

I took a deep breath, settled my backpack on my shoulders, and knocked on the door.

It came out feeble. Old ladies who had to lean on a walker to stay standing knocked louder than that. There was no way anyone inside the house could have heard it.

I started to knock again, but my hand stalled five inches from the door. I couldn't make myself touch it. My heart was hammering in my chest, and I heard a crackle from the doorbell as the ambient electricity fried its circuits beyond any repair. I hadn't even *meant* to do that.

It was ridiculous. I was a grown woman, with a six-figure savings account, excellent if forged academic credentials, and an incredible job waiting for me just as soon as I worked up the courage to take it. There was no reason I should be afraid to knock on this door, to see my family again.

This time I went too far the other direction, pounding on the door like I meant to wake the neighbors. I winced a little as the noise shattered the quiet on the predawn street—*not* the first impression I'd been hoping for—but at least it was done.

I stood on the doorstep for what felt like hours, running through all the ways this could go in my head. Anxiety cast a shadow over the hypothetical conversations, turning every turn of phrase into something barbed and toxic.

And then I heard the quiet *click* of a deadbolt being turned, and the door pulled open. The boy on the other side was tall, almost as tall as I was, but gangly, a puppy that hadn't grown into his new frame yet. He was wearing glasses, which combined with his neatly-cut hair and button-up shirt to give him an almost somber appearance.

I barely recognized him. But then, I hadn't seen him for...had it really been almost five years? He would be in high school now. Almost done with high school, in fact.

"Who are you?" he asked, looking at me suspiciously.

"Don't you recognize me?" I asked, trying to keep my smile steady. I'd been expecting this, but it still hurt. "I'm your sister, Tyler."

He stared at me for a moment, then stepped back into the house. "Alexis? Mom, dad! Alexis is back!"

I forced a smile, and followed him in.

For a while, I was overlooked. It didn't matter that the prodigal daughter had returned; Tyler still had school, and dad still had to go to work. Rebecca had either dropped or failed out of college, to the surprise of no one, but apparently she'd managed to get a job at a fast food restaurant, and she had to be there on time as well.

In all the bustle, it was easy for me to slip upstairs, almost unnoticed. That was why I'd timed this when I did.

I'd thought that they might rent my room out, or else use it for storage, but it turned out that they'd left it almost untouched since I'd left. The bookshelves were still filled with old, worn paperbacks, mostly horror and suspense with a dash of carefully concealed romance novels. Knickknacks and magazines were scattered around on shelves or lying on the floor, all covered in a thin layer of dust.

I dropped my bag on the neatly-made bed and looked around. It felt odd, being in my room again after so long. I still recognized it, and I remembered the meaning the various keepsakes and posters held, but it felt like I was looking at it from one remove. Like their meaning belonged to someone else, not me.

"Alexis?" my mother said from the door. "Darling, what's going on?"

I plastered a smile across my face again and turned to face her. "I thought I'd come back and say hello," I said. "Maybe move back in for a while. I've got plenty of money, I can pay rent."

"Oh, don't worry about money," she said, with a smile as fake as my own. "But what's up? Why are you coming back now, when...."

She trailed off, as though unsure what to say. It didn't matter, since I could fill the rest in for myself. When I'd been gone for years? When I hadn't even bothered to call since I left? When our last conversation had ended with tears on both sides, and a screaming match that had left Tyler cowering in the corner with the cat?

"I guess I just need to be at home right now," I said, not answering the question.

She seemed to accept it, nodding. "Do you have any luggage you need to bring in?"

"No. Just the one bag."

"Okay. We'll go out tomorrow and get you some decent clothes, anyway."

Mom stood there for a moment longer, looking like she wanted to say something but she wasn't sure what. Then she walked out, leaving me to unpack my bag.

Over the next few days, things around the house returned to their routine. Dad was still working seventy-hour weeks at the advertising firm. Mom was very much the socialite, although her social circles had changed slightly since I'd left. Tyler spent most of his time either at school or on the Internet. Rebecca had two different part-time jobs, one at a fast food restaurant and the other at a temp agency. In her spare time she liked to hang out with people who thought they were a tough crowd, which made me laugh a little.

She was also a junkie, addicted to a prescription narcotic of some sort. I wasn't sure whether the rest of the family knew, although it seemed likely that they had some idea. I didn't really care; Rebecca and I had been close once, when I was making the same dumb mistakes she was making now, but I liked to think that I'd grown up a little since then.

I had to wonder whether it had always been so petty, or it only seemed that way in retrospect. They lived their lives, and by and large it was pointless. A little more money, a nicer car, nicer clothes, but what did any of it *matter*? I had power, and while it might not have been much in the grand scheme of things, it was enough to do something real, something that mattered. In comparison, this was...hollow, I supposed was the way to describe it.

I was starting to remember why I'd left home in the first place. I'd come back here with the hope of remembering, reconnecting with the person I'd been before....just before.

The problem was that the old Alexis had been sort of a bitch. She'd been the shallow, petty, selfish sort of person who could look at this life and think that it *mattered*. When I'd left home, it hadn't been because I didn't want to live like this. It had been because I wanted to do it on my own terms.

And even after I'd left, nothing had been really different. I might not have *agreed* with it when my friends started to escalate things, moving from burglary to mugging, from mugging to murder, but I hadn't really argued, either. I hadn't even realized what that meant about me.

Not until the skinwalker gave me a knife and a choice had I realized who I was, deep down. I hated him for that. More than the pain, the deaths, the endless string of cruelties, I hated him for giving me the choice.

As time went by, I took to spending less and less time at home. I went to Seattle, to talk to Moray about life working for the Conclave, and how to use magic in a fight. He didn't really teach me much about magic; what he taught me was more a state of mind, an attitude. I also spent a fair amount of time back in Transylvania, working in the laboratory. If I was going to be a Guard, I would need to be equipped for it.

Weeks rolled by like that, and the gulf between me and my family grew and grew. I lost track of how many topics I was trying to avoid; sometimes it seemed like there were no safe topics at all. Mom asked for my cell phone number, and I couldn't give it to her because I didn't have a cell phone; the electronics tended to fry when I got excited during a conversation, and it had become more work than it was worth to constantly be replacing them. They asked what I was doing for money, and of course *that* couldn't be explained.

They asked what my plans were. Mom thought I should get a job, while dad tried to steer me towards college. I thought about being honest and telling them that I wanted to join the special forces of a secret organization that protected the world from supernatural threats, but there was no way *that* would end well.

So by and large I drifted along, trying to convince myself that I had something in common with them and failing more badly with each passing day. I'd just come to the conclusion that the whole endeavor had been a pointless waste of everyone's time when everything changed.

Oddly enough, it was my mom that called me downstairs to watch the broadcast. Apparently it had taken over the channel with no real explanation.

Or, as I later learned, *every* channel. Every television station, every radio, was temporarily replaced with a different sort of programming. He left the Internet alone, probably because he knew they would start spreading the news on their own within seconds.

I hadn't met Loki, not that I knew of, but I recognized him from Winter's stories. And Winter's reaction; there weren't many things that could get that kind of response out of my cousin. At first it was funny, and I was almost grateful to Loki for stepping in. It wasn't right that Winter was going to prison for something he'd tried his hardest to stop.

And then he started talking about how the rules had changed, and my smile slipped. "Shit," I said. "This changes things."

My mom looked at me oddly. "It's just a hacker or something," she said. "Probably a prank."

I shook my head. "No," I said. "You don't get it. This changes *everything*. Shit. Can I use your phone? I need to talk to someone."

She continued to give me that odd look, but she handed me her cell phone. I walked away from the couch, dialing a number from memory. "Moray," I said, the instant he answered. "What in God's name is going on out there?"

"This is in a different name, I think," he said dryly. "Yes, this is for real, and no, we didn't have anything to do with it. Although considering that I already got called to a meeting with Watcher, apparently *someone* knew about it."

"This is crazy," I said. "What do I do?"

"I'd suggest you lay low for a few days," he said. "Things are going to get worse before they get better." A moment later, the call ended.

I took a deep breath, tried to keep calm until I could hand the phone back to mom, and then lost it, muttering curses to myself as I sat on the couch with my head in my hands. I listened as Loki finished his speech and the screen went black momentarily before returning to the soap opera mom had been watching.

"Alexis?" She reached out to touch my shoulder, flinching back a little from the spark of static electricity that jumped to her. "Alexis, what's wrong?"

"Everything," I whispered. I felt almost numb, overwhelmed by the magnitude of what just happened. "Could you call dad, and see if he can get off early? I'd feel a lot better if everyone were home tonight." Not that it was a great defense, since this building wasn't warded or anything, but there were plenty of nasties that would rather attack people on the street than go to the effort of assaulting a house. Especially with me there.

"Darling, I think you're overreacting a little. This is just a prank or something."

"Please. It would make me feel better."

She hesitated, then said, "I'll call and ask him."

For the next few days, I thought that I might actually *be* overreacting. Oh, it wasn't good—there were riots in a few different cities, and plenty of reports of bizarre accidents and monster sightings. But it wasn't anything like as bad as I'd been afraid of, either.

Then Tyler, who had staunchly refused to stay home from school until things blew over, didn't come home one day.

Aiko listened to me patiently, which was as close as she was likely to come to telling me that she gave a damn about me. The kitsune was not a patient soul.

"I'm sorry," she said when I'd finished. "He's asleep."

"What?"

"Winter's asleep," she repeated with that same artificial patience. "Has been for almost two days. I don't know what they did to him in there—I don't think *he* really knows—but it was bad."

"Could you wake him up, then?"

"Alexis," she said, "think about it. I'm not sure I've ever seen him in this rough of shape, and that's *saying* something. If I wake him up right now, he'll feel like he has to go out there and help you, and if he tries that in the condition he's in, I don't know what'll happen, but it won't be good."

"What about you, then?" I said desperately. "Could you come out and help?"

I could almost hear her shaking her head. "Things are bad," she said gently. "And chances are someone's going to blame Winter for it. He's not fit to defend himself right now, and we haven't finished repairing the defenses on the castle. I need to be here in case someone attacks." She paused. "And honestly, I doubt I could do much to help you anyway. Finding missing people is...not exactly my specialty, you know?"

"Right," I said dully. "Thanks anyway."

"I'm sorry," she said again, before hanging up.

I stared at the payphone for a moment, then fed it a few more coins and dialed another number. "It's Alexis," I said as soon as Moray picked up on the other end. "My brother's missing. I need your help."

There was a long, ugly pause. "Shit," he said, finally. "Look, Alexis, things are pretty crazy here. I don't know—"

"I'll owe you one," I said, interrupting him. "It's my *brother*, Moray."

"Dammit," he sighed. "Fine. I'll be there as soon as I can."

I met the Watcher in a parking lot less than an hour later. I was wearing my heavy, Kevlar-lined leather coat, and carrying my staff, in addition to various other weapons. He was wearing a three-piece suit and the only thing that was obviously a focus of some sort was the wand in his belt, but I was confident he was well enough armed to take on a small army and come out on top.

"I don't have much time," he said by way of greeting. "Do you have something I can use to track him? Hair, clothing, something like that?"

Wordlessly, I reached into my car and pulled out a grocery bag. In it was the shirt he'd been wearing the day before, along with a zipped bag containing a few hairs I'd found in his hairbrush. I didn't have any blood, unfortunately, but hopefully this would do.

Moray grinned and snatched the bag out of my hand, walking around to the other side of the car. "Get in," he said. "I'll get the tracking spell going as we drive."

It was slow driving, since Moray's spell gave him little more than a direction and a vague sense of distance. That didn't necessarily translate to a location, and it certainly didn't translate to a street map. After a while it became clear that we were going to the river, though, which made it considerably easier.

And then I pulled over and parked, looking at a small garage not far from the docks. "You're sure this is the place?" I asked.

"Yep," he said, getting out of the car. "Based on the neighborhood, I'd say it's probably a chop shop. Looks like your brother was taken by a gang, maybe for ransom, maybe for tribute."

"Tribute?"

He shrugged. "Lots of things like kids. Could be they're in debt to one of them, and they took your brother for payment." He started to continue, but was interrupted when his phone rang. He answered it, his expression rapidly becoming grim, and hung up without saying anything.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Someone knew I left," he spat. "They're making moves in Seattle. I need to get back there, now." He turned and started walking towards the river.

"Wait," I said, hurrying after him. "I need your help."

"If I don't get back there in the next few minutes," he said, "a lot more people than just your brother will die. Besides, you don't need help."

"Yes, I do," I protested.

"Really?" he said, stopping by the edge of the water. "Tell me why you called me, then. It wasn't because you couldn't find him; you had the stuff, you could have done a basic tracking spell. Or even if you can't, you could have called a werewolf. There's a pack in town, and I *know* you've got some high-level contacts with them. They'd have been able to follow the trail here, no problem."

I didn't say anything, because I knew he was right.

"I know you know how to fight," he said, lifting his hands. Power gathered around them, greens and blues that were a touch too vibrant for the world to hold, because they were intended to tear a hole in the world's surface. "You're not that experienced, but you've got a skillset that lends itself very well to violence. A couple of thugs aren't much threat to you."

I continued to say nothing as a roughly circular patch of air transformed into nothingness, because he was still right.

"I don't know why you don't want to fight," he said, glancing at me. "Why you're scared of it. But I recommend you think carefully about whether it's more important to you than your brother's life." Then he stepped through the portal, which faded away a moment later.

I thought about it for longer than I'd like to admit.

Then I took a deep breath and walked over to the garage.

It took a few minutes of pounding on the door before someone answered. When they did I was surprised to see a woman, short and a little stocky, but in a way that suggested too many hours in the gym rather than a lot of food. "What do you want?" she said suspiciously.

"Hi," I said, with a forced smile. "I'm here to talk about my brother."

She eyed me for a moment longer, then took a step back, raised a pistol, and pulled the trigger.

I hadn't been expecting that, and I hadn't had a barrier up. It hit me in the abdomen and knocked the wind out of me, and I didn't think it had penetrated the Kevlar but it still hurt, and it

knocked me down, and she was pointing the gun at my head now and smiling and in that moment it was easy, it was oh-so-easy to lash out at her. Lightning was more natural, but force was quicker, and so it was force that I used, a blast of energy that hit her with the force of a small car.

It tore the door off its hinges and cracked the bricks of the wall, and it threw the woman to the ground before she could get another shot off. I wanted to stand, but I knew there were more important things to be done, so instead I *reached*, snatching the current out from the wires and spinning it around myself until my eyes ached and the air around me hummed with potential and I saw the world through the glare of blue electric fire.

The woman was getting up, so I let just a piece, just the tiniest piece of the lightning blazing in the air around me go, let it jump to her gun and then run up her arm and down her body to ground. She convulsed once as her muscles all jerked with the electricity running through them. Just once, and then she fell again.

Electricity is a funny thing. There isn't much room between enough of it to incapacitate someone, and enough of it to kill them.

I'd used a little too much this time. She wasn't going to be getting up. Normally I would have felt guilt about that, but with the electricity humming in the air and the anger running through my veins, there was no room for guilt.

I pushed myself to my feet, leaning on my staff, and walked inside. There were half a dozen people standing around, hard looking people dressed in black with the pale grey aura of human magic around them.

And there was also Tyler, tied to a chair.

One of them raised a gun, and I called force and storm and hit him hard enough that he hit the wall and slid down it, twitching a little. "Let my brother go," I said, walking forward. One of them sneered, and all of them raised their weapons. I called up more force, a heavy barrier around me, and another around Tyler, to protect him from ricochets.

The guns roared for a long moment, and then went quiet, although my ears were ringing such that it wasn't easy for me to notice.

Then it was my turn.

It's a good time to be alive, for people like me, people who see beauty and life in the spark of static, who look at a battery and marvel at the potential it holds. There's a wire in every wall, running underground and through the air, and at any given moment the current is pouring through them, so much of it that it's easy to get lost, to follow the path they trace through the world, to forget that you're more than just another charge, another tiny piece of the vast, interconnected web linking the world together.

It's not a question of *if* there's current to be had, in this day, but of *how much*, and even that has more to do with what you can handle than what's available.

I called on that electricity, that whirling storm, and it came to my call, the lightbulbs shattering, the wires that fed their lights and their tools and their luxuries all bursting at my touch, spewing more and more power forth into the air, and I was grinning a wide death's-head grin against the strain of holding it steady when it wanted, as it always wanted, to escape and go to ground, the intensity of that strain something almost physical, pressing against the inside of my skull.

And then I opened a hole, a tiny, well-defined hole, and it leapt from my grasp with joyous fury, pouring down the channel I had made for it.

What looked like a tiny bolt of lightning jumped from me to one of the gunmen, then to each of the others in turn. For a moment they all stood there, backs arched, trying to scream but unable to control their muscles, and, God help me, I saw the beauty there. Then it ended, and they dropped to the ground, guns clattering away from nerveless fingers.

I walked over slowly, leaning more heavily on my staff now. I hadn't felt the exertion while I was working the magic, as usual, but once I'd let it go it hit me all at once, and it was a struggle to stand.

Tyler was staring at me, pale, eyes wide. It was hard to say whether he was more frightened of me or of the people who had kidnapped him.

I reached the gunmen and stared down at them. A memory came to mind, not quite a flashback, but almost as intense.

The skinwalker had an almost infinite variety of ways to cause suffering, to torment his victims. I'd seen more of them, *far* more, than I wanted to. But with me, he'd favored subtler tortures, mind games and psychological trauma. His favorite game, once it became clear to him just how much I hated it, was to give me a choice.

I could kill one person, or he could kill three.

The first time I'd been revolted at the idea of murdering someone in cold blood. I'd never intentionally hurt anyone, let alone killed them, and the mere notion of doing so was horrifying.

He'd suffocated one, thrown the second off a building, and lit the third on fire. And then he went about his day, like nothing of note had happened, because for him, *nothing had*.

The second time, I'd still held out hope that things might get better, that the world couldn't *really* be this bad, that God wouldn't, *couldn't*, be cruel enough to allow such things to happen.

That time he'd taken children. He'd made it slow, and horrible, and he'd made me watch the whole time. I still had nightmares about that, and if I hadn't been a vegetarian *before* I certainly would have been one *after*.

The third time, I'd taken the knife.

Now, looking down at the gangsters, I realized that I had the same choice in a different guise. I could be merciful, let them go, do the right thing. And if I did, the next kid they took might not have a sister with magic to rescue him.

Or I could take the metaphorical knife, and take one more step to the dark side.

There were times it was very easy to see what made Winter the way he was.

I bent down, and picked up one of the guns.

I brought Tyler home, and went upstairs without saying a word to my family. Tyler hadn't spoken to me on the way back; it was hard to say whether he was more scared of the people who had taken him, or the one who was bringing him back.

In the shower, I threw up, scrubbed myself raw, and then threw up again. I ended up sitting there, shaking, until the water was cold. Then I got dressed, my fingers more steady than I felt they deserved to be, and packed my bag again. I didn't say anything as I left the house, and nobody said anything to me.

I sent my application to the Guards the next day. It had become clear that there would be no redemption in my life, no peace, no return to a life with a family and a desk job and sleep without nightmares. There are wounds too deep for healing.