ building after the fight with the black dragon?”

“Yes, but I was too distraught and traumatised to realise what was happening, so it doesn’t count.”

Arik grinned. “Alright. But only for a while, because we have to get back soon.” He shot up into the air and disappeared before landing as a dragon.

*Do you know, she thought to him as she walked over and stroked his head, that you’re the most beautiful dragon I have ever seen? Not that I’ve seen a lot of them, but compared to the black one, you’re stunning.*

He let out a sound that reverberated from deep down his throat, which sounded like a purr, but more masculine. She gave his head one last stroke before climbing up him and sitting on his back. She felt a breeze as his wings, which were right behind her, twitch and move, and suddenly, they were up in the air.

He twisted his way around up in the sky as Kerri looked down in a mixture of delight and fear, hanging on tight.

*Enjoying the view?* He asked her, turning his head to look at her.

*It’s beautiful. I can’t believe you get to see this every day.*

*Actually, I don’t do this very often. I haven’t flown for about three years.*

*Because of Sitara?*

He hesitated. *Yes. Because of Sitara.*

She pressed a kiss onto his back. *Hey, what’s that over there?* She pointed to a mountain in the distance.

*It’s a volcano.*

*Ooh, is it still active?*

*I don’t know. I think so.*

*Can we go see it?*

*Not today, but I'll take you there one day if you want.*

## 40 - The Ring With Her Name On

“What should we do now?” Kerri asked Arik, who was kissing her stomach. They were sprawled on the couch, supposedly watching television.

“I have something in mind,” he said into her stomach, smirking.

She whacked his head. “Get off me.” She picked up the remote and flicked through the channels, bored. “You know, I have a feeling that I should be feeling really concerned or worried or stressed out about the fact that one of the best werewolves in werewolf history is coming to kidnap me and enslave me in a chocolate factory. But somehow, I’m just not worried.”

He crawled up and kissed her. “Because deep down, you know that you’re going to be okay.”

“Mm. Maybe.” She ran her fingers through his hair, pulling on his black locks so that they were completely straight before letting go. “I love your hair.”

He nibbled on her ear. “Want to go shopping?”

She bounded up and he jumped back in surprise. “Can we?”

He grinned. “Let’s go to the fashion department.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s...well, it’s the fashion department in the company. It’s where I got most of your clothes. The ones before the invasion. And the best thing is, they’re all for free.”

“Really? Let’s go! What are we waiting for?” She dragged him off the couch.

“Are you a shopaholic?” he asked her after grumbling about her almost pulling his arm out of his socket.

“Not really. Kind of. You see, I need something to make me feel like a girl again. I’ve been spending too much time with guys, and shopping makes me feel like a girl, so...I’m going shopping.”

“I have other ideas on how to make you feel like a girl.”

She shot him a look. “I’d whack you on the head again, but you didn’t have that much brain cells to begin with, and I don’t want to spend the rest of my life with a blubbering horny idiot.”

He laughed and swept her up into his arms, making her shriek, and shifted.

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Kerri flicked through the clothes absentmindedly, carefully shielding her mind against Arik before going through the conversation she had had with him earlier on.

“Because deep down, you know that you’re going to be okay,” he had said.

Or was it because Ty was coming? Did she think that Ty was going to save her? Was that why she didn’t feel worried at all? Stupid, she chastised herself. Ty was the bad guy. Or was he? Was he actually the good guy who was coming to rescue her? Not that this was a horrible place, but... She shook off the thoughts. No. Arik was her True Love. That was obvious. Kind of. A little.

Besides, Ty was the bad guy. Yes, he was.

*That sounds very reassuring.* Arik’s voice sounded suddenly in her head.

*Hey! Why are you in here? I thought I blocked you.*

*You can block me when I don’t know it, but when I find out that you’re blocking me, it confuses and intrigues me. Then I read your mind on purpose to see what you’re thinking about.*

Kerri groaned. *Go away.*

Arik came over, slid his arms around her waist and kissed her hair. *Kerri, I promise—no, I swear on my life—that this side is the good side.*

*And you know this how? Maybe you think it’s the good side, but it’s not. How do you know that this is the good side?*

He bit his lip. *Because my father is the head of the bad side.*

She twisted around to look at him. *Really?*

*Really.*

*So...he’s the boss of the C.E.?*

*Yes.*

She kissed him. *You have an extremely screwed up life.*

*Thank you.* His lips never leaving hers, he reached behind her and took out a dress that was hanging from the rack. *Try this on. It’d look good on you.*

She raised an eyebrow and looked at it speculatively. *Really? I’m not so sure about the colour...maybe if the colour was darker...*

*You always wear dark colours. Trust me. This will look good on you.*

*I never trust guys to choose my dresses for me.*

*Well, that's stupid, because they're always the ones staring when you wear them.*

*You have a point.* She took the dress and headed for a nearby changing room.

\*\*\*

Arik tried not to let his jaw drop when Kerri came out of the dressing room.

"How do I look?" she asked, looking at the mirror self-consciously.

"Great," he managed to say. "You look great."

"Would it be too casual if I wore this tonight?"

"No, this is fine." He went over to her. "You look great."

"I still think the colour should be darker."

"I know. That's why I chose this." He held up the dark blue dress he had picked for her while she was changing.

"You know, for a guy, you have pretty great taste."

"So do you. Otherwise, you wouldn't have ended up with me."

She rolled her eyes as he pulled her in for a kiss.

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After buying—well, not exactly "buying" buying—the two dresses, a clutch, and some shoes, they got ready to leave. Then something in the corner caught Kerri's eye. It was a jewellery section. And there was a ring that was calling out to her. Practically had her name on it already.

"Um, Arik?"

"Yes?"

"All the stuff here is for free right? We don't have to pay for it?"

"Yes."

"So we just...take stuff?"

"Yes. Why?"

“Oh, uh, nothing.” She didn’t want him to know that she was about to steal a ring. An engagement ring, no less. But it was a beautiful ring.

“Do you want to take a look in the jewellery section?” he asked her when he saw where she was looking to.

“Just for a sec.”

He linked his hand with hers as they walked around the jewellery section.

“K! Arik!” Drake was running towards them.

“Hey,” Kerri called out. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for something to wear, of course!” He held up two suits. “Which one?”

Kerri and Arik both scrutinised the two suits.

You thinking what I’m thinking? He asked her.

Yep. “The pinstriped one,” Kerri said for both of them. “It’d look quite sexy on you.”

Drake kissed her on the cheek before running off again, eager to try on the suit. As Arik stared after his friend, Kerri reached out with one hand and snuck her ring—it was hers now—off the table and into her brand new clutch.

“Shall we go?”

## 41 - The Dinner

“Stop staring at me!” Kerri said, laughing as she swiped Arik’s arm with her clutch.

He kissed her neck. “Kind of hard to when you look so good.” He kissed a line up to her cheek, then to her lips.

She giggled. “Stop it; you’re going to ruin my makeup.” She ran her fingers through his hair and tried to push him away, but he growled and pushed her onto the bed.

She shrieked and hit him with her clutch. “No! Not now! We’re going to be late.”

He sighed. “Fine.” He raised his eyebrows. “But later...”

She rolled her eyes, smiling as she pushed him away.

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“So, uh, you’re, uh, new, right?”

Kerri suppressed a sigh and an eye-roll. “Yes, Clive,” she said, edging away from the man who was trying to moving closer and closer to her.

“Oh, uh, good. We’re uh, on a first name basis now, uh, right, Kerrien?”

Not another one of those desperate ones. “Just Kerri will do,” she said, giving him one of those you’re-a-loser-why-am-I-even-talking-to-you smiles. Come on, even the name Clive sounded desperate. The greasy hair, nerdy glasses and the constant need to try to feel her up really didn’t help.

“So, uh, Kerri,” Clive was saying. “I was uh, wondering whether you uh, wanted to go out for a—”

“Am I supposed to sit here?” she asked, interrupting him, desperate to get away from him. “I don’t think I’m supposed to sit here.”

“No, you’re uh, supposed to sit here. We all have uh, allocated seats. Yours is uh, here. Uh, next to me.”

Uh, crap. Kerri fought the urge to bash someone’s head in. “Are you sure? I mean...they mix things up really easily these days...”

He leered at her. “The name Kerrien, so uh, unique, so uh, one of a kind, it cannot be uh, mistaken.”

Unfortunately. Kerri nodded and was about to make a reply that consisted the word “Mmmmm” when the boss entered the dining room. The room fell silent and everybody—including her—stood up

immediately, and Kerri was temporarily forgotten, much to her relief.

“Sit,” the boss said in his gravelly voice, sitting in his chair.

They sat.

“Tonight, I want to formally introduce you to Kerrien McCarthy, the sorceress.”

A collective gasp gathered around the room as they all turned their heads to look at who the boss was pointing at. Kerri felt herself flush slightly and she smiled.

“Hi,” she said, standing up and giving a small wave.

“A few days ago, there was an invasion. And now you all know why.” With that, he sat back down again. “Let dinner be served.”

Kerri raised an eyebrow and tried even harder not to blush. If that was a form of formally introducing her to the most important people of the company, she wouldn't want him to slag her off in front of them. She sat down again as the chatting quietly resumed.

“Wow, Kerri,” Clive gushed from next to her. “I never uh, knew you were uh, the sorceress.”

“I'm a sorceress. It's not a big deal.”

“You're the sorceress. You're uh, the one who's going to uh, save us all!”

She smiled patiently, clasping onto her clutch so tight she was surprised that it didn't break.

“So, uh, I was wondering uh, if you wanted to...you know, uh, sometime, maybe, you wanted to uh, go out? Sometime?”

Kerri froze. She didn't want to go out with desperate losers, but she always felt bad when she had to turn them down. Suddenly she remembered something, and as she undid the clasp on her clutch, she talked so as to draw the attention away from what she was doing under the table.

“Well, Clive, you see,” she paused for dramatic effect. “I'm...it's...it's kind of complicated. You see, I'm...” she paused again, struggling to get the ring onto her middle finger. “I'm engaged. To someone else. Sorry.” She held up her left hand, wiggling her fingers.

“Oh.” He looked devastated. Kerri almost sighed in relief, but then the question he asked had her straightening up again. “To whom?”

Kerri stared at her ring. “Uh...”

“To me,” said a deep, familiar voice that suddenly appeared behind her. The deep, familiar voice that belonged to Arik.

She spun around. "I am?" she asked on an impulse. Then she quickly smiled and regained her composure, and linked her arm through his. "I mean, of course, yes, I am." She flashed Clive another smile. "Sorry." She practically ran away, dragging Arik along.

"Thank you," she said, dropping his arm when they were behind a potted palm in the lobby. "I think."

Arik smirked. "So that's why you wanted to take a look at the jewellery section."

She smiled weakly. "I knew it'd come to good use." *Just didn't realise it'd be tonight on this...special and totally uncalled-for situation.*

He leaned in close and nibbled on her earlobe. *Maybe one day, it will come to good use.*

For the second time that night, Kerri froze. *Whoa. Um, isn't it a little too early for that?*

*We're True Loves, Kerri. We could wait a day, or we could wait a century. It really wouldn't matter.*

*H-how do you know that we're...that we're, you know, True Loves?* Somehow, she suddenly felt scared.

He cocked his head, sensing her discomfort, and looked at her with his clear, green eyes. *I don't know, but we can always make sure if you want.*

She had to blink a few times before she fully understood him. *Um, I think...we should...go back. To the dinner thing.*

He moved suddenly so that he had her pinned up against the wall. He reached up and put his hands on either side of her face. *I love you, Kerrien McCarthy, and I'm sorry if I said something to scare you. Did I scare you?*

Kerri looked up into his eyes, wondering how she should tell him what was on her mind. *Arik Channing*, she thought, sliding her arms around his neck. *You scared the hell out of me.* She reached up and kissed him long and deep and hard.

## 42 - As The Knife Meets Its Doom...

Arik had to admit that he was surprised when she kissed him. He also had to admit that he was surprised that he had mentioned marriage. Not that he wanted to. He was supposed to be one of the most famous unattached guys in the company. Or infamous. Whichever. Well-known.

He never thought about any of that stuff. Even when he was with Sitara. It just...slipped out of his mouth. He didn't even know he had said it until Kerri froze and pushed him away.

*Can we please ditch this dinner?* He asked her.

*Weren't you the one who told me that I had to be there? Come on, let's go back.*

*Do we really have to?* He groaned as she dragged him back to the dining room, trying to get in as inconspicuously as possible.

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Fifteen minutes later, Arik watched as Kerri got to know the people. He tensed up when Colin Denver started chatting her up.

"Arik." Someone shook him. "Arik."

"Hm?" he mumbled, distracted.

"You might want to let go of the knife now," Drake said, gently prising the mangled piece of metal which vaguely resembled a knife out of Arik's hand.

Arik smiled sheepishly. "Sorry." He took the misshapen knife from Drake and dropped it under the table. "I was...distracted."

"Because the one of the hottest unattached guys in the company is flirting with your girlfriend?"

Arik pursed his lips. "Trust a good friend like you to try to take my mind off things."

Drake was staring at Denver now. "I don't know why I've never stared at him before," he said dreamily.

Arik made a face. "Please. No. Not you too. Just...no."

Drake continued to gaze dreamily at Denver, and Arik rolled his eyes, trying to concentrate on his dinner, picking at his food and wondering how he was supposed to cut through his steak without a knife.

As he stabbed absentmindedly at his steak, the thought of fighting Woodland suddenly appeared in his

mind. He sat up straighter, immediately alert. Tomorrow night. Tomorrow night, he was going to have a chance to finally take him down. And he was going to take that chance. He was never going to let him hurt Kerri. Never.



## 43 - The Boss Knows?!

“So,” Colin said, noticing the ring on Kerri’s finger. “You’re engaged? Congratulations. Who’s the lucky guy?”

Kerri blushed. “Oh. This...I’m...I’m not engaged.”

Colin nodded understandingly. “You’re one of those deluded ones, eh?”

Kerri laughed and swatted his arm. “It’s...kind of a long story.”

“I have time.”

“I...I was in the fashion department earlier today when I saw this ring. I guess I kind of just...fell in love with it.”

He nodded again. “That’s what all my exes used to say when they wanted me to buy them something.”

Kerri grinned. “Anyway, I took it and then I put it in my clutch and I just kind of forgot about it. Until this really desperate guy slash loser sitting next to me named Clive started asking me out and tried to feel me up. So I kind of slipped on the ring and said I was engaged.”

“I see. And did he ask who you were engaged to?”

Kerri nodded, biting her lip. “Yeah.”

He raised an eyebrow, amused. “So what did you say?”

“Uh, Arik...happened to be around. And he kind of...volunteered.”

“Arik? Arik Channing?”

“Yeah.”

Colin held up both hands, as if surrendering. “You’re engaged to Arik Channing?”

Kerri rolled her eyes. “No. Well...no.”

He relaxed a little. “And...do you have any kind of...intimate relationship with him?”

She blushed again. “That,” she said, dropping the ring back into her clutch, “is none of your business.”

Colin grinned. “I think I should probably leave now.”

“What? Why?”

“Arik and I...we...don't tend to mix and share our conquests. Although we always end up with the same ones. We both have good taste, I suppose. It didn't really go down that well for me last time.”

“Sitara?”

“Yep.”

Kerri nodded understandingly. “Maybe you should go. I'll go over and comfort him; he's looking quite upset, isn't he?”

He tipped his head to one side thoughtfully. “He's a bit red in the face. Do you think it's the jealousy or the wine?”

Kerri laughed. “I'll see you around. Oh, and by the way,” she called over her shoulder as she headed towards Arik. “Never refer to me as a flipping conquest.”

“Hey,” she said, sitting down next to Arik.

“Thank God you're here,” Drake said, sighing in mock relief. “Arik was about to bend his fork out of shape as well.”

Arik shot him a glare and placed the fork sheepishly back on the table. “Hey.”

“What's up with the cutlery bending?”

“I, uh...” he trailed off, going red in the face.

“He was jealous because Denver was flirting with you,” Drake said helpfully, receiving another glare from Arik.

Kerri grinned. “Aw. Ricky's jealous.”

Arik raised an eyebrow. *What did you just call me?*

*I had a sudden urge to imitate Mandy for a while, honey,* she thought, accenting on the endearment just as Mandy had done.

*If we weren't in public, I'd slap you.*

*If we weren't in public, you'd be doing a lot of other things.*

Amusement toyed with Arik's mouth as he looked away from her and calmly ate some broccoli.

“So, Drake,” Kerri said, trying her best to ignore the images that Arik was projecting into her head. “I haven't talked to you for a while. Anything interesting?”

Drake's eyes widened in excitement as he beckoned Kerri over impatiently. She went to sit down next to him.

"I've found the most amazing guy," he whispered excitedly.

"Aw, really? Good for you. What's he like?"

"I don't know, but...I really like him."

"Ooh. And have you ever felt this way about any other guy?"

"Almost never. Almost."

She hugged him. "That's good. That's very good. Congratulations, Drakey."

For the rest of the night, Arik and Drake introduced her to the most important people of the Sterling—Kerri realised that Carter was nowhere to be found, as was Mel. Good for them. She also realised that Joshua wasn't there.

"Where's Joshua?" she asked Arik.

Arik shrugged. "Humans...weren't invited."

Kerri frowned. "That's not fair. They're the ones who work the hardest."

Arik shrugged again. "Life's not fair, Kerri. It's just...that's the way it is."

"Didn't you ever try to make it fair again, then?"

"A few times, but I took the hint when my mother glared at me and very nicely told me to piss off and stop bothering her."

"Your mother?"

"She's the boss' secretary."

"That wasn't very nice of her."

"She isn't a very nice person."

"And I thought I was the one with the screwed up family."

"You have no idea." He slid an arm around her waist. *Come on, let's go.*

*Go where?*

*Somewhere. Anywhere. Just out of here. Preferably somewhere secluded.*

Kerri was about to suggest their room—oh, the originality of it all—when she noticed the boss coming their way. She quickly pushed Arik away, trying not to laugh as he stumbled all over the place to regain his balance.

“Channing, what are you doing?”

Arik straightened up immediately. “I slipped, sir.”

“I see,” the boss replied flatly. “I have a suggestion for you two.”

“Yes, sir?” they asked simultaneously.

“I suggest you two find out whether you’re two True Loves. If yes, then register so that you can officially be known as True Loves. You may regret it if you don’t, what with the things that are happening tomorrow night that I’m not supposed to know anything about.” He turned abruptly away from them after having the satisfaction of watching their jaws drop.

*We’re kind of screwed, aren’t we?* Kerri asked as they watched their boss disappear into the crowd.

*Kerri, don’t be ridiculous. We aren’t kind of screwed. We’re screwed big time.*

*So what do we do?*

*Publicly display our affection? After all, he already knows.*

She swatted his arm. *Shut up. What are we going to do?*

*Kerri, there’s nothing we can do. Except find out whether we’re True Loves.*

*But that would involve—oh, just say you want sex.*

He bent down to kiss her. *I want sex.*

She pulled him away from the dining room. *Let’s go then.*

A look of surprise crossed Arik’s face. *Really? But...I thought you—*

*I changed my mind.*

## 44 - Afterwards

“When we were...did you speak to me in Italian?” she asked him drowsily from where she lay exhausted against his chest after they had recovered and had stopped panting long enough to say a sentence without pausing in between to take a breath.

He smiled sheepishly. “Yeah.”

“Why?”

“I’m half Italian, and I had lived in Italy for the first thirty years of my life. Italian was my first language. Of course, I had seventy odd years to perfect my English, but Italian would always be my mother tongue.” He paused, blushing slightly. “When I was...when we were...I started to lose control over myself, and the Italian just kind of...took over.”

“And so did changing into a dragon.”

“Yes,” he agreed, kissing the top of her head. “At first, I was scared,” he admitted. “I was scared that I had killed you or really hurt you because only True Loves can Join in their natural form.”

She lifted her head and kissed him. “I guess that tells us something.”

“Mm.” He tightened his arms around her.

“Have you hurt anyone before? Like, have you ever changed into dragon form and hurt anyone?”

“Um, once.”

“What happened?”

“It was my uh...first time. Needless to say, I’d never experienced such...pleasure before.”

“Ah. I see.”

Suddenly, someone knocked on their door. Kerri drew the sheets up to her shoulders just in time before the door was thrown open.

“Drake!” Arik said indignantly. “When the door is closed. You knock, *wait for an answer*, then you come in.”

“Sorry,” Drake said, not looking sorry at all. “I just had to tell you guys something.”

“What?”

“It was...it was you guys a few minutes ago, right?”

Kerri blushed. “Uh, yeah.”

Drake nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, you’ve got to keep it down, guys. I could hear you all the way down the corridor. I had to put on some kind of loud music. It wasn’t very pleasant.”

Kerri grew bright red. “Right. Sorry.”

“No, no, it’s okay. Just wanted you to know that if I could hear it from my end of the corridor, then...well, basically, everyone else can hear it.”

Arik grinned despite himself. Beside him, Kerri batted him on the shoulder.

“Why are you laughing?” she asked, looking mortified. “It’s not funny. At all.”

Arik burst into laughter. “Sorry, Drake,” he said, still chuckling. “Thanks for the tip. You can uh, leave now.”

Drake nodded to them and left. A second later the door opened again. “Kerri, you’re going to have to tell me everything. And I mean everything.” He waggled his eyebrows at Arik, shooting a meaningful look at them.

Kerri threw her shoe at him, but he closed the door just in time. Then she turned to look at her. “It isn’t funny,” she said.

“No,” Arik said, putting on a straight face. “It isn’t. Not at all.” He reached down to kiss a trail down her neck.

Kerri groaned and pushed him away. “Not again.”

“What do you mean, ‘not again’?”

“If we do that again, I have a feeling that I might implode from the...excitement.”

“Well, we’ll have to see, won’t we?” he smirked.

She shrieked. “No!” She rolled away from him.

And off the bed.

“Ow.”

Arik burst into laughter again. Then he got hit on the head by a shoe.

“Your aim’s getting better.”

“Shut up. I’m going to go shower.”

“Can I come?”

She looked at him warily.

“I’ll be good. I promise.”

“Well,” she said grudgingly. “If you promise…”

“I promise, I promise.” He swung off the bed, swept her up into his arms and headed for the bathroom, grinning but otherwise ignoring her shrieks of protest.

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Arik looked down at Kerri, who was sleeping peacefully next to him. He tried not to think about Woodland coming tomorrow night—well, tonight, since it was like three in the morning—but he couldn’t help it. What if he came and took her? What if he lost to him again? Once was excruciating, but twice, well, it would be the ten times the excruciation and also humiliation. It would just about kill him.

What if they didn’t win and the boss found out? Well, he kind of knew already, didn’t he? But what if everybody else found out? He tightened his arm around her. It wouldn’t matter what other people think. Before, if Woodland came and took any of his other girlfriends, he’d suffer from the humiliation of his loss against his archrival. But if Woodland came and took Kerri, humiliation would be the last thing that was on his mind. He’d kill to get her back. He’d die to get her back. They were True Loves, that one thing he knew for sure. But--

*Arik, for God’s sake. Go to sleep.*

Arik looked down at her to find that she was staring right back up at him. *I thought you were asleep.*

*I was. Then some idiot mumbling some crap about humiliation and loss woke me up.*

He felt the heat creeping up to his cheeks. *Sorry.*

She reached up to kiss his cheek. *It’s going to be okay. Now sleep.*

He tried to smile, and then hugged her tighter to him and rolled over so that he was lying on top of her.

She raised an eyebrow and was probably about to make a snarky comment when suddenly she frowned. *Ow.* She reached up to move something that was pressing onto her collarbone. *What’s that?* She held up a thin piece of silver.

Arik looked down at the piece of silver. *Oh, it’s my…necklace. See?* He held up the silver chain that was around his neck. *All immortals have one.*

*Why don’t I have one?*

*Because...it is something your parents give to you. If your parents aren't immortals or they don't know anything about being one, then you won't have one. It is also said that, only the owner and his or her True Love can wear it.*

*Well, have you ever tested the theory?*

He bit his lip. *I don't like to part with it.*

Suddenly, drowsiness overcame him in waves, sweeping him closer and closer to sleep.

*What the hell?* He mumbled incoherently, shaking his head.

*Sorry. But you really need the sleep, and getting you distracted was the only way I could get into your head without you noticing.*

He felt her kiss him lightly on the lips before he drifted off completely.



## 45 - Registration

Arik was particularly jumpy today. He never walked anywhere, he sprinted, or he swaggered with deliberate slowness. When he was sitting down, he was either drumming his fingers on the nearest piece of surface that wasn't going to spear straight through his fingers or he was tapping his toes impatiently. When he wasn't sitting, he'd pace around the room, muttering to himself.

Kerri observed all this quietly, refraining herself from making sarcastic comments from time to time. She did everything as calmly as she could. She walked gracefully and elegantly—except for the time she tripped over the rug and was about to hit the stairs headfirst, thank God for Arik who saved her just in time—she sat down as calmly as possible, and she stood as calmly as possible in one spot.

See? Opposites do attract. The only thing they had in common was that they didn't speak. Not one word.

“Okay,” Drake snapped at breakfast. “This is unnatural.” He pointed at Arik, who had already scalded his tongue on hot coffee twice and was now gulping down cold water, then at Kerri, who was sipping quietly—and calmly—at her orange juice.

“You,” Drake said, pointing a finger at Arik, “are going to pull yourself together.” The finger swivelled towards Kerri. “And you,” Drake continued, “are going to stop sitting there looking like a nun.”

Kerri and Arik exchanged a look, then switched drinks and continued doing what the other had been doing five seconds ago before Drake had told them off.

Drake pursed his lips. “You're lucky that I'm sitting too far away and that I'm too lazy to get off my @\$ to come over and slap you.”

Kerri shrugged. “It's not my fault that Arik's freaking out over nothing,” she said coolly, speaking for the first time that morning.

“I'm not freaking out over nothing,” Arik muttered. “I'm freaking out very reasonably.” He winced and held the orange juice away from him. “Can I have my water back, please? The orange juice stings my tongue.”

Kerri rolled her eyes and they exchanged drinks again.

“What is wrong with you two?” Drake demanded.

“Nothing,” they answered simultaneously.

Drake narrowed his eyes. “Snap out of it. It's going to be fine. We have the whole day to get ready, to practise, to warm up. We'll be fine.”

"The boss knows," Arik suddenly said from beside her.

"Oh, crap. What did he say?"

Arik cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Nothing. Except for Kerri and I to...uh...register ourselves in as True Loves."

"Well, hop to it." Drake dismissed his friend with a wave of his hand. "Kerri," he started.

"Uh," Kerri stuttered, wanting to escape from the interrogation she was going to get. "I think I should go with Arik. To register."

"Kerri, get back here," Drake called, looking at her pleadingly.

"See ya!" She broke into a run. "Arik!"

He stopped, turned around, and smirked. "Avoiding the grilling session?" he asked as she came to a stop next to him.

"That's a rhetorical question, right?"

He slipped his hand through hers. "Let's go. The uh, registration department closes early on weekends."

\*\*\*

"Arik!" A young bubbly, blonde girl said happily at the reception.

"Hi..." Beside her, Arik trailed off, obviously trying to remember the girl's name. "Jenny," he said cautiously at last.

The girl frowned. "It's Annette."

"Oh, right. Of course. I forgot. Jenny was the one that *wasn't* as pretty." Arik winked at her, and she giggled.

Kerri mentally shook her head. *That poor girl.*

*Shut up.*

*How can she not know you're fooling her? That must be the saddest line I've ever heard in my life. And believe me when I say that I've heard some pretty bad ones.*

*Well, I did mention that the girlfriends I had weren't exceptionally bright.*

"So, Arik," Annette said, still oblivious to Kerri standing next to him. "Are you here to see me? You stopped coming a few months ago."

“Uh, well, I actually came to register something.”

The girl winked. “Of course.” She lowered her voice. “I’ll meet you in the photocopying room in five minutes, okay?”

Kerri raised an eyebrow while Arik flushed red.

*Really? The photocopying room? Not even the broom closet? That’s so unoriginal. No, not unoriginal, SAD.*

*Nobody went there, so shut up.*

*I wonder why. Maybe the banging noises scared them off.*

Arik grew into an insane shade of bright red. “Actually, Annette,” he said in a strained voice, slipping his hands into Kerri’s and squeezing it as tightly as possible while dragging her close to him. “Kerri and I are...registering as Mates.”

Annette looked stricken. “Oh, right. Mates. Well, congratulations, you two.”

Kerri tried to smile through the pain and raised their clasped hands. “I’m so happy,” she said. “I mean, what can I say?” She brought their hands back down. Very swiftly. Into his crotch area.

Arik choked back a yell of pain.

“See?” Kerri continued, smiling sweetly. “He’s speechless.”

“I’m speechless all right,” Arik choked out. “No words can describe what I’m feeling.” *Except maybe for intense, excruciating pain.*

“All right,” Annette said, typing something into her keyboard. “So, Arik Channing-Driscoll and...”

“Kerrien McCarthy.”

“Actually, Annette,” Arik said. “It’s only Channing now.”

Annette looked surprised. “You’re dropping your father’s—”

“Yes,” Arik said shortly.

“Alright.” She obviously knew when to butt out. “So Arik Channing and Kerrien McCarthy.” She double clicked on something. “Congratulations, you two are officially Mates.”

Arik grinned. *I would kiss you right now, but my groin’s still hurting.*

*How does that have anything to do with it?*

*Believe me, you don't want to know.*

Kerri wrinkled her nose as he led her out after they said goodbye to a forlorn-looking Annette. *I thought we were called True Loves. Why are we uh...Mates?*

*True Loves sound sappy. And it's kind of a nickname. Made up by the people who didn't believe in it and were being sarcastic and bitter, probably. Mates is the correct term.*

*Mates sound so much better.*

*Agreed.*

"Hey guys," Carter greeted them. "Did you guys just register?"

"How'd you know?"

"I saw you coming out from the registration department."

"Oh."

"So, Arik," Carter said after a pause. "I was wondering whether we should meet up sometime today to...work on the tactics and stuff like that."

"Oh, of course. Right." Arik kissed the top of Kerri's head. "Uh...go spend the day with Joshua. Or Mel. Or Drake. Whoever."

Someone caught Kerri's eye. She grinned evilly. "Or Mandy," she said innocently.

"Kerri," Arik started in warning tone.

"Toodles," she trilled. "I'm off to spread some good news."

*Kerrien McCarthy, come back here.*

*Please. Just because we're Mates doesn't mean you get to control me.*

*No, but I get that privilege being your trainer. Kerrien McCarthy, I hereby summon you to spend some time with either Drake, Mel or Joshua until I come back and avoid Mandy completely.*

Kerri groaned when she tried to test whether his order worked or not. It did. *Party-pooper*. Then an idea crossed her mind. She whipped out pen and paper—she always had some handy—and scribbled quickly into it. Then she called out to a random stranger.

"Hey, you!"

"Uh...hi."

She smiled sweetly. "You know Mandy right?"

"Yeah."

"Can you give this to her? Say it's from Kerri." She flashed him another megawatt smile and elbowing Arik when he tried to speak.

Arik pursed his lips after recovering. "You are in deep, deep trouble. How can—"

"Oops, got to go" Kerri chirped as Mandy crossed the room towards them after reading the note.

"She's coming and I have to avoid her, remember?" She shifted away before Arik could get his hands on her.

## 46 - Meeting in the Middle

“Oh crap,” Arik muttered as Mandy walked towards him.

“Hi,” she said hesitantly.

“Hey Mandy.”

“Congratulations, I guess. About you and Kerri.”

“Thanks.”

“I do feel sorry for you,” she said, lowering her voice.

Arik frowned. “What?”

“And I think what Kerri’s doing is very noble.”

Arik raised an eyebrow. “Again, what?”

She patted him on the back. “Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about. Kerri told me about it.”

He smiled patiently through gritted teeth. “I’m curious, Mandy. What exactly did Kerri tell you all about?”

Mandy frowned. “That you two are Mates because that was the only way she could stop you from molesting other girls, what with your pervert syndrome and all. She said she wanted to protect me.” She smiled. “Very noble.”

Arik resisted the urge to kill something. *Kerri, you’re so lucky that you’re not standing within fifty feet of me right now, or your head wouldn’t be attached to the rest of your body.*

She laughed into his head. *Lighten up, honey.*

*You know, you’re the only one who can joke about us being Mates without me actually getting pissed about it.*

*Well, that’s probably why we’re Mates, then.*

*Where are you?*

*What, and let you come decapitate me? No thanks. I’ll see you at lunch.*

*Twelve thirty?*

*One.*

*Twelve thirty.*

*One.*

*Twelve thirty.*

*It really doesn't matter how many times you say it. One.*

*Arik sighed. Twelve forty-five? He offered weakly.*

*Twelve forty-five, she agreed before she rang off.*

## 47 - The Calm Before The Storm

“Hey,” Kerri said, peering in through the door. “Am I disturbing you?”

“No,” Drake said, a forced smile on his face. “Come on in.”

“Are you okay?” she asked him, sitting down on the bed next to him.

“I’m going to be fine.”

“Yes, but you’re not fine now. So spill.”

Drake looked at her, and then shook his head. “I’m fine.”

She scrutinised him before shrugging. “Fine.”

“So what are you doing here?”

“Arik told me to—I mean, summoned me to spend my day with either you, Joshua or Mel. So I thought I could stick with you.” She pushed herself off the bed. “But I think I should go.”

“What? No, stay.”

“Oh, please.” Kerri waved away his feeble attempt. “I’ll leave you to sulk on your own. I’ll see you later, okay?” She kissed his forehead and gave him a hug before leaving.

Next stop: Joshua.

She knocked at his door before opening it. “Joshua?”

He looked up from where he was sitting on his rickety wooden chair. “Kerri.”

“Can I stay with you for the day?”

He nodded after a while. “Make yourself comfortable.” He gave a bitter smile. “At least, as comfortable as you possibly can.”

She tilted her head to one side. “Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

She shrugged. “Just asking. Everybody seems to be really nervous today. Well, not everybody, but the people who know about what’s going to happen tonight.”



He sighed. "You would be too, if you knew how grave the situation was."

"Grave? How grave is the situation?"

"It would be hard to take down Woodland, even when there are only three people fighting."

Kerri suddenly understood. "You want to fight."

He shrugged. "Male instincts, I guess."

She bit her lip. "I'm sorry when I asked for you to stay with me. I was...it's just that you're more easily hurt than the others, and you don't heal as quickly as they do."

He nodded. "I know."

"But you still want to fight."

"He stole my True Love," he burst out suddenly. "He blackmailed her. My Mate. He took her away from me." He narrowed his eyes. "I'm not going to let him get away with that without suffering," he said in a trembling voice before closing his eyes.

Kerri put a hand on his shoulder. "You know, he's not coming alone tonight," she said softly.

His eyes shot open. "What? Does Arik know this?"

"Yes."

"Then why the hell is he not letting more people fight? He's insane."

"Is Woodland really that good?"

Joshua shrugged. "It depends on how you look at it, I guess."

"Is he better than Arik?"

"They're about the same. But Arik hasn't fought for years except for when there's the occasional invasion. It's Woodland's job to fight. He has to go to other minor companies to take what they have. He leads the invasions."

Kerri gulped.

Joshua banged his fist down on the table, which shuddered and threatened to break. "He should've let me fight, dammit."

"I can talk to Arik about it, if you want. After all, it was my idea to not let you fight."

He shook his head. "Arik's stubborn. He's not going to let me fight."

“It’s not like you need permission.”

He shook his head again. “It’s my job to protect you while they fight.”

Kerri slapped him across the face. “Stop with that crap. You’ve done it for like a hundred years now. For God’s sake, Joshua. Do it for Sitara, if not for yourself. Go out there and do what it is you want to do.” She touched where she had hit him. “Sorry about that slap, by the way.”

He glowered at her. “It’s okay.”

She looked at him for a moment. “You want to see whether he’s bringing Sitara, do you?”

He blushed. “What?”

She shrugged. “It could happen. Besides, bringing Sitara would surprise Arik and probably put him off. So he might bring Sitara. Oh, stop looking at me like you haven’t thought of it before.”

“Okay, I admit I have thought of it before, but that doesn’t matter.”

“What, you’ll fight on as if you haven’t seen her?”

He gritted his teeth. “I’d try my best.”

“And if you were forced to kill her? If you were the one who cornered her and Arik was knocked unconscious and Drake was yelling at you to kill her? Would you?”

Joshua clenched and unclenched his fists. “I don’t know,” he said a minute later. “Probably.”

Kerri widened her eyes. “You would kill her?”

“If Drake and Arik’s lives depended on it, then most probably yes.”

“But she’s your True Love.”

His gaze hardened. “So?”

“You...you wouldn’t.”

“I could. I wouldn’t want to, but I could.”

“Then what? How would you be able to live with yourself?”

He gave a bitter smile. “Who said I’d live afterwards?”

“What, you’d kill yourself?”

"I should just as well. There's nothing to live for anymore."

Kerri thought hard. "How about...protecting the company?" she suggested weakly.

He shot her a look, and she shrugged and replied with a look that said I was only trying to help.

"Do you think you'd know?" she asked him after a while.

"Know what?"

"Whether she was here or not."

"Well, it's not like she's going to call me and expect me to welcome her with open arms and a cup of coffee, is it?"

"Do you want to see her again?"

He shrugged. "Yes and no."

She gave him a hug.

"Don't," he said dully. "I know you're trying to make me feel better, but this hug means nothing. It means nothing if you don't know what it feels like to lose a loved one. A True Love, nevertheless."

She sat back. "I'm sorry."

He looked at her. "I wasn't trying to be insulting or anything like that."

"I know."

"But I was, wasn't I?"

"A little," she admitted. "But I understand." She leaned forward to hug him again, but stopped herself just in time. He smiled and stood.

"I have to bring some things down to the garden."

"For tonight?"

"For tonight."

He hung his sword around his hips and picked up a few other weapons that Kerri felt pained to even look at. "Let's go."

\*\*\*

Kerri lay down on the grass and stared up at the sky as Joshua went around the garden putting down

weapons in unseen places just in case he'd need them later.

As if he'd need anything else other than two guns, two knives and a sword. But then again, she didn't fight—at least, not like men—so she couldn't judge.

"What time is it?" she asked drowsily.

"Twelve."

"Arik says lunch's at twelve forty-five."

"Twelve forty-five?" he asked her. "He couldn't have made it at one?"

She looked up in agreement. "That's what I said. But does he listen to me? No."

Joshua snorted. "You're his Mate. You can make him laugh, cry and fight for you, but you can't make him reschedule lunch to fifteen minutes later?"

"Shut up. I already made him change it from twelve thirty to twelve forty-five. What else do you want from me?"

He lay down next to her. "Change it to twelve forty-five?"

She reached out to swat him but he rolled away. "Damn your fast survival instincts," she muttered, and heard him laugh softly.

"You can go fight if you want, you know?" she asked him.

"Yes. But I don't want to."

"Bullshoot."

He sighed. "I do want to fight the bastard, but I don't want to have to fight Sitara."

"But she may not even be there."

"But she may."

"But she may not."

"But she may."

"But she—oh, grow up."

"I can't actually do that."

Kerri resisted the urge to slap him across the face again. "Do you think we should take Mel here after

lunch?”

Joshua shrugged. “Sure. It’d be good to let her familiarise herself with the area.” He looked at his watch. “We still have thirty minutes. Is there anything you want to do?”

“Arik said I should practise my magic. Would you mind if I did that?”

“Why would I mind?”

She shrugged. “Just asking.”

“Knock yourself out.”

And she did. Literally. And also by accident. She had just been randomly flicking up small little mountains when suddenly Joshua coughed and she jumped and earth shot out from the ground and hit her in the face.

She came to when Joshua doused her with ice cold water. She groaned, and then choked, and then spat out the mouthful of dirt.

“Blech. Gross.” She reached for some water and rinsed her mouth with it.

“You can say that again.” Joshua was eyeing the mouthful of dirt with disgust. He offered her his hand, and she took it gratefully as he pulled her up. “It’s time for lunch. Do you think you can stomach food?”

Kerri grimaced. “As long as there’s no mud in it.”

\*\*\*

“Hey honey,” Arik greeted her when she sat down next to him.

She raised an eyebrow. *Did you just call me...honey?*

*It’s just an endearment.*

*It’s a thought-inducing endearment.*

*And what thought does it induce?*

*Oh, I don’t know, but maybe, just maybe, Mandy?*

Arik choked on his food and Carter slapped him on the back. *It wasn’t meant to induce Mandy thoughts.*

*What thought was it supposed to induce, then?*

Arik smirked. *You. In honey.*

She swatted him on the arm. *Filthy minded dragon.* She reached over and took a bite of his meal. "What the hell is that?" she asked grimacing. "It tastes like mud."

"I wonder why," Joshua muttered from beside her.

She ignored him. "Can you get me some of this stuff, please?" she asked Arik. He shot her a look that said *I'm not your slave* and she returned it with a look that said *you could've fooled me.* He pursed his lips and got up to go get her some food.

"Oh, Mel, I just remembered," Kerri said. "Joshua and I want to take you to the place we're hiding in tonight."

"That's a great idea," Mel said enthusiastically from where she was sitting next to Carter, his arm around her waist.

*Aw, they look so cute together,* she thought to Arik as he came back with her food.

He kissed her cheek. *I personally think we're so much cuter.*

She stifled a giggle. *I thought you would've realised by now that we're not exactly a cute couple.*

*No, we're a stunningly sexy, wild, cool couple.*

*Saying we're a cool couple just officially made us not cool.*

*You're right. We're not cool.* He sat down behind her and slid his arms around her waist. *We're hot.*

She giggled. *You dumbass.*

*I love you too, dear,* he thought sarcastically.

Kerri looked around the table. Everybody was off in their own world. Mel was giggling at something Carter had whispered into her ear; Drake was moody and was pushing his food around on his plate, muttering to himself; Joshua was stirring his coffee absentmindedly, no doubt thinking about tonight and how he would love to kill the bastard who had effectively ruined his life.

*What are you thinking?* Arik kissed her neck.

*A lot of things.*

*Care to share them with me?*

She kissed him back. *Nah. Nothing important. You nervous about tonight?*

*A little,* he admitted after a while. *Be sure not to come out until I tell you to, okay? I know you don't like following orders, but listen to me just this once? Please?* He kissed her lightly.

*Fine, fine. But you're going to have to make it up to me afterwards.*

He chuckled. *I'll try my best.*

## 48 - The Werewolf Cometh...

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur. Arik continued to practise with Drake and Carter while Kerri went off to God-knows-where with Joshua and Mel.

“Arik!” Drake snapped, obviously not in a good mood. “Be careful. I could’ve killed you.”

“What? Oh, yeah, sorry.”

“You and Carter aren’t focused enough,” Drake said, telling them off as if they were children. “I know you two have found your True Loves and everything, but there’s a time for everything. And now is not the time for you to fret about your Mates. They are fine.”

“Sorry,” Arik and Carter muttered.

“If you’re distracted like this later on, Woodland and his pals will kill you. You don’t want that happening, do you?”

“No,” they answered simultaneously. Drake can be very intimidating when he wanted to be.

“I thought so. Now focus.”

\*\*\*

The tension at the table during dinner was so obvious it was almost tangible.

“I’m going to leave early with Mel and Joshua just in case Ty comes early,” Kerri murmured to him.

“Do you have to?”

She kissed him. “It’s for the best.”

His grip around her tightened. “When are you leaving, then?”

“Well, now.”

Arik sighed.

*Hey, Kerri soothed him, running her fingers through his hair. It’s going to be okay.*

*Mm.*

She kissed him. *Come on, where’s the fight in you? Don’t die on me, okay?*



He kissed her cheek. *I'll try.*

She stood up and was about to follow Joshua and Mel out of the dining room when Arik grabbed onto her arm.

"Yes?" she asked, turning around.

He stood up to face her and reached behind his neck to unclasp his necklace.

"I want you to have this," he said, placing it around her neck.

She smiled. "Thank you." *I think we're officially a cute couple now.*

Arik kissed her one last time and watched her walk away.

\*\*\*

Carter was pacing the room, Drake was staring moodily into the mirror and Arik was thinking about Kerri. Where was she? Had Woodland already taken her? No, that wouldn't be possible.

He checked his watch. It was eleven thirty. Woodland should be here soon. He cleared his throat once, and then twice. It was too quiet in this room.

Carter and Drake looked drearily up at him, and he shook his head. "It's going to be over soon," he said, forcing a smile on his face.

"We're not sulking because of the fight," Drake said dully. "The fight we're looking forward to."

"Then what is it?"

"Not knowing whether our Mates are going to be okay," Carter snapped.

"Well, I have the same concern as well. You had the opportunity to back out of this, but now you've joined in, you've got to stay in, okay?" Arik snapped back.

Carter scowled at him and he scowled back.

"How are they going to get in here without setting the alarms off?" Drake wondered aloud.

"He used to work for the Sterling," Arik said, directing his scowl at Drake. "I'm sure he'll find a way."

"Yeah, but all the passwords and locks have been changed since he's been away. We change them every time someone leaves us, remember? Just in case they decide to betray us."

"Oh crap."

"You should be glad, maybe then he won't be able to come."

“No, he’ll definitely come, and he’ll make a public entrance so that we’ll get in trouble afterwards.”

Drake and Carter groaned and Carter was about to say something when suddenly a crack appeared in the ceiling, causing it to give way and causing a large crash. All three men were thrown back against the wall. They exchanged a look, nodding to each other for good luck as they watched three men emerge from the smoke.

Woodland came out first. “Hello, Channing-Driscoll.” Then he smirked. “No wait; it’s just Channing now, isn’t it? Your father’s very disappointed that you decided to drop his name.”

Arik scowled and cast a spell on the door to make sure it stayed locked. “Let’s get this over with.”

“What? No inviting me for a cup of tea? Maybe a biscuit?”

Arik hurled a large gust of wind at him. “Go screw yourself.”

Woodland laughed and dodged it easily. “You’re still so predictable after all these years.”

Arik tightened the grip of his mind so that Woodland wouldn’t be able to gain control of him and use his thoughts. Woodland had always been good at mind-control.

Woodland smirked. “Don’t you want to know whether I brought your lady love, Channing?”

Arik scowled, although he was a bit put off. “Don’t bring Sitara into this.”

Woodland laughed. “Don’t worry. I told her that you wouldn’t want to see her and made her stay.”

Arik growled. “Enough.” Two men appeared behind Woodland, and with a slight nod of his head, all three of them suddenly grew into wolves and ripped right through their clothing.

Arik and Drake morphed into dragons. Arik headed straight for Woodland while behind him, Drake and Carter went for the other wolves.

The fight was a blur. It was like old times, when Arik and Woodland used to wake up early in the morning to practise their skills, but this was fuelled by hate and anger.

He was doing fine when suddenly out of the corner of his eye he saw Carter fly past him and hit the wall, unconscious. Drake yelled to him that he got it, and Arik nodded, distracted.

Arik continued to fight Woodland, mostly defending himself and blocking his blows then attacking, since he had to help defend Carter’s comatose form as well.

*You were always too compassionate, Channing,* Woodland sneered in his head.

*Better than being a cold bastard like you.*

*It's fun being me, actually. You should try it.*

*Over my dead body.*

Woodland shot a wall of fire at him. *By the time I'm finished with you, you will be a dead body.*

Arik flipped up and over it, unleashing a stream of fire at him. *We'll see*, he thought smugly as one of Woodland's men slumped down next to them, out cold.

Woodland growled and suddenly leapt towards Arik, and his men did the same to Drake. They crashed through the glass and landed in the garden below. Arik and Drake hissed in pain, as dragons detested glass and detested glass even more when it was stuck in their body. Arik curled his tail around Woodland's leg and flung him out. Woodland crashed against a tree, but quickly regained his position growling.

Suddenly, something crashed down onto the ground next to them. Everybody's head whipped around to see what it was.

Carter. Arik looked up. A wolf was standing up there, looking out of the broken glass wearily, having just awoken. It must've had pushed Carter off the building before he had time to wake up. Arik's snarled ferociously. The bastard.

He looked back to Woodland just in time to see Woodland leaping towards him. He collided into him and they slammed into the wall. Arik's head hit the brick wall, and everything went black.

\*\*\*

When Arik came to, he was bound to a tree, and he was human again.

"Wha—" he muttered groggily.

"Glad to see you're coming to, Channing." Woodland had morphed back to human and was sneering down at him.

Arik snarled at him and strained against the ropes and then howled in pain.

Woodland's sneer grew. "Like our new ropes? They were designed especially for dragons, seeing that they hate glass so much and all." He motioned towards the ropes, which were encrusted with small but sharp shards of glass that stuck out in every direction.

Arik scowled at him wordlessly and looked around. Carter was still unconscious, but was tied up anyway. Drake looked well and truly pissed off, although he couldn't do anything about it because he was gagged and tied up with the glass-crusted rope as well.

"You know, Channing, for the last few months, I've been practising a new skill that my five-centuries-old friend taught me." He kneeled down so that he was the same height as Arik. "It's basically when you slip into another's mind and not only take control, but you can also send out messages telepathically to

another person in the name of the person you're controlling." He smirked. "Fascinating, isn't it?"

Arik was about to tell him how flipping fascinating it wasn't when he felt something pierce through his mind like a giant headache and took a firm grip of his mind. Arik howled and tried to block it out, but Woodland was strong.

With an evil smile on his face, Woodland took out a piece of cloth and gagged Arik with it. Then he slowly flipped through Arik's memories.

"Interesting," he murmured as he went over the...intimate experience he shared with Kerri that night. "Very interesting indeed." His eyebrows suddenly rose when he got to the...good part. "True Loves, eh?"

Arik snarled but could do nothing. Suddenly, he could hear himself sending out telepathic messages. To Kerri. His eyes widened, and he strained against the ropes and tried to yell for Kerri not to fall for it, but the rope and the gag didn't help.

*Kerri? Kerri, love*, his voice thought smoothly. Arik prayed for Kerri to be in a deep, deep sleep.

*Arik?* Her voice came on uncertainly. He groaned. Of course she wasn't.

*You can come out now, love*, he heard himself think, *everything's all right. It's all over*. Arik struggled helplessly against the rope, aware but not caring as the glass drove into his skin, burning him.

*Are you sure?*

No, no, no, he wanted to yell. No. Woodland grinned. *Yes, love, you can come out now*.

Arik watched in silent horror as Kerri stepped out tentatively from behind a waterfall and out.

"No," he choked out through the gag, but it was too late.

Woodland and his men were gone.

And so was Kerri.

## 49 - What Happened

Everything happened so fast.

She had stepped out of her hiding place.

Then she saw Arik bound to a tree.

Then she was airborne.

Then she saw Ty.

Then he saw that she was looking at him,

and he knocked her unconscious.

## 50 - He Is SO Drunk

"You've got to stop drinking, man," Carter said from beside him.

"frackoff," slurred Arik. "Icando...whateverthefrackIwant."

Carter tried to take the drink out of Arik's hand, but Arik growled at him, downed his drink and stumbled towards the bathroom, tripping over his own feet.

He looked blearily at himself in the mirror, and he realised one thing:

He was drunk.

His face was red, and it was stifling hot in the room. His eyes were bloodshot, and he couldn't see how many fingers he was holding up. He could feel himself shaking and sweating.

He felt like a drug addict suffering from withdrawal symptoms. And he was suffering from withdrawal. Withdrawal of Kerri. He shuddered and collapsed, sliding down the floor with his back against the wall.

Carter came in and knelt down beside him. "Let's get you into bed, okay?" he said softly.

Arik looked groggily at him. "Areyouhittingonme?" he slurred.

Carter looked at him disgustedly. "You and Drake would get along so well right now," he muttered.

Arik looked at him thoughtfully. "Maybe Ishould get togetherwith Drake tonight," he said, trying to un-slur his words.

Carter shot him a look, put an arm on his and shifted to Arik's room. "Bed. Now." He pointed to Arik's bed and Arik stumbled towards the bed.

"Ineedadrink," he slurred.

"No, you don't," Carter assured him. "Just close your eyes and sleep this off. I'll see you tomorrow." Carter patted him on the arm and shifted away.

*Kerri, where are you?* he thought incoherently. *It's already been five days. I'm missing you like hell. Where are you?*

When Mel and Joshua came out, they had immediately untied Arik, Drake and Carter, and Arik had leapt up, howling and all set to go after Kerri, but Drake and Carter held him back and gently told him that she was long gone.

He had checked out from the Sterling and headed towards a pub. There was a bar at the Sterling, but

everyone recognised him there and the last thing he needed was everyone asking him whether he was okay.

Five hours later, he had stumbled out of the bar completely drunk. He had drunk so much it was a wonder that his saliva hadn't turned to alcohol as well. From then, he was always seen with a can of beer or a bottle of booze in his hand, and he was half drunk.

He never got hangovers. He was never sober enough to.

*Kerri, where are you? I need you,* he managed to think before drifting off into a deep sleep.

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When he woke up, he didn't even wait for the dizziness to kick in before grabbing the bottle of pure vodka from his bedside and taking a good long swig.

"That's better," he muttered to nobody in particular. He was hungry. He considered eating the vodka bottle, but then remembered it was made of glass and would probably kill him.

He paused. That idea sounded rather appealing. He finished the bottle of vodka, had smashed it against the bedside table and was about to put a broken shard of glass in his mouth when the door suddenly burst open.

"Oh, no, you don't," Drake said, rushing over to him and flinging the glass away from him quickly. He made Arik show him his hands. "Christ, you've got glass burns."

Arik smiled proudly up at him. "From holding the bottle too long. Did that all by myself," he said, dazed. "Do you by chance have any beer on you?"

Drake put his arm around Arik and helped him up. "You," he said, dragging him towards the bathroom, "are going to clean yourself up."

"Wha—why?"

"Because it's personal hygiene!" Drake exploded. "You're going to take a shower."

Arik looked at him. "No, I'm not."

Drake looked up at the ceiling. "God help me," he muttered before closing his eyes and stripping Arik of his clothes.

"Kerri?" Arik slurred. "Is that you?"

"If you weren't my friend," Drake muttered, "I would've said yes and taken advantage of you long ago." He pushed Arik into the shower and turned it on. "I'm not letting you out until you take a shower."

Arik yelped as the cold water hit him right in the face. He stumbled around blindly and slipped. He

groaned. It reminded him of Kerri when she slipped in the shower.

“Arik, take a flipping shower.”

Arik randomly grabbed a bottle of shampoo and squirted some onto his hand. He dropped the bottle of shampoo as if it stung him. It was Kerri’s shampoo. He started sniffing it.

Drake peered in at him. “Arik, what the hell are you doing snorting shampoo? Coke, I’d understand, but shampoo? Really?”

“It smells like Kerri. Here, you smell.” He stuck his hand under Drake’s nose, but then the alcohol must’ve been screwing with his eyesight because he smushed it into Drake’s face.

Drake wiped the shampoo from his eyes. “This is going to be a loooong day,” he muttered.



## 51 - Damn Those Dreams

“Arik?” she asked, her eyes widening and sitting up in bed.

He grinned. “Hello, babe.”

“Oh my God, have you come to save me?”

“You betcha.” He strode over and laid a hand on her shoulder.

She was roughly shaken awake by someone saying, “Wake up, dog.”

She wearily opened her eyes and saw Ty. “Oh,” she said glumly. “It’s you.”

“Glad to see you too,” he said, turning abruptly away from her. “Wake up. You’re going to see the boss today?”

“The boss?” She suddenly froze. The boss...wasn’t that Arik’s father? Oh, this was just great. Something caught her eye and she raised her hand slowly.

There was a thick piece of metal encasing her left wrist where her watch used to be.

“What,” she asked slowly, “the frack is this?”

Ty turned around casually. “Oh, yeah, that’s the thing I had to put on you. It basically stops you from using your powers. Cool gadget, huh?”

“Very cool,” she muttered, wondering how many hammers it would take to break the thing.

“Don’t bother trying to take it off,” Ty said as if reading her mind. “You can only take it off with the key, and not even the boss has it.”

“Then who has the key?”

Ty shrugged as if he couldn’t care less. “I couldn’t care less.” He threw her a black cloak. “Wear this.”

She picked up the thing disgustedly. “Where are we going? The black mass?”

“Put it on, Ree.”

“Do not call me Ree,” she hissed to him, dragging the cloak over her head. “You lost that right.”

Ty stared at her for an immeasurable length of time. “You know, I actually cared for you, maybe even loved you. But then you went and shackled up with my archrival slash ex-best friend. So yeah, the

feelings kind of left me pretty quickly.”

She didn't care if she was going to get in trouble for it or not, but she couldn't care less, she was too angry: she threw a clock at him.

It *pinged* off his head, and he caught it with one hand. “That,” he said drily, “hurt.”

“It was meant to.”

He grabbed her roughly and shifted.

“Never touch me again, you blockhead,” she spat at him when out of the corner she saw someone ridiculously familiar standing there watching them. She turned.

Arik's father looked absurdly like Arik—or should it be the other way round? They even looked the same age, but that was inevitable because of the immortality thing.

“Mr. Channing...” she trailed off.

“It's Mr. Driscoll. Channing is my ex-wife's last name.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I assumed the bastard cut out my last name.”

Anger flared in Kerri. “He's not a bastard.”

Driscoll smirked. “Actually, technically, he is.”

“He was...born before you were married?”

“That's what a bastard means.”

Kerri kept calm. Driscoll walked around her, as if examining her from all angles.

“Can you stop making me feel like a zoo exhibit?” she snapped.

“Feisty.” Driscoll chuckled. “Guess we go for the same kind of women, too.”

Kerri clenched and unclenched her fists. “What do you want?”

“You to work for me.”

She snorted. “Yeah, that's not going to be happening any time soon.”

Driscoll leaned against the wall behind him, measuring her up and down. Finally, he pushed himself off the wall.

“Let me give you a little...motivation,” he said smoothly. “Either you work for us, or we kill Arik.”

“You’d kill your son?”

He shrugged. “He’s a bastard child. If I kill one, then I can make another one, no problem.”

This man was inhumane. He could not be called a man.

Kerri gasped. “You...”

“I’m not a father who loves his kid. I’m a man who made a drunken mistake.”

“You are...” Kerri couldn’t bring herself to finish his sentence.

He sighed. “Answer me. Are you going to work for me or not?”

“Okay,” she finally said, seeing as she didn’t have a choice. “But if I have to work for you, then shouldn’t you take this thing off me?” She held up her metal-encased wrist.

Driscoll put her hand over the metal and muttered something, and Kerri could feel a bit of her magic leaking back into her. “This will allow you to use some of your magic, but if you try anything drastic, you’ll black out.”

“Lovely,” she muttered. “Can I at least shift?”

“Yes, but not far off. You definitely wouldn’t be able to shift out of the C.E. We built blocks. Nobody shifts out of the C.E. unless they have my permission.”

“It’s like a bloody concentration camp.”

He shrugged. “As long as it keeps them in order.” He took her hand and pressed a kiss onto the back of it. “It’s nice to finally be able to meet my son’s Mate.”

She withdrew her hand in disgust and then frowned. “How did you know?”

“You don’t know anything, do you? When you register as Mates, it gets recorded down on the Record of Mates. Besides, Woodland here told me all about it.”

She scowled at Ty, who shrugged it off.

Driscoll dismissed them with a wave of his hand, and Ty grabbed her and shifted so that they were in their room again.

“Uh,” he scratched his head. “You can...do whatever you want. Explore, or something. I don’t know what to do with you.”

“Aren’t you even worried that I may escape or something?”

Ty laughed. “Even I can’t escape from this hellhole, Ree. I doubt you can.”

She opened her mouth to tell him to stop calling her Ree, but changed her mind. “Where are you going?” she asked when he pulled the hood of his cloak up over his head.

“To do some stuff.” He vanished.

Great. Fanfreakingtastic. She wandered along the halls aimlessly, checking out the place. Everything was so boring. There wasn’t even anything that was in white. There were black and different shades of grey. It was like a loony bin. She felt as if she had walked into a black and white movie.

Talk about depressing, she thought. She sighed. She missed Arik. She had tried talking to him telepathically but he didn’t reply. They must’ve blocked that too, but she didn’t care.

*Arik, please get me out of here. Or give me the strength to get out of here. I beg you. I can’t stay here forever. I can’t. Not without you.*

But she could hear him. She heard him asking where she was. And she heard him totally pissed out of his mind. He was completely drunk. She couldn’t even make out what he was thinking, was that drunk or what? What killed her most was that she knew it was because of her, and she couldn’t even comfort him, tell him that she was there, and tell him that it was going to be okay. He couldn’t hear her, but she could hear him. How screwed up was that?

She had been reduced to tears a few nights before when he had asked her where she was and when she was going to come back. He also told her that he needed her and that he loved her before he fell asleep.

No answer. She sighed. She went down the fire escape stairwell. She didn’t understand why they had fire escape stairwells. If there was a fire, then everybody would simply shift out of the way, wouldn’t they? There was a wooden door at the bottom floor, and she tried the handle, thinking it was locked. It wasn’t.

She peered out. It was a garden. Of course, it wasn’t as beautiful or lavish as the one at the Sterling, but it was good enough. At least there was some colour. She had never been so grateful to see the colour green.

She was just thinking about Joshua and their little secret hiding spot—which probably wasn’t a secret now, but whatever—when she heard someone singing.

The lyrics weren’t in English, but the song was beautiful just the same. She walked subconsciously towards the singing. She found a tanned girl with long black hair sitting among the grass, her back facing her.

She was about to cough to announce her presence when the girl turned around. She was beautiful. And she was Indian.

“Uh, hi,” Kerri said awkwardly. “I heard you singing. I hope you don’t mind.”

“You’re...Kerrien?”

“Yeah, but please call me Kerri.”

The girl motioned for her to sit next to her. “It’s nice to meet you in the flesh, Kerri.”

“How do you know about me?”

“You were registered as Arik’s True Love.” She smiled. “I’m glad he finally found his True Love.”

“You’re Sitara,” Kerri said, realisation dawning on her.

She nodded, and started humming, twirling her fingers around a blade of grass, plucking it and then tearing it into shreds.

Kerri smiled. “Joshua does that too.”

Sitara looked up. “You know?”

“Yes.”

She looked worried. “Does Arik know?”

“No.”

She sighed in relief. “Good.”

“I know you came because Ty threatened to tell Arik about you and Joshua.”

Sitara smiled sadly. “I did what I thought was best.”

“Do you miss him?” Kerri found herself asking. “He misses you.”

Her smile went from sad to gentle to bitter. “I miss him too.”

“He dreams about you.”

Sitara started ripping up another blade of grass. “I do, too.”

“Haven’t you ever tried escaping from this place? Just...get out of this horrible hellhole?”

Sitara laughed bitterly. “Believe me, I’ve tried. God knows I’ve tried. They caught me every time.”

“If you had a chance to leave, would you?”

“Before, I would’ve said yes straightaway, but now...I don’t know.”

“Why not? You get to be with Joshua again, and you get to see all of your friends.”

“The thing is, Joshua and I would still have to stay a secret, and that was hard the first time. It’s going to be hard the second time, too.”

“How about if I was there?” Kerri asked gently. “Then Arik wouldn’t mind. That much.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.” She looked up. “I always knew Arik would end up with a gorgeous woman,” she said, smiling wryly.

“You’re gorgeous, too.”

Sitara shrugged.

“If...” Kerri trailed off uncertainly. “If I was to try to escape, would you help me?”

Sitara raised an eyebrow. “I...don’t know.”

“We could escape together,” Kerri said excitedly.

Sitara shook her head. “I would like that, but...I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

“There’s a chance of it happening.” Kerri raised her left arm. “If only I could take off this damn thing, then our chances of escaping will be so much bigger.”

Sitara’s smile grew. “Driscoll is a very cunning and sly man. He’d usually hide the key where he knows nobody, and least of all you, would think to find it. I hope that would be of help.”

Kerri laughed. “I don’t think so, but thanks anyway.”

“Just keep looking.”

“Sure.” Kerri looked away. “How long have you been here?”

“Three years.”

“Must’ve been the worst three years of your life.”

“Pretty much, but my life before the Sterling wasn’t that great either. My childhood was pretty rough.”

“I can imagine.”

“No, you can’t.”

“You’re right, I can’t.”

They laughed.

*Kerri, where are you?* Arik’s voice sounded in her head again. He was still sounding slightly drunk, and Kerri didn’t need to see him to know that he had been crying. *Kerri, I love you. Come back, please. I love you.*

*I love you too,* she shouted out in her head. *I love you, Arik. Can you hear me?*

Obviously not. There was a pause. *I’m coming for you, baby,* he thought after a while. *I’m going to find you no matter what, okay? Hang on. I’m coming for you.*

She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

## 52 - Taken Care Of

Arik had decided. He had decided that he was going to look for Kerri. And nothing was going to stop him.

Except, apparently, for Drake and Carter.

He had a feeling that she could hear him. He could never make sure, of course, because she never replied, but he felt like she could hear him, and he had the feeling that she wanted to reply, but couldn't.

He climbed into bed, still drunk. He had been drinking nonstop for almost two weeks. That had to break some kind of record.

*I love you, baby,* he thought to her. *Do you see what's happening to me? I'm a mess, Kerri. I'm an alcoholic. I don't even get hangovers because I'm never sober enough to feel them. Come back, babe. I miss you. I love you, Kerri, d'you hear me? I love you. I'm a mess without you.*

He missed her so much it hurt. The bed seemed empty without her and much too big, even though it was a single bed.

*Sweet dreams, Kerri,* he managed to blurt out before sleep overcame him.

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"Hey, you actually made it to lunch," Drake greeted him.

"I ran out of beers in the fridge," Arik said, sitting down next to them.

"Again?"

He shrugged. "I'm going to go get one now." He got up.

Carter grabbed and pulled him back down into his chair. "No you're not."

"Piss off," Arik grumbled as he brushed his friend away and heading for the drinks section, knowing but not caring that his friends were shaking their heads at each other.

"Look, Arik, you've got to stop drinking like this," Carter said as soon as he joined them. "It's been almost two weeks now."

"It was okay for the first few days, but two weeks of nonstop drinking and almost no food is too much," Drake said, joining in on the nagging. "Look at you; you've gone from fit and muscular to thin and scrawny."

"Who are you, my parents?"



“Arik, we’re only doing this for your own good,” Mel said gently, placing her hand on his arm. “We know how horrible you must feel but—”

Arik stood up, finishing his beer. “Do you? Do you know how horrible I feel? Do you have any idea how it feels when your Mate trusts you with her most important thing—her life—and then for you to have failed her? Do you know how it feels?” He threw the beer can down on the floor and crushed it with his shoe. “No, I didn’t think so. So just leave me alone.”

He walked out of the room. He could’ve shifted, but walking out looked more dramatic. He went back to his room to find Drake and Carter already there.

“What the hell?” he asked them.

They shrugged. “We shifted.”

Dammit.

“What are you doing here?” he asked them.

“Clearing up,” Drake said. “And taking away all drinks that contain alcohol.”

“What? Don’t touch my stuff!”

“Your stuff is going to be the death of you.”

“But it’s still my stuff.”

“Not,” Drake said, dropping a glass bottle into a bin bag quickly, “anymore.”

Arik groaned. “Why can’t you leave me alone?”

“We will,” Carter said, coming up to him and handing him a sleeping pill, “after you take this.”

“Okay, I will, now go away.”

Drake crossed his arms. “We’re not stupid. Swallow it now.”

“Who are you?” Arik grumbled. “My parents?” He sighed when neither Carter nor Drake moved and swallowed the pill. “There. Happy?”

They nodded and stayed until he started feeling drowsy. Then they made sure he got into bed and once they got out the door, locked it with a spell so that he couldn’t get out until the morning.

## 53 - So That's The Way It's Going To Be

Kerri cried so hard last night after hearing Arik's thoughts she was hysterical. Even magic couldn't calm her down.

Ty kept asking her what was the matter and after a while got irritated and told her to shut up. When she took no notice, he tried different ways of calming her down. At one point, he even got onto his knees and begged.

He had finally took her in his arms and held her close to him, trying to soothe her. She had closed her eyes and tried to pretend that he was Arik, but couldn't, because Ty smelled...woody. She had finally cried herself to sleep.

When she woke up she didn't need a mirror to know that her eyes were swollen and puffy. She groaned when Ty turned on the light and buried her head into the pillow.

"Get up," he said through a yawn.

"No."

He knelt down next to her. "Look," he hissed. "Because of you, I didn't get much sleep last night, and you of all people should know that I like my sleep. I don't have much magic left in me because of the lack of sleep, and you know that I'm not a morning person. I did everything I could to calm you down, and I'm sorry if I didn't succeed, but I didn't exactly sign up for this." He got up and went to pull on his cloak.

"I don't like this place much either, Ree," he told her. "I'm not staying here voluntarily. I was blackmailed, just like everyone else, so don't give me a hard time. Now get up."

Kerri sat up in her bed. She hadn't thought about it that way. That Ty didn't like this place as well. "Why didn't you try to escape?" she asked. Her voice was hoarse.

"When I first came here, I was going to, but the night before, someone else tried to escape and failed." Ty shook his head and laughed. "You won't believe what they did to him." He pulled the hood of his cloak up over his head. "Hurry, we're late."

Kerri realised that century-old men had issues with punctuality. She brushed her teeth and washed her face in record time. She was sorting through her clothes and was wondering why they looked so familiar when she remembered that these were the ones Arik got her. The ones that were stolen after the first invasion. So this is where they went.

"I'm sorry," she said softly as she followed him down the hall. "I hadn't thought of the fact that you didn't like working here either."

He shrugged, not slowing down. "It's like going to school. You don't actually like going to school because of the things you have to do there but because of the people you meet and because of the privileges you get."

Kerri snorted. "Privileges? Here? What privileges do you get?"

Ty turned around then, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Watching our archenemies go down," he said.

When Kerri finally realised it was Arik he was talking about she bit her lip to stop herself from hitting him. "I thought you two were friends," she said finally.

"We were," Ty said, walking again. "But he didn't understand."

"Didn't understand what?"

"That I didn't want to come here. He thought that I wanted to betray them to this company. Sure, werewolves betray, but that doesn't mean we want to do it, and it sure as hell doesn't mean we want to do it in this place."

Kerri grabbed his arm. "Escape," she begged. "Escape with me. Let's get out of here."

Ty's lips tightened. "Loyalty is vital when you are working for the C.E.," he said edgily.

Kerri dropped his arm and shot him a look of frustration and disbelief. "You'd rather give up your own happiness for loyalty to something you hate?"

"No, I'd rather stay alive." Ty turned and started walking.

He could stay alive and be happy, she wanted to tell him. But she didn't, and instead started to follow him.

"Oh, and Ree?" Ty stopped and turned around.

"Yes?"

"I think it's better if you forget about this conversation and just go back to hating me," he said before turning around and she stood there and watched him walk away from her.

So that's the way it's going to be.

And that's the way it's going to stay.

## 54 - Mick

“What do you want?” Arik mumbled into his pillow. “I haven’t touched a drop of alcohol for three days, I eat and sleep at decent times, and I shower, shave, brush my teeth, comb my hair and wash my face daily. What else do you want from me?”

“Get up, you lazy bum.” Drake hauled Arik out of bed. “You’re going to like what we’re going to do.”

“You wanna bet?” Arik muttered as he went to brush his teeth.

“We’re going to come up with a plan to save Kerri,” Carter announced.

Arik choked on his toothpaste. “We what?”

“You heard us.”

“But...why?”

“Because as much as we enjoy seeing you drunk and dancing on top of the bar and singing at the top of your voice,” Drake said, grinning and receiving a glare from Arik, “we miss her. And so do you. Duh.”

“But...” Arik spat into the sink and rinsed his mouth. “Maybe we shouldn’t.”

“What? Why?”

“Because...maybe it’s meant to be, y’know?” Arik shrugged, trying to act casual. “Maybe this is my punishment for...whatever I did.”

Drake reached over and slapped him in the face. “Snap out of it, dude. We’re saving Kerri. End of conversation.”

“Yeah,” Carter agreed. “Even Mel misses Kerri. She wants to help.”

“Besides, even if you give up on Kerri, do you think that she’s given up on you? Don’t you dare let her down,” Drake scolded him.

Mel suddenly appeared in the bathroom.

“Gah!” Arik shouted.

“Good morning,” Mel said cheerfully. “I came up with a plan.”

“Really?” All three men were intrigued.

“Yeah. You know how spirits can pass through walls and things like that? We can get spirits to go and save Kerri.”

“Even if the spirits can get in and get out through walls, Kerri can’t,” Arik said glumly.

Mel’s grin got wider. “Do you know Mick?” she asked.

“No.”

“Mick’s a spirit, and he has a gift. When he touches a person, he can make the person possess the same state as all spirits. They’ll become invisible and can pass through walls and all kinds of stuff.”

Drake brightened. “Three cheers for Mick. Will he help us?”

“Well, I haven’t talked to him about it yet, what with this thing being strictly confidential and all. But knowing Mick, he’s going to want something out of this as well.”

“Why is everybody so flipping selfish?” Arik asked. “I mean, what can he possibly want?”

“Well, here’s the thing.” Mel turned to Drake. “Mick’s gay. And he’s interested. So I—well, he—was wondering if you would...” she trailed off. “Well, you know.”

“You want me to sleep with a *spirit*?” Drake asked incredulously.

Carter smirked. “Better than what you’ve been sleeping with for the past few months—your pillow.”

Drake glared at him. “You know, I would hit you if it weren’t for the fact that it’s true.”

“I know.”

“So will you do it?” Mel asked him.

“But...how am I supposed to...do it?”

They all stared at him.

“How do we know?” Arik asked finally. “We don’t sleep around with men.” Then he turned to Mel. “Except for you, of course, but you—”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” Carter told Arik.

“—haven’t been getting any,” Arik finished, smirking. “That is, according to Carter.”

“What part of ‘don’t finish that sentence’ do you not understand?” Carter asked him, frustrated.

Arik shrugged. “At least you have your Mate. I don’t have mine.” He punched Drake’s arm. “So? Are you going to sleep with Mick?”

"I haven't even seen him before," Drake spluttered.

Carter rolled his eyes. "Does it really matter? You don't remember names of half the guys you sleep with anyway."

"But I...I'm with somebody right now," Drake said reluctantly.

Arik snorted. "When has that ever stopped you?"

Drake shot him a look. "If this wasn't also sadly true, I'd hit you too."

"Come on," Mel begged him. "Just consider it. You get fantastic sex, and we all get Kerri back."

"How do you know it's going to be fantastic?" Drake grumbled. "I'm probably not going to be able to even see the guy."

"Older spirits can master the art of...making themselves visible for a period of time. And Mick's old."

"How old?"

"Old enough." Mel hugged him. "Please?"

"I don't know why you look at me like that even though you know the look won't work because I'm gay," Drake muttered.

"Pretty please?"

"Fine, fine. But only if I can see him when...during...the process."

Mel waved away his comment. "Done. In fact, I'll go get Mick now."

"Now?" Arik asked. "Can't I at least get changed?"

"Sure you can," Drake said cheerfully. "But let's just say that if you do, I won't be the only guy staring."

Arik looked at him balefully. "Out. All of you. Now. Whatshisface can wait outside along with you guys."

When he got out, Carter and Mel were checking each other's tonsils. Arik cleared his throat and they jumped apart.

"Where are Drake and Mick?" he asked as they hastily straightened their clothing.

"They..." Mel trailed off. She looked to Carter for help.

"They uh, really hit it off."

Arik raised an eyebrow. "So they're..."

"Jumping each other bones?" Mel asked, not very ladylike or fairylike at all. She nodded. "Yep."

"So that's what inspired you two to do the same in my room," Arik remarked dryly, and they both blushed. "So what do we do now?"

Carter shrugged. "Wait?"

"Knowing Drake, we're going to be waiting for quite some time," Arik said wryly.

Carter turned to him, disgusted. "And how would you know?"

Arik grimaced. "I used to have to share a room when we were trainees. Let's just say that if you didn't have earplugs at the time, you wouldn't be getting any sleep at all."

"Can we please change the topic?" Mel asked. "I really don't like where this is going."

Arik shrugged. "He asked."

"Yes, and he'll regret it," Mel said, giving Carter a look that said so. She sighed. "Does anybody have an idea of what the C.E. looks like from the inside?" she asked, not really expecting an answer.

Arik smiled sheepishly. "Uh, I might just be able to draw out a map."

"What?" Carter yelped. "How?"

Arik ran his hands through his hair and paused when he remembered how Kerri used to love doing that, and smiled. *I'm coming for you, babe. Just wait for a bit, okay? I'm coming.*

"Uh, my dad...he's the boss of the C.E. and I remembered the first day he took up the job. There was a lot of screaming in the house. My mom and dad were fighting. She threw the stuff he brought home onto the ground and the next day she filed for a divorce. I found a blueprint on the ground so I kept it in the room. Figured that this was the place that drove my parents apart, you know? So...I would take time to look at the blueprint everyday and I kind of memorised it after a while."

Carter looked at him for a while. "You didn't use to talk this much," he said after a while.

Mel hit Carter's arm. "Hey, shut up."

"What? I was just saying—"

"I happen to like sensitive guys who talk about their feelings instead of people who cover things up, so there. That'll give you something to talk about."

Carter flushed. "From now on, I'm going to be doing a lot of talking," he whispered to Arik, who

laughed.

“So Arik,” Mel was saying, smiling sweetly at him. “Can you draw the thing up for us?”

“Uh, yeah, sure. I’m not sure whether I’m going to be able to remember everything cos’ I haven’t looked at the blueprint in a while, but—”

“Why don’t you just look for the blueprint?” Carter asked him.

“Because I burnt it,” Arik said flatly.

“Why are you such an idiot?” Mel turned around to ask Carter.

Carter shrugged. “Hey, you wanted me to talk more. You can’t have it both ways.”

Mel rolled her eyes and handed Arik a piece of paper. “Start drawing, buddy.”

“I have to warn you, I’m not exactly the world’s finest artist, so don’t expect anything...well, good.”

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By lunchtime, Arik had finished a sketch of every single floor of the C.E. and its garden. It didn’t take that long considering that every single floor looked almost exactly the same.

He flung his pencil down onto the table. “Finished.” He for one was relieved that it was finished. Drawing the sketch had brought up painful memories. He rubbed his eyes. “Can we go to lunch now? I’m starving.”

Mel gathered up the blueprints. “Sure. Let’s go. Maybe Drake and Mick are going to be down there.”

Arik grinned. “Yeah. I want to meet this Mick. I’m going to go first. See you guys later.” He shifted off.

“Hey Arik,” Drake greeted him.

“Hi. How was Mick?”

Drake grinned. “I never kiss and tell.”

“Oh well. But I’m pretty sure you did some things other than kiss.”

“Drake rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean, Rick.”

“So, when can I meet the legendary Mick?”

The air next to Drake shimmered and a man—handsome in a rugged, lead-guitarist-of-rock-band kind of way—materialized and grinned. “Hi.”



“Mick, I presume?” Arik asked, reaching over to shake Mick’s hand.

“Yep.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise, Arik. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“What has Drake told you?”

Mick grinned. “All kinds of things.”

Arik sat down at the table and bit into his apple. “So, uh, has Mel talked to you about the...thing we want you to do?”

Mick lowered his voice. “The confidential thing?”

“Yeah.”

“Yep. Just call me at any time and I’ll be more than happy to help you guys.”

“Thanks. Mel should be here with the sketches soon.”

“What sketches?” Drake asked.

“I drew sketches of the blueprints of the C.E. so that Mick would know where to go.”

Drake laughed. “If we trust your artistic abilities, Micky would walk into a wall, expect to get into the room K’s supposed to be in and get into the bathroom instead.”

Arik scowled at him as Mel and Carter shifted and appeared next to them.

“Hey guys,” Mel said cheerfully.

“Hey, Mel,” Drake said with the same level of optimism. “Micky, Carter. Carter, Micky.”

Carter frowned. “I thought it was Mick.”

Drake shrugged. “I like to call him Micky,” he said, blushing ever so slightly.

Mel shot Carter a look that plainly stated *you really don’t know when to shut up, do you?*

Mick reached over to shake Carter’s hand.

Carter was delighted. “Whoa, I thought your hand was supposed to pass through mine or something.”

Mel looked at Arik. “What am I going to do with him?” she whispered. “He acts like a brainless

chicken.”

Arik shook his head. “You’re going to have to get used to it, Mel. You are, after all, his True Love. You’ll learn to love him for his…”

“Idiocy? Stupidity? Foolishness?”

“Goofiness,” Arik concluded.

Mel smiled. “Do you love Kerri for her faults?”

“To me, Kerri has no faults. I love her just the way she is. Sure, sometimes she can be a bit…violent, but she didn’t change for me like every other girl did, and that’s what I love about her.”

Mel squeezed Arik’s hand. “We’ll get Kerri back. Just see.”

Arik smiled back. “I know. And I’m really grateful to you guys for doing this.”

“You’re not the only one who misses Kerri. We’re doing this for all of us.”

“I know, but thanks all the same.”

## 55 - The Great Escape

Kerri was lying down on the grass with Sitara, staring up at the clouds in the sky.

“Think hard,” Sitara told her. “The key to that thing has got to be somewhere.”

“Why are you so sure that the key’s going to be in the most obvious place and that the reason I wouldn’t be able to find it is because it’s too obvious and that I’ll ignore it?”

Sitara shrugged. “That’s the way Driscoll thinks. But then again, he’s full of weird ideas, so who knows? Maybe he chucked it somewhere in our realm. I’m just saying it never hurts to make sure.”

“Our realm? You mean the Human Realm?”

“No. It’s what the Sterling calls the O.R.”

“Oh.” Kerri’s hand reached up to her necklace—or rather, Arik’s necklace. She had decided that as sweet a gesture it was, she was going to give it back to him when she saw him again. If she saw him again. She sighed, running her thumb lightly over the indented carvings of Arik’s initials. A.D.

She missed him.

She reached behind her neck and unfastened the necklace and held it up with her fingers up in front of her, watching the sunlight glint brightly off it. She sighed and looked at her wrist, at the ugly metal casing.

Then she noticed the slit that the key was supposed to be inserted in to unlock it. She held up the thin sliver of silver with Arik’s initials in it and then looked into the slit of the metal casing and saw little convex patterns inside.

Would it fit? She wondered as she pushed the piece of silver into the metal cuff. It sprang open and dropped down to the grass.

“Oh my God,” she said excitedly, sitting up.

“What is it?” Sitara asked her, her eyes still closed.

“I found the key.”

Sitara’s eyes opened. “What was it?”

“The necklace Arik gave me.”

“Driscoll must’ve taken a copy of it when you were unconscious and made the cuff then.”

Kerri closed her eyes, enjoying the feeling of her magic rushing back into her, the Mark at the back of neck glowing brightly and heating up. “Ah. I feel strong again.” She sighed.

“Don’t!” Sitara cried when Kerri was about to do some magic.

“Why not?”

“Give the magic a little time to settle down,” Sitara said. “If you do anything now the result’s going to come out like ten times stronger than it should.”

Kerri lay down again and snapped the cuff back on her wrist. “This is going to be useful later.” She put the necklace back around her neck, already feeling the magic draining from her.

*Thanks, Arik. I knew you’d help me get out of here.*

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It was late at night when someone tapped Kerri on the shoulder.

“Wha—” she mumbled.

He shushed her. “Be quiet.”

She frowned and opened her eyes. That didn’t sound like Ty. She looked around the room and saw nobody. Great. This place was making her insane.

“I’m Mick, a friend of Drake’s. I’m here to bust you out.”

“Where the hell are you?” Kerri whispered fiercely. Beside her, Ty rolled over in his sleep.

The voice shushed her again. “I’m a spirit. You can’t see me. Yet. Now are you coming with me or what?”

“I suppose so,” Kerri said.

“Okay, this is going to feel weird,” the voice warned her before touching her on the arm.

“Wha—whoa,” Kerri yelped as she felt herself melting away and becoming invisible. “Hey, I can see you now.” She looked him up and down. “I can also see why you’re Drake’s uh, friend.”

Mick winked at her. “Let’s go. Be quiet though, just because they can’t see us doesn’t mean they can’t hear us.” He grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the room.

Once they were outside he took something out of his trouser pocket and unrolled it. It was a sketch of the building.

A very bad sketch. "Who the hell drew that?" Kerri asked, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

Mick shot her a look. "Your Mate." He stuffed the sketch back into his pocket. "Come on. This way."

"Where's Arik?" she asked him.

"At the Sterling."

"Does he know you're here?"

"No."

She stopped and Mick was comically thrown backwards when she refused to move. "What?"

"I decided to get you out of here one night earlier."

"Why the hell would you do that?"

Mick shrugged. "Felt like it. Besides, it would surprise Arik and all the others."

"How do I know that I can trust you?"

"You don't. Take a risk, Kerri."

Kerri narrowed her eyes. "What's the name of Drake's ex? The one with the creepy hair?"

Mick laughed. "That's easy. Kelvin."

Kerri raised her eyebrows.

"His name is Kelvin," Mick protested. "He just likes people calling him Kelly."

Kerri grinned. "Fine. Let's get out of here." She grabbed his arm. "Wait, can we bring someone else with us?"

Mick frowned. "I don't know—"

"Arik won't mind. I'm sure."

"Well..."

"Please?"

"Fine, fine, but hurry."

Kerri dragged him all the way to Sitara's room and knocked on the door.

“Sitara,” she whispered.

Sitara was reading a book. She looked up, frowning.

Kerri nodded at Mick and he took hold of Sitara’s arm and made her invisible.

Sitara looked from Kerri to Mick.

“Who’s he?” she asked eventually.

“Our saviour,” Kerri said. “Come on, let’s go.”

“But...I can’t just...leave.”

“Oh, yes, you can. Come on,” she prompted. “Think about Joshua and all your friends. And freedom. And happiness.”

Sitara finally relented.

They were about to pass through the last wall—Kerri thought passing through walls were cool—when suddenly the alarms went off.

“What’s going on?” she asked Mick as Sitara’s eyes widened in fear.

He groaned. “I forgot that there were also spirits at the C.E. who can see us.”

“Go through that wall,” she ushered them towards the wall. “Go, go, go!”

“It’s no use,” Mick said as they went through the wall. “The spirits can still come and get us.”

“I have a plan,” Kerri said.

Once they were through the wall, Kerri told Mick and Sitara to stand back and quickly slotted the piece of silver into the cuff. It snapped open and as the magic rushed back into her like raging water that flowed through a broken dam, Kerri spread her palms wide and let the heat spit at full blast out of her hands.

Fire coated the whole building and it went up in flames. Beside her, Mick and Sitara spouted fire at the C.E. as well. After a while, Kerri motioned for them to stop and brought her palms up and towards the sky, thrusting with all her might. The ground shot up and encased the C.E., still in its flaming glory.

Kerri wiped the sweat away from her forehead, exhausted. “Let’s go.”

It was raining hard, but she didn’t care, because she was going *home*.

\*\*\*

“Thanks again, Mick,” Kerri called after him.

"I'll see you in the morning," he called over his shoulder before going into Drake's room.

Kerri turned around and put her hands on Sitara's shoulders. "Go to Joshua," she said softly, smiling.

Sitara smiled suddenly, pulling Kerri into a hug. "Thank you, Kerri," she whispered in her ear before shifting away.

Kerri turned and faced the door that led to Arik's room. She took a deep breath, unable to keep the grin off her face.

*Honey, she trilled, I'm home.*

## 56 - Not a Dream This Time

Arik woke up blearily, confused. He could've sworn that he'd heard Kerri's voice. The door opened and Kerri came in.

Oh hell, not another one of those dreams.

He looked at her warily. "I'm dreaming again."

She cocked her head and looked at him. "No, you're not."

"I think someone should slap me now. I need to wake up."

Kerri grinned. "If you insist." She sat down on the bed next to him and slapped him.

He touched his cheek and sat up. "Okay, I'm definitely awake. The Kerri in my dreams would never slap me."

Her grin got wider. "I can do that again if you want."

He cupped his hands around her face. It was Kerri. She was here. It wasn't a dream. She was actually really here right next to him.

He laughed in wonder and relief. "It's you. It's really you."

She smiled and ran her hands through his hair. "Yeah, baby. It's me."

He kissed her long and deep and hard.

And the best part? This time she didn't disappear or fade away into thin air, and he didn't suddenly wake up to find himself making out with his pillow.

\*\*\*

"It's really you," he murmured, hugging her close to him.

She laughed. "Did it take you that long to figure it out? What gave me away?"

He grinned and kissed the top of her head. "The sex."

She rolled her eyes and kissed his neck. "Oh, I have something to give you," she said, lifting her head from his chest. She reached behind her, unclasped the necklace and handed it back to him. "Here."

He frowned. "You don't want it?"



“No. I mean, yes, I do. But...you should keep it. After all, it’s the only memory you have left of your father.”

“What do you mean?”

“A.D.? Arik Driscoll?” She put on Arik’s necklace for him. “This is just something to remember him by.”

“Why? It’s not like he’s dead.”

She cleared her throat uncomfortably. “Actually...”

“You killed him?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe, maybe not.”

“What did you do?”

“I uh, set the building on fire, and then I built like a massive wall around it so that they couldn’t get out. I know it’s going to take them like five minutes to drill a hole through with the magic, but we were escaping, so...”

“We?”

“Yeah. Mick came to break us out. Oh, and we brought Sitara back with us.”

Arik stiffened. “Sitara?”

“Yeah.”

“Isn’t that kind of...awkward?”

She began lazily tracing random patterns on his chest. “Not really. I uh, have to tell you something.”

He kissed the top of her head again. “What is it?”

She sat up and so did he. She opened and closed her mouth for a few times.

“Sitara’s not your True Love,” she said finally.

Arik laughed. “I know that,” he said, running his fingers lightly up and down her arm.

She cleared her throat again. “Uh, she’s Joshua’s True Love.”

He froze. “What?”

She smiled weakly. “Yeah.”

Arik took time to digest this, letting the information absorb. Then after a while, he nodded. "Okay."

Now it was her turn to look surprised. "What?"

He shrugged, smiling. "I'm happy for Joshua and Sitara. They're good people and deserve each other." His smile dropped a little. "Except when Sitara betrayed us, but—"

"Yeah, I'm going to have to tell you something else."

"Yes?"

"Sitara left because Ty threatened to tell you about her and Joshua, and she didn't want to upset you or Joshua, and she didn't want to break your friendship. So uh, yeah, she left."

He blinked a few times. "Well, then. They're both good people. So, you're saying Mick came to bust you guys out tonight instead of tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He said something about 'feeling like it'. Who is this Mick anyway?"

Arik grinned. "Mel introduced him to Drake, and in exchange for his help to save you, Drake promised to uh, please him."

"I thought he looked gay."

"So where's Sitara now?"

"Probably off in Joshua's room doing the same thing we were doing a few minutes ago." She kissed him.

"I have to say, what we did back there, that was pretty amazing. I mean...that was probably the best."

She grinned. "Wanna top that?"

He grinned right back at her. "I never can resist a challenge."

## 57 - She's Really Back!

Kerri was happy. She lay on the bed next to Arik, who was snoring lightly, his chest going up and down with every breath he took. She smiled. He smelled good in his unique, Arik-y way.

She kissed his cheek before heading towards the bathroom to brush her teeth and get changed. When she came out, he was still sleeping. Probably all worn out by the excitement last night. Cough cough.

She decided to go down to breakfast first. Joshua and Sitara were already there. When Joshua saw her, he leapt up to hug her.

"Thank you," he whispered in her ear. "Thank you so much."

She grinned when he finally let go. "No problem."

"Oh, and it's great to have you back, just in case you thought that I didn't give a flip about you."

She laughed. "I understand."

When Drake saw her at their table, he screamed. Literally screamed. Everybody turned to look at him, but he ignored them and rushed over to Kerri.

"K!" He pulled her into a hug. "Oh my God, you're back!"

"Hey Drake." She hugged him back. "Yeah, didn't Mick tell you?"

"Oh, right."

"I really have to thank him. He was the one who got Sitara and me out of there."

Drake's eyes widened. "Did you say Sitara?"

Kerri held her hand out towards where Sitara was sitting next to Joshua, the two having pulled apart once Drake had walked into the room.

"What are you doing here?" he asked Sitara as she came over for a hug.

"I escaped, thanks to Kerri."

"Carter!" Drake yelled loud enough for Carter and Mel, who were just walking into the dining room, to look up from their conversation. "Get your @\$@ over here! It's Kerri and Sitara!"

Carter ran towards both Kerri and Sitara and enveloped them in a huge bear hug while Mel flitted over.

“Hey Mel,” Kerri greeted as she hugged her friend. “Thanks for saving me.”

Mel was surprised. “What do you mean?”

“Well, if you haven’t remembered Mick and his special gift, then I wouldn’t be here.”

Mel looked frustrated. “We were supposed to go tonight.”

“I know, but he wanted to surprise you guys.”

“He certainly did.” Mel hugged her back and turned to Sitara. “Hi, I’m Mel.”

“Sitara.” They shook hands. “I know I come from the C.E.,” Sitara started, but Mel waved her away.

“I know, I know, you’re on our side. Everybody knows.” She winked. “Gossip travels fast.”

*Kerri?* Arik’s voice suddenly appeared in her head, his tone urgent.

*I’m down at breakfast.*

She could hear his sigh of relief. *I thought you were gone again.*

She laughed into his head. *You’re not getting rid of me that easily.*

He appeared next to her and kissed her right in front of everyone. “Don’t scare me like that again,” he murmured, ignoring the whistles and calls from Carter and Drake.

She stopped for a while to catch her breath. “I’ll...try,” she breathed, laughing.

He kissed the top of her head and went over to Sitara. “Hi,” he said after a while.

She smiled. “Arik. It’s been a long time.”

“Yeah, yeah, it has.”

“Uh, Arik, listen. I don’t know whether this is going to be the right time to tell you, but—”

“You and Joshua are True Loves.”

A look of surprise crossed Sitara’s face. “You know?”

“Yeah. It’s okay. Really. I’m happy for you two.”

She smiled, obviously relieved. “Thanks, I uh...thanks.”

Arik pulled her into an awkward hug before turning to face Joshua. “So, congratulations.”

Joshua smiled. "Thank you, sir." Kerri knew that he was truly happy.

"No 'sir', just Arik." Arik smiled back at him and patted him on the back before returning to Kerri.

"So?" he asked her, sliding his arms around her waist. "How'd I do?"

"Good," she said, kissing his cheek. "I'm proud of you. Very mature. Very unlike you."

He pinched her waist. "I think what we did last night prove that I'm very, very mature indeed."

She slapped him on the arm. "Arik!"

"What?"

"You just...told everyone what we did last night."

"You know they've probably heard all about it last night first hand. Three times, too." He kissed the top of her head.

"Wow," Carter said. "Three times?"

"Four," Drake said, grinning. "Mick and I counted." Mick materialised and was holding up a banana suggestively and winking at her.

Kerri threw an apple at him, but it went straight through him. She shuddered. "Ugh."

"Four times is impressive," Drake was saying. "Especially with a Mate, too. It's very exhausting. But then again, when you're...mating with your True Love, your sexual appetite never gets satisfied. Well, it does, but there's always room for more, if you get what I mean."

"It's ten in the morning," Mel said, groaning. "I do not want to know about any kind of appetite unless it involves breakfast."

All men sitting at the table smirked. "There are a lot of things you can eat for breakfast, Mel," Drake said, winking at her and Carter.

Mel nodded at Kerri, and Kerri threw an apple at Drake's head.

"Ow! I was just trying to be helpful."

"Well, you're not, so stop being disgusting."

"So Kerri," Mel said, changing the topic. "How does it feel to be back?"

"Unbelievably great."

"Just like the sex?" Carter chimed in.

Kerri shot him a look.

“Actually,” Arik said, grinning, “I want to know the answer to that one, too.”

She grinned, rolling her eyes. “You’re all incorrigible.”

**~End~**

um yea i'm writing the second book already, i'm just wondering whether i should continue to add it on this book or start a new one. but if i am starting a new one, you'll be able to guess the title...(lol it'll probably be sth like Kerri2??)

xx