

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

SILVER EMBERS

Becca Finn

Table of Contents

Love’s Landscapes.....	3
Silver Embers – Information.....	5
Silver Embers.....	6
Chapter 1.....	7
Chapter 2.....	29
Chapter 3.....	53
Chapter 4.....	62
Chapter 5.....	74
Chapter 6.....	87
Chapter 7.....	94
Chapter 8.....	104
Author Bio	114

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

SILVER EMBERS

By Becca Finn

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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SILVER EMBERS

By Becca Finn

Photo Description

A man lies on his back, sun streaming onto his burnished skin and through his curly brown hair. He looks like he should be comfortable in his red toga and on his soft white sheet. Yet the man reaches beside him, the heartbreak almost palpable around him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

“Where you used to be, there is a hole in the world, which I find myself constantly walking around in the daytime, and falling in at night. I miss you like hell.”

—Edna St. Vincent Millay

I miss him like hell. Our first meeting nearly ended with bloodshed. He was arrogant and cold and so infuriatingly self-righteous that I damned him a thousand times for the power he held over me. I didn't want to trust him, didn't want to need him, and certainly never thought I might grow to love him. Now, I miss him so badly I can hardly bear it.

Tell me the story of this man and his lost lover. How did they get separated? What will it take to bring them together again? I'd love HEA with this story. Fantasy or SF preferred! No incest, rape or BDSM please!

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Tiffany

Story Info

Genre: science fiction, fantasy

Tags: switch/versatile, magic users, enemies to lovers, mage/sorcerer, humorous

Word Count: 40,572

SILVER EMBERS

By Becca Finn

Chapter 1

Present day

As I lay basking in the light of the high summer sun, I can't help but hurt. Deep down in my soul, I ache. Outside my home, through the open windows, I hear my people, the Elementals, enjoying life unhindered. Knowing they are one with nature, as we have evolved to be. That used to make me so happy. The joyful laugh of children running down the streets, the yip of a playing dog.

Yet I can't enjoy it.

The white sheet is so soft under my hand—I caress the spot where he would have lain. Where he'd laid in the past, even if just one night. I close my eyes and remember the feel of his fingers over my arm, my chest. His breath whispering over my cheek.

Is it sad that I have yet to wash this sheet? It still smells faintly like him, and I just want one thing left that was his. He is no longer with me, and I can't even begin to guess what happened to him. If he is even still alive at all.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to hold back the thoughts before they consume me. A sharp rap on the door to my room breaks me from my melancholy.

I would ignore whoever it is, but the merest idea that one of my people could be in need has me jumping to my feet, careful not to disturb the sheet.

As soon as I slide the locks on the door, my only sister storms in. My friend Kiren follows, an apologetic look on his face.

I am her junior by nearly ten years, but we look so very similar. We are both deeply tanned, with a bronze sheen from enjoying the outdoors. Our eyes are a fiery orange that flash with red and yellow. Our hair is dark brown and curly, though mine is kept cropped short and hers cascades over her slender shoulders in a chaotic fashion. She dresses like me as well, in simple velvet togas that drape to our knees.

She sets herself gracefully upon my sheet, drawing her legs beneath her. Then she just stares at me. I lean against the wall beside the door and try not to look at her. Kiren pulls the chair out from my desk and sits on it, crossing his legs.

I'm sure she doesn't miss how much I am squirming under her gaze. She's always had that effect on me.

"I've been trying to get it out of you for over a week now. The whole story. You've told me enough to start the evacuation plans and for Kiren to increase defences. Yet you say nothing else. I need to know more in order to be most effective as a leader," she says calmly, but the flash of red in her eyes stands to betray her feelings.

"How are you, sister dear? How is your wonderful husband on this fine day?"

I try for a smile, but I must fail if the look of pity in Soline's face is anything to go by.

I slide down the wall and sit there, resting my head upon my knees.

"Please tell me what happened. What has made you so upset, Reynard? Why are you acting this way?"

Kiren smiles. "We're worried about you."

"I'm unsure if I can tell you without breaking," I whisper, the words like a curse.

A curse. I chuckle at my own morbid thoughts. Everything just seems to remind me of Sebastian.

Though a curse was how it all started.

"Why don't you write it down, like a story," says Sol, jumping up to summon a servant to bring a stack of papers for me.

Ever efficient, the papers and some pens are presented to me in only moments.

"Just write whatever comes to mind and I'll read each page as you finish it," says Sol, smiling.

Then, letting my mind wander back, I let go with a sigh that is almost like relief as my pen dances over the pages.

It all started when that psychotic mage took residence near the city. Mages are a race of beings that evolved to cast spells using power within themselves rather than nature. Our common ancestors, humans, are still around today but are not common. Magi inhabit pretty much the rest of the planet except for our city.

Eons ago, the Magi and Elementals were at war. Since the Great War was so long ago, nobody is certain as to the exact reasons that caused it. All I know now is that the relationship between our two races is still strained to this day.

Azmarine (where the majority of Elementals live) is a city that lies in a large vale surrounded by mountains. One side of the city is flanked by a jungle, a desert and a spring-fed lake. At the top of one of the peaks is a flat expanse of ice. It's like our holy place. The perfect place for all Elementals to live, without the vast amounts of technology used by the Mages. (I know that you know all of this Soline, just let me get the story out my own way.)

Me? I prefer to bask in the sand and sun, baking until the moon takes over the sky. Filling my entire being with the power of nature. That is how I spent much of my youth, so long ago.

Four weeks ago

That fateful day, I wouldn't have been able to do that, even if I hadn't had other responsibilities. The sun wasn't shining, the sky covered in a thick layer of a roiling green smog. The usual opalescent quality of the cobbled street stones had dulled to grey. Plants that usually grew abundantly along the streets and between buildings sat drooping, their life fading from their delicate leaves and petals.

A drizzle of rain sputtered down from the clouds, running in thin green rivulets down my skin. I preferred to feel the air on my skin, so I only wore a short-sleeved shirt and brown leather pants. The wind still carried a slight warmth to it, which kept me from being too chilled in the wet weather.

I stood outside the manor that I lived in with my sister (the Lord of Azmarine) and her husband. The city was quiet, which felt so unusual for such jovial people. Not even the sound of birds could be heard in the background. The lack of sun was depressing; everybody was huddled in their homes. I shivered out of discomfort with the situation.

I left from a back exit of the home, so I was standing around the corner when I heard the conversation. It was between Kiren (the general of the Azmarine army) and my sister. I was pretty sure they were sitting on her patio, which was secluded from the public.

“Where is he?” asked Kiren in a hushed voice.

I guess Kiren didn't know I was downwind. I could hear what he was saying, even if it was a bit quiet by the time the words reached me.

I assumed Kiren had been talking about the crazy mage that had been near the city until I heard my sister reply, “In his bedroom. I have him going over plans for the new playground in the west quarter.”

Shit! They were talking about me. I'd already finished those. The layout for the playground had been easy since I'd already spoken to many of the families in the area and received their input. I'd come out here for some fresh air.

“Good. I know he'd just want to come along with us if he knew the plan.”

I winced. That hurt. I was a good warrior, dammit. I had trained for years and honed my craft with the sword. I could send fireballs blazing flawlessly, avoiding comrades and hitting only the enemy.

In theory.

I hadn't actually fought in a battle of any kind. But that was beside the point.

It wasn't like Kiren had fought much before either. This was a time of peace.

“He means well. You know how much I love my brother.”

“I do know. But since he isn't around, let's talk about the mage.”

“Who is this man the Order put you in contact with? And what did he tell you?”

“The man is called Sebastian, the only necromancer known today. The Order sent him because he's been chasing the crazy mage across the country. We're going to meet him on the mountain and confer with him on how to deal with the problem. His target is near the ancient murals.”

“Why is the crazy mage doing this? It can't be that he is just psychotic.”

“It has to do with—”

The wind picked up, and as I peeked around the corner, I saw that Kiren and my sister were walking away so I could no longer hear them.

I gritted my teeth and resisted the urge to stomp my foot like a petulant child. I hated that they were trying to keep this from me.

I loved the work I did with the kids and the poor. Don't get me wrong. But just because I was one of the smallest fire Elementals born in centuries meant nothing. Compared to most Magi or humans, I was downright normal. Heck, some humans would think I was tall, being five foot nine and covered in sleek muscles.

To my people, however, I was a runt. Not that they would ever say anything. I'd had to work twice as hard to prove myself worthy. But I guess I still hadn't proven anything.

It never helped anything that I wasn't the brightest flame on the torch. If that makes sense?

I went back into my room and started to change into some light armour as I plotted what I would do. I needed to prove that I was capable to fight with the best of them.

Present day

Sol slams the last paper down in front of her and glares at me. Her eyes start to glow a bit. I avert my own gaze.

"I don't think you're an idiot. I just—"

She trails off and looks to a photograph of a man and woman who look so much like the two of us. It is framed and sits on a table beside my bed. She sighs deeply and works on smoothing the paper sitting in front of her.

We don't speak for a while, until I shuffle on my knees across the room and plunk myself down beside her.

"You're just my older sister, and you want to protect me."

She nods. "You're all I have left."

I don't bother to tell her that she doesn't need to go to such lengths to keep me from danger. Yet the story I am about to tell her almost proves all of her actions right.

She rests her head on my shoulder and takes a deep breath before saying, "Why don't we continue with the story? I will try not to interrupt, okay?"

I know better than to believe she will stay quiet. But I move back to my earlier position and continue to write anyway.

Okay. I am totally a people person, fair and just—it's what I am good at. However, I'm not really that great at planning things out. For once though, I wish I'd thought ahead a bit. Maybe if I had, I wouldn't have been climbing up the winding mountain trail, shivering. At least I was smart enough to wear pants and a thick tunic under my light armour.

But then, if I had stayed home, would I have met Sebastian?

A less stubborn man would have headed back down and trusted the soldiers. Actually, I do trust my people. Implicitly.

I just like doing things myself and seeing the results with my own eyes. Soline tells me that the only reason I haven't died due to my own stupidity is because of her. I know she loves me and worries for me. I should just be thankful that nobody else besides Soline ever brings up my occasional bouts of idiocy. (Yes Sol, I know you have never actually called me an idiot. I thought you were going to keep quiet?)

Anyway...

Four weeks ago

I drew my blade and squinted my eyes against the snow, which was falling ever more heavily in those sickly olive-hued flakes, as I came to the apex of the mountain. Now that I was closer to the source of all the trouble, I could see that the very tip of the mountain was radiating a barely visible pulse of energy, tainting everything around it. The large puffs of clouds, normally white, became dark green and spread like a virus.

The leather of my glove creaked on the hilt in my right hand as I gripped it tighter. The situation creped me out.

I approached the mouth of a cave, slipping in from the side when I saw that the coast was clear. The passageway was rather narrow and slick with ice, so I had to tread carefully. My eyes adjusted to the dark so I didn't need the light spell Magi or humans would have.

I walked for at least ten minutes through the passage, going deep down, not stopping until I heard voices in the distance.

The clash of metal against metal rang in my ears, propelling me further, forcing me to pick up my pace.

A fight was taking place in a massive cavern, the walls of which were covered in vast and detailed murals. Each picture carved into the stone depicted the evolution of some of the ancient humans into Elementals.

On one side of the room was a towering man with crazed-wide eyes and flowing red robes. This had to be the mage and the cause of the spell over the city. He was in a trance, standing by a tall pole that appeared to be carved by hand. It was glowing and surrounding the man with a jade aura of pulsing light. The pole itself was one with the stone ceiling above.

A dozen of Kiren's soldiers, as well as Kiren himself, were there, each of them fighting off a spectral form of the mage. The men and women there were mainly frost Elementals. I could see the icy ground under them pulse, and the air glittered around them with the cold. I understood, from experience, that the fighters were channeling the power into their sword. They could do it for quite some time without getting tired. At such a high elevation, the element of cold was everywhere, so the frost Elementals barely had to exert themselves to use such abilities.

Directly outside the aura the mage had set around himself was another person. This man was not one whom I had ever met, but must have been the one sent by the Order of Magi. The one named Sebastian. He was about my height, though that was where the similarities ended. His hair was a light brown and hung pin straight to fall around his ears. His ashen skin was covered with the glow from the demented mage's spell, and his silver eyes were focused intently in front of him. Around him, holding their own blades, were skeletons.

These undead creatures fought off the spectres, allowing him to concentrate—probably on getting through to the rogue mage.

I didn't have much time to think about it before I was attacked by a spectre as well. I allowed a surge of energy to roll from the lingering traces of fire element in the ground beneath my feet and cover the sword. Slashing in front of me in a wide arc, I took out my foe. The incorporeal form burst into flames before fading from existence.

Falling to my knees and sliding on a patch of ice, I managed to avoid another apparition, by slicing from the bottom as I passed it.

Gaining distance, I used all of my skills to power forward. I thought to myself that there was no real reason for everybody to keep me back from this mission. Being smaller than most males of my kind, I had trained twice as hard to be a warrior. Due to my smaller size, which was actually tall if I were a

human, I was pretty fast. My leather armour was also light enough to allow me the extra boost of speed I needed to get to the mage—

Just as Sebastian had taken him down.

At that point, a bunch of things happened at once.

The mage locked eyes with me, and immediately focused every bit of spell energy at me. At the same time, both Sebastian, and my friend Kiren called me a moron.

All right, so Soline and Kiren could call me moron and I wouldn't complain.

Probably because that had been a pretty bone-headed move, running up to a crazy man with powers that I didn't really fully understand.

But as I fell to my knees, I couldn't help but feel a deep pain within myself. I had failed. I'd proven everybody right in their assumptions about me. As darkness consumed me, I faintly wondered why it hurt to think I had failed in the eyes of Sebastian, a man I had never even met.

I woke up cold and on a hard surface. Where in the world could I be?

A sharp slap to my cheek forced me to open my eyes.

And a deep voice to the side of me made me focus. "I've been chasing that asshole over half the fucking globe since he came out from hiding. Then you come in, let him absorb your fucking energy and place a curse on you to prevent any kind of healing unless somebody tracks the bugger down. Perfect. Just perfect."

"That's the Lord of our city's brother you are talking to," said the voice of one of the soldiers.

Thank the Gods that at least one of my citizens still respected me. After this move, I would have to do another charity benefit to boost confidence in me. Maybe for orphans. Not that I needed a reason to help orphans.

I groaned and tried to sit up, brushing away Kiren's hand of help. Before I could make it, a foot planted itself on my chest and pushed me back down. Hard.

"Okay. I'm a decent guy. But if you don't let me up, I will have to get mad at you," I said, wanting so badly to glare down at that black boot. "And who are you anyway?"

Several of the soldiers rushed forward to help me, but Sebastian was still surrounded by skeletons. Each of the undead creatures had their swords raised, prepared to protect their creator.

“You can call me Sebastian. And I am the one who has been attempting to take out Jarcat, the psychotic asshole that was draining the life energy from your city. The same mage that drained your powers. Or didn't your feeble brain process the words I just said?”

At that, I pushed away the boot. Or tried at least.

I felt as if I was trying to push at a stone pillar. Shit. Maybe this guy was on to something with the whole lack of abilities thing.

I still had my swiftness. That had nothing to do with magical ability, and was all me.

I grabbed my sword, which had fallen to my side, and slashed out at Sebastian.

He just hopped away with a nimble grace that I had to admire.

Getting into a defensive stance, I was taken aback when his undead minions didn't move to attack me. They just stayed around their master. All eight of them.

“So, the Order sent you down to help us out? They weren't able to send somebody who isn't an asshole?”

Sebastian just crossed his arms over his chest. He looked to be as buff as me, and had no armour on to hide that fact.

“Jarcat is a rogue Order member who is trying to start his own resistance group. He is very powerful and I am the only Order mage strong enough to handle him. Besides that, I have nothing more to say to a member, let alone an aristocrat, of a race of untrustworthy, slutty and barbaric creatures such as yourself.”

Ready to strike first, and answer questions later, I summoned a fireball to blast him and his foul creatures away. I'd show this asshole who was a barbarian (which I admit would have been counterproductive, but I wasn't thinking). Yet as I lifted my hand, all that came out was a faint wisp of smoke.

I tried again.

Nothing.

Smirking, Sebastian walked past all of us and headed for the exit. He was not getting away so easily.

“How did that other mage, that Jarcat guy, get away? Is the city safe? And how do I get my powers back?” I asked as I followed him out.

Spinning around, his long black coat billowing as he moved, Sebastian glared at me, I didn't flinch.

“Number one, he got away because you were too damn close to him. Before you came into the area, I had warned the soldiers to stay away. They fucking listened, though they didn't exactly trust me. They understood what I was trying to do. Instead, the bastard managed to absorb your energy and use it to help him teleport away.”

Sebastian was ticking off the points with his slender, pale fingers. “Second of all, yes. The city is probably safe for now. Unless he comes back. Which he will if I don't catch him.”

I let out a breath of relief that the mage was gone, at least for now. The sigh was repeated behind me by Kiren's men.

“What about my powers?”

Sebastian ignored me. Just turned around and continued to walk.

“Excuse me? I insist that you respond this instant,” I said, putting every ounce of authority into my voice that I could muster.

More nothing. Not even the skeletons. Though they weren't alive, so I wasn't actually surprised at their lack of response.

Charging forward, I put all of my weight into knocking aside a skeleton and slamming right into Sebastian, causing him to fall to the ground.

I got on top of him, fist raised to punch when I found my position being reversed. Sebastian was now on top of me, pinning my wrists above my head. He brought his head down to my ear.

He whispered, “Beg me.”

“Huh?”

I actually didn't think I'd heard what he'd said correctly.

“If you want my help getting your powers back, you need to beg me.”

“Fuck that,” I snarled, bashing my head into the side of Sebastian's.

No way was I going to humiliate myself in front of so many people in such a way.

Sebastian growled and loosened his grip on my wrists long enough for me to wiggle free, right into the waiting arms of Kiren. Except that my traitor friend held my arms behind my back.

“Okay. We all need to take a breath,” said my friend, the strong-as-an-ox earth Elemental who had decided to not let up on me. “For what it’s worth, Rey, I’m a pretty good judge of people and I think he is telling the truth about his intentions. And I’ve spoken with him on the communicator, so I know who he is.”

At the time, all I could think of was how much of an ass this Sebastian guy was. I snorted in disbelief. The Order of the Magi wouldn’t send such an asshole. I’d spoken with the Order before, and all of the mages I had socialized with were very pleasant. But this fucker was like a little package topped with an ass-kicking instead of a bow.

Kiren held my arms with one hand, and with the other he flicked the tip of my ear. “Don’t be a stubborn mule for a moment.”

Pretty sure that was Kiren’s subtle way of calling me an ass.

“Fine. What makes you want to trust a word that he says?”

Sebastian didn’t even hold a hand to where I had slammed my head against his. It sort of bruised my ego to think that I hadn’t hurt him enough to warrant concern. The man just stood still again, with a smirk. A smirk!

I suppressed a growl. Possibly for the second or third time, I was too angry to remember.

Kiren sighed and then said, “Because I’ve not only heard of him before, as I’ve said his talent precedes him. But I know who he is because I’ve met him before.”

I stared skeptically at Sebastian. “You’ve met Kiren?”

“How would I remember that? You all look the same to me.”

I once again attempted to charge forward, but Kiren’s grip stopped me. Gah! How was I the only one who wanted to clock this ass upside the head?

“Seriously, Kiren. I’ll find a way to get my powers back by myself,” I said, gritting my teeth when my words received a snort from Sebastian.

“How do you get powers back from Jarcat, hmm?”

“I’m sure that I can think of a way,” I said, looking back at Kiren. “I’m not going to hit him so let me go.”

After scrutinizing my expression, Kiren let go, and I stood up straight. Sebastian’s eyes bored a hole into me.

“What’s it going to be? Are you coming with me?” asked Sebastian. “Or should I just use your body, here and now, to find out where Jarcat is? If I do that, I will not come back with your powers. I will let them die along with Jarcat.”

“Wait! Now I have to come with you to get my powers back?”

“That’s the way it always was.”

Throwing my arms into the air in exasperation because I was clearly the only sane person there, I said, “I have tasks to do. People depend on me.”

“I’m sure that all of your jobs will be better off without you. I’ve heard a number of rumours about the Lord of Azmarine’s idiot younger brother. You probably spend most of your time fucking anything that moves,” said Sebastian.

Deep breath. I would not hit him. Really. I was fairly certain that I could resist. Even though it would have felt damn good to have the bones in his face crack under my fist.

“Azmarine is more prosperous now than it has been in over a century. I have nearly eliminated poverty and implemented some of the most modern healthcare services in the world. My sister is a great leader, but I have my place as well.”

“Yet for all you have done, you still need to get on your knees in front of me to beg for my help. Funny, that.”

I looked over at Kiren for help. “Do you seriously know this guy? Could you be thinking of somebody else? Like, anybody else?”

Shaking his head, Kiren said, “His name is Sebastian Risdro. He is a necromancer who works for the Order of Magi. He’s kind of an enforcer for them. I’ve heard of him because I keep on top of any kind of military news.”

“I’m not military. The Magi pay me for each job I do,” said Sebastian, but I didn’t really care to listen at that point.

Okay. I could do this. I'd just get down to my knees. Now.

I looked down, and noticed that I'd still failed to move. This was harder than it looked. I didn't want to humble myself in front of my people like that, not after everything I had tried to do to prove myself worthy in their eyes.

I looked over to Kiren sheepishly and tried to give him a pleading look. Maybe, if I looked enough like some kind of cute puppy or kitten, he'd leave and take the soldiers with him. Then, if it was possible, I could beg with my dignity still intact.

Getting the message right away, Kiren led the soldiers to the outside of the cave. As if on a show of faith, Sebastian sent off his undead with a simple flick of his hand. I was fairly certain that he spoke some magical words under his breath, but my hearing had changed. Small sounds like whispers were now muffled like I had cotton in my ears.

Once we were alone, I breathed in deep. I cracked my knuckles by making fists. I narrowed my eyes.

"I don't have all day," said Sebastian.

"Fine," I said, and quickly fell to my knees.

Thankfully I was wearing the leather armour, because I went down hard. My joints had still felt a jolt of the pain. I could have sworn that I had tried to be more graceful than that.

Then, saying the words so quickly that I am sure they all slurred together, I said, "Please will you help me get back my powers?"

"Come again?" The ass was enjoying himself.

I repeated myself, still not enunciating, I was sure.

"You really don't want my help, do you?"

"Please. Will. You. Help. Me?" I said, biting out each word.

The smirk that covered those pale pink lips just grew larger. "There, now was that so hard?"

Yes. It actually had been difficult. But I said nothing in response, just ground my teeth.

"We leave now. Say goodbye to your friend at the mouth of the cave."

“Wait, what? I have to find somebody to do my job as minister of social services. After everything that’s been happening in the city, you can’t just expect me to abandon them. They need me now more than ever.”

“Not my problem.”

“You are a piece of work aren’t you?”

“I probably am and yet I couldn’t care less.”

The trip through the cavern corridors seemed much longer than it had been going in. Everything was pitch black, and I stumbled quite a bit in my attempts to move. The only light that I had to go by was a faintly glowing dagger at Sebastian’s hip. I used it as my guide and managed to follow the other man.

I was sure that my skin would be bruised the next morning, which sucked, because my skin looked awful when it was bruised.

Seeing the quizzical lift to one of Kiren’s brows, I went over to him. “He expects me to leave with him now.”

“Shit,” said Kiren, running his hand through his wavy blond hair. “Your eyes aren’t even bright anymore. The bronzed sheen on your skin looks... human.”

“I realize. It will be demoralizing,” I said, pacing a bit while I felt Sebastian’s eyes on me like a brand. “Can you get Soline to take my stead until I can get back? You’ll help her right, since she’s doing twice the work as normal?”

A gleam flashed in Kiren’s eyes before, with a sly voice, he said, “I’ll help her as much as her husband will allow.”

I groaned. Sebastian lifted his chin and glared icy daggers at Kiren and me. “How quaint. And how fitting to my picture of your people.”

Choosing to ignore that jab was difficult, but I managed to speak only to Kiren. “Seriously. I don’t need to know about my sister’s sex life.”

“Sorry.” But I didn’t think he really was. “And I will help out as much as I can, though she won’t need much assistance. Before you ask, no I won’t give her all the details. I know that you’ll never hear the end of it otherwise.”

He and I both knew my sister well. I chose to forget just how well Kiren also knew my older sister.

“Thanks. I owe you one,” I said, giving my friend a one-armed man hug.

“Yes, yes. So touching. Can we head out now? I’m trying to be a nice person here, but my time is precious,” snapped Sebastian.

Nice person. Ha!

Giving my friend a wry smile, I walked over to Sebastian. He turned, his long black coat billowing out behind him. Not stumbling this time as I was able to see better, I followed along a path that wound around the mountain. I watched him take out his communicator and press a few buttons before speaking into it.

“He escaped. Yeah I know. I have a good way to find him again though. I’ll be there in a few days to brief you further.”

He pressed one last button before he stuffed the device into a pocket of his jacket.

It wasn’t far before we came across a travel pod.

Compared to the small oval-shaped vehicles in Azmarine that could hold two people, this was huge—I was certain that it could hold over ten people comfortably. I’d no idea how Sebastian had parked the vehicle along this ledge. This rocky outcropping didn’t seem large enough to fully contain the vehicle. I was sure a small breeze would knock it over the edge.

“How hasn’t the pod fallen?” I asked, because I didn’t see a reason not to.

Taking out a round device from a pocket of his coat, Sebastian pressed a button and a door on the travel pod slid open.

“I always forget how much your kind spurns the use of technology. It uses energy from the stream of magic around it to keep it where I settled it,” he said, as if he was musing to himself.

I saw his words as another insult and growled.

He ignored me.

“We do have travel pods,” I argued.

“Yes, and the technology that they use is ancient compared to the way life is over your mountains. We no longer need to use steam engines.”

Sebastian and I went through the door, followed by his skeletons. Moving his fingers in a way that appeared simple, but must have been intricate, the undead each took a separate seat in the twelve-seat pod. They sat there, lifeless and eerily still.

Creepy.

I went with Sebastian to the front of the pod, where he sat in the driver's seat.

I felt the need to defend my people. "We just don't need all that modern tech. Not only do we not want it, but we have everything we need provided to us by our ancestral home. Only certain professionals like Kiren need tech to help communicate with the outside world. Why seek another way when ours works for us?"

"Except when a psychotic spell caster cuts off the sun and starts a rain that kills all of your plants and therefore, food."

There was that. I plunked down in the bucket seat that was actually really soft. Oh... so comfy. Modern amenities did have comfort on their side. I tried not to show how much I enjoyed it.

If Sebastian noticed my near groan of ecstasy, he didn't say a word. He just appeared focused on initiating the engines.

Then, he took off and headed away from my home.

That had to have been the longest flight I'd ever been on. Sebastian said it took just under five hours of travel, but I was pretty sure I had been in that seat for an entire day. If I were to think logically about it all, I'd realize that the steam-power travel pods used by my kind would have made the trip take at least three times as long. But I wasn't thinking logically.

No, instead I kept finding my eyes drawn to Sebastian.

He was really hot, in that cold and indifferent way he seemed to have. I was always drawn to men who were more my size. Sometimes I would even find a woman attractive, but not often. I preferred men.

I found myself wondering if Sebastian had a big cock. Would it be as pale as the rest of his skin?

I didn't even realize that I had been reaching for the man in my thoughts until he snapped, "What the hell are you doing?"

I yanked my hand back into my lap and crossed my legs. It wouldn't do for him to see my hard-on.

"Nothing," I said, deciding that I needed to move so I'd stop feeling so stiff.

Really, I did try to get up to stretch my legs. But as soon as I got to my feet and turned around, there were the skeletons just staring at me. I mean, if they had eyes. I tried to be glad that Sebastian didn't have zombies with him, but I couldn't.

I didn't make it far before I just went back into my seat. At least my erection had deflated.

When I shuddered, Sebastian just snorted.

I decided to break the silence. "What? Should everybody love the animated bones of former living creatures? I happen to find the things creepy as hell."

One of those elegantly shaped brows rose on Sebastian's face, though he didn't look over to me. He stayed focused on staring out the windshield

"I'm a powerful mage. I could have zombies or even ghouls. I'm sure that even one such as yourself would know what a ghoul is."

"Yes. I do know what that is. The foul eaters of flesh. Back during the great war, when necromancers were more common, they raised armies of ghouls to fight for them," I said, crossing my legs. "Still doesn't change how I feel about the skeletons."

"Does it look like I care about your feelings?"

Do not hit the man driving the vehicle. I do not want to crash while hundreds of feet in the air.

I said these in my head like a mantra.

So, like I said before, it was a long trip.

Eventually though, we arrived at the nearest city, which had taken the entire five hours to fly to. The mountains that Azmarine was nestled in were in the midst of the great forest. We didn't get many visitors, even once faster modes of transportation were created.

The city ahead of us was full of towering metallic buildings, gleaming in the light of the newly risen moon. Lights from thousands of travel pods glittered in the streets below us, and zipped around the skyscrapers. We joined one of the large roads. I stared, rapt, out of the pod at the bright colours and the absorbing view.

Large screens stood sporadically through the city, advertising everything from drinks to cosmetic products. The sounds of horns honking, and flashes from streetlights dazzled me.

I had been to a city before. My people live much longer than humans or Magi. I just hadn't been in one in over a decade. Probably longer. There was never a need, and everybody generally left us alone.

By the time we arrived at the edge of town, I was leaning back in my seat with my eyes closed, sure there was a dumb smile on my face. If Soline were here, she'd be making some kind of joke about me being able to sleep well that night. (No Sol, those jokes don't offend me. They're funny. Really, I think they are.)

Sebastian's building was tall like the rest of them, but seemed somehow swankier. Its windows were tinted, and I was unable to see into the homes they concealed. The parking garage required a pass-card to enter and was three levels high. Sebastian parked near the top where there were only a couple of other pods around.

Making another of his flicking hand gestures, the undead followed him. I kept my distance. Yet in the quiet of the apartment building, I could hear the clacking of the skeleton bones.

We all went through a door that was marked with the word "private". It was written in the common tongue, as most things in this city would be. Growing up, my father had insisted I learn how to speak, read, and write in the language. Not many Elementals could do so. It had rarely been useful for me as it was. I didn't mind though, reading and writing was one of the things that I did well.

The elevator took us up to the very top of the building.

"Why don't you just use stairs?" I asked.

Giving me a look as if I was stupid, Sebastian said, "Do you know how hard it would be to get this many skeletons to walk up twenty flights of stairs? Gods, but you're stupid."

Well, I had been right about the meaning of the look that he had given me.

Still... "You got them to fight for you. Or, in theory, since I guess I didn't actually see them fight."

I knew that you couldn't actually hear eyes roll. I realized that, but I was pretty sure I heard Sebastian's eyes as they rolled. Maybe it was just me. Or maybe he just has noisy eyes.

"That is because I raised them to do that. They can still climb stairs; they'd just stumble a lot and are unorganized. You really don't know anything, do you?" he said as we got out of the elevator and walked down a hallway.

“I know plenty. I’m not stupid. I just don’t understand how you can get them to do complete fighting manoeuvres but not command them to climb some stairs.”

No response. Ha! I had finally made that asshole shut up—

When I looked over though, I saw him opening a door and ushering the skeletons in. He was focused, not rendered speechless.

The room he was putting his minions in was dark, and looked just like some kind of storage room.

Sebastian uttered a few arcane words and the skeletons sat and went slack. But their bones managed to still stay together, like they were glued or something. Then he shut and locked the door.

We went down the hall a bit more to what I guessed was Sebastian’s place. When I got inside, my jaw dropped.

As a member of what would probably pass as Elemental royalty (without the title of prince) I had a fairly large home. But it turned out that this home at the top of the apartment building was bigger. The ceiling was vaulted on one sharp angle. The sitting room was connected to the dining room and the kitchen. Everything was dark or shiny, with modern amenities casting their artificial glow over the darkened room.

Dark, until Sebastian flicked on a light fixture that hung overhead.

I stood in the entrance hallway and removed my boots. I hadn’t noticed Sebastian do the same, but it was habit.

From across the room, I heard my host mumble something. I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me, since we weren’t being very chatty with one another. He wasn’t facing me, instead he was disarming himself onto his dining table. That trench coat sure could hold a vast array of weapons.

Several moments later, he spoke up, “I probably have food to eat in the fridge.”

My stomach chose that moment to growl loudly. With all the events of the day, I had forgotten to eat.

I slid off the chain armour that covered me and left it near my boots, then I jogged to find some food.

Gods, there was so much room in that kitchen. Did the man feed armies?

That thought left almost right away when I saw the contents of his icebox. Sorry, “fridge”, I was not used to that word.

There was hardly anything to eat. I opened one package that had plastic over it and sniffed. I curled my lips in disgust.

The contents consisted of a bunch of brown saucy lumps with a side of small yellow lumps that may have started their lives as corn. Pretty sure that wasn't food, even my newly-dulled senses could tell that.

I found some dried fruits. That was it.

“You barely have anything to eat here,” I called out to Sebastian, who was sharpening one of his blades slowly and methodically.

“Don't really need much,” he said, and continued his task, the *shick shick shick* of the metal against the whetstone echoed in the room.

I got the feeling that Sebastian didn't entertain very many guests.

“It's been a while for me,” I said to prompt him to his duties.

It was, after all, a point of pride among my people to host guests. Regardless of status, we were all proud to offer the food and comforts of our homes. There was nothing I enjoyed more than providing for those who visit the home I share with my sister. Perhaps more than was necessary, as my reputation as a merry-maker was known throughout the city.

Sighing, like I was being a huge inconvenience, Sebastian grabbed a communication device. He pressed a few of the glowing silver buttons and put it up to his ear.

“Yeah, hi. I need a full order for Sebastian Risdro. Should be on my file. Add extra fruits and veggies. And there will be a substantial tip if you get it all here in under an hour,” he said, and then hung up the phone.

Scratching the top of my head, I said, “Thanks. I don't eat meat often, so I'm glad—”

Sebastian interrupted me. “I know your people don't eat meat. All vegetarians in your happy land of peace and obliviousness.”

My jaw dropped again, it was happening a lot that day. “Where the hell did you get all of that out of ‘I don't eat meat often’? I'm not a vegetarian anyway, since I do eat it sometimes.”

“Because I know your kind.” Sebastian gently placed down the dagger he’d been working on and strolled to face me. “I saw how you stared at me in wonder over using a phone. You live in the past, the age of the ancients.”

Huh? I felt like this man was speaking a language that I didn’t understand. I was seriously confused and felt like I was missing something big.

“I’ve seen those devices being used before—” not often, but I didn’t add that, I just kept talking—“We just don’t need technology. Our connection to nature and resilient bodies are enough for us.”

Sebastian brushed passed me and opened a cupboard. He pulled out a plastic bottle and twisted off the cap. After taking deep draws of the water, he said, “Do you realize that won’t be enough? Magic has been the weapon of choice for a long time. But magitechicians are discovering ways to combine metal and tech with magic. Weapons that can shoot bullets of energy faster than you could see or dodge.”

I cringed, though I didn’t know whether to believe him or not. He continued, while pointing a finger at me.

“One shot at your heart. You’d fall down dead. Each clip of energy bullets could take down ten of your people from a long distance. A fresh clip can be changed in only moments. Each of your enemies can be armed. Do you understand what I mean now?”

My hands had fisted at that point and my jaw was getting sore from clenching.

“I do. But we take up only a small part of the world, and in a remote location. Humans and Magi don’t like to enter the great forest. They’d need an awful lot of travel pods to bring in enough people to overtake us. Why bother?”

“Less pods than you’d think. And why bother? Naive idiot.” He rolled his eyes and just leaned against the counter.

Despite his cocky demeanour, I still noticed his body. He’d taken his coat off, revealing a short-sleeved shirt stretched over his chest. Sebastian was roughly my height, but more slender than myself. He still had a decent set of muscles on him. His black pants were also tight, and cradled his bulge nicely. If only he wasn’t such an ass.

“Oh Gods! See this is what I mean! Here I am, telling you of the perils of your lack of adjusting to the modern world, and you are ogling my cock, just like you were on the ride here.”

Huh? Oh, right.

I got myself back on topic with a shake of my head. “Look, I’m sure you are aware of the fact that Azmarine has peace treaties with all of the Magi cities. My ancestors set them into place, and because of my grandfather, the world leaders regularly come to visit and discuss diplomacy with my sister. We do export some of the goods that only we produce. We’re in good political standing.”

“Great. But none of them will help you when an uprising happens. Why do you think Jarcat came to Azmarine in the first place?”

I felt like I should remember that name. He’d said it before. I was pretty sure he had anyway. Why now, of all times, did I have to be absent-minded? My mind kept wandering back to Sebastian’s fantastic muscles.

Sebastian rubbed his nose a bit before saying, “You don’t remember who I’m talking about do you?”

My mind cleared long enough to remember and I snapped, “Jarcat was the guy who stole my powers.”

Despite how much I willed myself not to, my face flushed.

Clapping slowly, with a single raised brow, Sebastian said, “Good for you. You’re so clever.”

About to open my mouth once more, a sharp ringing filled the air. Sebastian grabbed a coin purse (okay, wallet, whatever) from his pocket and went to the entrance of his home.

I sighed and filled a cup with water from a tap, not needing water from a plastic bottle. As I drank, I thought that this experience couldn’t be over soon enough. Hopefully, before I was forced to murder the self-righteous asshole.

Chapter 2

Aside from me making a new friend in Reynard Junior, the climbing ivy (I will explain that in a moment), there were some things that I wanted to know.

Number one: How many knives did Sebastian really need to sharpen? There had to have been close to one hundred of the things (I may be exaggerating a tad, by one hundred I may actually mean five).

Number two: Why in the world did Sebastian sleep so much? When he wasn't, y'know, sharpening knives, he was sleeping. The man rarely even ate, a fact that brought up enough questions all on its own.

Number four (and the most important one in my book): Why were we not doing anything to get my powers back?

Er, did I maybe miss number three? Crap, I did and I am writing this in pen. How about this? Number three can be: Why does Sebastian sometimes bring his skeletons into his home just to sit them on various pieces of furniture? I think he does it to creep me out.

There. That's a good one. Also, I didn't like how I woke up to one of the things by my face while it was sitting on the ground near the couch. I pretty much screamed like a little girl (of which I most assuredly am not).

Anyway, I should probably get back to the story (when I said before that I screamed like a girl, I meant that I screamed like a man. Big burly man screams).

Three weeks and four days ago

Three days. I spent three days in that apartment without a single useful task to do. Every attempt at conversation was quickly shut down (when Sebastian wasn't insulting me and all of Elemental kind).

I was happy to find that Sebastian's apartment did have one thing I enjoyed: a potted vine plant.

It looked sad; its green leaves fading and the stems drooping just over the terra cotta pot's edge. The dying plant needed some love, and I was the one who needed to give it.

I spent a good while giving the ivy some water, in just the right locations around its base. Then, I prowled around the entirety of Sebastian's home to find the best source of light. When I failed to find enough, I propped open a window with a book I found and put the plant on the windowsill.

"What are you doing?" asked Sebastian on one of my many passes by him.

"Trying to save the life of this poor soul."

He blinked a couple times. "It's a plant."

"It's alive," I pointed out while I constructed a makeshift trellis for the sweet little plant to climb.

"Whatever," said Sebastian, standing up and heading to his bedroom.

I smirked and called out to him, "Its name is Reynard Junior. Just so you know."

I think I imagined the laugh I heard before Sebastian's bedroom door snicked closed.

I was a reasonable guy. *I still am*. But I get frustrated when not provided any sort of explanation at all. Maybe if Sebastian was doing some kind of spell to locate the psycho mage I'd understand.

Nothing though. Nada. Zilch.

This was probably why, on the fourth day, I snapped.

For each of those days, I had slept on the sofa. It was sort of comfortable, in its own unique way. A bit on the lumpy side though.

Which is all to say that I'd had a crap sleep.

So I didn't appreciate Sebastian slapping the back of my head and saying, "Get up. You've had enough time to laze around."

Blink. I probably blinked several times before a response squeaked out of me. "Laze around? Me?"

I ran a hand over my face before I went back to staring at Sebastian. I could not believe the nerve.

"I am ready to start the ritual."

More blinking. "Uh... what?"

His response was a roll of the eyes.

"No, seriously. You tell me nothing. Why should I even trust you?"

A sharp burst of wry laughter came from Sebastian as he turned and walked to the large window in his sitting room. "Because it is trust me or be forever a shame to your lineage. An Elemental with no power. Think of the horror."

I made a loud war cry, possibly a banshee-esque wail, as I leapt from the sofa towards Sebastian.

Catching him unawares, I shoved the man. He fell forward, onto his hands and knees before rolling to the side and away from my body slam, which made me hit the floor with a thud.

I quickly got back to my feet and ran for one of those knives. Too bad he got there first, the slippery fucker.

Then I was body slammed into a wall, a blade against my throat. Those silver eyes were narrowed to slits, his lips tightened to thin white lines. The edge dug deeper into the skin of my neck, and I felt a drop of blood slide downwards. From the corner of my eyes I saw that all of the undead were in the room but Sebastian hadn't bothered to order them to come near me.

"I'll warn you one last time: do not fuck with me. I will not help you if you attack me again. Say it!"

I resisted the urge to gulp or tremble and in a firm voice, I said, "I will not attack you again, unless you attack me first. Then it's on."

Those eyes remained on me, expression unchanging. Until, a moment later, I saw the barest hint of a smile before it was hidden again.

Sebastian shoved off me and turned once more, heading towards the hallway to his bedroom. I saw him slip the knife into the back of his pants.

I followed him, using the back of my hand to wipe at the small bit of blood that was drawn. Normally the door to the bedroom was kept locked, whether or not Sebastian was in it. I knew. I'd tried to open it.

I couldn't tell you what the rest of the room looked like because that wasn't what caught my attention. Set up in the corner of the rather spacious room was a circular slab of onyx stone, wide enough for somebody to sit on. Beside it, closest to the wall, was a pedestal made of the same stone as the slab in front of

it. On it sat a bowl of clear liquid (I guessed water), a holder of incense and—oh Gods—a pile of bones.

“Take off your clothes,” Sebastian said, while placing small red candles around the outside of the slab. He lit each one with a long stick-like flame device that he’d crack along the middle to activate a flame at one end.

“Sorry... what? Is this punishment for attacking you?” I asked slowly. My traitorous fingers had already undone the top button of my shirt before my brain told them to stop.

Sebastian sighed, deeply and with great dramatic effect. “You cannot be clothed for the ritual. All outside influences need to be removed from your body in order for me to use your body to scry for the mage who took your powers.”

He sounded so matter-of-fact. Doing this, being naked, would mean such vulnerability. It would require trusting this man. Gods but I didn’t want to. I hated it. I wanted to scream.

But instead, refusing to allow my fingers to shake, I removed each piece of clothing. Folding them each neatly, I placed them on top of Sebastian’s bed. Then, I stood, with my hands in front of my cock and waited.

Since I’m a chatterer when I’m nervous, I said, “So what necromancer abilities do you have that make you the one who can track Jarcat? There are plenty of mages. Couldn’t they just send a bunch of guys instead of you and your skeletons?”

“I can track down specific life forces. It is in that way that I can bring back the dead. Any mage could technically animate a corpse, but they’d have to control every action it took by themselves. My skill with life forces enables me to track down souls in the afterlife and request they inhabit their former body in a sort of half-life state. I have one of Jarcat’s personal items, so I technically could have used it to track his whereabouts right after he disappeared.”

I shifted on my feet a bit, still covering my bits and pieces and decided to ask nicely since I had no idea how long this rare forthcomingness would last. “So why didn’t you?”

Done lighting the candles, and holy crap how long did that even need to take anyway, Sebastian faced me. For a moment or two, the man just stared at me with those frosty eyes, moving up and down my body. I couldn’t help but feel a pang of arousal that I hurriedly shoved away in my mind.

“Because life forces are like flames. They flicker and ebb and sway in the natural stream of magic on the planet. The closer I can get to him, the more accurate my scrying will be.”

“Huh?” I felt my nose and forehead crinkle as I cocked my head to the side.

Sebastian slid a hand over his face. “He had absorbed your powers, correct?”

I nodded.

“And you are right here. So all I need to do is look within you and find where your powers are. You and he are tied in that way, so I will be able to find him. The object I have only carries minute traces of life force since he’d only touched the thing. Understand?”

I grinned. “That actually made sense. Yeah.”

“Great, I’m glad because I need you to concentrate and not be rattling off incessant questions to me. Now kneel on the platform,” said Sebastian.

I did as he asked without argument since he did finally take the time to explain something to me.

“Face the pedestal and place your hands on either side of the top.”

Okay. Easy so far.

I heard the snick of a bottle being opened and then felt cold oil being dribbled over my shoulder blades.

“Ah-ha. Chilly. Still a fire Elemental at heart, power or not,” I said.

“Sorry, but this needs to be done. The oil is purified and is a good conduit for the scrying.”

I wanted to answer but I couldn’t once I felt his hands on me. Sebastian was surprisingly gentle, kneading my muscles and slipping over my skin.

He liberally applied the oil to me, sliding over my legs in the front and back. He ran some down my chest, neck and even on my face. Then, just when I thought he was done, his hand cupped my balls.

Rolling them in his hand, he slowly dragged his touch over my rapidly hardening shaft and liberally coated the entire length. Those hands felt so skilled on my flesh, stroking up and down my cock. Despite myself, I began to pant heavily. Then two fingers trailed down my perineum and then circled my

hole over and over. The bastard had the nerve to chuckle before smoothing the slick over the cheeks of my ass.

“Well, I suppose this tells me how much I turn you on,” he said, in an infuriatingly smug voice.

Trying to control my breathing, I said, “Anybody would react to their penis being stimulated. It’s normal.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Reynard,” drawled Sebastian, saying my name for the first time instead of calling me idiot or moron.

I shivered, and not because I was naked.

“All right. You will now lift both of your hands over the bowl of purified water. Clasp your hands with your wrists facing inward. And don’t jerk your body,” he said, voice turning steely once more.

I did as he said and wasn’t very surprised when I saw a dagger edge towards me. One of the blades he had sharpened to perfection. It was silver and had a hilt covered in opals. With one strike, he scored slashes in both of my wrists at the same time.

I didn’t flinch. But I wasn’t sure how much I liked seeing my blood dripping into the water. Though I suppose not many people would.

“Now bring your hands to the slab of stone below you and press them down,” said Sebastian, taking one of the bones and stirring the bloody water.

When the blood from my wrists touched the place where I knelt, intricate runes that had been etched into the surface lit up with a crimson glow. I hadn’t even noticed them there before. I suppose I’d been too distracted by Sebastian’s hands.

Chanting in some arcane language, one that only a necromancer must be privy to, Sebastian stared into the water. I felt power from the stone seep into my skin and heal the wounds, but I didn’t move.

My body had started to get stiff when Sebastian’s eyes grew glassy and the words stopped pouring from his lips. His head jerked back to face the ceiling, and his muscles shuddered.

He heaved out a gasp of air, bringing his hands to his chest.

“He is in the capital city,” he rasped out, seemingly desperate for breath. It sounded like he had been running for hours. There was also a slight pallor to his skin that I hadn’t noticed before.

“What is he doing there?”

I sat up and stretched my arms and my back.

“I saw him enter a large warehouse. Inside was something that looked like a travel pod but much more sleek and with guns on each side of them.”

“Wait—Weapons? What the hell for?”

Sebastian stood, his eyes unfocused for a moment, and said, “For war.”

As soon as Sebastian laid that news on me, he stood up and headed right to the bathroom. I heard the water rush as he washed his hands of oil and products of the ritual before he came back out to me.

“Clean up fast. I have somewhere I need to be.”

When he came out of the bathroom, I saw that under his eyes were dark circles. His skin seemed pale and his shoulders slumped ever so slightly.

I stood up and plodded to the attached bathroom, which didn't have a tub but a shower stall. His other bathroom in the apartment did have a rather large tub. I still didn't know why he needed all of this space for just himself.

“So go without me. I can deal with not seeing your face for a while.”

As he walked out of the bedroom and into the hallway, he said, “Except that I don't trust you in my house by yourself.”

My lips curled in disgust, and I slammed the bathroom door behind me. I was already naked (as you know), so I just stepped into the shower and started the hot water pouring down onto me. It was a nice experience, being in this apartment. Azmarine has plumbing, but it is very basic. This showerhead was elaborate and had over ten different spray settings. There was a secondary showerhead, behind me, that could be changed as well. The water also came out piping hot, which I appreciated. Hot water didn't always last very long in Azmarine since we primarily use wells for individual residences. Only hospitals had access to scalding hot water directly out of the pipes. When I wanted super-hot water, I went to the hot springs near the eastern mountains.

Regardless of how much I enjoyed myself, I finished swiftly. I wanted to know where Sebastian had to be. And truth be told, I didn't want to be cooped up in the apartment for any longer. I just resented that he didn't trust me.

Though I didn't trust him either, so I guess it made sense.

I dressed in some of Sebastian's clothes. There wasn't much in the way of options in what to wear. Everything in his wardrobe was various shades of grey or black. Pretty boring to tell you the truth. I longed for the comfort of a simple toga, since I could have one in any colour I chose.

Sebastian waited for me by the door, leaning against the wall and tapping one of his feet with impatience. He'd donned his long black coat and had swept all of his hair back from his face. He sighed dramatically when he saw me and opened the door.

"Boots and let's go."

I scowled. "Are you ever not bossy?"

"No," he said, gesturing for me to get out the door.

"Frick, I'm going as fast as I can."

"In that case, try to go even faster. Don't you realize that a war could be coming to your city?"

I finished lacing my combat boots and stomped out in front of Sebastian, who locked the door behind me. We went towards the closet full of skeletons. (Is that ironic? Maybe it is sort of amusing, even if Sebastian having skeletons in his closet isn't ironic.) He touched the foreheads of four of them and they snapped to life, standing up. Without a thought (Which is obvious actually, since they aren't alive. Of course, they don't have a thought. I'm not very bright, am I?), the undead surrounded Sebastian as best as they could.

We got to the first floor, and the elevator stopped in a different spot. The doors slid open, and we were in a lobby that was almost as large as Sebastian's apartment. A man at the front desk near the entrance to the building snapped to attention and looked over at us with wary eyes. A woman in uniform near the double doors of the exit startled and jogged away from us to a back room, where the door was promptly slammed shut.

"They seem to love you here," I said, smirking as I trailed behind the swiftly walking Sebastian.

"They fear what they don't understand," he said, not taking care to not be heard by the various people around him.

My brows creased, and I said, "How do they not understand it? Sure it's creepy, but it's magic. Most of you guys use magic, don't you?"

The fresh air hit me and enveloped me. I breathed in deeply and stopped for a few moments. The quality of air wasn't the greatest in this modern city, but much better than the stale oxygen of Sebastian's home.

I didn't know how long he'd been turned around staring at me. I kind of thought Sebastian would have either walked ahead without me or he would have complained at my lack of forward movement.

But instead, the man was staring at me like I was some kind of unknown specimen. I felt like he was trying to peer into my soul and was a bit unnerved.

"What? What'd I say?"

"Come on," he said, returning to the Sebastian I had known for the past few days. "I need to report to the Order headquarters."

Ah. Finally, I was being told something. I wonder if his forthcomingness with information was a slip on his part.

Regardless, I was glad to know where we were going.

The walk to our destination was quite long. I actually relished it, and enjoyed our stroll through a park along the way. I wondered if Sebastian didn't take his travel pod for my sake. Did he know this was what I really needed?

In any case, I doubted that he did this often. He was a mage after all. They loved technology.

Part way through the park, near a small copse of trees, was a bench and a small lake. I saw Sebastian's head turn and stare before he went to stand beside the wooden seat. His lithe fingers skimmed over the back of the bench, and his eyes were fixed on the water.

The pond had a small school of fish swimming around, perhaps looking for chunks of food to be thrown in. Cattails and long sweet grass made up the perimeter of the water, and on the surface floated lily pads with their elegant white flowers.

"Even in the middle of a city like this, nature peeks through," said Sebastian quietly.

I didn't expect what he'd just said, so I went to stand next to him. I looked at him from the corner of my eyes and then eventually I spoke, "Do you come here often?"

He nodded.

“It’s pretty. Calming as well. Serene enough that a water Elemental friend of mind would love it here.”

I smiled and looked at him just in time to see his face darken. He bared his teeth at me and snarled, “Let’s just get going. I don’t need to hear about your sexual conquests.”

Huh? “Who brought up sex? I was just trying to explore common ground.”

He ignored me, so I shook my head and did the same.

I just held my head high and followed Sebastian as he stormed towards his destination.

The building that the Order of the Magi was situated in was tall and long. It nearly spanned an entire city block in both directions. Also, it had to have been over twenty floors tall. Each entrance and exit looked to be heavily guarded by mages. Some of the men and women twirled balls of energy back and forth in their hands and some just had their hands on various forms of blade weapons.

Finally, Sebastian picked a door after walking around almost the entire building. The doors were both twice the size of regular doors and made of glass. This entrance led to a parking lot where over a hundred travel pods were settled. Most of them were designed for two people, so they didn’t take up much room.

Sebastian still appeared slouched, with apparent dark circles under his eyes. He seemed tired, until he started going towards the guards near the door. Once he was in eyesight, he straightened his spine and put a smirk on his face. The transformation from fatigued to snarky was actually pretty fascinating, though most assuredly no less irritating.

From the corner of his mouth, he said, “Keep your lips sealed and just follow me. If you say anything at all, I will kick your ass.”

This, of course, was my cue to say something. “Why the hell can’t I?”

Sebastian flew towards me, his skeletons staying in the place where he had been. He wrapped a hand around my throat and snarled in my face.

“Because I fucking said so. You need to learn when to listen.”

I grasped at his wrists and found them to be immovable. How the hell did he have such a strong grasp?

“I listen when I am given reasons. Just tell me why I can't talk.”

His fingers slid from my neck and he said, “You'll find out.”

By then, we had attracted attention. Two of the five guards came over to us, hands poised to throw an attack at me. They didn't get too close though, and I noticed them eyeing the skeletons warily.

“Is anything wrong, sir?”

The way they looked at Sebastian made it clear they weren't talking to me. Why would they have been? They didn't know me.

Sebastian brushed invisible pieces of lint off his shirt and pants before being flanked by his undead minions once more. He shook his head and said, “Everything is fine. This is just my servant and he was lippping off.”

Even under the careful scrutinizing from the guards, I really wanted to tell Sebastian a thing or two. I was nobody's damn slave. I kept my mouth shut by imagining getting my powers back. How great it would be to fling a fireball right into Sebastian and wipe that smug look off his face. I then had to fight to keep myself from laughing.

One of the male guards slid his eyes all over my body, toes to head. The lecherous bastard lingered on the dick that was hiding in my pants, then he grinned and said, “Hmm, I've heard that Elementals are really good at sex. A buddy of mine says there is one in the red light district who sleeps with anybody rich enough to afford him. Where did you get this one?”

Moving quick as a whip, Sebastian's hands shot out and wrapped around the creep's throat and he let gravelly words fall from his lips. “Not that kind of servant, you pig.”

The guard's buddies looked at each other, obviously conflicted. I could tell they wanted to help their friend out. But Sebastian seemed to have rank in this place. Instead, they just backed away a few steps.

In Sebastian's grasp, the guard squeaked, “But they are known for their sexual talents. Why wouldn't you?”

With words so low that I could barely make them out, he replied, “Because I don't just stick my dick in everything that moves. That's why.”

At that, Sebastian flung the man down to the ground in front of him, and then stepped over him gracefully.

I just followed Sebastian as the other guards stepped out of his way, staying several paces away. We went into the large building.

And massive it truly was. Not just in size, but in the obvious purpose it held. There were all kinds of people wandering around. I saw some mages being followed by mechanical creatures of all sorts (dogs, humanoids, birds, you name it). Other magic users displayed their talents less obviously, but they were adorned with all kinds of glowing objects. Most commonly, I saw amulets with huge glowing pendants hanging off of them. Other glowing objects were bracelets, headbands or armour, and I even saw one woman with five little star-shaped rocks spinning around her waist.

It was all pretty fascinating. I wondered why I didn't see any other people with undead. And why did all of these men and women avoid us. Just creeped out I guessed?

Soon though, Sebastian had ushered me into an elevator. Once in, he pressed the button for the twentieth floor. For a moment, that smirk slid from his face and he closed his eyes and sighed deeply.

I stared at him without shame. I felt like I had the right to, since not too long previously, he did have his finger up my ass.

“What?” he said, tapping one of his boots on the metal floor.

“You look exhausted.”

“I'm fine. And didn't I tell you to shut your mouth?”

“Fine. Fuck you.”

I mimed locking my lips and then dramatically hurling away the key.

As I did that, the invisible key would have flown right through the elevator doors that slid open to expose a sterile-looking grey and white office/reception area. A slender man sat behind a large computer screen and tapped away at a keyboard that was no thicker than a piece of paper. Every now and then he would swipe at the screen as well. He didn't even look up at us as Sebastian walked to the desk and waited.

Sebastian coughed.

No response.

Sebastian growled.

The man just curled a lip up in obvious distaste but didn't turn his attention away from his tasks.

I saw that Sebastian had moved his hand to a knife on his belt when an office to the side of us opened suddenly. A tall man came out and leisurely walked to Sebastian. His hair had an occasional streak of grey, and slight lines were around his eyes. He was one of the glowing objects mages (I planned to learn more about the Magi at a later date, because my knowledge seemed sorely lacking). His robes were golden, the significance of which I was aware. That colour of robes meant that this was a Mage of the highest possible rank.

“Now, now Sebastian, there is no need to resort to violence. How may I help you?” asked the man whose body seemed to be cool and composed. One hand was behind his back and the other gestured towards the office he’d just come from.

Sebastian followed, and when I made to go sit in the small waiting room that I’d spied to the right of me, he tugged viciously on my arm.

The office door was shut behind us and the golden-robed man leaned one hip against his desk, which was so neat and tidy that I wondered if he worked here at all.

“So what brings you here today, and with such a guest? Reynard Taje from Azmarine, I presume?”

I nodded and was about to confirm what he said when Sebastian sharply elbowed me in the side. Right, I’d locked my mouth, key lost to the ether of make-believe objects.

“It doesn’t matter who he is, Phil. Just let me have it,” said Sebastian, sitting down in a chair in front of the desk.

Phil had been in the middle of sitting down in his own seat when Sebastian had spoken those words. The ageing man slammed the palms of both hands on the desk in front of him, rattling a container of pens.

“How the hell did he get away from you? The situation practically served him to you on a silver platter.”

Ah, that was why Sebastian wanted me here. He intended to throw me to the boss to chew out so that he didn’t get in trouble. I winced but no verbal lashing ever came. Only my practice with keeping my cool stopped my jaw from dropping in shock.

“A mistake on my part. I miscalculated the spell I was going to cast to trap him. He got away,” said Sebastian, not dropping his gaze from Phil’s.

“Is that so?” asked Phil, looking at me for a few agonizing moments before sitting back down.

“It is,” said Sebastian, crossing one of his legs to rest his ankle on a knee.

“And I am to assume that you are going to be on your way to find him again. We need you to get back what he took. Who knows what he is doing? Rallying more young mages to believe in his cause, I would assume,” said Phil reaching into his desk for a bottle of amber liquid and three tumblers.

He set them down on the desk and poured a finger in each. Then he handed one to each of us.

I sniffed the drink before taking a sip. I looked at Sebastian and he had taken a large gulp of his. How he could take such a large drink of such strong whiskey I didn't know.

“Yes. I am going to follow him. It brings me to my second reason for being here. I scryed on him.”

Phil waited more patiently for Sebastian to continue than I would have. The infuriating man just uncrossed and recrossed his legs and drank for a few moments.

Then, finally, he said, “I think he is preparing for war.”

“I didn't think he had enough supporters,” said Phil, looking hard at his whiskey.

“There are enough mages who think that the planet should be ours alone who would follow him. Despite how batshit crazy Jarcat is.”

My eyes widened. “Fuck keeping my mouth shut. My city is still in danger?”

Sebastian rolled his eyes. “Yes. But if you weren't stupid you'd know that. Your *friend* Kiren and your sister were informed long ago and have been planning for the potential coming war.”

“Bullshit, I'd know about that. They'd tell me that much.”

I am pretty sure that I saw a grin on Phil's face as he watched Sebastian and I. I didn't care because right then I was up in Sebastian's face, who was also standing up and glaring at me.

“Maybe there is a reason why they didn't tell a moron like you who can't keep his big yap closed,” spat Sebastian.

“Maybe you’re lying to me. And besides, if you knew this, why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

He put up a hand and ticked points off on his fingers. “One, I am not beholden to you, so I don’t need to tell you anything. And two, I thought that you would know about such an important thing. How could you not notice that the general of the armies was preparing for an attack? A man that you claim is your friend.”

“I—” I started to say but then trailed off, clenching my fists before continuing, “I have other tasks.”

My voice didn’t waver, though I felt like I was spouting excuses. Shit.

“Regardless of this, Sebastian, Mr. Taje, there are more important matters at hand.”

As much as I wanted to disagree, that would be selfish. Azmarine’s safety had to come first, even if it may or may not be my city. And even if my family and friends were keeping me in the dark about what they were doing.

I flung back the whiskey and let the burn course down my throat, almost bringing tears to my eyes.

Then I met Phil’s eyes straight on and said, “Whatever I need to do in order to help, I will. I promise.”

He looked at me shrewdly and said, “Perfect. Let’s shake on it.”

I smiled, this was great. This guy was proof that most Magi were good people. I reached out and shook Phil’s hand. As soon as my hand was grasped, Phil leaned quickly to the side and touched Sebastian as well.

For the second time in too short a period, Sebastian called me a moron before groaning and pressing a fist to his temple.

I felt a tingle up my arm before I felt weak and needed to sit down. What had just happened?

“I couldn’t help it,” I said in protest as Sebastian and I walked back into his apartment after taking a taxi pod back. “I thought he was on our side.”

Sebastian tossed his coat onto the back of a chair in the sitting room and turned to me with a look of exasperation in his eyes. “Yes. He is. But he’s also a devil in disguise.”

“Huh,” I said, looking up from untying the laces on my boots.

“By on our side, I refer to the fact that he had no desire or will to destroy Azmarine. He would rather keep Elementals out of his way. He is unhappy with Jarcat for stirring up dissension and will do anything to stop him from taking more followers away from himself.”

“Oh,” I said, setting my boots to the side and walking in to where Sebastian was. I sat across from him.

“Which is why I told you to shut your fucking mouth.”

“Okay. I get that. But it’s not like I signed a blood oath or something. He isn’t going to hurt us or anything.”

“No, not physically,” said Sebastian, going over to a chest in the corner of the room and opening it to reveal a hoard of supplies for going into battle. “But by saying those words to Phil and then shaking his hand, you have damned us both for his ultimate goals and plans. He has bound you and I. Phil can manipulate the souls of the still living. He has entwined ours. Our lives are forever bound.”

Since I’d already said “oh” once, I changed things up and said, “I see.”

“So hence my calling you a moron.”

“Will you stop calling me that!”

“Why should I when it’s true,” said Sebastian, though I could tell that he was getting distracted by packing.

I scratched my head. “What does being bound mean exactly?”

“It means that I need you with me now, even if I want to ditch you later. I need you to gain energy from.”

“How exactly do I do that?” I asked, with calm curiosity. Though I felt as if I should have been angry at Phil, I wasn’t.

“It’s not important right now. We need to focus on other tasks, like leaving,” said Sebastian, holding up his index finger in my face before he added, “I’ll tell you later, when it’s important. I don’t want to think about it anymore, lest I kill you out of sheer frustration.”

Leaving Sebastian’s home only took a few hours. He got clothes for me, and we packed some supplies into his travel pod. I wasn’t thrilled to see the skeletons again, but there wasn’t much that I could do about it.

Since Sebastian's apartment was on the outskirts of the city, we were flying over the forests once more. The quiet didn't seem to feel as oppressive as the last time we travelled, but perhaps that was because I had been getting used to him.

Not long after we were in flight, Sebastian's communicator started to bleep out a tune. He answered.

"Risdro," a pause, "Uh-huh. No, I haven't yet. We are on our way. Fine, talk to him."

With a quick move of his arm, the phone was in front of me. I took it from his hand with two fingers and gingerly put it up to my ear. I wasn't used to holding these things.

"Um, hello?"

"Rey! Oh man, it's Kiren."

"How are you? How are the war plans going?"

"Crap. So you've found out have you?"

"Yeah, I have. Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, trying to relax myself in my seat as I waited for the response.

On the other end of the line I heard him huff and then say, "Because Soline didn't want you to worry. She knows how good you are at your job and she didn't want to distract you."

"But she wouldn't have. It actually would have helped me do my job better. At least I think that it would have."

"I'm so sorry, Rey. If it helps, I was conflicted about her decision to keep this from you."

I nodded before I remembered that he wouldn't be able to see me. "I know. I can tell from your voice that you are."

"See that's the kind of thing we need you in Azmarine for. You are so kind, forgiving and intuitive. You need to hurry up and get your powers back so you can be here."

"So why did you call anyway?"

"Aside from seeing how your task was going, I need to know what to tell your sister."

I couldn't help it. I laughed a bit. Sebastian glanced over at me with his frosty eyes, but I somehow got the impression that he wasn't upset at me for breaking the silence. Don't know how I knew that.

"It's not funny," said Kiren, and I just then noticed the hush to his voice. "She is doing a good job of running both your job and hers. Not as good with the social affairs as you are, but adequate, don't you dare let her know I said that though."

"My lips are sealed."

I glared over at Sebastian when I distinctly heard him mutter about that being a joke. I didn't respond to his words and waited for Kiren to say more.

"But she is also going out of her mind with worry for you."

I frowned. "I know. She worries so much since our parents both went to the great beyond. Though I'm younger than her, I should be the one worrying, not Soline."

His response to my words was a desperately whispered, "Oh shit."

"What?" I was pretty sure I had an idea of what though.

In the background on Kiren's side, I heard a shrill female voice. It sounded far away at first and continued to get closer. I heard a shuffling come from Kiren, and he swore.

Then, "Reynard Taje! I will hurt you if you don't come back. Or if you come back injured. Don't you dare—"

At the same time, Kiren whispered, "Gotta go, bye."

And he hung up.

I had a wide grin on my face. I knew it because my cheeks hurt a bit. I looked at Sebastian as I gave him back his device, and my smile grew wider when I saw one of his own grins creeping over his lips.

"You're smiling." I felt triumphant to discover that this man wasn't quite as cold as he seemed.

Sebastian frowned deeply and scowled at me. "I am not. Necromancers do not smile."

"They dooo," I sing-songed like a small child. "You thought Kiren and my sister were funny."

He ignored me, but I noticed that the travel pod picked up speed, his hands white knuckled on the steering wheel.

“I don’t mind if you do that near me. I’m not going to judge.”

He snorted. “You just want to get me comfortable around you so that you can fuck me or something.”

Huh? Where in the world did that come from?

“I’m confused.”

In a patronizing tone of voice, he narrowed his eyes and said, “Of course you are.”

Fuck it all. I turned in my seat as much as I could with my seat strap still on and looked out the window at my side. But I was more upset at Soline for not trusting my ability. Everybody treated me like a child. I wished that I got more credit for being capable of taking care of myself.

Though in the back of my mind, I started to wonder if the actions of my family were of my own doing. Was my attitude so bad?

I wish I had some kind of clue.

After a couple hours, I had resumed looking out the front windshield. My neck had started to get a bit of a crick in it, and we still had a while to go before we got to the capital where Jarcat had set up base.

I looked down at the various knobs, dials, and screens on the panel under the window. One screen caught my eye as it flashed a red dot behind what I thought looked like a diagram of our pod.

“What does that mean?” I asked, too curious to keep up the silent treatment.

“Shit! Shit, shit, shit!”

Okay, so the red dot was bad. If I had any clue about how to drive one of the damnable travel pods, I would have tried to help. Instead, I just had to relegate myself to watch. Maybe Sebastian was onto something when he chastised me about my people’s general dislike for technology.

Before I could brace myself, the entire vehicle swerved to the right just as a cylindrical ray of purple energy whizzed by. He veered left when another ray shot on that side. On the screen, another red dot appeared in front of us all of a

sudden. Just as I saw it, I looked up. Outside the window was another travel pod.

This pod seemed different though. It was sleek and had an eerie sheen over it. I thought that perhaps I could see through it, just barely.

Sebastian pulled the pod upwards, and I had the sense to hold onto the armrests. Not that I thought that would do me any real good, but it was instinct.

Below, I could see a long metal tube poke out from the ship that had been in front of us. Now that we were nearly above it, I saw a buildup of violet strands and glowing swirls before it shot.

The entire pod made a shrieking groan before the metal started to twist near the back of the vehicle. Rips across the backend started appearing first, getting closer and closer to the front where we were.

The cargo hold was in the back, and our bags as well as weapons started to fall down to crash into the forest far below us. Seats were wrenched out in a burst of squealing speed and skeletons were also sent airborne.

Sebastian yelled at me over the horrible sound of metal tearing, "All right. When I tell you to unbuckle your seat belt, do it. No questions asked."

I nodded, though I knew that Sebastian was paying attention to steering. He had very little control left, but he tried to aim for a lake.

The blue grew closer and closer and I was thankful that our seats were still intact. My breathing grew rapid and Sebastian yelled, "Be calm. Take a deep breath."

When I think back, I wonder how he could have heard me over all of the other noise. But then, I just nodded once more.

Just as our ship hit the water, Sebastian yelled, "Now!"

And I let loose the clasp.

Water hit my skin like a thousand needles. Everything was dark as if a curtain was pulled over my eyes. I had no idea which was up or down, so deep in the lake. My lungs felt like they were on fire, and every fibre of my being screamed to take a breath.

I swam furiously in a direction that I thought was toward the surface when I felt a hand on the back of my jacket. The grip tugged me in the opposite direction, and I let myself follow.

Slowly I made it to the surface, the dim light get closer and closer. Once I reached the surface, I gasped for air with hungry draws, treading water.

Sebastian's tugging continued. "Breathe while you swim."

My teeth started chattering as soon as we fully emerged from the water. While it was still autumn, winter was close on its heels, and the wind was letting me know with its sharp sting. Sebastian didn't stop until we were in a thicket of bushes.

Overhead, one of the travel pods that shot at us swooped down, but I just barely saw it through the bushes and trees above us.

My shivering grew worse, and I wrapped my arms around my knees, curling myself tight. I peeked over at Sebastian, who wasn't trembling in the slightest.

"A-aren't y-you c-cold?" I asked, whispering the words in case there was somebody nearby, though I had my doubts.

Sebastian shook his head; his brow was creased from the frown on his lips. "A perk of being a necromancer."

I barely felt room for shock when the man's arms wrapped around my shoulders tightly and his body pressed behind me. He moved his hands over my arms in an attempt to warm me up. It started to work, even if just slightly.

I tried to smile. "D-Drawback o-of b-being a f-fire E-Elemental."

"We need to get you moving. Stay close to me; we'll stick to crawling through where we will have cover. I think they are gone, but I don't want to risk being shot at. We need to find whatever supplies we can salvage."

I nodded, not feeling like dealing with getting out words between my chattering teeth.

The forest here was so very thick, untouched by civilization. I could feel the element of nature all around me, flowing around me but not into me. I desperately wished I was near a desert or a fire so I could feel its power, even if I still couldn't use any of it. I missed my home.

Eventually, after about two hours of walking around, we'd found less than half of our supplies. At least we found some of the clothes so that I could put on something warm and dry. Thanks to Sebastian's seeming obsession with blades, we found a number of different sizes of daggers. There were a bunch of other useful supplies and one bag to carry them in.

None of the skeletons survived the fall, which I couldn't find it in myself to be upset about. When we arrived at the first pile of bones, I saw Sebastian kneel beside it. He started speaking under his breath and swiping his hand over the remains.

At first, I thought that he was going to raise it back. When he just stood up and the pile was still just a pile, I wondered what he had just done.

"What was that about?" I asked clearly, my teeth barely chattering at all.

"Easing their way back to the afterlife."

"Oh," I said, shifting back and forth on my feet to keep myself warm.

He turned on me, backing me up into a tree, his lips twisted.

"What? You going to start in on me again about the damn skeletons? Going to tell me how despicable I am?"

I had no idea what to say to that. No idea at all.

"No. I think it is honourable for you to do that," I finally said, and I really meant it.

His eyes widened slightly, his mouth moving to soundlessly repeat the words that I'd just said. Then he just huffed and turned.

"Fine."

We managed to find the last of the bones, and he prayed over them. After the last one, I said, "Who attacked us? Who would even know that we were all the way out here?"

He was quiet for a while. Every now and then he would tap his fingers on his upper leg as he walked, or he'd chew his bottom lip ever so slightly. I started to understand that these little actions were actually what he did when he was deep in thought.

"Jarcats must have found us. Though I have no idea how that could have happened."

We had travelled for hours before I felt drawn to my right. It was a caressing feeling in the back of my mind, gently tugging me towards it. The two of us had managed to get near some mountains, and we were close to the base.

“I think there’s a cave nearby,” I said.

“How do you know?”

“I am sensing something that feels like home.”

We didn’t go far before we broke out from the trees and saw the mouth of a cave nearby. Both of us could fit through it side by side, and the cave tunnel was just as wide, curving to the left.

Not going far, Sebastian dropped the pack he was carrying over his shoulder and lowered himself to the ground. “Warm in here.”

“I know,” I said, revelling in it. “There must be a pool of magma down the tunnel, further underground.”

“That’s how you knew it was here huh? Guess you still have some of your innate talents left.”

“Do you mind if I go try to find it?”

Sebastian stared at me before nodding and grabbing a dagger. “I’ll find food for us.”

Not until he’d left, and I was on my search for that primal source of heat, did I think about what he’d said. Sebastian didn’t really eat. Was he getting food just for me?

I shook my head. Sebastian must eat sometimes. And besides, the guy wouldn’t want to drag a half-starved man around. This was for his benefit.

I was surprised at how close the pool of magma actually was. Only a ten-minute walk down the passage. The walk had been a bit steep in places where the path kind of dropped, but the effort was worth it when I saw the beautifully roiling red-orange liquid.

I still had resistance to heat, as I was able to get closer than any human could without protection but my clothes did not. I had to take them off before I got closer. I was sad to find that with the loss of my powers went the ability to physically interact with magma. I couldn’t get very close to the pool before I had to stop and just sit. I really wanted to hold some though, but I didn’t.

I’m not as stupid as I seem.

I closed my eyes and allowed myself to get lost in the bubbling sounds. This felt as close to home as I could get. I wasn’t worried about lava getting on me because I could sense that I was safe there.

A while must have passed because I heard my name being called. Sebastian was close, but I couldn't see him.

"I caught some fish. They are cleaned and cooking right now. Come on, I can't get any closer or I'll burn to death."

I chuckled and went to where I'd left my clothes. I immediately felt Sebastian's eyes on me, roving over my body while I dressed. On a lark, I decided to dress a bit more slowly, giving Sebastian a show. I slid each article of clothing over my body. I let him see my obvious erection.

Maybe I was high from being so close to a source of power for me, I don't know. But that is the only reason I could think of for why I strolled up to Sebastian and pressed a chaste kiss on the man's lips.

"Thank you for getting food."

Then I just went back to where we'd set up camp.

Chapter 3

Sebastian spent most of our meal together avoiding my gaze. He hadn't had time to respond to my kiss back near the magma pool, and I didn't know if he would have.

The man only picked at a few flakes of his fish, eating with his fingers since we didn't pack forks. We hadn't really planned on a trek through the wilderness.

The silence was awkward, and I felt the urge to fill it. "Did you catch these with your dagger?"

He shook his head without looking at me. "I set off a small blast of energy near where some were swimming."

"Would have been impressive if you'd caught them with a dagger. My father tried to show me how. He was a nature Elemental. My mother was fire. Dad loved to teach me everything he could about nature and survival. I just couldn't get into it. I always preferred to start fires. Not the best ability for a small child to have in the woods."

When Sebastian chuckled under his breath, I nearly swallowed my tongue. I'd actually expected some kind of caustic remark about Elementals. I watched him pick at his food that he had placed on a large leaf. He almost appeared paler than usual, which I hadn't thought possible.

"Are you okay?"

"Huh?"

Sebastian looked up at me, the flames from the fire casting a yellow glow over his ashen skin. Under his eyes were dark circles and his lips were pressed together thin.

"I asked if you were okay. Are you upset because I kissed you? I honestly don't know why I did that since I am pretty sure we hate each other."

"No," he said, closing his eyes and letting out a shuddery rush of air. "I have used more energy than I thought I would. First, I slowed the descent of the ship, then I had to locate and save you from the lake. Now, I am having to keep using my energy to make sure that we head towards the nearest city."

"I had no idea that would take so much from you. Don't Magi usually have an object of focus to replenish their energy?"

Placing down his leaf, Sebastian stared into the fire. "Most do. But not necromancers. We need to kill a living being. To fully restore myself, I'd have to find animals to slay in sacrifice. Or—"

"Or what? Your next word had better not be Elemental," I said it jokingly, but I didn't actually know what he would say.

"Sex. With you. That is what Phil did when he bound us. The bastard thought he was doing a good thing."

"Seriously? It sounds like a good deal to me and I could help you out with that," I said, putting aside my own leaf plate that I had long since cleared of food.

I took a long swig of water from a canteen we had found (no kissing with fish breath). Then I went to sit next to him by the fire, and I reached out for him. Sex was something an Elemental could do well.

"You have a really great body. I'd love to show you how good I can make you feel. Show you that my experience with sex isn't a bad thing."

He flinched away from me and my newlygrown erection wilted just a bit in my slacks.

"No. I'd rather wither up as a shell of depleted energy than sleep with another one of your kind. Especially you."

And then he stood and stormed out of the cave and into the strong wind.

Shit, but I wish I understood that infuriating man. It was just a bit of sex. And what did he mean by sleeping with another of my kind? I mean, aside from the obvious.

Laying out our last remaining sleeping bag on the ground, I lay on the side closest to the fire. Using my jacket as a pillow, I fell into a shallow and troubled sleep.

I awoke to the feeling of fingers on my shoulder in what was a soft and tentative touch. When I opened my eyes, I noticed that I had rolled to face the rough wall of the cave. The fire had dimmed to embers and flickered specks of light over the stone.

I faced Sebastian, and met his gaze. For a moment, I was sure that I had seen into his soul, those silver orbs drawing me in like a moth to a flame. There was hurt in his expression that I caught before he tried to hide it.

Unable to stop myself, I reached out to cup his cheek, brushing the backs of my fingers along the cold skin.

“You’re freezing, how long were you out there?”

He shrugged as best as he could from his position. The steel shields went back up on his face but I refused to move my hand. Instead, I brought my hand to his hair and carded my fingers through those silky brown strands.

“What do you need Sebastian?” I asked as I tightened my grip ever so subtly.

“I think you know.” He didn’t sound happy.

“I thought you’d rather wither.”

His lips pursed before relaxing. “I changed my mind.”

“Don’t seem like the type to do that often,” I said before I shimmied closer and brought my nose to the crook of his neck.

I breathed his scent deep, glorying in the musk of pure male with a rich overlay of the woods. I flicked my tongue out to taste his skin, the saltiness bursting in my mouth. Licking my way up, I made a path up the side of his neck to find his ear. I sucked the lobe into my mouth, raking my teeth across it just enough to sting.

I felt my cock twitch, slowly coming to life.

With a breathless voice, he replied, “No. I don’t often change my mind. But I need this. I need the energy to get us out of the forest.”

Letting the small piece of flesh go with a pop, I brought my face to within inches of his and said, “Really? That’s the only reason?”

I let my touch whisper down his arms and over his slender hips, up and down. My lips and tongue continued their assault on Sebastian’s neck. I made sure to work up a couple of marks with my teeth for good measure.

“Yes. It is. Now please, don’t make me beg.”

Normally I might have considered making Sebastian do just that, just liked he’d done only days before. But at that point I desired him too much to care.

In one fell swoop, I pinned him beneath me, my hands on either side of his face. I brought my mouth down on his in a brutal clashing of lips and teeth. Our tongues swirled and probed, exploring every inch of wet heat.

His hands reached to grasp the back of the shirt I still wore, clutching so tight that I knew I'd have marks the next day. My hips lowered to meet his, my clothed erection meeting Sebastian's. He was just as hard as I was, rubbing up into me, groaning.

"Need... penetration... so... close," he said, gasping as he broke away from our kiss.

"Naked."

I whipped off my clothes in short order. While Sebastian worked on his, I darted to the fire pit to rekindle the flames. Given my natural talents in the area, it didn't take long to restart it.

Though when I turned around I was speechless.

With one arm under his head, Sebastian lay out like my own personal feast.

He had the well-toned muscles of a man who had trained in combat, and the red glow from the fire danced over them—defining them. There was not a hair on that torso save for a trail of fine silk that dipped down to surround his cock.

Oh and what an impressive dick it was, long and slender. Uncut and dripping into the dip of his belly button, angled a bit to the left. His balls were plump and tight to his body.

I pounced, grabbing his legs and bringing his entire length down my throat until I felt the tickle of his pubes against my nose. I was incredibly glad that I'd trained away my gag reflex.

He cried out, filling the corridor with the echoes of his pleasure. Maybe he'd never had somebody deep-throat him before.

Letting him go from my mouth for a moment, I pushed his legs closer to his chest and looked at him, "Are you sure?"

His mouth hung open, both hands fisted at his side. Sebastian nodded.

Scooting back a bit, I leaned my head down and sucked one of his lightly furred balls into my mouth. While I worked that part, I brought my fingers down to caress Sebastian's tight entrance.

Massaging it, I slipped the second testicle into my mouth before letting them slide free. I heard my soon-to-be lover's breathing grow heavier and more rapid, his kiss-swollen lips parted and glossy.

Spitting on the fingers that circled his hole, I started to press in with one digit. Immediately Sebastian lifted his hips, his ass seeking more.

"I'm not a girl, Reynard. Just fuck me!"

Teasing his perineum with my tongue, letting my saliva drip down to ease the way of my fingers, I brought my free hand to stroke his dick. Slowly, I increased and eased a second and then a third finger in. Only because he'd asked for more. There was no way that I was sticking my cock in until I was sure he was ready.

"Fuck me!" said Sebastian again, nearly breathless, hips still writhing.

Grinning wickedly, I said, "Beg me."

"No," he said, but his tone was low and shuddery.

"Guess you don't want my cock to fill you. I'm so hard and leaking a bit too. But I could just finish myself off," I said, sitting up but keeping my fingers in his ass.

"Don't you dare," he hissed, and then added, "please."

"Maybe..." I let myself trail off as I curled my fingers and hit that spongy pad of nerves.

That did it.

Sebastian nearly shot up, his eyes wide, while he cried out, "Oh please, please, please."

I couldn't hold back any longer. So, I brought myself up to Sebastian's face, and straddled him. "If you want it, get me wet first."

I tapped the tip of my ruddy cockhead on his chin, and saw a pearlescent bead of pre-cum smear on the skin there.

Oh Gods, how I groaned when he sucked me. It must have just been because it was Sebastian. Maybe there had been sexual tension between us that I had been too irritated to feel. I'd had partners deep-throat me before and Sebastian only got half-way. But it felt so warm, so good.

When I had been sufficiently covered in wetness, I moved back, slinging his legs over my shoulders. Pressing the tip of my dick at his entrance, I pushed. I probably should have seen it coming when he grabbed my hips and pulled, finding myself buried to the balls in Sebastian's slick passage.

While I groaned in pleasure at the tightness, I heard Sebastian hiss. I didn't thrust like I so desperately wanted to, instead taking one of his hard pink nipples into my mouth. I bit it before moving to the second nub, which was sucked thoroughly before also being bitten.

I caressed the length of his body, soothing him and pressing feather-light kisses along the pulse at his neck.

Only once I felt his muscles relax, did I dare move.

With unhurried motions, I slid in and out, feeling him clench his muscles around me. Sebastian clawed at my back as I sucked up another mark on his neck and made my way up to his jaw.

“Faster. Please.”

I grinned against the unnaturally smooth face and said, “My pleasure.”

I punctuated that by slamming my hips forward, resting my arms on either side of his head. Every one of my moves was met by Sebastian as he mewled loudly.

Sweat built up with our frenzied motions, slicking the way for his cock to rub between us.

Angling my thrusts upwards, I knew I hit the right spot when he erupted, spilling his hot, creamy release onto our bellies. His cries filled the cave as I snapped forward twice more and found my own completion.

As my cock jerked, I met Sebastian's eyes and saw them glowing bright enough to light the room. His mouth was cracked open as he sucked air deep into his lungs. The atmosphere around us crackled, and his body shivered beneath me. The light slowly faded to their normal silver before he blinked several times as if to clear them.

Pressing feather-light kisses against his cheek and nose, I rolled to lie beside him and drew him next to my body. We didn't bother to clean ourselves up or move any further. We just fell into a comfortable sleep.

Present day

“Okay, I really did not need to know that part of it, Rey!” says Sol as she holds the paper on which I had just written my first lovemaking with Sebastian.

“It's part of what I have to tell you. It's important,” I say, leaning back from the table where I'm sitting, working the kinks out of my now-stiff back.

Kiren, who is reading as Soline hands him the papers, finishes the last segment and then chuckles.

“Nice,” he says, I see a twinkle in his eyes.

Soline rolls her own eyes and says, "Could you have just said something like, 'We kissed and fucked'?"

She looks so hopeful that I grin a bit as I say, "If I have to hear about when you, Kiren and your husband have threesomes, surely you can read this."

Soline looks at me and tries to look disgusted. All I see is an undercurrent of pity for me.

"I'm sorry. Can you continue?"

I shake my head and say, "Maybe later. I have tasks that need to be attended to."

Soline nods and says, "How silly of me. Of course you do. But do tell me when you are ready to resume your tale. Perhaps after all of the sex?"

I chuckle though I'm not feeling it. "Perhaps."

Kiren leaves first, after nodding at me.

Soline hesitates by the door, her hand touching the knob with the tips of her fingers. "For what it's worth, I'm so sorry that I kept things from you. You have to know that."

She leaves, closing the door quietly behind her as I put the papers away in the drawer of my writing table.

I see a letter in the drawer, which I didn't realize I still had. I didn't know I'd kept this.

It's from an old lover of mine and childhood friend.

Dearest Reynard

I am writing to you, this missive, to inform you that I am leaving Azmarine. I have already asked Kiren and he has given me leave. My journey will be for at least a year, but perhaps longer. Perhaps what I am about to tell you is just my wild and fool's heart talking, but I'd like to get to know the humans and the Magi. Believe me, I understand the reasons our people had for disdaining technology. And I understand that you wish to keep our culture strong. However, I no longer believe they are valid in all cases. I wish to travel the world and seek tech that will be useful to us. This can potentially be a boon to our people.

Thank you for allowing me this, even if you do not understand.

Sincerely, your friend for life,

Cathal

It was written to me quite some years before today though. Cathal was back in the city, somewhere. We'd briefly taken up our "friends who fuck" relationship, but it fizzled out. Now he is still in the army and happy in his life. It was never love for Cathal and I.

I knew what love was with Sebastian.

I shake my head and drop both of my hands down beside me. I don't remember why I kept it, but I could barely stand to finish reading it all the way through, even though I knew every word it said. I crumple the paper up in my fist and toss it aside.

I don't have time to think about Cathal, and how deeply I should be upset at him.

The sun is setting behind the mountains, which are barely letting over its red-orange light. Shadows loom heavy in the streets currently being lit up with lanterns. Shopkeepers and other citizens hurry by me, waving their greetings as they go about their business.

There actually hadn't been much to do, though I know I had implied otherwise to my sister. I just need a clear head and a calm soul. Perhaps I should go into the desert and lay on the sand while it still retains the warmth from the sun. It would be a nice way to relax and try to forget.

From behind me, I hear Kiren's voice calling out for me. I turn to greet him and notice that Cathal is beside him. They are jogging briskly towards me and their faces look quite serious.

"What's wrong?" I ask, steeling my back and going into Lord-of-a-city mode.

"You should go into the shelter," says Cathal, staring at the ground as if the pebbles are so very interesting.

"No. I've been back for a few weeks now and it's been the same shit—"

Kiren raised his hand and tried to speak, but I interrupted him.

“Let me talk!” I say, the words snapping out. “I have been trying to be more involved in the city affairs and nobody is letting me. You know how damn hard it can be to get Soline to spill any kind of info. But I won’t take the same from you two. Come on, please tell me what is going on.”

Kiren gritted his teeth before running his hand through his hair.

“We’re going to be under attack soon. A message just came in warning of it,” says Kiren, green eyes swirling with unease.

“When? I didn’t know that this would happen so soon,” I say, fighting off the urge to pound something.

Citizens around us, who are listening in, gasp and quicken their pace.

“My contact says that by the time he managed to escape and get to a communicator that his captors had been gone for half a day. I’d say we have about a day and a half left to prepare, at best,” says Cathal.

I nod. There was no time for tantrums. “And who is your contact?”

Cathal replies, looking to the side and wincing, “Sebastian Risdro.”

Chapter 4

Present day

I had been running around for nearly forty-eight hours. No attack had come, and we hadn't seen any sign of travel pods. I stopped doing the various tasks that I'd set upon myself in order to grab a small bite to eat. I hadn't eaten since I found out about the coming attack. There is so much to do to evacuate the people and make sure they are safe and well taken care of.

Truth be told, if this weren't such a dire situation I would enjoy the break. That way I could avoid thinking.

When I open the kitchen door, I think that I should feel surprise when I see my sister, her husband (another fire Elemental), Kiren and Cathal in various positions in the room.

"Sit down," says Soline, in a serious voice as she pushes out a stool at the counter with her booted foot.

"Sol. I really have things to do," I protest, but I know my voice sounds weak.

I'm tired, hungry and soul weary.

Kiren pipes up, "All of the non-soldiers, children and elderly are deep within the old underground temples. We have patrols up and workers who are almost done fortifying our few possible entrances."

I plop down in the dark wood chair and soon find a mug of steaming tea set in front of me by Sol.

"Right now we think perhaps the rest of your story about Sebastian may help us here," says Kiren, folding his arms across his chest.

Out of the corner of my eye, I sneak a look at Cathal. He looks decidedly nervous, and I don't blame him, given what I know of his past.

"Do I have to do it here, in front of everybody?"

Sol nods, her curls flying around her face. I would argue with her, but I am too tired.

"I've caught them up to where you left off."

Shit. Here goes nothing.

So, I start talking.

Three Weeks Ago

When I woke up the next morning, I noticed that Sebastian had squirmed out of my grasp. He sat beside the fire, poking at a cooking fish. I saw that beside him was a pile of berries, the nice and plump purple ones that were tart and sweet at the same time.

“Thanks for making breakfast,” I said with a yawn. “Man, I slept well last night.”

Sebastian didn't look up, but said, “You need to keep your energy up.”

“How about you, Sebastian?”

That got him to look at me, eyes narrowed to tiny slits.

I don't let that intimidate me, “Despite how I act when you piss me off, I'm a pretty friendly guy. So how about your energy levels?”

“Fine, they are completely restored, so I thank you.”

I took the fish he'd been poking at and started eating it as I popped berries between bites of fish.

“My pleasure,” I said after I'd swallowed.

Again, he was quiet. But I didn't expect anything different.

So, I said, “Do you really not need to eat?”

He shook his head. “When I gained my powers as a child, I stopped eating. I no longer had the need.”

“Hey Sebastian?”

He glared at me. “Mmmm?”

“That's weird.”

He grinned wryly. “Yeah. It is. No other mage I have met is like this.”

I had the feeling that I'd insulted him somehow, but I hadn't meant it that way. My family and I tease each other all the time.

So I added to what I'd said before, “But your lack of appetite makes you who you are. I'm starting to like you.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.” And then I added, “We should do that again. The sex I mean, it was great.”

As we were packing up the few things we'd taken from our packs, I heard him say, “Yes, we should. It was pretty good.”

I probably had the most idiotic grin in the history of grins.

I was pretty good. Sex with me was pretty good. I knew that. But hearing the necromancer with the cold demeanour say it was uplifting.

So, we left the cave, after I took one more naked trip to the magma pool just to soak up the nice warm feelings of it. Our trip continued the way we had been heading before, with Sebastian making the occasional check to make sure we were on track. (I hadn't noticed before, but when he checked the direction his eyes would get a silvery glow to them. Very sexy!)

It was about noon by the time we got to the outer edges of the capital city of Corevias. I could see, in the distance, the downtown area was full of towering skyscrapers. It would take days of walking to reach it. The suburbs and other parts of the city sprawled out for many miles, taking over what had been forest.

The moment we came into the city, we neared some kind of huge factory or warehouse. The asphalt stank like garbage and chemicals. We walked down the side of one of the roads, passing the seemingly abandoned buildings.

Just as he was opening his mouth to speak, something caught Sebastian's attention. Shoving hard, he pushed us both into a doorway of a small building. We crawled, so that nobody could see us through the two windows that were barely letting light through and made it into another room in the back. This must have been an office at one point, the occasional yellow and ageing paper littering the floor, an overturned desk in the corner.

Hiding in the corner behind the protective cover of the desk, I asked in a voice that was barely audible, “What the hell did you see?”

“Jarcat,” he mouthed back to me, eyes wide.

Tapping the fingers of both hands on his legs, his eyes darted back and forth, like he was thinking up a way to escape.

I tapped his shoulder to get his attention and whispered, “How many were there? Even without my powers, I still have combat expertise. We can take them.”

Shaking his head, Sebastian said, "Jarcat was there, as I said. You know how powerful he is. If he is here, then he likely has a small army with him as well. That moment where he was alone by Azmarine was a fluke. And even then, think about how many people it took to take him on. That was the only time I had ever seen him alone, and it was because the spell he was casting needed him to be alone in its beginning stages."

"Well shit," I murmured, reaching beside me to pick at a crumpled sheet of newspaper.

"My sentiments exactly."

As Sebastian sat and started to plan, I shuffled around the room on my knees. It may have been reckless, but I hated sitting in one place doing nothing. Along one of the walls, near the floor, I saw the slightest inconsistency. There was a small gap in the floorboards. It wasn't there on the rest of the wall and was wide like a closet door. I stood up and started to pry at the wooden wall panels, getting my fingernails under it.

"What are you doing?" asked Sebastian, sounding incredulous.

"There's a hidden door here," I said, distracted and trailing off.

"So, it's an old building. It was probably boarded up years ago."

I don't know why, but I didn't think that was the case. I thought it was hiding something.

I felt drawn that way.

When I pried enough of the panels away, I'd revealed a passageway and headed down it.

"This is a dumb idea, Rey. Seriously, this could go anywhere."

"It's the same feeling I got when I felt the magma nearby, only stronger," I said, because I couldn't explain the sensation any other way.

Sebastian and I were quiet for a while as we walked down the musty, old corridor. It twisted and turned several times but stayed level for several minutes before we got to another set of panels. This time we were facing the back of what was obviously a false wall.

We listened to the other side and heard only faint sounds. Once the sounds were gone completely, I took one board away and peeked out.

I saw an office that overlooked a huge warehouse area. In the large expanse of room were what had to be close to a hundred travel pods. All of them were of the variety that had shot us down before. Soldiers moved around, carrying wooden crates. I couldn't see the contents, and doubted that Sebastian could either.

Voices came closer from a nearby hallway, and I quickly put the panel back and listened.

"Well look faster. I have it on good authority that the necromancer has been under Phil's direct order. He's taken one of those primitive Elementals and is helping it get back the powers I absorbed from it. He knows I am here and is headed this way, I'm sure of it."

"I understand, sir. But how can one man jeopardize our entire operation?" asked the first voice again.

The sound of flesh smacking flesh snapped through the air before the man, Jarcat, who was obviously in charge said, "It is not your place to question me. But if you must know, I will tell you. If Sebastian discovers what he can do with that power, he will be nearly unstoppable. Those filthy vermin in Azmarine have no idea what they have. They squander it on growing plants and making fires. Truly pathetic."

The first voice stammered a bit of nonsense before saying, "Y-yes, sir. We will continue to look for him. But I think we killed the two of them in that crash."

"Good. If you do well, I might just keep you as my apprentice when my plans come to fruition."

"Should I wake the elders? They are in the engine areas now."

Jarcat spoke forcefully, "Do not. They need their rest in order to get their revenge."

"All right sir. I will see that Sebastian is captured. Still wish him to be delivered alive, sir?"

"Yes, that would be preferable."

The door snicked shut, and from the cracks of the panels I smelled the acrid smoke of cheap tobacco seep towards us.

The two of us backed a bit into the corridor, out of earshot. We huddled close.

Pointing forward once we got to the door, Sebastian spoke, "I can cast one spell, and maybe another to do something about Jarcat. It will make our bodies and energy signatures invisible. The problem is that every Magi in the area will know I am around, and the spell doesn't last forever."

"Maybe we shouldn't risk it since they will catch us for sure."

He shook his head. "We'll have enough time to get to a travel pod. If you can fly it to the Order headquarters that is in Corevias, then we will be safe. Can you fly one?"

I winced but nodded. "Not well. But enough to perhaps save our lives."

I hoped so anyway, because we were screwed otherwise.

Lifting both hands onto my shoulders, he made me do the same to him. He touched our foreheads together and chanted quietly. Glowing arcane symbols floated up around us in a wide circle, covering us from head to toe.

We ran down the corridor and moved aside the wall panels.

Jarcat's head whipped over to see what had just happened. As he stood, ashes fell down from the brown rolled cigarette in his hand. He glared, and his hand glowed and raised as he went to cast a spell.

Sebastian was faster. He snarled out some guttural words, and Jarcat became trapped in a violet force field. I couldn't hear his cries of outrage, but I could see his lips move.

"Now run. Be as silent as you can because they can still hear us. But let's get out of here and into a ship."

I nodded before I said, "I assume that if he can't get through that shield, than neither can we?"

"That's right, unfortunately."

Jarcat would be safe from being stabbed for now.

So, we booked it. I don't think I had ever run so fast in my life.

True to his word, nobody could see us. But they could sure as hell tell that Sebastian had cast a spell.

Jarcat's mini-prison didn't last long, and he soon emerged from the office barking orders, running around with his red cloak flying behind him. He was fuming, and his teeth were bared as he swore. Other mages scurried around looking furiously in every place they could. I saw one of them go to where

we'd just come from, but once Sebastian and I were out of the tunnel, some kind of barrier blocked the entrance from sight. Clever.

Under our feet, the ground didn't change at all. It was like we were floating over the ground except that I felt it under my boots. Sweat beaded up on my forehead, and my knuckles whitened over the dagger at my side.

From out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jarcat, old and wrinkled but still standing with an aristocratic poise. He held some kind of metallic, circular device in his hand and was pointing it around. I could tell that he couldn't see us, but that didn't matter.

As soon as he pressed one of those gnarled fingers on a button, Sebastian collapsed to the ground in a heap. They still couldn't see us, since they didn't immediately run over. Sebastian curled himself into a ball of writhing pain. No sound escaped his mouth, but I saw him bit his lip so hard that blood welled up and dripped over his chin in a thin red stream.

"Curse the Gods!" yelled the head mage. "That should have broken his spell."

The mage's apprentice meekly walked over with his head down and his hands wringing. "If I may, sir?"

"Go ahead. Tell me whatever nonsense is running through your head."

"Perhaps he is having sexual relations with the Elemental that he brought along? We both know that he refuses to kill without just reason."

I listened to this as I picked Sebastian up and slung him over my shoulder. The weight almost felt like too much, but I had to get him to the travel pod closest to the open siding. Normally I would have been able to carry him without an issue, before I lost my powers and therefore some of my supernatural strength.

I couldn't help but be fascinated by what I'd heard. I knew that Sebastian wasn't like most necromancers, but that he doesn't kill without reason? I didn't know that, though I should have guessed. Sebastian had been challenging my perceptions of him from day one.

Sebastian shivered and clung to the folds of the back of my coat, and I'd felt coldness seeping out of him through his clothes.

We got to the travel pod just in time. I was by the door to it, with my free hand on the handle and sliding it open, when a shout sounded behind us.

“Right there!”

Shit, shit, shit!

“Sorry about this,” I said before I threw Sebastian to the floor of the pod, trying to be as gentle as I could.

I leapt in and slammed the door shut, fastening the locks.

“Okay. I can do this. I drive the pod at home every now and again,” I told myself as I sat in the driver’s seat.

The panel before me was nothing that I’d seen before. Not even Sebastian’s pod was like this. Everything glowed, and there were no traditional buttons or levers. No words were anywhere to indicate what I should do.

Since there was no way to actually figure out which button to push, I pressed the pad in front of me. It was a square, red and glowing.

And it did nothing. Great.

I heard, and felt, the banging and shouts on the door. I had no idea what to do, feeling so out of my element. I tried another panel. I mean, one of them had to do something right? I felt the engine purr to life only to sputter to a premature death.

“The panel with the circles on either side of it,” said Sebastian’s raspy voice from behind me.

I pressed that panel but nothing happened. Did technology hate me? It must.

“Draw your finger—” he took a pause to catch what seemed like a desperately needed breath—“across it like a zig-zag, then press the panel you did before.”

By the end, his voice was barely audible over the shouting from outside.

When I did as he instructed, everything came to life and the pod started to move forward. Bracing myself, I took a hold of the wheel, which could pivot in all directions, and started to fly.

I took off just in time because the door was just starting to slide open a crack. I busied myself by manoeuvring through the warehouse. The side of our travel pod scraped along another pod, making a loud metallic screech. In front of me, I saw some of the soldiers starting the process of shutting the massive warehouse doors. But I was close and just slipped the vehicle out in time, aiming it up into the sky in a wobbly line.

I heard Sebastian's ragged breath and his body slowly crawl across the floor. Just as he made it, I heard a sharp crackle of power and Sebastian's cry. Moaning in pain, he still managed to close the door and lock the lowest latch.

Then, there was silence.

Okay. I was freaking out. Sebastian was still quiet, and I was too unsure of my piloting skills to look around to see what was up with him. As it was, my hands hurt from how hard I was gripping the steering wheel.

By what I was seeing on the various panels, we had been followed for a short amount of time. The closer we got to the main city, the further away we were tailed. But as we neared the metropolis, natural traffic grew heavier. Soon I couldn't tell which ships carried a normal citizen or a minion of Jarcat.

Eventually, I managed to slip into a parking garage and land the infernal ship.

As soon as I stopped it, I jumped from my seat and took a look at my companion.

There was a gash that went from the side of his face near his ear, all the way down to past his chest in a jagged line. It wasn't bleeding much anymore, just a bit down the middle. Whatever had caused the wound had burnt the slash as it went. Sebastian was lying on the floor in a pile, though thankfully, I still saw the rise and fall of his chest.

Opening and closing various cabinets, I eventually located a first aid kit. *There is no way that I could convey to you just how excited I was to find that the kit did not consist of various magical healing instruments. It contained traditional healing implements.*

I moved Sebastian to lay flat on the ground first. Then I moistened some of the pre-packaged pads with disinfectant and cleaned the wounds. I noticed him twitch as I did so, even though he was unconscious. Must have stung.

Then I took gauze and tape and bandaged the still oozing injuries.

Shit. This was bad. This was really bad. Not just because I was worried for myself. I found myself concerned deeply for Sebastian himself.

I brought my hand to stroke down his hair, brushing it from his face. He was so beautiful, even injured. I bent down and placed a kiss on his forehead, which left my lips tingling with the cold radiating off him.

“What do I do? I have no idea how to help him,” I whispered to myself and heard the edge of desperation clearly.

I bent down again and placed a gentle kiss on his lips, swooping my tongue to lick at the saltiness of them. I felt perverted, doing this to an unconscious man. But when he started to kiss back, I didn't care.

I continued, still softly, until he pulled back and saw him mouth, “Sex. Energy.”

Oh. Yeah. That could work, but there was no way that I was penetrating him while he was in that kind of state. I'd have to hope that other acts could help just as well.

I worked open the button on the top of his pants, popping it open and pulling down the zipper with a snick. Pushing down both his slacks and his undergarments to his knees in one move, I freed his still-limp cock. Now something had to be done with that.

First, I dragged my tongue down his neck and then to his sternum. My hands smoothed up and down his sides until they found a home on Sebastian's hips. I licked over to the soft disks of his nipples, sucking the right one into my mouth, rolling it gently between my teeth until it hardened.

I nipped and sucked until I heard his breath hitch and his body began to squirm. It was just too bad that his other nipple was covered by the gauze and bandages.

I resumed my journey downward, tasting the valley between Sebastian's abs, slowly and deliberately teasing.

“Please,” he said, the words falling from his lips like a sigh.

I allowed my breath to wisp over his wet skin, cooling it before licking again. I did this all the way to his belly button, which I swirled my tongue into, thrusting in a facsimile of sex.

“That... feels so... uh,” mumbled Sebastian, whose head rolled back and forth on the floor. His voice was still hushed and possibly sore from his cries of pain earlier, but I could hear the evident desire.

I took pity on him and went down.

I flicked my tongue out for a taste of the tip of his cock, revelling in the hint of essence that I found there. Immediately, my actions started to work as the shaft below my tongue hardened a bit. I used one hand to roll his balls, giving

them the occasional tug, just hard enough to make him squirm. Then I took his cock fully into my mouth and sucked.

I relished the feeling of letting Sebastian fill my mouth. The throb of the veins on that perfectly sculpted dick. His foreskin was fully stretched over the rosy tip by the time I let him plop free from my mouth.

Just when it looked like Sebastian was about to protest, I placed a finger on his lips and said, "Shh, just trust me."

I removed my own pants and undergarments and wasted no time in thrusting two fingers up my ass. I hissed at the sting but knew I had a huge grin on my face. I didn't mind at all.

Being able to help Sebastian by having sex with him? Possibly the greatest feeling ever.

Removing my hand and spitting on it, I then inserted three. With my other hand, I used more saliva to slick up that rock-hard shaft. I positioned myself over it as Sebastian placed a hand on my leg.

"Are you sure? I don't want it to hurt," said Sebastian in what I assumed was a wound-induced bout of caring.

I smiled wickedly and said, "I do."

Then I slammed myself down to the base of that dick. I cried out, clenching my eyes shut even as my own cock started to leak and turned from just erect into steel.

"So hot," whispered my lover. His eyelids fluttered closed, and his hands fisted into trembling balls as they rested on my legs.

I leaned and took his lips in a soft kiss that didn't match the brutal way I fucked my ass on his cock. Up and down I went, pegging my prostate with every move. Soon he even thrust back a bit. We would break our mouths apart to breathe, but never for long, before continuing our rhythm.

I had no warning, but I felt his cock pulse and fill my ass with seed. The act was enough to trigger my own completion, which sprayed from me all over Sebastian's chest in a white stream.

Collapsing to my side, careful of his chest wound, I took a look at him. When he started to remove his bandages, I protested.

"It's fine," he said, and peeled one off.

His skin had knit together. I couldn't even see a scar.

"Holy crap!" I whispered. "That's impressive. You are some kind of fantastic, and not just in a sexual way."

Sebastian smiled, real and wide. I couldn't help but mirror him as we lay in each other's embrace for just a while longer.

Chapter 5

With his energy restored back to normal, Sebastian went about the travel pod. He opened up various panels and electrical boxes. Said that he was looking for whatever made this ship different.

“I feel weird in here,” I said when he’d started to use one of the tiny screwdrivers he’d found to jimmy open a lock on a door in the back.

“What do you mean?” he asked, his head close to the slit in the lock opening and staring.

“Just... I felt drawn towards the area with the ships in them before, right? Well, I feel like I reached the place I needed to be and I’m surrounded,” I said, leering at him without shame.

“Surrounded by what,” he asked.

He grunted, and I heard a click from the lock. He looked over to me with a wide and triumphant grin on his face and then flung the door open.

I gasped and stumbled back when I saw it. Inside, attached to hundreds of wires and sitting atop an engine, was a man. Probably. The guy was ancient, practically a walking mummy. So I couldn’t be one hundred percent sure of the thing’s gender. Its skin was red, with flecks of orange and yellow in it. The thing’s head was utterly devoid of hair and the completely naked body was covered in thousands of wrinkles.

“I-is it alive?” I stammered, backing away as I caught a gross whiff of stale air.

“Yeah. But what the hell is it? It’s not Magi or Elemental. I don’t think?”

I shook my head and tiptoed forward just enough to slam the door closed.

I said, “Why don’t you fly this to your Order’s HQ and figure this crap out before I get even more creeped out?”

Sebastian agreed with a nod of his head, but then added coyly, “I bet you miss my skeletons now in comparison, huh?”

I just groaned and swatted his arm. “Asshole.”

“Indeed, but you love it.”

I kinda think I did.

The Order HQ was much the same as the one I'd been to before with Sebastian. Only this time we were flying, so a voice came over the loud speaker and I heard an electronic blip before the machine spouted words.

<<Unknown vessel. Please state your identity and purpose for arrival.>>

Sebastian touched a screen beside him and said, "Sebastian Risdro here with a stolen enemy ship. Over."

<<Voice recognized. Thank you. Please proceed.>>

I was sitting backwards in my seat, keeping an eye on the door for the creepy old guy. No way was that thing catching me off guard.

I said, looking at Sebastian from the corner of my eye, "How come things weren't this strict at the HQ in your home town?"

"This city is more dangerous. The crime rate here is quite high. More protection is needed. That might be why Jarcat is here actually. Nobody would notice him amid a city full of crime. Besides, it was pretty obvious back there who I was, walking up to the doors with skeletons. They can't see me now."

"True."

We landed on an airstrip near the top of the huge facility. I saw from the window that we were being surrounded and Phil was strolling towards us.

We got out of the ship and went to meet the man half way across the roof's tarmac.

Sebastian gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. "There's some old decrepit man in the engine area, hooked up with wires. It doesn't look like us."

A shrill cry of alarm sounded from the ship and Phil chuckled. "Looks like one of our mages already found what you are talking about."

Going back to look and see Phil's reaction, I stood outside of the travel pod. No way was I getting closer than I had to. Phil took a pen from a pocket in his shirt and lightly pressed the tip of it into the old man's forehead.

Nothing happened and I released a breath that I wasn't aware I was holding.

"Wuss," whispered Sebastian in my ear.

I shivered at the feeling of his hot breath against me but still carefully watched Phil.

After several minutes of poking and prodding, Phil backed away and spoke, loud enough for all around to hear, "Everybody out but Sebastian and his Elemental friend."

In no time flat, the area was cleared and we had privacy.

Phil leaned against the wall of the ship, watching the old man on the engine with rapt fascination.

“I heard the rumours but I didn’t know they were true,” said Phil.

Sebastian asked, “What is he?”

“A native of this planet.”

I blinked and whipped my head to Sebastian. He’d heard that right? Was Phil out of his mind?

Sebastian didn’t look at me but instead just nodded, “The legends are true then?”

“Okay. You two need to seriously stop talking around me like I am not here,” I said, shouting and stamping one foot.

Shit. I was turning into a child.

Both men looked over to me and shook their heads.

“The natives on this planet before we arrived,” Phil said. “Did you know that the humans who were our ancestors have not always lived here?”

“What do you mean? Did they live on another continent on the planet?”

Phil shook his head steadily. “Nope. I mean this planet itself. We came here as one race. I know now that we actually bred with the natives of the planet, which is how the Elementals and Magi came about. We used them as slaves.”

I felt ill. The idea of slavery infuriated me.

I said, “I read a lot, even books that are imported into Azmarine. I can say that I have never heard about any kind of alternative world history.”

“I’ve known Jarcat for years,” started Phil. “I think in his studies, he found obscure information on the true history of our people. The documents he found were vague and easily misinterpreted. I know that when Jarcat told me of his suspicions that Magi and Elementals aren’t from this planet, that I didn’t believe him. He said he thought that the natives of the planet were being preserved somewhere. I told him that he was losing his mind and to stop studying so hard.”

Sebastian hummed thoughtfully before he said, “Guess Jarcat wasn’t so crazy after all.”

I rested my head in my hands as I slumped to the ground by the ramp to the travel pod. My head hurt and my eyelids felt like they weighed a ton.

“What does this have to do with this guy or what’s going on?”

I realized that I had begun to yell into my palms.

Sebastian leaned back in his chair and said in his cool and detached voice, “Because your people were the greatest threat out of all of those who had started to breed with the natives. Elementals were actually the descendants of the leaders and aristocrats from the group of people who arrived on our planet. They went after the capital city, the most sacred grounds of the natives. Azmarine. The Magi actually tried to stop the Elementals from the utter slaughter they were trying to do. Your kind wanted to breed with them for their power and then kill them to get rid of competition for resources.”

Phil added, “And this decrepit man is actually one of the natives that I suppose Jarcat found somewhere. Though where or how I have no idea.”

“So we started the great war,” I said in a hush.

Looking from between my fingers at his form, I saw him standing gracefully before me. I brought my hands to fist my curly hair and yelled curses to the blue sky above me.

Sebastian knelt before me and spoke in a serene wave of words, “Calm yourself, Rey.”

He placed a hand on my arm and gave me a wobbly smile.

I took a few lungfuls of air, letting each breath out slowly before saying to Phil, “Okay. So I still don’t get what’s going on.”

“Legend has it that some of the Order of the Magi took some of the natives and preserved them in a magical state of stasis so they would not age. But any concrete evidence of such a thing occurring has been long gone. To the point where even I, leader of the Order, thought it to be a legend. Now I know otherwise.”

My eyes widened. “You really think that guy is some sort of native of this planet. How do you know that whole story about us flying to this planet on some kind of huge travel pod isn’t a legend? This guy could be some kind of magically enhanced... guy.”

I tightly closed my eyes and spoke again before anybody else could, “And I know how stupid I sound right now.”

Sebastian grabbed my wrist and squeezed. "While your theory is not correct, it isn't stupid."

Huh? My jaw just about dropped. Of all the things that happened on that day, Sebastian saying that I wasn't stupid had to be one of the most shocking. Maybe sex was wearing down his barriers?

I could only hope.

"Tell me, Mr. Taje. Do you not feel the connection you have to this man?"

I shrugged. "Maybe."

I did. I really did. But admitting that would be like admitting my ancestors were some kind of race of crazy genocidal psychopaths. Which they would be, if the stories were true. But I did feel some kind of connection to the wrinkled old man with his red-flecked skin and his fiery eyes—

"Holy fuck!" I said, pointing to the man, whose eyes were open and his bony hand was trembling as it pointed up and out at me.

The decrepit man ground out the words like gravel. "Monster. Child slayer. Death to your kind, who take the elements for your own use."

Then the man started to wheeze and clutch his chest.

I couldn't take it.

I ran out.

I had managed to run down several flights of stairs before Sebastian caught up to me.

"Hold up. Where are you even planning on going?" he asked, slamming a hand down on my shoulder once the two of us were both standing firm on a landing.

"Anywhere but here. I can't take this anymore Sebastian. This is all too much for me."

"I understand what it can be like. How overwhelming learning something new like this can be."

"How could you?" I asked, moving my face to within inches of his.

"You did not just say that. You have no idea how I feel."

Spinning around, he quickly brought an arm to wrap around my neck and put me in a tight chokehold.

So, he was going to fight me. I don't know what I'd done to bring this on but I'd bite. I needed to blow off some steam.

I rammed my elbow back, jabbing his stomach until I felt his grip loosen on my neck. I slipped free and dodged to the right to get away from the swing of his fist. He ran forward, ready to strike again when I darted my leg out, seeing him fall to the ground.

He caught himself and sprang back to his feet, faced away from me. I charged and slammed him against a wall, twisting an arm behind his back.

And the scrappy fucker slammed his head back on my face. I felt blood gush from my nose, and I got really mad.

No more trying to subdue him, I was going to go for broke. I leapt and punched at the same time, cracking my fist along his jaw.

"Fuck!" he shouted right before I pinned him again.

Writhing beneath me, he snarled and spat at me.

"Just tell me what the hell I said and I'll let you go."

Pinning his wrists above his head, his eyes became luminous and narrowed.

"You really want to know?"

I blinked, confused for a moment but not enough to loosen my grip on him. "I thought that was the point of this?"

"Fine." He closed his eyes. "Let me go for a second and I'll show you."

I slit my own eyes at him until he glared pointedly at me. I shrugged and let him go, slowly but surely.

When he sat up, he reached into the pocket of his trench coat, an inner pocket that had been closed with a zipper.

He handed me a few photographs. They had been worn around the edges from age, and had been wrinkled from wetness and since dried (I assumed from when we'd crashed into that lake before). I looked over them carefully, not knowing if I was really seeing what I thought I had.

The pictures showed Sebastian with someone who could not have been anything less than a lover. In one photograph, the two of them were dancing

under some coloured lights. In another, they were kissing passionately on a sofa. In the last one, they were standing at an altar, exchanging vows.

What took my breath away was not the fact that Sebastian was one of the men in the pictures, but that I knew the other. I knew him well.

My former on and off lover and sex buddy, Cathal.

“I loved him. I loved him so fucking much. I had never opened my heart to anybody until he came along. Not after being sold by my parents. I met him when he came to my city looking to learn more about our ways. We fell hard and fast.”

I wasn't sure I wanted to know where this was going.

“We went everywhere together and decided that we needed to spend the rest of our lives together. He eventually had to go back to Azmarine, where he said he would work on getting permission to live with me permanently away from the city.”

I felt sick to my stomach, and my heart was aching.

“We kept in touch over the phone. But it took him more time than he expected. So, I went to surprise him. I needed to be with him even for a little while. Do you want to know what I saw when I got there?”

Oh Gods, no I didn't. Though I was sure I had a pretty damn good idea of what he did see.

“I went right into his house because you people don't lock your doors. I heard the sounds from his bedroom, but I didn't think to believe them. Maybe he had a brother that sounded like him. Maybe those weren't the cries of pleasure being wrung from Cathal that I had grown to love. But I opened that door. I saw my beautiful water Elemental Cathal under you. You were fucking my spouse's ass as if you had no care in the world.”

Hearing the words out loud were so much worse than thinking I knew. I wanted to vomit.

“I would never have done that if I had known. You have to believe me.”

He turned away from me, but I could practically feel the heartbreak and despair from where I stood across the travel pod. “It broke my heart. Shattered it.”

“I'm sorry. We didn't mean anything to each other. He was just a friend from childhood.”

He held a hand out behind him and said, "I don't want to hear it. Let's just get to the quarters I have here and sleep."

I nodded even though he wasn't looking at me. Together he walked down more flights of stairs. I don't know how many because I wasn't focusing on anything but the tightness in my chest. I realized that this pain hurt worse than losing my powers. I'd give them up in a heartbeat to save Sebastian pain.

I just wish I understood what that meant for my feelings.

Eventually, we got to a floor with a hallway full of apartments. Sebastian walked to one and swiped a pattern on the small screen beside the door. It opened with a low blipping noise and the two of us walked in.

The walls in the small apartment were slate-grey and unadorned. A leather couch occupied one wall, which Sebastian flopped onto right way.

I sat in a similar looking dark leather chair that was opposite to Sebastian and closed my eyes. It was nice to be comfortable.

"You can take a shower if you'd like. There's one in the bathroom through that door. No tub unfortunately, but the water is hot and the pressure is nice."

I smiled because Sebastian was at least still talking to me.

"I will. But I hope you have one as well. You also stink from our trek in the forest. Can smell you from over here."

He smirked and the waved towards the bathroom. "Go. Wash."

We were both clean and sitting at the two-person dining table eating some of the canned foods that Sebastian kept in his safe house. He was poking away at a portable computer, utterly focused. Every now and then, I would see his eyes slip to look at me.

"I'm sorry again for what I did to you," I said, not looking up at him.

"Stop it. I told you that I don't want to hear it. You didn't do anything on purpose."

"All right. If you're sure," I said, reaching out and putting my free hand on Sebastian's. "Just know that I'd never hurt you on purpose."

My lover nodded, sadness still radiated off him.

I picked at what I was assured was beans, jabbing the individual pieces with my fork. I was hoping that at some point, Sebastian would tell me what in the

world he was doing over there. I squirmed in my seat and then bounced a bit. There had been entirely too much quiet and while I understood it, I needed to break this spell of serious and morose silence (no wonder my father put my sister in charge).

Grinning wickedly, I plucked a little brown morsel from my bowl and flung it at Sebastian's forehead.

It hit and slid down to tumble off his nose and down to his lap.

His eyes narrowed at me, and he hissed, "Are you a child?"

I threw another one. "Nope. But I'm the only one who has food."

"And I could kill you by draining your life force with my magic."

I frowned. "But then who would give you sex energy?"

He growled and mopped his face with the napkin that he'd snatched from beside my bowl. I promptly flung another at him.

This time, he deflected the mini projectile with the napkin.

"Ha!" he said, and laughed.

I smiled wide and said, "See. That got you smiling."

His expression cracked and wobbled before he changed the subject.

"So I think it may be a bit of time before we can get to Jarcat and get your powers back. It will take quite a while to accomplish."

Now it was time for my own grin to fade to a frown. "So it will be a while yet until I get back home?"

He nodded and stared at the computer on the table in front of him.

"This is all getting to be too much, Sebastian. I feel like I'm afloat on an ocean, and there is no land in sight. My people are in danger from Jarcat and his band of Magi, we've been deluded about our history, and I just found out that I did a horrible thing to somebody I was really coming to like."

So much for me wanting to break the serious mood.

I stormed around the room until I got back to the bowl of beans, which I picked up and hurled across the room and into a wall. Regretting my actions right away, I darted to the kitchen and grabbed a towel.

Tears stung my eyes. "I'm such a moron. Everybody is right. I can't even control my temper. My moods are swinging so much I'm surprised I'm not dizzy yet."

With rough movements, I wiped up my food, grumbling under my breath as I realized I needed another cloth.

I felt Sebastian's hand on my shoulder first, before he drew me back into him in a loose embrace.

I turned and sank to my knees in front of him. "I'm so goddamn sorry and I know that I don't deserve your touch for the part I played, however unintentional, in the breakup of your marriage. But I need to forget. I need you right now."

His hand stroked through my hair and went to cup my cheek as I stood to face him.

"I know. I also want you."

This time our kisses were as light as feathers, a slow sweep of tongues and gentle touches. My fingers skimmed up the bottom of his shirt and played over the hard muscles of his abs. His nipples had already hardened to stiff peaks.

Moving apart only to breathe, we must have kissed for hours, eventually moving to the bedroom to lie beside each other on the bed. Our limbs were tangled together and our clothes were shed at some point along the way.

Gods but I needed this, needed this wonderful man's body.

Sebastian broke away from me, resulting in an unmanly whimper ripping from my throat.

He placed the tip of his thumb against my lips and whispered, "Just getting oil. I want to do it properly this time instead of using spit to slick the way."

I nodded because that sounded great. Though I'm sure that he could have said anything at that point and I'd have agreed. He was back quickly with a small, dark green bottle that had a twist-off cap.

He slicked his fingers and was about to reach behind him when I rolled from my side to my back and lifted my knees to expose my entrance.

"I need you."

Those beautiful eyes flashed and his pupils dilated before he slunk towards me. He placed one hand on the back of my thigh and nudged the index finger of the other at my already fluttering hole.

Sebastian pushed just one in with an agonizing slowness, going in and out with care. As he stretched me further and further, he went up to press his lips to

my throat. I was gasping for breath, clutching the bed sheets in my fists and resisting the urge to wildly buck my hips. He licked along the pulse in my neck before he placed the tip of his already oiled cock at my entrance. When had he moved his hand and lubed himself?

That thought no longer mattered when he slipped into my greedy ass, being sucked in like I so desperately wanted him. Sebastian didn't stop until every last inch of him was buried and his balls brushed against me.

We moved together then as one, my legs wrapping around his hips. It was deliberately slow and—dare I say—beautiful. Every inch of his body melded to mine and I lost track of where I ended and he began (*I don't care how cliché that sounds because it was true, so don't laugh Sol. And hey Kiren, you can shut your face too*).

The pleasure built up in me, rising like a wave and crashed over me, taking my lover with me. My hands flailed trying to grab onto anything as we shook against one another, spilling our passion.

Collapsing atop me, Sebastian's breath started to slow until it evened out into sleep.

Not able to help myself in the bliss of the moment, I whispered three meaningful and yet so very stupid words, "I love you."

Reaching over to the sheets beside me, I felt around in a clumsy series of pats. The entire side of the bed next to me was cold, and the blankets were tucked in around me so that I felt snug. Shrugging them off me, I got up and put on some of the clothes that Sebastian kept in this small apartment.

Man, I was so glad that we were about the same size, especially because this small place was rather chilly. I plodded out of the bedroom, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. I expected to see my lover sitting at the table, looking at his computer and not eating. Maybe sharpening knives?

Well, I did see the whetstone that he had used earlier, sitting on the table along with a half-empty glass of water.

But no Sebastian.

The apartment wasn't that big, so I didn't have to look for long to discover that he wasn't in the place. Not even a note was placed anywhere to inform me where he had gone. Only a small card with a bar code on the back of it.

How rude was that? I had thought that we were past this stage of Sebastian not talking to me.

So, I made some food for myself, convinced that Sebastian had just gone out for a bit. One hour passed, then two.

Once four hours had gone by, I started to think that maybe he never really forgave me for the part I'd played in the breakup between him and Cathal.

Okay. New order of things to do.

Number One: Find Sebastian.

Number Two: Get powers back.

Number Three: Go back home to Azmarine and wring Cathal's neck.

It seemed like a valid plan to me. I'd hammer out the details as I went.

I got up from the chair I was sitting in and immediately fell to my knees. Silver washed over me in waves and was all I could see. I grasped out for support, clutching the fabric of the chair to ground me. I felt hot and gasped for breath.

When my sight began to clear, I felt drawn to leave the apartment. It was like there was somewhere I needed to go. I wondered if I somehow knew where Sebastian was.

In my search for Sebastian in the apartment, I'd found a stash of weapons. I grabbed a leather coat and put it on, and then filled every pocket with blades of various types. I couldn't use any of the guns, since they all relied on the ability to cast spells in order to operate. I also grabbed a bunch of the money I saw stored in a little metal container. I also took that little card. It was probably important.

Putting on the boots I'd left by the front door, I went to leave. There wasn't much else that I could do.

I went back to the staircase we'd used before and descended. Eventually, I got to the first floor and started to wander.

There were a number of mages milling about the halls and foyer. They gave me strange looks but didn't stop me. I wondered for a bit how lax the security was around there when I was approached by several armed guards.

"Identify yourself," said one of the guards. She had drawn her gun and was pointing it directly at me.

“A guest of Sebastian Risdro.” I saw a couple of the guards get looks of disgust on their faces. “I have this card. I think it’s ID.”

I reach into my pocket and every one of the remaining guards drew their weapons. Maybe I should have moved my hands slower?

At least they weren’t shooting.

I extracted the card and tossed it to the ground, and then placed my hands above my head in surrender.

The woman who’d first drawn a gun on me bent to pick it up and took a small device from her side. It shone a red glowing line over the bar code on the card and blipped in a cheery tone.

At least I thought it sounded cheery. It didn’t sound bad at least. Bad would sound like a siren. This was more like a chirp.

She tossed it back and said, “Fine. But call down next time instead of wandering around like some kind of lost moron. I’ll escort you to the main entrance.”

We were almost at the door to leave the place when I heard the crack of a gun behind me. The female guard who was escorting me out was slumped on the ground in a heap, a thin line of blood seeping from the corner of her mouth. I looked around and noticed that small handfuls of soldiers were being held at gunpoint. So many of the soldiers had turned on their comrades.

Walking towards me suddenly was the apprentice that had been talking to Jarcac previously. The youth had a smug grin on his face, and his eyes glinted in the artificial light of the large foyer.

“I thought the necromancer would have taken you with him. Guess he was trying to keep you safe.”

I tensed my muscles to jump at the man, but the muzzle of a gun was pressed to my temple in a lightning-quick move.

The apprentice came toward me, touching my shoulder with the tips of his fingers. “I wouldn’t try to do that if I were you. Our plans are set in motion. We’ve taken the headquarters in every major city on the planet. The Order is now under Jarcac’s control. Nobody can help you. Least of all Sebastian.”

His cruelly twisted lips were the last thing I saw before pulse after pulse of energy washed through me and I fell into a twitching mass. Then I blacked out.

Chapter 6

I woke up in a cold room. I'd been stripped of all of my clothing and weapons, and I was lying on the rough stone ground. Somewhere behind me, water dripped down in fat plops to the floor.

It was a prison cell, and the door was made of solid steel with only a tiny grate in the front and a slat at the bottom that looked to be just large enough for a plate of food to slide through. My shackles were attached by a chain to the wall. There was a bucket in the corner and I cringed. Not even Elementals used buckets for our criminals. Gods. We had indoor plumbing, even for those of us who needed to be detained for the safety of the others (we didn't take prisoners often). No other object was in the room, and no other person either.

A dim bulb was on the ceiling, covered by a metal cage. The light was just barely enough to see by.

With no windows to the outside, I had no idea what time of day it was or even if I was above or below ground. The cold I felt made me think that I was in a basement area, but I was no earth Elemental. If I were Kiren, I would have been able to detect how deep underground I was or wasn't. In that regard, I was out of luck.

I heard the scrape of the locks on the door being opened, and I immediately sat up, not even bothering to cover my genitals.

Coming in was a familiar face. It was the apprentice that I'd seen in the ruins of the warehouse. Behind him were a couple of guards (I could tell because they were huge, like walking mountains). They rested their hands on the butts of their guns.

I wanted to tell them that they needn't worry. I was starved, naked and without any of my powers. But for once my mouth decided to take a break and stayed closed.

Small blessings I guess.

"So I think that you can guess why you're here," said the apprentice, putting his hands behind his back and standing still.

"Um, not really. Can you spell it out for me?" I said, having an idea but not having enough confidence in myself to be sure.

Raising one brow, the apprentice said, "Really?"

He sighed and waited, as if expecting me to answer or get a clue or something. I just stared at him with blank eyes.

“Fine,” he cleared his throat. “We have Sebastian.”

So, I was glad I hadn't opened my big mouth. See, I thought that they were going to ask me where the man was. That had been the million-dollar question for me. Now I knew. Okay, so what now?

“No matter how hard we try, we cannot get him to tell us where the Native is. Would you like to tell us? We can be very persuasive.”

I tried for a wry grin, but my lips just wobbled on my face instead. “I can honestly tell you that I have no idea where it is.”

He didn't even approach me. I saw him slap the air with a glowing hand, and a burn of pain swept across the side of my head, as he stayed across the room from me.

I stifled a hiss of pain and resisted the urge to try to hold my forehead.

“Want to try again?”

“Not really, since I told you that truth the first time,” I said, my voice rising to match the anger I was feeling.

Another magic slap on the other side of my face (couldn't these guys do anything without using some kind of spell?).

My entire head hurt, from just those two strikes. He kicked the air, and I felt it in my ribs. I was sure one of the bones had been cracked. Again, to the other side.

I doubled over, holding my stomach and grit my teeth before opening my mouth just enough to say, “I don't know where it is.”

One of the apprentice's hands went up to stroke his chin thoughtfully. “Well, if that is the case, then I don't have any use for you.”

Oh how I wanted to think quickly. If they killed me, how could I help Sebastian? Come up with something, anything. And then I had it.

“I was in charge of watching it while Sebastian went to the Order headquarters,” I blurted out, waiting until the apprentice rolled his hand in the air to gesture me to continue.

“I left it in the ship that we stole from you and left the door open by accident. By the time I realized my mistake, the man was gone.”

The mage laughed and held his stomach a bit as he did so. “Do you honestly expect me to believe that? Who would be that stupid? And besides, the Native wouldn't have been able to move far on his own.”

I tried to shrug and just winced from the after-effects of the pain I had been dealt. “Have you heard the rumours of the Lord of Azmarine's brother?”

Apprentice narrowed his eyes and said, “I have, though I've never given much credence to gossip.”

“Has your mentor told you about how he stole my powers and cursed me? I just ran up to him even though he was clearly incredibly powerful. How dumb was that?”

My actions that day were pretty stupid. I didn't even have to lie to this guy to tell him that.

“Anyway, maybe somebody took him or something,” I said.

“So you are seriously saying that you left one of the last natives of this planet, sitting out in the open somewhere.”

I hid my face and shuddered (*which I think I pulled off beautifully if I do say so myself*). “That's right.”

“Sebastian Risdro must be slipping to leave a moron like you in charge of such a thing. I'll have to go see what Master Jarcat says.”

The apprentice stalked out of the room with his walking mountain men, and they slammed the door shut behind them.

For once, I encountered somebody more dense than me. My explanation had been lame, but I was glad it had been believed.

Then I just had to wait.

At some point, I must have drifted off into a fitful sleep, because I woke up to hear a quiet scratching sound. I looked around while I sat up and couldn't see where it was coming from. I thought that it may have been coming from above me somewhere, but the cell was so dark that I couldn't make out any kind of details.

After several maddening moments of wondering what was up, I heard the sound of metal clang to the ground from the ceiling. That was followed by clacking of what could only be described as bones. That was what came to my mind right away, and I soon found that I was right.

The sharp nails of a small rodent climbed up my legs and then my torso. The hollow sockets where the skeleton rat's eyes used to be were glowing, and upon the surface of its skull were tiny runes etched on it crudely.

In its mouth was a scrap of paper, shimmering faintly. I opened it up and read the note:

Place the rat near the side of the door to your cell. When it is time, it will explode. You should be facing away with your arms over your head. Once it does, you will have to come for me. Detonating the explosions will have sapped nearly all of my scant amounts of energy.

Sebastian

My lips quivered into a smile. I must have been losing it to feel affection for such a cold and to the point note. Yet I did. I'd only been parted from my lover for mere hours but I missed him already.

Shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I sat on the note to keep it from view. Sebastian's idea was clever, on my way to the door I used the glowing eyes from the rat to see where it had come from. There was a small air vent, barely large enough for the rat itself. Clever man.

I placed the skeleton rat next to the door on the side on which it opened. I went back to the corner of the room and tried to look as unimposing as possible.

I don't know quite how much time passed by, but it couldn't have been long before the handle on the outside of the cell started to be turned. The door was opening as the apprentice and the guards came through.

"My master doesn't buy your story of leaving the guy on the ship. So you'll have to take it up with—"

The apprentice didn't get the chance to finish what he was saying as the rat exploded violently, sending the door off of one of its hinges. Stone from the wall was sent flying, none of it onto me. The mage and guards screamed and fell with three sick thuds.

I turned quickly, stunned at how I was still alive. I knew that I'd fared far better than they had. The three corpses lay in a heap, bleeding and battered. That was when I'd noticed the barely visible sheen around me.

The note. It must have had some kind of protection on it.

Quickly I stooped to one of the guards and looked for keys. I found a couple on the guards and pass-cards like the one I found in Sebastian's home.

I ran out into the hallway and looked both ways. Down one of the halls there was a cell door that was off its hinges and there were some small rocks scattered about. That was the direction I ran in.

I went into the cell to see Sebastian lying on his side on the ground, his eyelids barely open. His eyes were fading to grey with only the occasional fleck of silver. I ran to him and scooped him up in my arms.

"Oh Sebastian. Why did you go off by yourself?" I whispered raggedly as I ran out into the hall and tried to find the stairs up from this place.

He put a shaky hand on my chest and uttered a few words.

Suddenly my ribs tingled and radiated heat outward. It was like I'd been cold for so long and was now being cloaked in a blanket of pure warmth. Gasping, I nearly stumbled on the steps. My eyes stung like I'd been looking at the sun for too long.

Finally, my fingers burned and smoke puffed out from the tips of them.

"You—"

I kissed his forehead and ignored his grimace.

"I went off by myself to absorb your powers back from Jarcat. If we'd gone together, you would have warned him off with your bumbling nonsense."

As he said it, a barely there smile curved one side of his lips.

"I—" I had known that I didn't have much time, but I needed to feel him. So I took his lips in a deep kiss.

When he leaned back, our lips were swollen.

I said, "So how do I get out of this place?"

"Go right," said Sebastian, resting his head on my shoulder.

I followed his directions to the tee. He led me out to the exterior of the building. On all sides of us was cliff, beyond which I could hear the loud crash of waves.

"It's deep enough and there are no rocks on the bottom. The drop shouldn't be too far if you go feet first."

I set him down to his feet, and he wobbled a bit before placing his hand on my arm to steady himself.

I said, "What do you mean me? Aren't you going?"

I grasped his wrist and started walking towards the cliff.

"Swim as far as you can down the left shore until you come to a bridge. Go up onto it and walk down the road to your left. There should be a travel pod. Take it and go home after you go to my safe house to pick up some things, some money."

"No," I said, practically dragging him along. "You are coming with me."

He may have shaken his head, I couldn't see. I refused to look back at him.

"I knew that we wouldn't get out of this together."

Okay, that got my attention. "What?"

"Once I found out that Jarcat fled here, I knew that you wouldn't make it out with me alongside you."

"You just don't want to try. If you're worried that you'll slow me down, I don't care. I'll carry you if I have to."

"They'll never stop chasing me. You need to get back to your city and help your people."

He was right, dammit. But I didn't have to like it. There had to be another way.

When he spoke again, tears almost stung my eyes. "And forget about me."

By then, we were almost at the edge of the cliff, which really wasn't that high. I would have called it a hill if one side of it wasn't a sheer drop to the water below.

"But I l—"

Sebastian placed his hand on my lips and whispered, "Don't."

Then he pushed me hard. That probably used the last of his energy, I wouldn't know. I was already falling. Above, where Sebastian still stood, I heard the sounds of men calling out and rushing the edge of the cliff.

The last thing I heard before hitting the water were the words: "Let the Elemental die in there."

Present Day

“So what happened then?” asks Soline as she rests her chin in her hands and stares at me with her undivided attention.

I shrug, drinking the dregs of my now-cold tea. “I swam for ages, got to the bridge, found the pod and came back here. It was all so anti-climactic.”

I don't mention that I took the white sheet that Sebastian and I had made love on. It seemed a bit too pathetic.

While I'm talking, I see out of the corner of my eye a movement. Cathal was edging away.

“Get the hell back here. I almost forgot my vow to wring your puny little neck,” I call, feeling frustrated and helpless.

I see the Adam's apple in Cathal's throat bob as he gulps air.

“Why did you hurt him?” I ask. “He is such a great guy underneath that cold exterior.”

“I don't know. I didn't mean to hurt him.” His voice squeaks as he puts out his hands as if to pray to me.

“You didn't think that his husband sleeping with another man would hurt him?”

“I was young. I made a mistake. I needed to be back in Azmarine. When I came here, I didn't realize how much being with Sebastian had stifled me. I should never have married.”

I make a noise in my throat that I'm sure doesn't sound manly in any way, shape, or form. “You didn't see the heartbreak in his eyes when he told me about you, Cathal.”

I am going to lay into him more. I don't think it will make me feel better, but I need something.

I don't get the chance because outside the gongs are being sounded. We are under attack.

Chapter 7

Outside the sun is starting to set and the clouds are darkening the sky. Earlier in the day, it had been sunny and beautiful, and now it is starting to rain in fat drops. Behind me, I hear Kiren on his communicator directing his soldiers.

We are just on the outskirts of the city, so I look up and see travel pods flying towards our city, cresting just over the mountain range that is closest to me. There are so many of them, and to be honest I am a bit worried.

As I see one of the ships let loose a stream of purple energy at the warning gong, I realize that I'm a lot worried. The gong topples over with a great clang, and the person who was manning it leaps to the side to avoid being hit. She stumbles a bit and falls over the side, only to snap into flight as soon as she regains her senses. Thank the Gods she is an air Elemental.

I run back inside to arm myself with a longsword, though I know that I probably won't get the chance to use it. None of the ranged weapons we have would be of any use against fighting travel pods.

Then I run out to the street.

"Where do you need me?" I ask Kiren, since he's obviously the one with a mind for tactics.

"West Tower," he says. "They are short on fire up there."

I nod briskly and run off to my duty.

Beside me, the road gets shattered by a ray of energy, leaving a deep smouldering gash in the cobble. I dodge to the side and run to the tower by taking some back alleyways. The Magi don't even have to get out of their ships. They are so confident of their skills.

And why wouldn't they be? We have made a mistake by being so lax in our defences.

I don't let my melancholy drag me too far down. I get to the stairs of the tower and run up all six flights. The top of it is mostly covered, but with an open section all the way around. That way soldiers can shoot their attacks through it, but not be hit themselves. Though based on what I just saw on the road, this tower doesn't stand a chance.

The soldiers don't turn, but all greet me. Right now, I'm not their Lord but their comrade.

I kneel by the opening and look for a good shot. Pods fly all over the city. Every now and then, one of them turns invisible. Barely any of our people are getting attacks through, but the travel pods are taking down our buildings one by one.

When I am pretty sure I have a clear shot, I reach into the energies around me. I let them swirl up my arms and through the tips of my fingers before shooting them out towards one of the attackers.

It hits, slamming into the side and almost engulfing the vehicle in flames. But when it keeps flying past the fireball I just let loose, its gleaming surface is only just barely singed.

"What the hell?" I snarl.

One of the soldiers beside me mutters, "It's been like this since they first attacked."

Just on the ridge of the mountains around us, I see another fleet of ships land and just rest. They've surrounded the city.

The travel pods inside the city land near the town square. Then the Magi get out. They've rounded up a good number of our soldiers. When the hell did they do that? I see Jarcat who is looking all around the city. His own minions are aiming guns at our troops.

Taking out a metal cone device, he lets his voice carry over the buildings to reach me and the rest of the officers, "If you want them to live, show yourselves."

I have no other choice. I run down the stairs to meet them.

I approach Jarcat, whose red robes flow behind him in the wind that rushes over the area. His eyes gleam with satisfaction.

"So you got back your power, have you?" he said, his smile twisting in that way that made me sick.

Tinged with madness.

"Sebastian's a fool for giving it back to you. After all, you were the one who ran up to me when my shield dropped in the first place."

“Why are you doing this?”

He clasps his hands behind his back and rocks on his heels.

He smiles. “Because I can. I don’t think that the Magi need to share the planet with you.”

“But we all came here at the same time,” I protest, seeing out of the corner of my eye as Kiren walks up beside me, followed by Cathal.

They both gave me confused looks.

“I beg to differ. I assume that good old Phil told you a bit about the legends, didn’t he?”

I don’t say a word and make my face a steel mask.

“I know that he did. Legends state quite clearly that you Elementals ravaged the lands of the natives, slaughtering them and stealing.”

Kiren shakes his head. “My ancestors wouldn’t do that. We’re a peaceful people. And how come we’ve never heard these legends before?”

Jarcat snorted. “Perhaps you are today. But you were not back then. Did you think that maybe your history was forgotten for that very reason?” He kept going, “The Magi wanted to peacefully integrate with the natives. You beasts wanted blood. You didn’t want to share. Do you know why you are physically stronger than the Magi?”

I glare, but Kiren says, “Okay, I’ll bite. Why?”

“Because you take after the natives. You wanted their power and strength, so you forced their women to carry your children. You raped them on their holy grounds and gained their strengths. The Magi wanted to stop your kind, and the natives wanted to help us do it.”

I say, “All right. Say this is true? We started the Great War. We also ended it with a peace treaty.”

“Your kind only drew that treaty up because you had won. You’d wiped out all of our tech. You had become the superior beings physically. We had no choice.”

“So what? This is about revenge for something that happened thousands of years ago?”

Jarcat shook his head and says, “The natives?”

He gestures to one of the travel pods that had landed near the town square. Coming out of it, being supported on both sides was one of the natives. His skin was pock-marked from all the wires that had been attached to him.

“This man, as well as the rest of his kind, is from that era. They know how to not only stop your kind, but how to tap into the natural power of this city. Elementals may have taken this place and won the war because of your sheer numbers and power, but you have forgotten your war-like ways. The natives of this planet disliked technology and Elementals bred with them so much that the same distaste is in your blood. The Magi have not. We embrace modern technology and are now superior.”

“Fuck that!” I snarl.

“What can you really do to stop me? We have the advantage. I have the numbers behind me, so Phil and the rest of the order cannot do much to help you. My acolytes and I can now harness the power of this place and reign supreme. The natives that have been preserved all these years want their revenge and will do anything to help.”

My hand darts to my longsword and I whip it out. I leap forth, fusing my blade with fire and slash to strike at Jarcat's neck. I'll show him what I can do.

“Stop,” he says casually, and I fall to my knees.

I feel the power stiffen every one of my muscles. I try to move but I can't. I can only just barely let my chest rise up and down to breathe.

“Most of my life was spent raising one of the natives from his slumber. He taught me how to come to this city and absorb enough power to raise the rest of them. They have immeasurable power,” he says, stopping Kiren and Cathal, as well, if their curses were anything to go by. “Too bad that none of my forefathers could find the natives. They were hidden until recent years when I discovered their location. We could have taken down you beasts earlier.”

“My people didn't do those things that you speak of. Our ancestors, sure, but we are innocent. We just want to live our lives,” I say, with great effort. “Don't do this to us.”

He grins and gestures his men towards me and my friends. “It's cute how you plead for your freedom. I wonder if the natives did the same, in order to keep their homes, their children.”

I growl when one of the men grabs my arm tightly and hauls me up.

"I bet they did. And you Elementals didn't listen to them. How many children do you suppose your forefathers killed in order to take what they felt they deserved?"

He leads us to one of the houses that his men have secured and then locks us in. They surround the place with their soldiers.

"We're stronger," says Kiren. "Physically we can take them. But as soon as we do they'll send their extra fleet in to take us out."

"There has to be another way out of this," I reply, pacing the floor. "What he said about our ancestors was true, Sebastian's boss told me some of this. And Sebastian confirmed that what Phil said was true. It's a hard pill to swallow, but I think that deep inside you know the accusations are true."

Kiren sits on a lounge chair, putting his hands between his knees and glares at the floor. "I don't know what we can do other than call the Order of the Magi for help."

"But that guy back there said that the order wouldn't be able to help," says Cathal, sitting across from Kiren.

Kiren looks up and says, "I have spoken to Phil many times over the years and not once did I get that impression, there has never been worry about lack of troops. There must be more to this than that."

So the three of us sit and think for as long as we have time to do so.

So as smart and tactically minded as Jarcat and his followers have proven themselves to be, they don't know everything. Specifically they do not know how nearly every home in the city has a passage that connects to a series of interlinked tunnels that travels the span of the city. It's all underground, so most of my kind don't prefer to be there. As it is, I feel a bit stifled and trapped, being so deep underground.

Kiren, being an earth Elemental, isn't so bad. I don't mind being underground if I'm near magma. And I'm sure Cathal wouldn't be so damn fidgety if there were some kind of underground source of water nearby. But our tunnels aren't near those things, and are protected from them in order to maintain their integrity

The entrances to these tunnels are well hidden in the floors and are virtually undetectable. Granted the Magi are smart, and I'm sure they'll figure out how we escaped eventually. We are just hoping to buy some time.

Though to do what, I am unsure.

Right now, we are heading down the various twists and turns that will lead us to the rendezvous spot that we picked. All of the soldiers would meet there and we would make plans.

Many of the other soldiers were already there, though some were definitely missing. Even more of the fighters were injured to various degrees.

Thankfully, Soline isn't here. We (meaning me, Kiren and Sol's husband) had convinced her that she needed to stay behind with the spouses and children to be in charge of them. She wanted to fight, and goodness knows she's damn good at it as well. But our city needs its leader. So I'm glad she is safe in the underground temples.

"You go check to see who needs to be rearmed," Kiren says to one of his lieutenants and then turns to Cathal. "You see to the injuries. I think many of them are being dealt with already, but make sure."

Kiren turns to me and says, "You always told me that your father kept books and other information in the vaults, correct?"

I nod.

"Go in there and see what you can find. There has to be something that we can do to protect our city."

I want to argue. I want to say that if the natives of this planet couldn't do anything, how could we? But I had to try, so I went on my way.

The vaults are underground, as well, and were made by our ancient ancestors. They were built to last. The doors are built of reinforced steel that is plated with titanium. The vault's combination was entrusted to me by my father, and the only other people who know it are Soline and Kiren.

I open it and slip in, closing the door behind me since there's a way to open it from the inside.

There is a fair bit of stuff down here; most of it does not have much use to me. A variety of gold bars line the walls as well as numerous small chests of gems. There is a short shelf of old books, which my father had assured me were not interesting. I wonder now if my father had been hiding something from me. I feel all the more a fool for taking his word for it. I hope for the sake of his memories that I am just being paranoid. How can I handle more lies?

I grab a stack of the books from the shelf and slide on the wall to the ground where I start to flip through them.

I'm thankful that I am at least a fast reader, since I manage to skim the pages swiftly.

Each page that I go over seems to prove that my father simply did feel that these books were of no interest to me. They just go over some of our old social and religious rituals (nothing that would be of any use in a fight or anything). There are some diagrams on the ancient pages that have patterns for traditional clothing.

Not one word even goes to prove what Jarcat claimed was true, though I know that Sebastian wouldn't have lied to me. When he did open up, it always seemed to be pure honesty.

I get up to put the books back, and see that behind where the books had been sitting, was a loose panel in the wood of the back of the shelf. I nudge it aside and see a few older books and papers.

The books are some kind of journal and account the tasks of an Elemental whose job it was to coordinate breedings with the natives that they called the Taje. Oh, shit. The natives were called Taje. My last name. We took them over, and my damned family took the name of the race as their last name. Like some kind of trophy.

I set the book down, go to a free space in the corner of the vault, and empty the contents of my stomach.

The entries in the journal make me sick if you want the truth. I was always told that we were peaceful. That this planet was ours, and we needed to care for it. How could my ancestors lie to me? To my people? I had to at least think that my father was protecting me by keeping this from me.

Kiren breaks me from my thoughts by opening the door to the vault. He kneels in front of me and says, "What have you found out."

With a broken voice, I say, "It was all true. Our past is a lie, Kir."

"Shit."

"Not only that, but I've found out nothing to help us out now."

Sebastian would have known what to do. He'd have helped me figure out a plan. No, I can't think of this right now.

I sigh. "Do you need me?"

“I came to tell you that we’ve set up barricades to take them down one by one when they make their way down here. I also just wanted to see how you are doing.”

I nod briskly and leave the documents on the floor. “I’m not a child. You realize this?”

“I know. But you were very distraught before this about losing Sebastian. Perhaps you can go see how Soline and the people in the shelter are faring?”

“You are right. As usual. Sol is probably getting up to all kinds of trouble anyway, knowing her. Checking up is probably wise.”

We both smirk, and I make my way to the temples. As soon as I can no longer see Kiren, I frown deeply. I can’t believe that even during a war, my family checks up on my life.

The temples are in the mountains and can be reached by the tunnels under the city. They can also be reached from the other side of the mountain, deep in a cave in the jungle on that side. The doors on both sides were over ten feet tall and titanium plated. To open them required a combination locked panel to be opened (which I knew was an old-fashioned method). The panel revealed a lever, which could be pulled and set off a series of mechanisms that opened the heavy doors.

The doors scrape slightly along the ground as they open slowly. I go through and then close the lever on the other side (which doesn’t require a combination), and see the refuge that has been set up. I’d been the one to set up the plans, but seeing it being used is different.

The temple is massive and contains several rooms that are the size of buildings. The first room, the one I’m in, is a gathering area. People are sitting around, eating and socializing. Some people seem withdrawn into themselves. I guess we just aren’t used to being threatened. This is scary for them to be forced from their homes and hidden from the sun. Especially so soon after Jarcat had originally attacked the city.

There are signs placed around to direct citizens where to go. I head towards where I know the offices to be set up.

The office is situated in the smallest of the rooms and has a few desks set up. Here, there are also crates of supplies. Soline is flitting from place to place, chatting with people and giving orders for how supplies are to be rationed. To

be honest, it looks like everything is running smoothly. Judging by the looks of exasperation on the faces of those who are taking orders from Soline, I think they feel that way too.

She isn't used to being idle.

"Dear sister of mine," I call out with a half-hearted wave.

She spins around on her toes and upon seeing me, launches into my arms like the ball of energy that she is.

"How are you? Kiren hasn't been keeping up with calling me. I know he is busy and all, but I'm dying here!"

I frown. "I'm fine, but the enemy has pretty much taken over the city above us. We've barricaded ourselves in the tunnels. They've overwhelmed us, Sol."

I say all of this in a quiet voice as I lead her away from the ears of the citizens.

Her eyes widen before she collapses onto a padded wooden chair that is nearby, her body making a soft *fwump* under her. "How long can we keep them away, Rey? They will starve us out. What do they even want?"

"Revenge."

And so I tell her in whispers what I've learned. Her tiny fists ball up and punch the wall beside her. I'm glad that I'm not that wall. Her hand leaves a single mark. Her underlings look over with concern, probably in good part for me since she's been known in the past to whale on me. Now that I have my powers back and my body is at full strength, I can take what she can dish out.

"Please tell me that you didn't know any of this," she jumps up and wraps those hands around my neck, practically hanging off. "So help me Gods Reynard Taje, if you've known something this big, and didn't tell me, I will flay the skin from your bones."

Behind us, I see her husband run up and place his hands on her shoulders. Not for the first time I am glad that he isn't a fighter because it means he can be around to rein in her temper.

"I didn't. I'm as upset as you are, Sol," I say, as I start prying those deceptively strong hands off me.

Her eyes are narrowed as she allows herself to fall back into her husband's comforting arms. I smile gratefully at him.

“It is my fault in a way. I believed Dad when he told me not to worry about anything that was in the vault. That there was nothing of interest. I’m a fool, and I have never been more glad that you are the leader and not me.”

Sol’s rigid shoulders, slump and she sighs. “You are a good and loving man. I don’t want you to doubt yourself. And you aren’t a fool for believing Daddy. You are trusting.”

“I sure feel like it. You have your hands full with running the city, foreign relations as well as planning for this war.”

She raises a hand in protest to stop me from talking, and says, “I am so sorry for keeping that from you.”

I smile. “It wasn’t a jab at you for withholding information. I understand that you had good intentions. I am just saying that I feel like I should have been doing less protesting of technology. I should have been doing more research into our past. Perhaps there could have been some way to aid us in this war.”

Sol smiles and turns to her husband. “Please take over here. You’ve been watching me and I trust you. And Reynard, I think that perhaps the best use of your time would be to go into the vaults and do more research.”

I’m pretty sure that the other leaders in the shelter would be relieved, and I was proven right when Soline went over to tell everybody that her husband was in charge.

Then Sol and I go out to the rendezvous point.

Chapter 8

My sister and I part ways when she explains our decision to Kiren. He also looks a bit relieved to see Soline.

I am about to go back to the vault when a feeling comes over me. I don't know what exactly it is, just a slight pressure in my chest. It almost feels like something is tugging me above ground. As I go back to the vault, I wonder if the feeling is Jarcat trying to control me. But then I realize that if he could control me from wherever he is, that he could do it with anybody else.

So what can it be?

Dizziness overcomes me, and I rest one shoulder against the nearest wall for support. All I see is silver lit up like burning embers, dancing like flames. Beckoning me like before when I was in Sebastian's safe house.

I know right now that Sebastian is nearby, in the city or approaching it. I don't know how I can tell this for certain. It's just a deep-seated feeling.

I quickly go to the vaults and grab the papers and diary that I need before I head out.

I take one of the lesser-used tunnels that leads to a small passage. This passage is just large enough to crawl through and leads to a work shed on the outskirts of town. I figure that the Magi are less likely to be in this small shanty. They are probably looking over the houses that the soldiers were kept prisoner in.

At least, I hoped. I hoped that they weren't in the tunnels already.

I peek out from under the floor boards I set aside and then climb out of the hole, replacing the flooring. This shed is near some of the public gardens kept by the earth Elementals. It is mostly filled with tools and jars of preserved seeds and roots for planting. There are no windows except for the one tiny one situated high up on the door.

I brush the dust off of it and look out. I see travel pods flying over the city in the distance. Every now and then, one of them flies over the small building that I'm in.

They are searching for us. But the second wave of fighters that had come along is still situated along the mountain ridge. I wonder why they haven't moved.

I eventually come to notice that every fifteen minutes I watch from my window, a foot patrol comes by. That might leave me with enough time to get out of the shed.

Once the next foot patrol goes by, I open the shed and dart out. My options are either the bushes on the side of the gardener's house, or run further to get to the alleyways of the city. That would mean that I am out in the open for quite a long time (considering how dangerous the travel pods can be). But I need to take the risk.

There is an acre of gardens and open grassland between me and the shadows of the alley that I am aiming for. I wish that the shed with the tunnel had been beside the wheat fields. Then I would at least feel safer.

As if the Magi were trying to prove me right, I start getting shot at. Blasts of energy hit to the right and then to the left. Some of my skin gets singed, and I cry out. I see a charred line across the backs of both of my calves.

I am so damn close to the building. It will provide at least a little bit of protection, and maybe I can lose them.

Behind me I hear the sounds of Magi on foot, calling out orders to try and flank me. I hear guns being cocked, and threads of panic well up inside of me.

The pain in my legs is so intense that I can barely continue. Only the thought of letting everybody down keeps me running.

Building up heat in one of my hands, I concentrate the power, feeling the flames curl around me. As I breach the shadows, I send a plume of fire behind me, willing it to spread like a fan to engulf all those who are following me.

This doesn't stop the travel pods that are following me, and I know that I can't really destroy them. So I keep running between buildings, wishing I had an idea of where I needed to go.

I don't stop until I have cleared several city blocks worth of distance, weaving left and right to confuse anybody who is tracking me. I stay low and avoid being detected by air patrols.

I wish I knew why I was being drawn out here into so much danger. I still follow the sense of urgency I have, being tugged in its direction like a rope has been anchored to my very being.

I don't know where I am heading until I see Jarcat. Before him is Sebastian, who is on his knees. Blood is dripping from the corner of his mouth, and it is all

I can do not to run forward to try and save him. I know I'd be shot before I even got close.

He and Jarcat have a couple of soldiers around them in front of the city library on its grand limestone steps. Jarcat pulls back his hand and I hear it smack across Sebastian's cheek. "What is Phil planning?"

Sebastian looks up and spits bloody saliva onto Jarcat's chest and says, "That you have no idea how fucked you are."

Another slap, this time Sebastian twitches after the blow as if electricity is running through him.

"They don't have the resources. We control every city now."

Sebastian mouths the words, "You will never win."

I back into the alley a little bit so I am not seen, and I hear Sebastian speak once more, "You may be getting the natives into place in order to gain the power that courses through this city, but it won't succeed."

Getting the natives into place? What place?

I hear Sebastian grunt in pain and a wet cough wrenches free of him.

"You talk too much," sneers Jarcat. "They're at the shrine right now. The power will flow through our ships and it will be done."

The shrine. Okay. What shrine? Were they talking about that place where Jarcat had been when this all started? What of it?

"And do you think the average citizen won't rebel against this? Rebel against the murder of the head mages of the order?" says Sebastian.

"With the power of this city in our specially outfitted ships, it won't matter what the people have to say. I will control them all. And besides? The shrine is protected by guards. Phil could never get past our defences and my little friend here," Jarcat says, patting the shoulder of one of the natives who stands beside him leaning on a cane, "can help me stop any Elemental who tries to break in as well."

And that's when I got it. I understood what was happening. Sebastian drew me to him to get this all out in the open. To get Jarcat to reveal his plans to me unintentionally.

And I know what I need to do.

So as I have mentioned before, I am reckless. I tend to do things without thinking them through. But in this one case, I need to act. If I think too hard, or ask for Kiren or Soline's advice, I might be dissuaded from my goal.

But the safety of my people is on the line. I need to do this for them. And for Sebastian, who is being held captive by that lunatic.

The tunnels really do go everywhere underground, as I have mentioned before, so this is good.

Now I think back on my life and on all the things I know about my city. The place where Jarcat had originally started trying to affect the city? The walls in that room were covered in murals, all very primitive but always reminded me of my own people. But I know now how wrong those assumptions had been. The murals depicted the natives of this planet engaged in everyday life, interacting with the elements in nature. And the pole that went from the floor to the ceiling was a shrine.

It made total sense.

I remember as a child, I would wander around the area, exploring the tunnels often and playing in them. I knew of a particular tunnel that went in behind that shrine. It had partially collapsed hundreds of years previously, and one had to crawl through spots of it. The journey was perilous, so nobody used it these days. Honestly, people didn't see much reason to visit the murals either. Except for scholars (but there aren't an overabundance of those in Azmarine, we're a hands on kind of people).

So I knew that I had a way to get into the shrine.

When I crawl through the tunnel, my knees scraping along the rough stone ground, I eventually get to the entrance to the shrine room. This part of the tunnel is almost completely blocked except for a gap near the top of a huge pile of rocks.

Climbing is hard because there are loose stones everywhere. This wouldn't be a big deal if I didn't need to move silently. I need to be careful to avoid making any kind of sound. At the top, I peek out for long enough to see what I am up against.

I am ten feet away from the shrine, which is surrounded by the natives. They are in a circle and are glowing from head to toe, floating just off the ground. Their arms are raised and stretched out to the carved pole. Near them are three guards who are armed. In the other main entrance to the room are five guards. I'm sure there are more all along that tunnel.

Eight against one. Possibly more if I don't act fast. So I need to do this right.

Below the pile of rocks I am on is only a one-foot drop, so I don't have to worry there.

Before I go, I draw my sword and sheath it in flames. I crawl to the top and jump out.

I'm noticed right away, before my feet even touch the ground, but I expected nothing less. I draw strength from the nature around me and cast a shield of fire to surround me; my footprints glow like embers on the rocky floor. The first two soldiers who come at me get knocked back when I violently will my aura of fire outwards. The next meets my sword with his own. I feint left and then make my move, gutting the man before me.

I gather more flames around me and blast them to knock back the soldiers again as I move ever closer to the shrine. One of the men makes it through, and I spin, slashing the air in front of him, missing. But the sword's flames sear into the soldier's body, burning deep while he screams in agony. I don't waste any time and run the last two feet to the shrine.

Once there, I behead the first native. The Taje. Shit I don't want to. But this is for my people. So I swing once more and behead the next.

Blood is pooling on the ground, the glow in the area is fading. I spin to deflect the slashes of two of the soldiers who have approached, but I'm not fast enough to avoid the next hits. I take a deep gash on my arm and another on my leg.

I have to finish this. I knew it was suicide when I started. I send out one last blast of fire, shoving the soldiers away, knocking around the natives just slightly. I need to be quick. There is no way I can summon more energy to produce flames this soon.

I slay the rest of the ancients, each in quick succession. The pole stops glowing slowly, fading to a dim speck until the room is shrouded in shadows.

I fall to my knees. There is no point in trying to run. I am weak from the exertions of the past few days and then this effort.

I face my death head on, not looking away. The white-hot pain of a sword being driven through my chest makes me scream out. It is agony.

But I do not think of my family or my people, though I did this for them. No, all I can think of is how much I wish I had more time with Sebastian. How

much I wish I could have held him one more time. Kissed his soft lips. Or how I wanted to yield my body to him again.

It was not to be.

And so I fade away.

Everything is dark. I am looking around, yet I am pretty sure I don't have eyes. I can't blink or turn my head. I don't think I have arms either. This feels weird.

What's happening? Where am I?

Wait? Who am I?

Flickers of what may be memories seem so far away, behind me I think. I can't really force myself to care.

I think I'm heading forward, though I can't see where. I just know that it is where I need to be.

Floating here is like swimming through a thick and viscous liquid.

Then, from behind me, I hear a whisper. I can barely make it out, but it sounds sad. It cracks and fades.

I move farther to the place I need to be.

Then I feel a tugging behind me, like a thread is wrapped around me and is pulling me towards something. The feeling is making it harder to get where I need to be. In irritation, I glance back.

I see something that looks like embers, still barely hot. But they aren't orange. They are silver.

Curious, I float away from my destination and check out these alluring embers. Slowly, I approach and they burst into flame. Small at first but the closer I get, the larger the flame until it is the size of a pyre.

Then I hear the voice again, familiar and clearer. "Reynard."

Who is that? Is that my name?

Who is calling for me?

"Come back to me, you fucking moron!" the voice says, muffled like it is speaking through a wall or something.

I inch closer still, reaching for the flame. When my fingers caress the surprisingly cool fire, I feel a jolt through my body.

Body?

I open my eyes. Everything is blurry, and I can't see much. I think that maybe it's my bedroom ceiling?

“Wha—”

“Rey,” says somebody, female and way too loud.

I feel arms being wrapped around me, lifting me a bit from the bed I'm lying on.

“When Phil found you, I was sure you couldn't be saved,” says... Soline, yeah I don't think I could ever forget her voice for long.

“What happened? I only remember killing those natives and then—”

Soline draws back, and her worried and loving look becomes fiery and evil. She rears back her hand and slaps me. Everything, all of the recent events in my life, comes slamming back into me. I gasp aloud and desperately chase my breath, willing it back into my lungs.

“Don't ever do something so stupid,” she starts to cry, “and idiotically brave and wonderful again.”

She collapses against me and sobs, wetting the thin fabric toga that is draped over my body.

Across the room I see the rest of my friends approach. Kiren's eyes are suspiciously wet, but the rest of his face doesn't show signs of crying.

He says, “You saved us. Phil had been there, trying to get through but he couldn't break the barrier. He couldn't get into the city to ask us about tunnels, and truth be told we had forgotten about that abandoned passage. Taking down those natives was just what they needed to clear the soldiers out and get into the city to help us.”

Into my chest, Soline says, “You're a hero. I am so damn sorry that I ever doubted you in any capacity.”

“It's all right,” I mutter in a rough and crackly voice.

I find myself looking around the room, for somebody. Cathal, who hasn't come too close to me, lets one corner of his mouth raise.

“He is lying down. He’s exhausted,” says Cathal, nodding his head towards the closed door of my room.

Gently disentangling Soline and handing her off to her husband, I struggle to my feet. Dizziness overcomes me, and I plop my butt back on the edge of my bed. My hand rises to clutch at one of my temples, and I groan.

“I need to see him, please,” I say, not caring how whiney and pathetic I must sound at the moment.

Kiren immediately goes to one side of me, and I rest one arm over his shoulders to let him support me. Cathal goes onto the other side of me and they help me walk out the door. Sebastian’s room isn’t too far down the hall, but my feet and legs feel like they are made of rubber and my friends practically have to carry me the entire way.

When I enter the room my eyes focus in on Sebastian. His alabaster skin is paler than I have ever seen it. I can see the veins under his skin pulsing blood through his body. His arms hang limply beside his body.

I let Kiren and Cathal deposit me on Sebastian’s bed and I say, “Please close the door behind you and don’t let anybody in unless I call for assistance.”

They pause for only a moment, Kiren most of all. I think he is used to protecting me. But he smiles and nods his head before also taking his leave.

Once the door clicks shut, I collapse beside my lover, tracing circles onto his bare chest. The sheets that are covering him go just up past his hips, and I let my finger dip down to the top of the fabric.

I press a soft kiss to the side of his jaw, working my way to his chin and then down his neck. My hand sneaks lower, barely whispering over the silken flesh of his flaccid cock. I move until the weight of Sebastian’s balls rests on my palm, cradled lovingly.

I see his eyelids flutter but remain closed. He used every bit of power in himself to bring me back. Based on what he has told me about necromancy, I wasn’t sure he could even raise the dead back to actual life.

But he did it for me.

I am so overwhelmed with emotion that I nuzzle my face into his neck, breathing in his musky scent. I need him so bad.

After I slip the sheet off his body, I start to stroke his cock, which rapidly hardens in my hand. I’m already so stiff that it hurts, and I’m leaking all over the bedspread.

Moving on top of him, I take us both in hand, careful to avoid crushing his body. That's when I see his eyelids slit open, dazed but aware.

"Moron," he whispers, but it sounds like an endearment to me now.

He gently wraps his arms around my shoulders and spreads his legs under me.

"Take me."

I shift to get off the bed, so I can find something to use as lube when he says, "I want it rough. I want to feel you."

He brings his knees up to his chest and exposes his hole to me, that pink starburst.

I dive down, feeling suddenly energetic despite my recent brush with death. Oh what Sebastian does to me.

Laving the tip of my tongue across that wrinkled skin, I taste his pure maleness. It is so wonderful. More. Gods, I need more.

Stiffening my tongue, I jab it in, revelling in Sebastian's gasp and then moan. I continue to fuck his ass with my mouth, faster and faster until I feel one of his hands clutch my hair. He tugs it hard and his eyes are pleading for me. Desperation rolls off him in waves.

I oblige him and position my leaking head at his entrance before pushing it in with one swift move.

His cry bounces off the walls, and my breath catches in my lungs. I never thought I'd get to do this again. Touch him, feel him, or even to be inside of him again.

I'm vaguely aware of noises in the hallway outside, but ignore them. The door never opens, and I wouldn't stop even if it did.

Sebastian's legs surround my waist as I thrust, hard and brutal. My lips find his, clashing down so hard I draw blood, whose, I don't know. We don't care. Ours tongues dance together in time with our fucking. Sweat makes our bodies slip together, and heats us up further. I grip both sides of his head in my hands and stifle the cry of my orgasm in his mouth. It pulses inside of Sebastian, filling him and spilling over.

He breaks away from my kiss to scream out in ecstasy as his dick twitches violently and spills between us.

The wonderful glow of energy returning to Sebastian fills the room from his eyes before he falls limp in my arms.

His skin is still pale, and feels cold as I run my hands up and down his torso.

"I think I'll need another round later today. When I recover more. Just what I needed to heal," he says, voice rough from screaming.

I fall to lie beside him, bringing the sheet to cover us up to our chests. Drying cum be damned, I can't move. Neither can he.

"Why did you do it?" he asks, meeting my eyes.

"For my people," I say and then bury my face in his chest. "And so that hopefully you would be safe."

"Reynard. You could have asked for help. You could have done something else."

I shake my head against him. "By then it may have been too late. I heard you telling Jarcat the whole story, you knew I was there right?"

"Yes," says Sebastian, kissing the top of my head, "but I thought you'd gather more people."

"It would have taken me a while to get to them. Then convincing my family that I wasn't going off half-cocked again, not thinking things through. I had to go by myself. I couldn't risk anybody else."

I feel like he wants to say more. He even tries to a few times, but the words always die part way out. I am sure that he wants to refute what I've just told him. My ideas aren't always the best when it comes to tactics. I know this. But I also know that part of my plan was correct. And I saved my city, right?

Sebastian sighs deeply before he draws me up for another scorching and wet kiss. I smile against his lips.

We eventually part, to fall down on the bed and close our eyes.

As I drift off I hear him quietly say, "I love you, idiot."

The End

Author Bio

Becca Finn loves a good book. Ever since she can remember, she has been dreaming up new characters and stories for them. When she wasn't drawing or daydreaming, she was writing. However, it wasn't until she discovered the wonderful world of male/male romance that she decided to produce fiction that others would want to read.

Today, she is a parent of three small children, a writer, an artist and lover of whatever life can offer. She is bisexual, but if you ask her, she will tell you that she's queer. Becca may be quiet and introverted, but is a firm ally of every person in the LGBTQ spectrum and beyond.

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