

ABSTRACT

Magic Runs Red

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In the great city of Saint Petersburg, dark magic is lurking. Seventeen-year-old Anya is a Russian socialite with a picture-perfect life: a life of parties, beautiful dresses, and her boyfriend Sevastien planning to propose any day. But when Sevastien gets sick with a mysterious illness, Anya confronts her darkest secret. She is a *koldun*, a person with magical abilities that draw power from blood. When a reunion with her old mentor goes horribly wrong, Anya's life is linked Sevastien and the clock starts ticking before they both perish. Teaming up Kazik, an unlikely ally, Anya quests to break the spell that links her to Sevastien and also to cure him of the disease. But life doesn't always go according to plan, and as Anya grows closer to Kazik she grows farther away from Sevastien. Ultimately, Anya confronts the weight of having dark magical abilities and is able to save Sevastien and herself from death.

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Chapter 1

“The koldun and the vedma have been intertwined for centuries. Their dark and light magics, respectively, have been known to push each other to the limits. While the vedma are known for their healing and natural element abilities, the koldun are known for their blood magic. A few drops of blood from a powerful koldun can have disastrous consequences. Due to the innately dangerous powers of the koldun, practicing dark magic is a crime punishable by death.” – A Brief History of Magic by Andrei Ivanov

The tight lacing of my corset almost made me forget about the knife in my boot. Almost.

At this point, the knife had become a safety net. If I had it with me, I knew I would be able to work my way out of most situations. It didn't matter that I refused to use it in public, just the simple act of having it shoved in my boot during society functions reminded me I was safe. Reaching under all my petticoats to retrieve the knife might be cause a problem, but if I could cut the blade across my forearm within enough time, everything would be fine. Everything except for this dance.

“Nadia is expecting the baby in March, but her husband is insisting they make the move to Moscow by January so that everything is settled.” Mother's overly saccharine voice filled my ears. “I don't see how moving out of Saint Petersburg helps anyone.”

The other ladies at the table mumbled their agreement while delicately sipping their wine. Each was poised and proper, patiently waiting for their turn to enter the conversation. They were like cats, sitting still before their time to pounce on the next subject.

“I heard her husband wanted to make sure both mom and baby stay healthy,” another woman chimed in. “I’ve heard that some of the lower class are falling ill.”

“Alana told me that her cousin got sick last week,” a younger woman with thick brown hair and an overabundance of freckles added. “I hope it isn’t the same illness.”

I tuned out the conversation and continued to pull at a piece of lace on my dress, watching as the fabric frayed under my fingertips. Anything that distracted my mind from the dull words of high-society ladies was welcomed. Particularly when Sevastien hadn’t arrived to truly take my thoughts away from the evening.

Sevastien would be late as he always was. He’d enter with his green eyes bright and full of life, ready to tell me the events of his day. From meetings with his father and other political figures to simply reading something interesting he thought I would enjoy, Sevastien’s days held a certain excitement that mine hadn’t in quite a few months. He always managed to make the pointless hours sitting under my mother’s gaze worth it. And I had already been sitting under that scrutiny for two hours.

“Anya.” I accidentally yanked the bit of lace too hard as I jolted myself back to the present. My mother’s eyes fixed me with a gaze that brought to mind a blustery winter day. “Yulia asked you a question.”

My attention transferred from my mother to the woman sitting on her right. She was a family friend I had known since I was six, and her daughter Tatiana was the closest thing I had to a friend at society events. Yulia raised her lips in a warm smile that spoke of patience and kindness, standing in stark contrast to my mother’s cold stare. “When are you and Sevastien planning to get married, child?”

I took a sip of my wine, the red liquid tasting bitter as it made its way down my throat. The question hadn't taken me by surprise, at least, not entirely. It was something Sevastien and I had been considering, but it wasn't something that was in the books yet. Something inside me told me that there was no hurry to get married. Sevastien and I still had so much time to consider everything, and I wasn't quite ready to commit to a date yet. Still, I needed to give an answer.

"After August, when I turn eighteen," I replied, making sure to smile, though I imagined it looked more like a grimace. "We don't want to rush into anything."

"Ivan and I want Anya to have a spring wedding." Mother was taking control of the conversation. She was spinning it like a spider in a web and capturing me like prey. "Sevastien's family is originally from St. Petersburg, so we want her to have the wedding there."

"We really haven't decided on any details yet," I started, even though I knew it would be no use. Mother had already begun creating her fantasy of the perfect dutiful daughter who would get married to a dashing prince and live happily ever after in a palace by the sea. She certainly wasn't thinking about her actual daughter, the one who performed blood magic and carried a knife in her boot. My mother didn't know about that daughter. Very few people knew that girl. According to the government, she wasn't supposed to exist.

My fingers returned to the lace on my green dress. In a swift motion, I yanked the rest of the piece off so it was no longer hanging by a few threads. I itched to take the knife from my boot and make everyone here forget my presence. But I hadn't practiced my magic in months and pulling a knife out and cutting through the layers of my satin

dress to reach my veins would perhaps not be the most appropriate action for a society gala. Of course, that was just a hunch.

I looked around the grand ballroom of the Turgenev estate, watching the dancing couples as they spun around the floor. The fifteen-piece orchestra sang out the sounds of Tchaikovsky and tables scattered throughout the perimeter of the ballroom were decorated with white candles in gilded candelabras. Men in dashing black suits and women in dresses of green, grey, burgundy, and black sat and gossiped about the latest scandals in Saint Petersburg society. I glanced at the threads that had connected the lace to my dress and wondered if anyone would even notice that it was gone.

Boots clipped along the wooden floor and I looked over my shoulder to see the tall frame of Sevastien striding toward me. His golden hair was pulled back from his face and his cheeks were blushed with pink from the cold air outside. A navy jacket accented his slim body and his teeth were out in a full smile that engaged his dimples as he came my way.

“And the man himself appears.” Yulia’s serene voice declared. “We were here planning your wedding.”

“Were you now?” Sevastien questioned lightly as he reached for my hand and placed a kiss there. “I hope you’re not getting too ahead of yourself.”

“Only the right amount,” Mother said, attempting a smile that didn’t meet her eyes. “Simply discussing the potential timeline once you propose?” It was a leading question, and I prayed Sevastien wouldn’t take the bait.

“Anya and I have plenty of time to discuss that,” Sevastien countered. He glanced my way and raised his bushy eyebrows. “As for now, I would greatly enjoy a dance.”

Sevastien extended his hand toward me and I grasped it in my own. His skin was warm and soft against my own and he steadied me as I rose to my feet. He gave me a wink that made me roll my eyes. I nodded at the ladies at my table before taking his arm and walking to the middle of the dance floor, where the violins had started singing a new song. The gilded gold of the room glowed under the light of a crystal chandelier lit with what seemed like a hundred candles. Ladies in dresses of all colors waltzed around with dapper looking gentlemen in tailored jackets. Everything was beautiful but nothing was genuine.

“Thank God,” I whispered to Sevastien as we left the table behind. I breathed a sigh of relief at being away from my mother and her hoard of small-minded minions.

“How was my timing today?” His voice was low and quiet, giving it a husky quality to it. I stepped out and spun before responding.

“Two hours. I thought mother was going to actually start engaging me in conversations if you hadn’t shown up.”

Sevastien chuckled lightly before spinning me again. The orchestra continued the chirping melody of the song as we spun around the floor. My emerald green skirts and vibrant red hair twirled and made a certain music of their own as they rustled and swished.

“Tell me about your day.” I needed to hear what his life had been like while I was sitting and simply existing.

“What would you like to hear first?”

“Anything.”

Sevastien launched into a tale of his daily activities, and I felt my body relax. It was nice to hear that someone else was enjoying the world around them, even if I couldn't. I longed to be part of something adventurous or at least a little different, but I think I would be content if Sevastien just told me what he did every day. It wouldn't be the most interesting life; I would spend the rest of my days exactly as I spent them now: enjoying parties, attending luncheons, and reading books. But I guess love is a sacrifice, and I can be okay with that.

The cellos moaned out their final note. Sevastien bowed and I curtsied while also attempting to not trip on the abundance of skirts I had. Sevastien's gaze ran down my face and shoulders to rest on the spot of my skirt that was now missing a section of lace. He shook his honey-colored hair and his dimples came back out.

"Do I even want to know?" he asked.

"I didn't think it fit the theme of the dress," I responded.

We walked away from the dance floor and wandered to the table of refreshments that was waiting just past the orchestra and a massive grand piano. Sevastien nodded to family friends and acquaintances before making it to a servant at the refreshment table and requesting a glass of wine.

"No vodka tonight?" My tone was teasing as I questioned his drink choice.

Sevastien took a sip of his red wine smirked. "Am I not allowed to try different things?"

I shook my head and asked for a glass myself, having left mine with my mother. And I was not about to go back into the lion's den to get it.

"Were things really that bad with your mother before I arrived?"

I nodded at Sevastien's question and took a long sip from my wine before responding. "She's really pushing a quick wedding," I replied. "That's always been her ultimate goal for me. I was raised out of the womb to find a husband as soon as possible."

"I'm sure she loves you more than you think." Sevastien's tone was quiet but kind. The trouble with his statement was that I highly doubted that my mother much cared for me at all. I always felt like an afterthought. Katerina Grigoryevna hadn't wanted children since she had been part of a family of eight herself, but father had pushed for at least one child. I imagined the day I was born a girl instead of the boy that the *vedma* had promised was the worst day of her life.

"Papa always loved me more." I was his little girl, his *dedushka*. He spoiled me whenever he was home, but government had him gone to Saint Petersburg more than he was in Saint Petersburg.

"I'll always love you most," Sevastien said, laughter in his emerald eyes. I gave him a subtle nudge with my elbow and tried not to spill my wine.

"How's your mother?" I asked. "Is she getting settled into Saint Petersburg?"

"Oh, she's trying her best. It's easier now that she gets to see me every day, but the real trouble is Natalia. She hates that she had to leave her friends."

Whereas Saint Petersburg called my father, the government of Saint Petersburg called to Sevastien's. Sevastien and his father had come first to see what the culture here would be like last April. His mother and sister had arrived last month in a flurry of Saint Petersburg beauty, their trunks full of beautiful dresses and everything they would need to start a home here.

“She’ll get used to it,” Sevastien continued. He let out a small cough into his elbow and his wine sloshed to the edge of his cup.

“Getting a cold?” My tone was light but my concern was apparent.

“No, just a cough.” He ran his hand through his hair and gave me a toothy smile.

“Nothing can hurt me, Anya.” He extended his arm to me and we walked back toward my mother’s table. My grip on Sevastien’s arm tensed and my fingers grew paler than they already were.

“Do we have to go back to her?” I asked, anxious about more questions and prying.

“Unfortunately, we do.”

I exhaled loudly, trying to calm my nerves and ready myself for the interrogation that was sure to follow as soon as I took my seat.

“Hey.” Sevastien had stopped walking, so I stopped too. He turned to face me and looked down into my eyes. “Everything is going to be fine.”

“Easy enough for you to say, golden boy. My mother loves you.”

“Then let me do all the talking.” His voice was steady where mine was weak.

“Trust me.”

I grabbed for his arm again and we finally returned to my mother’s table. After a quick bow from Sevastien, the two of us took our seats. All of the ladies’ attention automatically turned to the charismatic and charming young man seated next to me. A natural at conversation, Sevastien took control of the situation and directed the conversation toward what had happened during his day. The ladies sat enthralled as he

talked about politics, his mother and sister, and finally came to rest on an illness that was plaguing the lower classes of the city.

“What’s causing it?” Yulina asked, leaning forward in her seat and smoothing out the skirt of her dress.

“Not sure,” Sevastien responded, his voice nonchalant. “It almost seems like it’s dark magic. The victims lose all of their memories before they die. And they lose a lot of blood, so it seems in line with the *koldun*.”

My body went ice cold. “I’ve never heard of a disease caused by magic.” The words felt like they were stuck in my throat.

“Neither had I, but I think that this is further proof the Tsar was right.”

“How do you mean?” My voice was weak and shook on my words.

“That type of power shouldn’t exist. The *vedma* are all well and good but blood magic is a whole different story. The *koldun* break the very laws of nature. They’re power hungry savages.”

There were murmurs of agreement from the ladies at the table when Sevastien finished speaking. I inhaled slowly, trying to calm down my racing nerves. Sevastien had never spoken this way. He had never given me cause to be afraid of what I was and what I could do. I hadn’t told Sevastien what I was for fear of a reaction like this. I had heard stories in the Unclean about young children saying the wrong thing in public or performing a bit of magic out in the open. They had simply disappeared a few days later. Covering any tracks was so important, especially when those tracks created a path of blood.

“Of course,” I replied, trying to get myself to start breathing normally again. Everything was fine. Sevastien didn’t really mean to say those things. Things would be okay.

Unconsciously, I tugged at the sleeves of my dress, trying to push them over my palms. How would Sevastien act when he finally saw my arms? Would he let me explain? Would he call the city guards? I hadn’t given much thought to my patchwork arms in months. Now they came into focus and became all I could see.

“I’m grateful that none of our family every possessed something so disgusting as blood magic,” my mother chimed in. I released my grip on my sleeves, put my hands in my lap, and looked up at my mother. She was her society self, always prepared to commandeer any rogue conversation. “We had a *vedma* on my mother’s side a few generations back, but there’s been little inclination for magic on either side for quite some time.”

I took another deep breath and let the conversation drift back into neutral territory. Yulina brought up her daughter Tatiana’s courtship with an army general and I heard Sevastien cough again next to me.

“A breath of fresh air?” I questioned. He nodded and I was relieved, more for my benefit than his. We rose and said our goodbyes before wandering off in the direction of the coatroom.

When I was finally enveloped in thick black fur of my coat, I felt more at ease. The weight of my jacket calmed me. Sevastien slid into his coat, the brass buttons glimmering under the candlelight. Without words, he led me outside and into the garden area by the estate. It was a crisp night, and snow still clung to tree branches from the blizzard the night before. The sun had gone into hiding for the night many hours ago, but the servants

of the household had lit the glowing streetlamps and had given a bright light to the December air.

I leaned into Sevastien, sharing my body heat with him. My breath came out in small puffs like cigarette smoke and my ears tingled from the cold. We approached a metal bench covered in snow, and Sevastien attempted to clear it with a brush of his arm. Snow flew into the air, but some clung to the bench, refusing to let go.

“For you, my lady,” he said, gesturing for me to sit. I let a smile cross my lips before sitting down, making sure to sit on my fur and not directly on the wet bench. Sevastien joined me, his arm a protective covering over my shoulder.

Silence surrounded us as we enjoyed the night and the beauty around us. Evergreen trees rose up on all sides of us, making the world look like a winter dream. Tiny icicles hung from their branches and brought to mind thoughts of Christmas. I wondered what a Christmas with Sevastien would look like. It had only been a few months since we’d met, but I found it hard to imagine my life without him.

The silence continued. I told myself it was because we were enjoying the relative warmth of the night and not because we were out of conversation. I searched my mind for any topic that would be interesting for both of us, but Sevastien’s earlier words rang in my head. *Power hungry savages. That type of power shouldn’t exist.* I needed to keep my past a secret. I hadn’t used my power since I left the Unclean months ago, but the knowledge of what I could do and what would happen if I said something wrong haunted me.

Sevastien’s body tensed beside me and thick coughs echoed out of his chest. He coughed and coughed, unable to catch his breath.

“Sevastien?” I asked as he bent over himself and continued to cough into the snow. Blood sprayed out from his mouth and onto the clean white of the snow by our feet. Panic dotted my vision. I reached out to touch him, but his body went limp and he fell into my lap, lifeless as the dolls I once played with in my nursery.

I checked for a pulse on his neck. It was faint, but there. His skin was cold, so I wrapped my arms even tighter around him in the hopes it would warm him slightly. His chest rose and fell at strange intervals as he breathed in the winter night.

“Help!” I cried, hoping one of the servants was close enough to come to my aid. I wasn’t strong enough to carry Sevastien through the snow. I yelled until servants came running toward me, sending the white fluff everywhere. Doctor Kuznetsov was called and my golden boy was taken away.

Chapter 2

“There is no good in the souls of the koldun. They are dark creatures, evil sorcerers, and they will stop at nothing to harm those around them. Their power is unnatural. It is based on pain and gives pain in return. That is why, from this day forth, no koldun shall be allowed to live and practice their magic in Russia. I will not have that dark art in my city.

– Tsar’s Address Against Koldun by Tsar Nikolai

Sevastien’s chest rose and fell with labored breath as I watched from my armchair in the corner of his room. He had fallen asleep mere minutes ago, but it already felt like he had been asleep for hours. Two days had passed since the gala, and still Sevastien did not get any better. I had been by his bedside the entire time, bringing tea when he asked for something to drink and holding his hand when he coughed so hard it felt that his entire lung would burst out of his chest. Blood spotted every handkerchief that I owned and I felt like I had become an old woman in the span of forty-eight hours.

I rose from my chair and strode softly over the hardwood floor to Sevastien’s bedside. His forehead was wrinkled in what appeared to be pain and sweat was trickling down his cheeks. I reached for yet another handkerchief that his mother had provided for me and wiped it across his face. Sevastien continued to sleep as I cleaned his face, making sure to remove any dried blood off the corner of his lips. He had grown so pale and so weak over the last few days. It was hard to believe that he was the boy that I loved.

I placed the damp handkerchief on his bedside table and grabbed the empty teacup that was resting there. I closed the door as quietly as I could, trying not to disturb the sleeping boy, though I knew that me shutting the door wouldn't wake him.

I descended the staircase into the grand foyer and made my way toward the kitchen, my boots tapping their way across the floor as I walked down one of the long hallways of the Solokov manor. Sevastien's mother and sister were out grabbing lunch with a family friend and Sevastien's father was away on business. I had convinced Sevastien's mother that it was okay for her to leave her son for a few hours. He certainly couldn't get any worse, and I would be here if he got any better. Larisa had told me that Doctor Kuznetsov would be coming shortly after one to check up on Sevastien.

I walked into the kitchen, startling the cook and servants there. The kitchen was warm, and I could smell fresh bread baking. One of the servants approached and took the cup of tea out of my hand. She offered me a small smile.

"I'll bring another cup to his room, ma'am."

I shook my head. "I'll stay and wait for it. It gives me something to do." All I did was drink tea and live in limbo. I was waiting for Doctor Kuznetsov to come back with good news, and I hoped that today would be the day.

A knock rang out from the front entry and I dashed to the door, holding up my skirts as I ran so as not to trip over them. My bright red hair was pulled back in a braid for ease, but small baby hairs had escaped and were brushing against my cheeks. I stopped before the door, took a deep breath, and dusted off my grey wool dress. Mother always told me to look presentable, and I supposed that meant I was supposed to look good when taking care of my ill boyfriend.

I pulled the door open just as Doctor Kuznetsov was raising his large fist to knock again.

“Anya Mikaelovna,” he said, his deep voice seeming to reverberate out of his throat.

“Doctor Kuznetsov, thank you for coming.” I stepped to the side and opened the large mahogany door a little wider for his large frame to step through.

“I’m assuming that he is still in his room?” Doctor Kuznetsov’s large boots tracked snow inside. He was hardly the typical doctor figure. He looked more of a pub owner than a doctor with his full beard and broad stature, but he had the gentlest way with people. He undid his scarf but kept a tight hold on his medicine bag as he made his way toward the spiral staircase.

“Yes, sir,” I responded, following after him. I stopped when I heard the whistling of the kettle from the kitchen. “He’s asleep for the moment. I’ll be with you in a moment as soon as I grab a cup of tea.”

“Take your time,” Doctor Kuznetsov said, beginning his trek up to Sevastien’s room.

I briskly set off for the kitchen and grabbed my cup of tea from the waiting maid. The scent of fresh mint and warm water filled my nose, and I took a deep breath before slowly walking back to Sevastien’s room. The hot cup burned my hand as I tried to keep it balanced on the saucer, but the pain kept me grounded. It reminded me that I was still present, still in this moment.

I pushed open the door to Sevastien's bedroom and saw that the doctor had managed to rally Sevastien from his slumber. He was sitting up with groggy eyes as Doctor Kuznetsov listened to his heart and lungs.

"But I don't understand." Sevastien's voice was hoarse and I walked forward with the tea out of instinct. "Where am I?"

"You're at your house." The Doctor's words were kind but firm. "Do you not remember coming back here?"

"I remember Anya and I were sitting in the garden of the Orlov estate, but I don't remember being here." I approached with the tea and set it down on the bedside table next to the still damp handkerchief. Sevastien turned his head to look at me, his eyes beginning to lose their sleep. "How did I get here, Anya?"

I felt a chill flowing across my shoulders and down my arms. "You fainted into the snow, darling." My pulse was beginning to quicken. "We brought you straight home in your carriage. Do you really not remember it at all?"

Sevastien was quiet and reached for the tea instead, taking a long sip from the dainty white cup and proceeding to cough from somewhere deep in his chest. I reached for another handkerchief as droplets of blood sprayed across his navy bedspread and onto my grey dress. Doctor Kuznetsov retrieved a small vial from his medicine bag which he poured into Sevastien's tea.

"Drink up, son," he said, grabbing the tea and raising it to Sevastien's lips as soon as his coughing subsided. "This will help you rest."

"But I don't want to rest anymore," Sevastien began, but the vial that the doctor had put into his drink acted quickly and his words began to slur. "I want to be awake so I

can remember.” Sevastien’s eyelids drooped and he slumped back into the pillows behind him, asleep once more.

“It’s from a *vedma*, in case you’re wondering.” The doctor placed the teacup back on the bedside table and turned toward me. “He should be asleep for a few hours.”

“What’s wrong with him?” I could hear my heart beating throughout my body. I felt like I was going to vomit my lunch.

Doctor Kuznetsov exhaled slowly and ran a hand through his beard. “A lot of us believe that it’s *koldun* magic.”

“Who is us?” I tried to slow my breathing.

“A few of my colleagues. Sevastien is, unfortunately, not the first case of this that I have seen.”

“If you’ve seen other cases of this you surely know how to fix it.” Hope was building in my chest, bubbling up my throat. I locked eyes with Doctor Kuznetsov, and I felt my heart sink.

“The cases I have seen all end in death. My patients begin to lose their memories. They regress, they get confused, and they lose a lot of blood. You’ve already seen that with Sevastien.”

I tugged on my sleeves, trying to pull them up over my palms. “But why do you think it’s *koldun* magic? Couldn’t it just be a mundane illness?”

Doctor Kuznetsov’s eyes drooped at the corners. “No normal illness does these things so quickly, child. It’s not natural.”

Not natural. That type of power shouldn’t exist. Power hungry savages. I pushed the words away. “But if it’s a magical illness, can’t a *vedma* fix it?”

“I had a *vedma* try and help a patient of mine, but her healing magic made her even sicker than the young girl had been. The *vedma* went mad and neither of them survived. No other *vedma* have been willing to try since.”

Hot tears began to burn their way down my face. I raised the sleeves of my dress and let the scratchy fabric soak them up, not willing to waste another handkerchief. The tall figure of Doctor Kuznetsov knelt in front of me and placed one of his large hands on my shoulder.

“I’m so sorry, my child,” he said. “I know that words don’t calm a breaking heart.”

I nodded, still wiping at my face as tears gushed from my eyes. Sobs broke from me and I only managed to calm them just enough to ask the question that I knew had no positive answer. “How long does he have?”

“Most patients last a little over a week.” The doctor’s tone was heavy. “If you don’t feel strong enough, I can tell his family.”

“No,” I blurted out. “I’ll tell them.” I was strong enough to handle this. I had no other choice but to be strong.

“There’s a little more medicine on the nightstand that will help with any pain he might be feeling. I’ll show myself out,” Doctor Kuznetsov replied. “Let me know if his condition deteriorates any further.” I listened as heavy boots clunked across the hardwood floor and waited for the final slam of the door before crossing the room and locking the door.

My knife felt at home in my hand as I retrieved it from my right boot. I removed it from its protective leather sheath and stared at the slim silver blade, turning it over in

my palm. A ruby was set into the hilt and shone brighter than any blood the weapon had drawn from flesh. I hadn't taken it out of its casing in months, but after all this time it still had the call of an old friend. An old, dangerous friend.

I sank on the corner of Sevastien's bed and looked at his sleeping face. There was peace in it, unlike how he had been sleeping earlier that day. His mouth drooped slightly open and his cheek twitched. I hoped he was dreaming of pleasant things.

You're doing this for him. You're doing this for him. I held the knife in my left hand and rolled up my right sleeve. A patchwork quilt of thin white scars revealed themselves along my arm. From the wrist down, my arms were nothing extraordinary. But when the security blanket of my long-sleeved dresses was removed, the truth of my life was revealed. My scars were the evidence I couldn't run away from, the story I couldn't hide. The story of a *koldun*.

"God help me," I whispered as I drew the knife to my wrist. I closed my eyes as the knife bit into the flesh of inner arm. I made the cut quick out of habit more than out of pain. Pain had lost all meaning to me. Years of cutting had bled most feeling from my arms, but they still served their purpose to me. I opened my eyes and watched as blood trickled onto my dress. I pressed my fingers to the cut before placing them on Sevastien's chest, near his heart.

"I can do this," I whispered. "I've done this before." I took a deep breath, trying not to think of the fact that I hadn't come close to performing any magic in months.

The words came back to me like the words to a childhood song. "*Izlechivat plot i kost. Izlechivat plot i kost. Izlechivat plot i kost.*" Black vapor spilled from my lips and advanced on Sevastien's body. It wrapped dark tendrils around his torso and up and down

his legs. But something was wrong. They didn't absorb into his body like they were supposed to. I continued my chant, trying to force the magic into Sevastien's body by sheer force of will. But the vapor simply flowed away from his body before dissipating into the air around us. I choked back a sob when I looked at my wrist and saw that my own skin had knit itself back together.

Tears once again streaked down my cheeks. It hadn't worked. My power had never failed me in all my years of practice, but in the time that I needed it to work the most, it was useless. I buried my face in a pillow and let out a desperate sob. There was no point to my magic if it couldn't save the person I loved most. Helplessness and grief descended upon me. I was going to lose Sevastien. I was going to lose him and there was nothing that I could do to stop it.

But what if there is something you can do? A voice in my head, so small I almost didn't hear it at first, spoke. *There's someone you know can help. Someone who can fix all of this for you.*

I dropped the pillow and stood up, grabbing my knife and shoving it into my boot. I knew what I needed to do. I took the final handkerchief from Sevastien's bedside table and wiped my face and arm, removing any dry flecks of blood that I found. I straightened my dress and rolled my shoulders back. It was time for me to see Adrik.

Chapter 3

“Magic chooses its own path. It isn’t determined by bloodline and it isn’t passed through generations. It simply appears in the people that it selects and gives them the abilities it wishes. Being born with magic is nothing but chance.” – A Brief History of Magic by

Andrei Ivanov

I pulled my grungy black cloak closer around me, pressing the hood down in an attempt to cover my bright hair. The streets were narrower on the outskirts of the city. Everything was leaner here, including the people. Young boys and girls hid around street corners, waiting for an unsuspecting passerby to wander past with a loaf of bread they could steal. Merchants stood in their dark doorways, looking at the collections of people with bitter expressions. Life was different in this neighborhood. It was much different than the world I had been born into.

As I wound through the crowded streets, I considered to myself if I had made the right choice. Adrik and I had not crossed paths in months, and I knew seeing him again would most likely not have a positive outcome. But I knew I needed to try. I needed to do anything I could to save Sevastien.

I turned a corner onto an abandoned looking street. The cobblestones under my feet were uneven and smashed and the buildings around me had windows laced with cracks. A door to my left was falling off its hinges. A normal person would have stayed away from this place, but a rush of happy memories filled my head as I looked around. The first time I had visited this street I was twelve years old and so new to the world of magic. My heart had beat loudly in my chest as Adrik led me through the veil to the

Unclean, my small hand closed around his larger one. I had been astonished at the world that lay just beyond the reach of those without magic.

Today, however, I crept up to the veil of the Unclean alone. Halfway down the street a shimmering hung in the air. I reached out and touched it as pain prickled up my fingers and my arm. The Unclean was only open to those with a magical gift, but even then, getting in wasn't a painless process. My fingers sank into the cold veil as I pushed it aside and stepped into the heart of dark magic in Saint Petersburg.

The Unclean had remained the same since my last visit. As I passed through, the temperature around me dropped ten degrees and I wrapped my cloak even tighter around me. Its threadbare fabric offered little protection from the cold, but it was almost better that way. I had dug into the back of my closet to find my old clothes. I had had a specific wardrobe here. Anything too fancy and I would get mugged, so I wore my most grungy clothes to keep myself hidden from the prying eyes of those around me. I would never wear my fur coat into the ghetto.

In response to the cold, groups of people had started fires in barrels and hands and bodies fought for precious space around the glowing flames. The fires provided plenty of light for the surrounding space. The merchants and dwellers of the Unclean wouldn't waste time or resources lighting candles. It wasn't something necessary.

Walking around was like walking through a covered city square. Merchants lined the sides, haggling their wares to those who wanted to try their hand at more complex spells. Young children ran around the legs of the adults, their ash smudged cheeks giving them an unnatural pallor. Weathered grey tents were interspersed throughout the

Unclean, as many *koldun* had set up a temporary home here. It was safer for many than trying to hide from the government out in the open.

My boots made no sound as I crossed the cobblestone street. Years of wear from hundreds of trips to the Unclean had made them soft and supple, perfect for remaining undetected when I wanted to be. As I passed by a fire, I caught the eye of a skinny young man with greasy hair. He stood without a cloak and his shirt was a patchwork of different materials with a deep red patch over his heart. He didn't appear cold, but his words were as he spoke. "Welcome home, little fox."

The use of my old nickname jolted me, and I pulled my attention away from the boy and hurried toward my destination. Even under my cloak, my red hair and short stature were recognized by the people of the Unclean and had gained me the nickname of fox. I had grown up here, practiced my craft here, and made a name for myself. I was well-respected by most and well-feared by some. This had been my home, but it now felt like I was a stranger.

I picked my way through the streets, keeping my eyes down to attempt to avoid any more unnecessary attention. My feet knew the way by heart through the street to the heart of Unclean, past the merchant stalls and fires to Adrik's tent.

The tent had always been a bright spot of color in the Unclean, a splash of deep red almost like the color of dried blood amongst the other grey tents. Adrik was the only *koldun* feared enough to have a colored tent. Many *koldun* feared that there would be a raid of the Unclean, so they stuck to their neutral colors, hoping someone else would draw the attention of the crowd. But Adrik had never cared if someone noticed him. He had always wanted to be noticed.

I stopped and regarded the tent. I couldn't predict how Adrik would treat me when I entered. Our last parting had been on negative terms, but I hoped he would be willing to forgive me. I would even be willing to work with him again if it meant he would help me save Sevastien. I inhaled deeply, the air filled with smoke all around me, and pushed my way in.

Silver orbs of light greeted me as I passed into the main chamber of Adrik's quarters. Lavish velvet couches in shades of burgundy were placed around the edges, with bookshelves and shelves of other magical items lining the tent walls. Adrik's prized knife sat on its pedestal on a shelf and ornate Persian rugs covered the floor. Hallways branched off the main chamber, leading to Adrik's personal rooms, training dens, and other places I had been forbidden to explore.

"My, my, my." A voice like honey spoke into the air, "The little fox has returned to her den."

I stood very still as Adrik rose from one of the couches, cracked his neck, and made his way toward me slowly, like a lion circling its prey. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on edge, but I forced myself to keep stay calm. My eyes moved to the floor and began tracing the golden details of one of the rugs. I needed his help and the only way I could be able to get it was to behave and pretend to be the devoted student I had once been.

"Adrik," I began, my voice taking the tone it had once known here in the Unclean. It was a sound of calculation and cold, like the *koldun* I was known to be within these walls. "I should have returned sooner."

“And yet,” Adrik said as he finally reached me, “you didn’t.” A long, pale finger touched my chin, sending a spark through me. Adrik lifted my chin. Brown met milky white as I stared into the swirling depths of his eyes. His irises were nothing more than faint grey circles in the snow white of his eyes. His eyes looked like they should be blind, but Adrik could see all too well. On certain days, I swore the man could look into the inner depths of my soul. It felt like he knew all of my darkest secrets, and some days I didn’t feel like he liked what saw. I wasn’t dark enough.

“Why are you here, little fox?” I remained quiet as Adrik spoke. His face hadn’t changed in the since I’d last seen it. His cheekbones were pronounced and his face was gaunt. His ebony hair was as ruffled and unkempt as ever, always at odds with the collected persona I knew. He was wearing a full black suit, perfectly tailored in every way. Everything about the man said *run* but I forced my feet to stay where they were.

“I’m here to beg for forgiveness.” I almost choked on the words, on the very falseness of them. “I came to ask for your help.”

Adrik circled me. “And what makes you think that I, after everything you’ve done, will help you? What makes you think I won’t just kill you now?”

My jaw tensed. I hadn’t considered that option. “Because you value confidence,” I said. “And my very presence here speaks of confidence.”

“Or of stupidity,” Adrik stopped in front of me again. “I’m still deciding which.”

I took a deep breath and continued the story I had practiced in my head. “I regret deeply what I did that night. I ask for your forgiveness and your help, though if you decide my death is the retribution for my actions, I understand.” I returned my eyes to the

ground, ever the humble student. The tenseness in the air sharpened, and I found myself counting my heartbeats as if they were my last.

“Little fox, I give you my forgiveness.” My eyes shot up to meet Adrik’s. He was smiling with all of his abnormally white teeth and I felt a lurch in my stomach. This was too easy.

Adrik stalked back to his couch and sank down, the plush burgundy velvet giving way under his weight. “Sit and tell me all of your troubles.”

I gingerly perched at the edge of the couch and took a breath. “My boyfriend is dying.”

“A boyfriend?” Adrik questioned. “Things have changed since you left.”

“He’s dying from an illness the doctors don’t understand and I need your help.”

“Is he coughing up blood and losing his memories? Because that has been all too common.” Adrik ran a hand through his hair. “I think some of the scum living here are planning to use their dead to build those fires of theirs.”

“Yes, those are his symptoms,” I responded. “I need to save him and the *vedma* aren’t powerful enough to help.”

Adrik scoffed and rolled his eyes. “The *vedma* couldn’t save someone if their lives depended on it. The *koldun* have always been the superior ones. Isn’t that right, Kazik?”

My attention shifted to the other side of the room, where a boy was lurking in the shadows of the hall. Pale blue eyes shot in my direction and Kazik ran a hand through hair so pale it was almost white. He carried a thick leather-bound volume in his hand. I hadn’t detected his footsteps, but Adrik’s ears were like that of a hawk. My old partner-

in-crime was wearing a grey sweater, pushed up at the elbows to reveal a map of the same pale scars that I had. He was lanky but toned, and I took notice of the muscles in his shoulders. Some things hadn't changed.

“Stop lurking and find something else to do,” Adrik said, waving Kazik away with a quick hand motion. Kazik melted back into the shadows, his hair the last thing of him I saw before even that was gone. His hair had always reminded me of a ghost, and while I had never called him that to his face, I had always called him that in my head. I knew that he would find somewhere else in the tent to hide and spy. He always wanted to have his finger on the pulse.

“Regardless,” I said, “I need your help. I attempted a healing spell, but it didn't work.”

“So you're asking me to fix things instead?” Adrik appeared amused by my request. “I haven't had to do a healing spell like the one you're requesting in a number of years.”

“Please, Adrik.” I was getting close to begging now. I didn't have another option if this didn't work. “Sevastien's my world.”

“I suppose I can help,” Adrik said. “After all, you were my favorite student.”

Adrik rose from the couch and sauntered over to a bookshelf. He pulled a particularly dusty volume off the shelf and flipped through the pages until finally finding what he was looking for. His finger trailed across the page and he looked back up at me.

“You wouldn't happen to have a bit of this boy's blood, would you?”

I reached into the pocket of my trousers, which were a ready alternative to my dress, and pulled forth one of the soaked handkerchiefs from Sevastien's bedroom.

“Smart girl,” Adrik replied. “It should be a relatively quick spell, but I’m going to need you to help, since you’re the one that is so emotionally invested in this boy.”

“Thank you, Adrik,” I said, feeling my heart begin to soar. This was it. I was going to save my love.

“Just make sure to invite me to the wedding,” he responded, already pulling a knife from his belt and making the first cut on his lower arm. “I truly love weddings.”

I pulled my knife from my belt as well and made my cut. Crimson blood spilled forth and I looked toward Adrik for guidance.

“Repeat after me,” he said and then began to say the words of the spell. I repeated after him as he took the handkerchief. He placed it on my arm and I felt an intense pain in my heart. It was like a ripping apart of my body and having it placed back together in the wrong ways. I looked into Adrik’s eyes, finished my final line, and everything went dark.

Chapter 4

“Magic craves balance. There is a give and take to everything in the universe, and magic is no different.” – A Brief History of Magic by Andrei Ivanov

My body felt like it had been run over by a herd of horses. An aching pain was racing up and down my spine and I had to grit my teeth to bear it. I opened my eyes and tried to remember what had happened and where I was. Adrik’s tent came into focus around me. Kazik was cleaning a knife and Adrik was lounging on one of his couches, reading an old tome of a book. I tried to sit up and instantly regretted that decision as the pain turned sharp on my back. Something wasn’t right. I could feel my heart beating the way I always had, but now it felt like it was beating twice. It was like a phantom heartbeat, not entirely my own but also part of me somehow.

My mouth was a desert when I finally found the words to speak. “What did you do to me?”

Adrik closed his book with a small thud and turned his attention toward me. His lips were pulled up in a hint of a smile.

“Oh, little fox,” he purred. “Forgiveness isn’t a word that I know.”

Horror hit me. “What did you do?”

Adrik leaned forward on his couch to place his elbows on his knees. He was the picture of calm and collection. The perfect predator, a spider in its web that I had so willingly thrown myself into. “I was quite kind, if you stop and think about it. I could have killed you both right here and now. At least this way you’ll have a little more time together.”

I managed to find the strength to move into a sitting position. Running my fingers over the soft threads of the rugs around me, I tried to calm my breathing as it skyrocketed. My heart was pumping faster than normal, but the second heartbeat stayed at a consistent tempo. My anxiety wasn't affecting it. It was like the other heart was asleep.

Realization dawned on me. "You linked our lives together." My words were soft and hesitant, hopeful that Adrik hadn't done this to me. "Sevastien and I are sharing the same life force."

"It's really poetic," Adrik replied, leaning back on his couch. He threw his arms behind his head and looked away from me. "Now the two of you will die at the same time."

It was time to beg. There was nothing else I could do to try and sway this man to come to my side and help me. "Adrik, please."

My old mentor's head snapped to look at me and I flinched, instantly feeling the pain in my spine. The frozen look on his face told me that my pleas had fallen on deaf ears.

"Did you really believe," he began, rising and stalking toward me, "that after ruining my chance at making the world a better place for people like us that I would help you? You're not even worthy of a clean death to me anymore."

Adrik's words brought me back. There had been a plan. I had had a job. I had failed.

"I couldn't kill him," I began. "It didn't seem right."

“The tsar would kill you if given half the chance,” Adrik knelt down before me. “You were given one job. But you didn’t kill the tsar like you were supposed to, little fox. You killed Kostya instead.”

There hadn’t even been any blood when Kostya died. It had felt so unnatural, given what we were. He had just fallen, the light fading from his eyes as my spell took effect. Kostya had pushed me too hard. I didn’t want to be a monster and kill the tsar. But I had become a monster of a different type instead. I had murdered a friend.

“There will never be a day that I don’t regret my actions.” Tears were building behind my eyes. I couldn’t cry here. I had learned the importance of strength in front of Adrik, even if I as currently sitting on the ground.

“Anya,” Adrik continued, looking at me with those unnatural milky eyes, “you ruined everything that I had planned. We would have been free to practice our magic in the open. You could have grown even stronger. You might even have been stronger than me one day. But because of you, we continue to hide in this desolate place. We hide in the damp and the dark and are hunted for what we are. This is your fault, little fox.”

It wasn’t my fault. I was trying to do the right thing. “But I was - ”

“I’ve given you and your boyfriend a little extra time together.” Adrik was done listening to my pleas. “Call it mercy or whatever you’d like, but you’ll both wither and die from the illness the same as any other person. You’ll just do that together now.”

My heart sunk to my stomach while Sevastien’s continued to beat on, completely unaware of the awful fate that we now bore. Adrik rose and turned his back on me. He walked towards the entrance to his personal chambers but hesitated before leaving.

“Enjoy your misery, little fox,” my old master said to me over his shoulder. “Now get out before I change my mind and kill you after all.” With that, his soft steps were the only sign he had left as I dropped my head in my hands and cried.

Coming home, I had snuck through the servants’ quarters and back into my rooms. Mother shouldn’t have been around, but I didn’t want to run the risk of running into anyone who might ask questions about my tattered apparel and puffy red eyes. The pain in my spine was a consistent dull ache, a constant reminder that I had made a terrible mistake. Not just in trying to save Sevastien, but in trying to right my wrongs with Adrik. I knew my old tutor and I should have guessed the reaction I would have if I returned.

I climbed the spiral staircase that led from the servants’ quarters, opening an old oak door and crossing a threshold before I was in my wing of the household. I briskly walked toward my rooms before shutting myself inside with a satisfying *click* of the lock.

Think, Anya. There were options. There had to be options to save us both. It was no longer just Sevastien’s life on the line. I didn’t want to die yet either. I knelt by my bed, felt under it with my gloved fingers until I found what I was looking for. With a strong tug, I pulled a weathered green trunk from underneath my bed. It had been a long time since it had seen the light of day and a thick layer of dust had settled on top and into its crevices. I took my knife out of my boot once again. Laying the blade against my skin, I made another quick cut before running my fingers across the blood and placing them on top of the trunk.

“*Otkrytyy.*” The satisfying *clink* of the lock snapped and I pulled the lid up and off the trunk, revealing all of my precious grimoires and spell tools inside.

Adrik had given me my first grimoire on my first visit to the Unclean when I was just a child, but I had collected the rest from visits to the *volshebnyy* market over the last five years. Dozens of thick leather volumes were layered on top of each other, mixed in with crystals, rolls of parchment, and a few extra knives that I kept around in case I should lose my cherished blade.

I picked up the first text from the pile and went straight to the table of contents. I scanned the lines with my finger, trying to find anything that talked about life forces and how to unjoin them. Nothing. I picked up the next volume and found an entry for entwined life forces. I paged through the grimoire violently, tearing a page in the process. When I found the entry, it was nothing more than a note on the fact that life forces can be linked together. I dropped the grimoire with a thud on the floor, which sent a cloud of dust into the air around me. The next book went the same way. No luck on how to untangle life forces. The next gave me little information on how to bind life forces together and the next wasn't any more helpful than the first. A scream of frustration was building itself in my throat, and I had to push it back down. I didn't need to scream. I didn't need to let anyone know that anything was wrong.

Paging through the last grimoire, I finally felt myself losing any form of hope. Adrik was the strongest *koldun* I knew. If he crafted a binding spell, there wasn't any way that I would be able to break it. My search had been for nothing. I was doomed. I just didn't want to accept that yet.

I piled the books back into the chest and slid it underneath my bed again. I wiped up any remaining dust on my floor with my cloak before throwing into onto my four-poster bed. Nothing was amiss in my room now. The pistachio-colored walls were the

same and the emerald green bedding was unbothered, with the exception of the cloak resting on it. My cream-colored wardrobe still sat in the corner and my French doors that led out onto my private balcony remained closed. Nothing was different in the physical sense, but I could feel that my life was ending.

Pacing across my hardwood floors, I considered my options. I could talk to a *vedma*, but I had never met one that was willing to talk to me before. And Doctor Kuznetsov had said that the *vedma* weren't willing to help on this particular issue, so that idea was out. I could go to the *volshhebnyy* market and try to find a new grimoire that might give me more information on how to untangle life forces, but that would be a stretch to find. I knew a few booksellers that catered to the *koldun*, but none of them had ever had something so specific.

A walk. I needed to get some fresh air. I grabbed my cloak off the bed and rushed back out of my bedroom and down the servants' stairs. The fresh air was always good at helping me think.

I walked away from my house and toward the small park near my home. I had spent hours in this park over the last few years, and it was a place of calm for my racing mind. Couples promenaded arm in arm among the pathways and children were playing in snow while their nannies watched from nearby benches, knitting scarves and socks. I strode along my favorite path, hoping that if I continued along my way something would hit me.

The air was crisp, but there wasn't any wind to bring the burning cold that was typical for December. I suddenly remembered that I was wearing my Unclean clothes when I caught the attention of a nanny who was knitting a red scarf. She looked at me

and the look of disgust made it clear that I wasn't welcomed here. I picked up my pace and wandered off the path and into the trees surrounding the park instead. It was time that I was alone for a little bit.

I found a familiar oak tree far from the views of nannies and couples and sat down in the snow. Carvings lined the trunk, and I allowed myself to stop and stare at them for a minute. Most of them had been done by my hand when I had been trying to think or when I had simply run away from my mother for a few precious moments of peace. I traced my fingers over a star that I'd hacked into the wood before sinking on my knees into the snow. I didn't care that I was getting wet; that was truly the least of my concerns. I stared into the rest of the trees and felt my tears finally starting to flow. I was quick to brush them away, lest they freeze on my face.

“Ya know, crying isn't going to fix anything.”

I jumped at the calm voice that had disturbed my solitude. I glanced around me and couldn't find anyone, and felt my attention instantly go to my boot. I reached for my knife and heard a chuckle.

“No point in that, little fox.” The voice was coming from above me, so I turned my attention to the branches of the tree. A blonde head and ice blue eyes met my attention. “You know we're a pretty even match in a fight.”

Kazik. Just the person I didn't want to see.

Chapter 5

“Koldun magic is a simple process. A koldun simply has to provide their blood and speak the correct spell for their magic to take hold. However, not all koldun have the same strength and cannot craft the same spells.” – A Brief History of Magic Brief History of Magic by Andrei Ivanov

“The hell do you want?” I asked through gritted teeth. Kazik continued to smirk down at me from his position in the tree, all toned limbs and arrogance. I couldn’t believe that I hadn’t seen him; there weren’t even any leaves on the tree. He was practically lounging there, calm and collected and ever a total prick. I slid my hands inside my cloak and under my arms to keep them warm but also to keep myself from reaching for my blade and throwing it at Kazik as hard as I could.

Kazik batted his eyelashes at me. “Oh, you know me, little fox. I’m just hanging around.” As he spoke, he rolled his body off the branch but hooked his legs onto it, so that he was swinging upside down. His blonde hair fell away from his eyes, and he breathed out a puff of air that materialized in front of him.

“Hang around somewhere else,” I said, my jaw tense. “I don’t need Adrik’s pet following me around.”

Kazik held his hand to his heart in mock surprise. “Me? Adrik’s pet? I would never.” He snickered and rolled his eyes. “Of course, someone had to take up the position once you left, so I guess I’m guilty as charged.”

He was insufferable. I rose to my feet, my knees popping as I did.

“I said, what do you want?” I pushed the words out of my mouth and towards Kazik’s face with effort. Kazik’s cheeks were pink from the cold, a contrast to his pale skin. His hair was almost as white as the snow by my boots and his eyes were bright. I wanted to punch him right in his nose. Maybe then it wouldn’t be so straight.

Kazik ignored my question and instead flipped himself off the tree branch and landed with a soft thud. He ran a quick hand through his hair before rustling in the pocket of his grey coat and pulling out a silver cigarette case. The case was carved with two initials that must have belonged to the previous owner. Kazik had nicked it, along with its contents, three years ago when we were on an errand for Adrik. He took it with him everywhere he went and always made sure that it was in pristine condition.

Kazik pulled out a cigarette and placed it between his lips before grabbing his worn matchbox. He lit the cigarette, crushed the now useless match, and blew a puff of smoke in my face.

“You look good, Anya,” Kazik said, taking another puff of smoke. His tone was sarcastic and sly. “Must be those fancy parties you go to.”

“What. Do. You. Want?” I spat the words at him and watched with satisfaction as he cringed back ever so slightly. “Answer or I leave.”

Kazik flicked the ash away from his cigarette. “You have a problem,” he said. “And I might be able to offer a solution.”

“I don’t know why Adrik is having you bother me, but I’m sure that I can figure this out on my own.” My words were lies. Wasn’t I in the park because I couldn’t think of another solution to Sevastien and my linked life forces? Almost like an answer, I felt the second heartbeat in my chest quicken. Sevastien must be awake.

“Believe it or not, but I am capable of making some of my own decisions,” Kazik remarked. He finished his cigarette, dropping it to the ground, grinding it in with his worn boot before shoving his hand in his pocket.

“Doubtful at best,” I responded. The cold was finally seeping through my wet cloak. It was time for me to go home and get warm or I would be sick, and that was not something that I wanted to have to explain to my mother. “Goodbye, Kazik.”

I turned on my heel and took one step forward before Kazik spoke.

“I suppose you don’t want my help saving your boyfriend’s life, then.”

I spun around and my attention snapped back on Kazik. He was staring at the gown, a smirk playing at his lips as he dragged his boot through the snow.

“What do you know?” I didn’t move toward him, worried that this was just going to be another trick of his. Kazik and I had never been close, partly due to Adrik’s insistence that I not place my trust in anyone outside of him and partly due to Kazik’s personality, but I hadn’t spent five years with Kazik to not learn some of his mannerisms.

“It’s a who, actually. She goes by the name of Natalya.” He didn’t move his gaze from the ground. “Might be able to help you.”

I took a step forward, hoping that it didn’t come across as hesitant. “How can she help?”

“I can’t go giving all my secrets away, can I?” Kazik’s ice-blue eyes finally made their way to my brown ones. “You have to put some trust in me first.”

“Why should I trust you?” I asked. I wouldn’t get my hopes up. If I couldn’t find anything in my mountains of grimoires, then I doubt Kazik could do any better than me.

And yet, I wondered if maybe he could. Maybe he did know someone that could help me. It was unlikely, but everyone has secrets. Everyone has something that they keep to themselves, and maybe this is that something for Kazik.

I had been taught to never trust anybody but myself and Adrik, and that hadn't turned out too well. Kazik may be tied to Adrik in some way, but at this point, what was trusting him going to hurt? I was already dying, whether I felt it already or not. Sevastien was dying too. Adrik had given us a few days. I should make the most of the time that I was given.

"You should trust me," Kazik said, finally looking at me and pointing to my head with a long finger, "because your hair is turning grey."

I scrambled to grab the hair that he was pointing to and saw that it had changed from the vibrant auburn strands that I knew to an ashy grey that was unrecognizable for me. It was dry and coarse between my fingertips, unlike the other smooth locks that surrounded it. I tugged on it, hoping that it wouldn't break off, but a few hairs clung to my fingers.

Take the offer. You've got nothing to lose.

The hearts in my chest were pounding, mine continuing to keep up its rapid pace while Sevastien's was a steady *thump* in the background. I didn't want his heart to go out, but I certainly didn't want it to continue beating in my chest. It occurred to me that Sevastien might be confused about the two hearts racing in his chest, but now was not the time to be concerned with that. Now was the time for action.

"Fine," I said, letting the grey hairs fall from my fingers into the thick white snow beneath my boots. "What do I need to do?"

Kazik's lips pulled back in a crooked smile that spoke of mischief and a wilder nature that I couldn't quite place. "I never thought you'd ask."

Chapter 6

*“Be careful of the ones that walk in the night,
the ones with their arms all in blood,
be careful of the ones who whisper in your ear,
and make your life come undone”* – Children’s Song, Date Unknown

Claiming sickness had always been the way that I wiggled out of society functions with my mother, and tonight was no exception. Kazik needed to return to Adrik in the Unclean, so we decided to meet after nightfall. The only problem with that plan was that I was supposed to be at another gala this evening. Lucky for me, Mother wanted to deal with a sick daughter less than she wanted to deal with me at a party, so I was able to feign an upset stomach and remain in bed. And, given Sevastien’s illness, Mother claimed that I was keeping everyone else healthy by remaining home.

“Truly tragic, that story,” she had said, letting out a sob while Papa had draped her fur coat over her shoulders. “Anya will never find anyone to marry her now.”

Papa was attending the gala with Mother tonight, a treat that I was sorry I would be missing. He rarely was able to tear himself away from his work to spend evenings with us at galas, and I always enjoyed spending time with Papa. His deep laugh and calming aura brought a sense of peace to our high-strung family. Mother was always slightly more relaxed when she was at his side, though that wasn’t saying much.

Before my parents left, Papa came into my room and pressed a kiss to my forehead, his moustache tickling my skin. His eyes twinkled through his glasses at me and he gave me a conspiratorial smile.

“Can’t believe you’re leaving me to deal with your mother alone,” he said. Giggles rose from my belly like small butterflies and Papa joined me with a chuckle of his own. “Rest up, little one.”

Now that I was alone, I pushed around the soup that I was having for dinner with my spoon. Chunks of beef and thickly sliced carrots rose to the top as I stirred, the bowl warm to the touch. Loneliness crept up on me soundlessly, and I wondered what Sevastien was feeling right now. I hoped that he was asleep, though I hadn’t seen him since this morning and didn’t know any of the updates about his condition. Were his memories coming back or were they gone permanently? Was he able to sit up and carry on a conversation? Anxiety about him weighed on my shoulders like a wet blanket, cold and heavy.

As I continued to stare into the golden broth of my soup, my thoughts walked backward. Sometimes I thought of what life would have been like if I had had siblings, someone to share the pressure of Mother’s approval with, someone to laugh and play with. Would my brothers or sisters also have shared my inclination for magic? Would we have gotten along? I knew family friends that had a few siblings, but they were never the topic of conversation. Still, I wished that I had someone in my life that I could count on to be by my side through everything. Sevastien was supposed to fill that void for me when we got married. Now everything was a race against the clock.

A tapping came from the window to the left of my bed. A signal. I pushed back the thick green comforter that lay over me and my bed to reveal my outfit underneath. The blanket had managed to hide my thick black trousers and oatmeal sweater that had begun to fray at the cuffs. While they had once hung off my childish frame, they now fit

well. I had changed first thing when I had made it back to the safety of my room, walking into my closet and finding my old Unclean clothes in the far back corner, in another locked trunk that none of the servants had been able to open or remove. One of the slight conveniences to having magic was that you could keep your own secrets.

I knocked back on my window, signaling to Kazik that I had heard him and was coming outside. The thick leather gloves on my hands kept me from feeling the cold of the glass on my fingers, but the frost creeping up from the corners of my windows told me that it was going to be a chilly night. My cloak might not be my best protector against the elements tonight.

Regardless, I blew out the candles around my room but left the fire going in my ornate fireplace. The flames glowed bright orange and I stood next to them for a minute, contemplating my decision while also preparing myself to enter the now frigid cold. Kazik very easily could be lying about what he knew. He had done that to me a few times before, though not about anything as serious as this. This whole thing could be a trap, another punishment of Adrik's that was meant to take away any hope that I had regarding my ability to break the bond between Sevastien and I. But still, I needed to know.

My boots masked my footfalls as I crept out of my room, closed the door, and once again took the servants' staircase to the main level. I took the stairs two at a time, trying to stay light on my feet and make as little noise as possible while also keeping up my speed. Once I reached the bottom step, I pushed through the small wooden door that led to the back garden of our estate.

While the inside of my house always reminded me of a museum, spotless, clean, and perfect, the garden was wild. I spent plenty of time here in the brief summer months,

picking crocus flowers specifically because Mother didn't want me to, hiding among the birch trees, and laying in the grass reading books that Mother called "unladylike."

Despite her cold nature, Mother had created a safe haven for me in the garden, though she had no idea. Her flowerbeds, full of delicate petals of purple, white, and yellow, were my stomping ground when I was a young girl and they still brought me joy.

Snow clung to each individual branch of the trees, and miniature icicles hung from each tip and glistened in the light of the ornate iron streetlamps that ran along the perimeter of the garden. I traced the ground with my eyes, looking for footprints that might give me an idea of Kazik's location. He had been here a few times, always coming to collect me to do an errand for Adrik. He would always materialize out of a different corner or tree. He had an affection for trees I didn't quite understand. They were like a second home for him, and he seemed almost as comfortable among the branches than with his feet firmly planted on the ground.

"Kazik?" I hissed, not seeing his tall frame in any of the trees immediately around me. I didn't see his footprints either.

I took a few steps forward, wincing as I stepped on a stray branch that cracked under my weight.

"Very subtle." Kazik's husky voice whispered into my ear, tickling the back of my neck. I jumped to the left and spun, making him chuckle under his breath. Of all the things I missed about the Unclean and my *koldun* magic, I never missed Kazik's sense of humor.

Kazik was dressed the same way he had been earlier. A light grey sweater was layered underneath a darker grey jacket with eight silver buttons that were slightly

tarnished with age. Black trousers that were slightly too long for his tall frame led to his black boots that had a small hole in the sole from putting out too many cigarettes. He was the picture of a gentleman from a distance, but the devil was in the details.

“I’m here like you asked,” I said, gesturing at the empty garden. “Are you going to tell me the plan or not?”

Kazik rolled his eyes but the smile on his face was permanent. “There will be time for all that later. But for the moment, I know a *vedma* that might help.”

“Where is she?” I tried not to let my voice give away the hope that I was feeling, though I heard it increase at least a few tones. A *vedma* that was willing to help would be a miracle, given what Doctor Kuznetsov had told me.

“Near the *volshebnyy* market,” Kazik replied, cracking his neck in both directions. “I met her when I was there on an errand.”

“And you’re certain she’ll help us?”

“I’m not certain of anything, little fox.” Kazik said. “I just know that she might have the ability to fix whatever mess you got your boyfriend into.”

I glared at him, hoping my gaze was as sharp as the knife in my boot. “I didn’t cause Sevastien to get sick.”

“No, but you didn’t get your life forces bonded together, which basically cements both of your deaths instead of just his,” Kazik stated matter-of-factly. He shrugged his shoulders before continuing. “That’s pretty much worse.”

I was going to kill him if he kept riding on my nerves the way he was.

“We’re bringing Sevastien with us,” I said, walking to the gate of the garden and reaching for it. “We’re going to need him for the spell once we get to the *vedma*.”

Before I grabbed the gate, Kazik grabbed my wrist with enough force to cause pain before pulling me back to face him.

“Are you crazy?” he spat, anger turning his blue eyes to ice. “Do you know what a terrible idea that is?”

“If the *vedma* knows how to fix him, he needs to be there to be fixed,” I stated, yanking my arm out of Kazik’s grasp. “Their magic doesn’t work long distance like ours.”

“I know that,” Kazik shot back, “but he’s sick and will only slow us down. Plus, does he even know what you are? Is this really how you want him to find out?”

Kazik was right about all of that, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of knowing it. Sevastien would slow us down, but I didn’t want either of us to get sicker while we were trying to save him.

“We’re bringing him with. End of story.”

Kazik’s exasperated sigh was all the answer I got before he opened the gate. “Lead the way.”

We walked through the night without speaking. The only noise that cut through the silence was our sniffing to keep our noses from running due to the cold. I led the way with Kazik close behind. It was odd, us walking together like this, just like old times. It was comforting in a way.

I pulled my cloak closer around my neck and touched my hair to make sure that it was all hidden under my hood. I only wore half of my usual disguise and felt odd without it. Adrik insisted on my disguising myself whenever I ran errands for him, so I had taken

to dressing like a man. Tonight I only had my cloak, trousers, and boots to convince the world that I was a gentleman. I hoped it would work.

The lamps were lit outside of the Sevastien's house, so I stopped us at the corner to their street. Kazik leaned against a neighboring fence and pulled a cigarette from his pocket. I got a glimpse of his hands which were covered by a pair of fingerless gloves and wondered if his fingers ever got cold.

“What's the plan, little fox?” Kazik said, cigarette glowing between his fingertips in between each puff of smoke. His whole stance portrayed irritation.

I bit my lip and tried to think. There was no plan, at least, not yet. I had realized along the way that I couldn't just walk through the front door, which didn't leave a few options. I regarded outside of the two-story white Solokov manor and tried to come up with any way in.

Think, Anya.

“The window,” I said as a plan finally materialized in my head. “Sevastien has two big windows in his room.”

Kazik inhaled deeply from his cigarette and blew his smoke in my direction. “And what floor is his room on?”

“It's on the second floor.”

If looks could kill, I would be dead. Very, very dead. Kazik took one more drag off his cigarette before flicking the butt into the snow. He took a deep breath and clenched his fists in what looked to be an attempt to control his anger.

“And how, brilliant Anya, do you plan to get through this boy's second floor window and get said boy to leave with you?”

I made a mental note to never tell Kazik a half-finished plan ever again before grabbing him by the wrist and dragging him to the right side of the house by a birch tree that had long lost its leaves. I took Kazik's hand and pointed toward the gently illuminated window on the second floor that looked into Sevastien's room.

"That's the one we're going into," I stated, finally releasing Kazik's wrist and letting his gloved hand fall back to his side.

"Bold of you to assume that I'm going in there with you," Kazik said as he returned his hands to his pockets. "Your boyfriend, your problem. He shouldn't even be coming with."

The light from the streetlamps was dimmer toward right side of the house, and Kazik's face was hard to view from the shadows. I could just make out the curve of his jaw and his ruffled hair, but the tone of his voice was apparent.

I approached the exterior wall of the house and gestured for Kazik to follow.

"I'm going to need you to help me get Sevastien out." My voice was solid, but my confidence was not.

I heard Kazik mutter something under his breath, but he crouched down beside me and leaned against the wall. He motioned toward his shoulders and, out of habit, I stepped onto his legs before eventually making it onto his shoulders. Once I was stable, Kazik rose up to his full height and I was just high enough to reach the window ledge and glance inside.

Sevastien lay in bed, his chest rising and falling with the steady rhythm of sleep. His face was paler than I had ever seen it, but he wasn't tossing and turning with nightmares like he had been the day before, now that he had my life force and strength to

sustain him. The pile of handkerchiefs that had been lying on his bedside table had been removed and had been replaced with a copy of *The Poetry of Alexander Pushkin*. The armchair from the corner of the room that I had spent so much time in had been moved to sit beside Sevastien's bed, near his head.

I grasped the window frame in both hands and pushed up, hoping beyond all hope that the window wasn't locked. I shoved the window up, but stopped when the door to the bedroom opened and Sevastien's mom walked in.

I inhaled sharply and almost lost my balance on Kazik's shoulders, but I steadied myself.

"What's happening?" Kazik hissed up at me. I ignored his question and instead took in the sight of Marina Solkova.

She looked tense, understandably so. Her always perfect hair was frizzy around her face, and her dress was ruffled to match. She carried a teacup in her hand, which she set on Sevastien's bedside table. She ran touched his cheek before walking back out of the room.

"Anya!" Kazik hissed from below me. "What's taking so long?"

"There was someone else in the room," I replied, turning my face away from the window and down toward Kazik to keep the sound from traveling.

"Shit," Kazik said, his voice low. "We need to leave him."

"No," I replied. "I'm going to get him."

The words were barely out of my mouth before I shoved the window open and grabbed the inside of the windowsill. With all my strength, I pulled my torso through and

felt the bottom of the window pressing into my stomach. Kicking my feet to give myself some more momentum, I wiggled my way in and fell in a heap on the hardwood floor.

I held my breath and waited for Sevastien to move or Marina to return, but no one did. I rose quickly and stuck my head back out and looked down to find Kazik staring back up at me.

“I’ll meet you at the front door,” Kazik said. “There’s no way we’re going to be able to get you and lover boy out of the window after the spectacle you just performed to get in.”

“But no one in the house can know that he’s leaving,” I whisper-shouted back at him.

“Someone is going to notice eventually that he’s not where he’s supposed to be,” Kazik replied. “Might as well make our lives easier right now.” With that, Kazik disappeared into the darkness and I turned back toward Sevastien.

He slept soundly, but I needed to do this as quietly as I could to keep Marina from coming back. I sat on the bed and leaned over Sevastien and placed one of my gloved hands over his mouth. With the other, I shook Sevastien’s shoulder roughly. He woke with a jolt and made a startled noise that was muffled by my hand.

“Sevastien, it’s Anya,” I said, removing my hand from his mouth and gesturing at myself. “You need to get up and come with me.”

“Who? I don’t know you.” Sevastien said, blinking at me with groggy eyes. “Why am I getting up?”

I was already walking toward his closet on quiet feet and pulling out a thick jacket for him to wear. I brought it back to the bed and laid it down across his lap.

“I’ll explain everything in a minute, but I need you to hurry and put on your jacket,” I said.

“But won’t Mother need to know where I’m going?” Sevastien’s voice seemed so small, and I turned to see him looking for his mother. “I need to tell her.”

“No,” I hissed, reaching for his hand before he called for his mother. “It needs to be our little secret.” I intertwined his fingers in mine and smiled my best smile at him, but the look in Sevastien’s eyes was pure confusion.

“But I don’t know you,” Sevastien said. His voice was quiet, almost as if he was unsure of his answer.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. The linking of our life forces apparently only stopped the physical progression of the disease. The mental effects weren’t reversed and had apparently only gotten worse in the time that I had spent away from him.

“I’m your girlfriend,” I said, grabbing Sevastien’s coat with my free hand and rising from the bed. “And we’re going to just be gone for a little bit, so we don’t need to tell your mother.”

Sevastien looked at me for a moment. “Are you sure Mother won’t mind?”

“She’ll be just fine,” I lied. With all the concern about his mother, he was starting to seem like an eight-year-old.

Sevastien nodded and pushed his comforter off of himself and started to rise. I cringed as the bed creaked underneath him.

I helped Sevastien into his coat and I dragged him toward the door to his bedroom. I opened it and thanked whoever did the maintenance of the house when the

hinges didn't squeak. A few candles lit the way down the stairs, and I saw Kazik leaning against the doorframe and playing with something small in his hand.

"About time," he said, straightening up and putting his hands once again into his pockets.

"Who's that?" Sevastien asked, pointing at Kazik. He had stopped in his tracks at the sight of Kazik, and despite how much I tugged at his hand, he refused to step forward.

"That's a friend of yours," I said in my most soothing voice possible, even as my heart began to race. I could feel Sevastien's racing too, and I wondered how I could possibly get his to calm down because two frantic hearts were not helping me stay calm. "He's going to help you feel better."

Kazik did a mock bow and tipped an imaginary top hat at Sevastien. "Kazimir Volkov, at your service."

I shook my head at Kazik, who only looked back at me with mischievous eyes. I turned to Sevastien, who was now pulling against my grip.

"I need to tell Mother where I'm going," he said, tugging even harder to get away from me. "She needs to know where I'm going."

Sevastien opened his mouth and I reached toward it with my gloved hand, but it was too late. He yelled for his mother, and I heard frantic footsteps across the wooden floor and the sound of the door slamming before Marina came running in.

"Sevastien," Marina breathed, taking in the sight of us coming down the stairs and Kazik in the doorway. "Who are you people and what are you doing with my son?"

I guess my disguise worked, because between the relative darkness of the entryway and my masculine apparel, Marina didn't recognize me.

I opened my mouth, but Sevastien spoke first. “She’s taking me away, Mother. I don’t know who she is and she’s taking me away.”

Marina’s eyes grew wide and my heart almost jumped out of my chest.

“I was just going to take him for a walk,” I said, trying to back toward the door with Sevastien still in tow. I tried to keep my voice low, hoping that she wouldn’t recognize my voice either. Marina’s eyes were filled with fear and rage.

“You’re not taking him anywhere,” Marina replied, moving closer toward me. “I don’t know who you are or what you’re planning to do with my son but I’m calling the authorities - ”

Her words cut off and her eyes looked glassy and vacant. Marina’s jaw went slack, and I looked over my shoulder to see Kazik with his knife in his hand and a fresh cut on his forearm, blood already beginning to pool.

Chapter 7

“A koldun’s magic stems from the same magic as the vedma’s, but theirs took a different turn. The koldun didn’t want to practice healing magic, so their magic evolved into what it can do now: control those around them.” – A Brief History of Magic by Andrei Ivanov

The first time I performed magic, I cut too deep into my arm.

Blood flowed everywhere, including into the thick wool of Adrik’s Persian rugs that rested under my knees. I was in the Unclean, and Adrik had given me a grimoire, a terrified white rabbit, and a knife and told me to put the rabbit to sleep. I understood the basics of magic by that point, as my first few days with Adrik had consisted of me reading through old grimoires and watching Kazik, who had been under Adrik’s tutelage for a year, practice spells. The thing that I was unaware of, however, was the amount of blood that I was going to need for the spell or how little pressure it took to cut my forearm.

As the blood flowed, I panicked. I tried to push my sleeve down to cover the wound and stop the bleeding, but my hands shook so badly that all they were doing was irritating the wound. My breath caught in my throat, trying to rip itself out. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t think. I just couldn’t.

I managed to call for Adrik, but not before I started to get nauseous from the blood pooling through my fingers. He strolled in, hands stuffed into his coat pockets, opened another grimoire and pointed at another spell. He didn’t speak until I had repeated the words of my now beloved healing spell and watched my flesh knit itself back together. Only then did he tilt my chin up to him and speak.

“You needed to know how easy it is to draw blood,” he said, his voice low and quiet. “Now that you know, you won’t do it again.” He pushed the cage of the rabbit closer to me after that.

“Try again,” he had said, before leaving me to try the spell again.

Seeing Kazik standing with his knife in his hand, I was transported back into my twelve-year-old body, watching myself draw blood for the very first time. But I wasn’t trying to put a rabbit to sleep. I wasn’t in the Unclean. I was here and Kazik was the one with a knife in his hand.

He stepped out of the doorway and walked toward Marina. He placed his knife against his wrist again and made another cut before slipping his knife inside his coat pocket and addressing Marina.

“*Slushat,*” Kazik said, his voice as soft and calm as a lullaby even as black vapor poured from his mouth toward Marina. “You will go to bed. You won’t remember that we were here. Your son will be fine. Don’t worry about him.”

Marina’s glassy eyes blinked once, and she nodded almost as if to prove that she understood Kazik’s words.

“I will go to sleep and my son will be okay with you,” she repeated.

“You will not remember that we were here,” Kazik continued, looking at Marina with intensity. “You will not remember what we looked like. You will say that your son is visiting friends out of town.”

“Alright,” Marina replied, her voice empty of emotion. It sounded like nothing, like less than nothing. It sounded like a void, and I had to turn away to keep myself from walking up to her and trying to shake her back to her senses.

Marina's footsteps clicked across the floorboards and I felt a hand on my shoulder. I opened my eyes quickly to see Kazik's blue eyes staring into mine.

"We need to go," Kazik said, "before a servant pokes around and starts asking questions."

I nodded and squeezed Sevastien's hand as I led him toward the door. He looked back into the empty hall, but I kept my grip tight on his hand. Kazik went ahead of us, pulling his coat sleeve over his forearm to distract from the two cuts that were there. I closed the door quietly behind us, and we were suddenly surrounded by quiet.

We walked in silence for a few moments, Kazik leading the way as I held Sevastien's hand. I wasn't sure where we were going, but Kazik walked forward with determination so I followed. The silence eventually became too thick and I decided to speak.

"You should do a healing spell for your arm," I offered. He hadn't taken the time to perform that luxury after he magicked Marina, and it was something that we had always done after an errand. It was never good to let a wound stay open. While we had magic in our blood, without a healing spell we healed just like everyone else.

"I'll be fine," Kazik replied. His voice was so low and quiet that his words were almost lost before they reached my ears.

A few more moments of silence passed before I spoke again.

"Are you upset?" Everything about my question was timid and it took Kazik a moment to answer.

“No,” he responded, slowing his pace ever so slightly. I could now keep up with him without speed walking, which I considered a gift. I was running out of breath. “I’m just thinking.”

I had never pried into Kazik’s thoughts before. He had never been open with me and I was always taught to give people their space. That was a lesson that Papa always told me over and over again. But something pushed me to ask Kazik what he was going on inside his heads, so with a quick prayer that Papa forgive me later for ignoring his teachings, I spoke.

“What are you thinking?” It was a simple question, but it made Kazik stop and regard me. His eyes were calm but inquiring and he took a moment to speak, as if he was picking his words carefully.

“You weren’t the same in there,” Kazik said finally while gesturing to Sevastien’s house. “Something wasn’t right with you, but I can’t put my finger on what it was.”

“I’m the same as I’ve always been.” I’m not sure if my words sounded hollow to Kazik, but they definitely sounded that way to me.

“Keep telling yourself that,” he replied with a smile that caught the light of a streetlamp. “Maybe that boy of yours is changing you.” Kazik gestured at Sevastien, who was still holding my hand but was staring up at the streetlamp in complete awe.

“What are you doing, darling?” I asked Sevastien.

“The lights are so pretty,” he replied. “Like little stars.”

I bit my bottom lip in frustration but tried to remain kind on the outside. “Like beautiful stars. Do you remember when we sat out under the stars in the garden behind my house?”

“Who are you?” Sevastien asked, turning toward me. Whatever answer I’d been hoping for, this wasn’t it.

“Your girlfriend,” I said again, hoping that this time it would sink. Sevastien nodded before going back to staring at the lights. I squared up my shoulders and looked toward Kazik.

“What time are we going to the *vedma*’s?” I asked.

“I don’t know if we can go tonight anymore,” Kazik said. “I made the plan to go and see her when there were only two of us. It gets a little more complicated with three.”

I lower my eyebrows in what I can only hope will be a glare. “But if she’s near the *volshhebnyy* market, a group of three would blend in just fine.” Kazik didn’t respond, but just looked at me slyly like he had one too many times.

“Where is she really?” I asked. Kazik always made a face when he had told a lie and was just waiting for me to find out. No one could ever tell when he was lying; he was too good at it and had no obvious tells. But when Kazik knew that he needed to tell the truth, he had a certain expression on his face that made you come to the correct conclusion. And that was the look I was getting now.

“At the opposite end of the city, actually,” he replied.

“Where at the opposite end of the city?”

“The palace,” he said, finally coming out with what I unfortunately knew was the truth. “She may or may not be the personal *vedma* to the tsar.”

My gut fell into my stomach and I really thought that I was going to throw up, which wouldn’t be the worst thing that had ever landed on my boots.

Chapter 8

“A spoken word is not a sparrow. Once it flies out, you can’t catch it.”

- Russian Proverb

“Don’t throw up.” Kazik’s voice was both irritated and concerned. “I know we’re not wearing nice clothes, but I don’t want to have to replace my favorite boots.”

I crouched over, preparing to sit down. A million questions raced through my head, and I wasn’t sure which to ask first.

Kazik kicked at a patch of snow. “Take your time,” he said. “It’s not like we’re standing in the middle of the street with a man we just kidnapped who has the brain power of a five-year-old.”

“What - ?” I began, still hunched over and trying to hold onto the contents of my dinner. “How? Why?”

“Ah,” Kazik said. “The small details.”

I snapped up from my hunch and immediately felt the blood rush to my head. I stumbled but Kazik caught my arm and held me up. He was acting as my rock and all I really wanted to do right now was push him into the snowbank.

“The palace?” My voice had jumped an octave and was now absurdly shrill. “Your great plan was to go to the palace?”

Kazik took a step away from me and leaned against the streetlight that Sevastien was so deeply investigating. He held up his hands to me in mock surrender as his eyes twinkled with mirth.

“I simply thought of the best possible *vedma* who might be willing to help us and created a plan from there.” Kazik’s voice claimed reason but my temper was rising to match my red hair.

“How did you know a *vedma*? We don’t know *vedmas*. We just know our own kind.” I could practically feel the smoke coming out of my ears. “And how the hell did you manage to find the tsar’s personal *vedma*? I didn’t even know the tsar had a *vedma*.”

Kazik pulled out his cigarette case and lit another cigarette between his lips. “I, unlike most of *our kind*, know a lot of people. And meeting Natalya was a happy accident.”

“A happy accident?” I was trying so hard to keep myself from screaming and attracting any attention from someone who might be out. “Meeting someone who works in *the palace* is not a happy accident.”

Pressure was building behind my eyes and I held back a flood of hot tears. The palace was the one place in the entire world that I would never go back to. I sunk down into a heap on the sidewalk and placed my head on my knees.

The palace was where Kostya had died. The place where I had killed him. Adrik had said that the mission would be simple: get in, kill the tsar, and get out. But once we were in and I saw the tsar with his family, I couldn’t do it. I wasn’t a killer and I certainly wouldn’t become a murderer with the tsar. I had tried to back out, but Kostya said that I had to finish the job.

A strong hand found its way onto my shoulder, and warmth flooded through my torso. I looked up and saw Kazik’s face. Gone was his expression of playfulness and instead concern had filled his ice blue eyes. I had never seen that in them before. He

pushed hair away from my eyes with one of his gloved hands and sunk down so that he was level with me.

“Talk about it,” he said, refusing to let me move my eyes away from his. “Talk about what happened.”

I dragged my coat sleeve across my eyes to dry my tears and took a deep breath to try and keep my emotions in check. “You were there,” I said. “You know what happened.”

“I know what I saw,” Kazik said. His voice was the same calm that he had used with Marina, but no magic was flowing from his lips. “But I don’t know what you were going through.”

“What’s the difference?” I glanced over my shoulder to make sure that Sevastien was still around. He still regarded the streetlight with fascination.

“Many things,” Kazik said. He took out another cigarette and offered it to me before putting it back into his case. “What you do doesn’t always translate to how you’re feeling.”

He was right, I suppose. Every time that I did magic to fulfil the errands and assignments that Adrik had given me, I hadn’t wanted to do what I’d done. I hadn’t wanted to hurt people. I hadn’t wanted to control their minds. But I had done it. I had done it because I was a child looking for acceptance. And I was a child enthralled by the new power that she had been given. It had been a chance for me to make my own way and to have a voice in a world that wasn’t controlled by my mother. I didn’t have to get married in the Unclean. I didn’t have to wear fancy dresses and do small talk. I could just be.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, rising to my feet.

“Just because you don’t talk about it,” Kazik said, “doesn’t make it any less real.”

He kept looking at me with his piercing blue eyes, and I had to break the contact.

“We need to go somewhere to talk details about getting to Natalya,” Kazik stated, looking over at Sevastien. He had moved from the streetlight and was now making snow angels in the powdery snow near the sidewalk. “I’ll answer all the questions that you have, and we can decide what we want to do next.” Kazik’s voice had lost the soft touch that he had shown me, and it was back to his matter-of-fact decision-making voice.

“Where would you suggest?” I asked. “I would offer my house, but obviously that wouldn’t be a good idea, given my parents and Sevastien.” My mother would have a heart-attack if she caught me with a boy in my bedroom. That would most definitely break every definition of ladylike in the book.

Kazik paused for a moment, before looking between Sevastien and I with a look that I couldn’t quite read.

“I think I might know a place.”

Kazik hadn’t said where we were going; he had only grabbed Sevastien by the arm and motioned for me to follow as he set a brisk pace forward. I had shuffled along as we left the brightly lit neighborhood and settled into the shadows. We wove our way through narrow alleys and crooked streets, with only occasionally lit windows to show us the way. Kazik moved like a cat, vanishing in and out of the shadows without a sound. Sevastien, on the other hand, stumbled along after him, his feet tripping over the uneven cobblestones.

Regarding the area, I finally recognized the outskirts of the neighborhood surrounding the Unclean.

“Are we going-” Kazik cut me off with a flick of his hand.

“Give me a minute,” he said, yanking Sevastien along after him. He took a sharp corner around a short brick building and disappeared. I followed and found Kazik rummaging in his pockets.

“It should be in here,” he said, moving his hand from one pocket to the next before his hand emerged with a key. He twisted into a lock and opened a door that I hadn’t seen and gestured us inside.

A small entryway greeted us with a set of rickety wooden stairs in a corner. The entry was dark, with only a small lamp alight next to the stairs. The floor was worn wood and another door was next to the stairs. I took a step forward, anticipating walking to the entrance, but Kazik had already placed one foot on a creaky stair and was motioning me to follow him.

We climbed our way up two flights of stairs which each ended in a landing with several doors. Kazik took us to the second door of the landing and put another key into the lock before twisting the doorknob.

“Welcome to my home,” he said, stepping inside and leaving us to follow him.

I had always assumed that Kazik lived in the Unclean. It would have made sense, given the amount of time that he spent with Adrik and his ability to respond to all of Adrik’s whims. If he didn’t live in one of the wings of Adrik’s tent, it was possible that he lived with Volodya or Pavel or any of Adrik’s other flunkies in a small place in the Unclean. It hadn’t occurred that he lived on his own outside of the Unclean.

“How long have you lived here?” I looked around and saw a small studio with a twin bed in the corner covered in a patchwork quilt and a small wood stove in the kitchen. The walls were a dark shade of red which reminded me of the walls in my own home, but these were devoid of any art or paintings. The kitchen was just a small icebox, a short table and two chairs, and a light-colored wooden cabinet that must hold his dishes. A tiny door branched off next to the stove, which must have been the bathroom. The place was small, but cozy in its own way. It fit the image of Kazik that I had in my head.

Kazik just shrugged his shoulders in response to my question. “About two years? I couldn’t keep living with Volodya.” His body shivered with the memory.

Sevastien had found the bed and had collapsed onto it with a mumbled, “Sleepy time,” before starting the snore.

Kazik opened the icebox and pulled out a handle of vodka. He grabbed two mismatched cups from the cupboard and poured two shots of vodka. He pushed one toward me and took the other to the table. The legs of the chair screeched across the floor because no rug was covering the hardwood, which would have been completely taboo in my home.

“By all means, keep standing,” Kazik said. He downed his vodka and motioned for the other glass. “I’ll drink yours too if you don’t want it.”

I crossed over to the table and took the chair across from him. Sevastien’s deep snores resonated in the air as I drank my shot, allowing the liquid to sting my tongue before letting it caress my throat.

“Figured you’d need that.” Kazik’s voice was calm, and I wondered if it was manufactured calm or if he was genuine. Maybe it was the alcohol.

“How did you meet the tsar’s *vedma*?” It was back to business now. Despite Kazik’s help, I still didn’t feel like I could trust him, and I needed to save Sevastien and myself quickly before I started getting sick.

Kazik pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and middle finger and shook his head. “Minor details,” he said. “The important thing is how we’re going to get to her.”

“What was your plan before Sevastien?” I asked, leaning forward and placing my elbows on the table. “Can’t we just adapt that?”

“I was planning to go through the tunnels,” Kazik said. He was looking at me as if he was trying to gauge my reaction. “There’s one that could get us close to Natalya’s quarters, but it would require both of us to be at the top of our game. That’s where pretty boy gets us in trouble.” He gestured at Sevastien’s sleeping form.

The tunnels. Of course. That was the most logical way into the palace. The tunnels weren’t exactly common knowledge and were rumored to exist among the general population of Saint Petersburg, but they were well-known and utilized by Adrik’s flunkies. We had used them to get into the palace, and they were often utilized by the Tsar and his family to move about the city without being noticed. That’s why they were still in operation and not sealed off, though they were heavily guarded. Kostya had joked that Tsar Nikolai used them to get to his many concubines throughout the city.

I put my hands in my lap and started clenching my fists. *Don’t think about it, Anya. Don’t think about Kostya.*

“But we need to bring him with,” I stated. I was trying to sound confident, but my voice wavered. Kostya had infiltrated my thoughts and all I could think about was his lifeless eyes as he collapsed on the floor of palace.

We had been in the palace that night on a mission for Adrik, but it was more than a simple mission. Adrik had been planning it for months, carefully detailing each step over and over again so that we wouldn’t mess up. He had said that he had been working for this his entire life, that he had always dreamed of doing this so that the *kolduns* could be free to practice our magic in the open. He said that if we followed the plan we wouldn’t be hunted anymore. We just had to kill the Tsar and his family.

At the time it had seemed so simple. Adrik had wanted something, and I wanted to help him get it. It felt natural, wanting to give something to the man who had showed me how to use my power and had given me the strength to do so, despite how he had treated me. Adrik was someone that I looked up to, in an odd way. He had shown me what it was like to have strength, and I viewed him as a role model. I wanted to make him happy and I wanted to earn his praise. The plan seemed like an easy way to make him happy. I just hadn’t given much thought to what killing another human would actually be like.

Volodya, Kostya, Kazik, and I had snuck through the tunnels and incapacitated the guards at the entrance to the palace. I had felt a sinking in my stomach as I stepped over the unconscious body of a guard, but I pushed on. I was the only girl in the group, the only woman that Adrik had taken under his wing. I felt a certain pride in that, and I refused to act like a girl.

Sneaking into the palace had been easy. Kostya led the way, his switchblade in his hand. Any guards that we encountered were spelled to ignore us. They wouldn't remember that we had even been there. We snuck to the sitting room where we believed that at least one of the royal family would be spending their time after dinner. Kostya pulled me toward the front. I was the strongest of all of us, the one that Adrik had poured hours and hours of teaching into, so I was the one who would be doing the killing. It would be quick, simple. No one would feel any pain.

I made a swift cut across my forearm and prepared to speak, wanting to get everything done as quickly as possible. But when I looked into the sitting room, however, I didn't see just one person lounging on an ornate Turkish couch reading a book. I saw the entire royal family gathered and laughing. Tsar Nikolai was rolling around on the carpeted floor with his youngest daughter, Zoya, while Tsarina Samara watched from a nearby armchair, a smile lighting up her face. Alyosha, the eldest child, was playing a chess game with his younger sister, Yelena, while the final child, Rurik, sat next to his mother, reading a book. They were the picture of a happy family, their joy illuminated by the light of the fire.

"Go, Anya." Kostya's hand was on my shoulder and his voice was in my ear. But I was inside my own head, remembering nights that I had spent losing games of chess to Papa, laughter filling our sitting room. Tsar Nikolai's face transformed into Papa's face, rolling around on the floor with me. My heart ached to go home.

"Anya," Kostya said, his voice more urgent. "Hurry."

But I couldn't hurry because my feet felt like they were cemented to the floor. I shook my head, trying to get my traitorous feet to move just one inch backward, but they wouldn't budge.

"Anya," Volodya hissed from behind me. My mind still pictured Papa on the floor with me.

"I'll do it," Kostya said, pushing past me. I jolted out of my trance.

"No." My voice was equal parts worry and rage. I grabbed for Kostya's arm, but he was already at his knife. I looked toward the tsar and his children and my instinct to protect my own family rushed forward.

"*Umeret*," I said, the word coming out strong as I directed my black vapor at Kostya, whose mouth had opened to form the word himself. The smoke twirled into two tendrils and Kostya's blue eyes went wide as the vapor traveled up his nose and his eyes frosted over, leaving a white film over them. His face went slack, his jaw hanging open as vapor entered his body too, and I covered my mouth in horror at what I'd done.

"No," I whispered into my palms as Volodya grabbed Kostya's body before it fell to the floor. "No, no, I didn't mean to do it."

But our luck had run out, and I had turned the spell directed at the royal family toward one of my own. I hadn't been careful to keep my voice quiet as I performed my magic, and Tsar Nikolai was now looking directly at us and screaming for guards.

It had been the first and only time that I had ever pulled life from another person. And the look on Kostya's face stayed in my mind every day. All I remember of my escape from the palace was running as fast as my feet could carry me back through the

tunnels and throwing myself into the fresh air of the night before finally letting myself sob.

Chapter 9

“*Koldun* are capable of all sorts of magic. They can perform basic tricks if they possess less magic but can also become lethal if they are trained properly.” - *A Brief History of Magic* by Andrei Ivanov

“Anya,” Kazik said, his voice pulling me from my memory. I shook my head and looked at Kazik, who was staring very intently at me, his blue eyes unreadable.

“Sorry,” I said, reaching for my glass only to realize that there wasn’t any more vodka in it. Kazik poured me another cup from the bottle but left his own cup empty.

I stared at him for a minute before he motioned to my glass.

“Drink,” he said, his voice tense. “Then we talk.”

I downed my shot, grateful that I could blame the hot burn for the tears that were starting to come to my eyes. I placed the glass back onto the table and motioned for Kazik to fill it up again. Mother never enjoyed it, but Papa and I had spent many nights by the fire as I grew up drinking vodka. It was a Russian staple for a reason, and it also worked to clear my head.

“So, what’s the new plan?” I asked, pushing my glass toward Kazik, but he didn’t fill it a fourth time. Instead, he stared at me and folded his arms across his chest.

“That’s not what we’re going to talk about,” he said, reaching for the vodka himself. He poured himself another shot but didn’t drink it. “We’re going to talk about you.”

“Why?” My blood felt cold and the hair on my arms stood at attention. We didn’t need to talk about me. I didn’t want to talk about me.

“When was the last time that you did magic?” Kazik asked, leaning back in his chair so that two of the legs were off the ground. His leg rested on the table and kept his balance while he held his vodka in one hand.

“Last night,” I said smoothly.

“I don’t mean little magic,” Kazik said, still looking at me appraisingly with his ice eyes. “I mean an actual spell that takes effort. Not a healing spell that you’ve practiced a thousand times. Real, difficult magic.” He took a sip of his shot instead of downing the whole thing in one go.

Sevastien rustled in his sleep across the room, pulling the quilt up to his chest. He was peaceful. Besides the lack of memories and his behavior, Sevastien looked like he wasn’t sick at all. Of course, the trade-off for that wasn’t ideal because we only had so much time until I started to get sick.

“Don’t avoid the question, Anya,” Kazik said, bringing his chair back to earth and moving it closer to me.

“I’m not,” I said, trying to hide any tone to my voice that would betray my nerves. “I just don’t see why it’s important for you to know that.”

Kazik exhaled and started twiddling his glass between his fingers. “Magic takes practice,” he said, “particularly our magic. You know that. I just need to know how much ability you still have.”

I glared at him, before speaking. “It doesn’t matter when I did magic last. I’ve still got more power than you.”

Kazik barked out a laugh that took me by surprise, and I glanced over to see if Sevastien was still sleeping. He rolled over and mumbled under his breath before falling back into easy snores. I pulled my attention back to Kazik, who was still chuckling.

“Raw power, sure,” Kazik said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the table. “But I have a hunch that you haven’t been practicing at all since you left.”

I avoided Kazik’s gaze and instead dropped it to my lap. He wasn’t wrong. Magical ability wasn’t equal for everyone. It was given randomly and in random amounts to certain lucky people. But magic could be practiced to strengthen the ability that someone had. Adrik had made it very clear that I was one of the most innately powerful *koldun* that he had ever met, but I had had to work to get my power under control. When I had first met Adrik, my magic had run like a river over rapids. It was fast but out of control and was liable to splash any way that it liked and move in any way that it pleased. I had had to build a damn to control what I had. But just because I had lacked practice for a few months didn’t mean that I wasn’t capable anymore.

I raised my eyes back to look at Kazik and pulled my knife out of my boot. Striking the blade quickly across my arm, I whispered “*pereyekhat*” under my breath and watched as Kazik’s arm jerked over his head.

“Parlour magic,” Kazik said, bringing his arm back to rest on the table. “Show me something better.”

I ground my teeth together and tried to think of something that I could do. Every time a spell came to mind, all I could see in my mind was Kostya’s face as the light left his eyes. I hadn’t practiced any “real” magic, as Kazik seemed to put it, since I had killed Kostya, and I had hoped to keep not practicing magic until I died.

“I don’t need to prove anything to you,” I said, reaching once again for the bottle of vodka, but Kazik pulled it out of my reach. His eyes met mine, and there was a mix of emotions swirling in them. I could make out pity and perhaps even sorrow, but there was a third emotion there that I couldn’t quite place.

“You’re afraid,” Kazik said. He shoved the shot that he had poured toward me and took a chug from the bottle itself. “You’re afraid to do any magic.”

“No,” I said, downing the shot. “I’m not afraid.” There was a fuzzy feeling that was starting to accumulate by my temples, but I refused to let Kazik out-drink me. If this was a contest, I wasn’t about to lose.

Kazik dropped the bottle back onto the table with a firm *thunk*. He pulled his chair right next to mine and his face was so close that I could feel the heat of his breath against my skin.

“You know how I know that you’re afraid?” His voice was soft, but just like his eyes it was edged with something that I couldn’t quite comprehend. “You won’t look me in the eyes. The little fox that I remember had enough confidence for a room of ten men. You don’t have your confidence anymore.”

The legs of my chair scratched against the floor as I rose.

“I’m not having this conversation with you,” I said. “You’re either going to help Sevastien and I, or you’re not.” I started to move toward Sevastien on the bed, but Kazik grabbed my wrist and pulled me back toward him. My fists hit his chest and I fell against him, cursing myself for drinking so many shots.

“Let me go,” I said, trying to tug myself out of his grasp. But Kazik wasn’t trying to keep me against him. Instead, his hands came up to rest on my shoulders and he regarded me from under bushy eyebrows.

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” he said, still staring at me. His eyes were so blue, it was like I was drowning in an ocean of ice. “I didn’t mean to push you. I’m sorry that I did. I’m just worried about you.”

My hands were still on his chest, but they were no longer in fists. They were splayed across his button-up shirt, my thumbs running back and forth across the smooth fabric of it. I stopped my fingers from caressing his shirt and glanced back up at him. I was tired of hurting. Tired of feeling like everything was my fault and my responsibility. It was too much.

“Anya, please talk to me,” Kazik said, rising and pulling me into a hug. His voice was smooth and quiet, the type of voice that sings children to sleep or reads them lullabies. I’d never heard him talk like that before, to anyone. This was a different Kazik that I thought I knew.

“I’m just tired of hurting,” I whispered into his chest. “I’m tired of seeing his face everywhere.”

“I know,” he said, resting his chin on the top of my head. “I know it hurts, but it’s okay. It’s not your fault.”

But it was my fault. It was completely and entirely my fault. I had done the spell. I had said the spell toward Kostya. It was all my fault. I shoved away from Kazik and once again turned toward Sevastien, who was still sleeping peacefully on Kazik’s bed, unaware of the conversation that was happening around him.

“It is my fault,” I said, wiping tears from my eyes like I often wiped snowflakes off when I was a child. “I did it. Me. No one else.”

Silence hung in the air like a wet coat before Kazik spoke.

“Just because you do something, doesn’t make it your choice to do it,” he said, his voice full of sorrow. “Not all of your actions are your own.”

The floor creaked under his feet as he walked to stand in front of me.

“Get some rest,” he said, gesturing toward where Sevastien lay on the bed. “I don’t think pretty boy is going to try anything in his current state.”

I huffed out a laugh that was part humor and part irony. “Where are you planning to sleep?”

“I’ll be up for a while, so don’t worry about it,” he said. “I’m going to make some visits tonight still.”

He walked toward the door, grabbed his coat off of door handle, and slid it on.

“Do you want company?” I asked. I hadn’t considered the words before I spoke, but it didn’t sit right with me that Kazik was going back out into the night alone. He turned to me with a small smile, a twinkle of something in his eye.

“You’ve done enough for tonight, Anya,” he said. He opened the door, the hinges creaking with every small movement before turning back to me.

“Get some sleep,” he said before disappearing out the door and into the night.

Chapter 10

“The best things are found in hiding.” – Vedma proverb

The first thing to wake me in the morning wasn't the light shining through Kazik's single window. Instead, it was a massive crash from the kitchen.

My body jolted upright, pulling the tattered patchwork quilt off my body and back to the bed. Disoriented, it took me a few moments to realize that I wasn't in my crisp and clean bedroom, but I was instead in Kazik's small, messy apartment. Once my surroundings were established, I was then able to take in the sight in front of me.

Sevastien was holding a pot in his hands, looking like his hand had been caught in a cookie jar, while Kazik stood behind him, eyeing me warily.

“We didn't want to wake you,” Kazik said, moving to take the pot from Sevastien's hands. Sevastien's face fell even further when Kazik placed the pot over the stove.

“I thought I was going to make kasha,” Sevastien said, his lower lip jutting out. In that moment, he resembled a puppy that someone had kicked across the room.

“You are,” Kazik said, bending down to grab something from his icebox. “I just need to get things started for you.”

Sevastien jumped up and clapped his hands and Kazik instantly tried to quiet his excitement. My sleep officially interrupted, I stretched my arms above my head and cracked my back before leaving the warmth and comfort of the bed. My feet touched cold floorboards, and I quickly slid on my boots to keep some of my heat trapped close to my body before crossing the room to the kitchen.

Kazik was demonstrating to Sevastien how to stir the kasha, his arm wrapped around his shoulders like an older brother. The two standing next to each other was an odd sight; two worlds together that should never have met. Even their looks echoed different existences. Sevastien's face, while slightly slimmer from the illness, was well defined and well-fed, while Kazik had the angular features of someone accustomed to going without food. Kazik's almost white hair contrasted the golden locks that Sevastien had been given with. Even their heights were different, though it felt odd that Kazik was shorter. Poised next to Sevastien as he helped stir the kasha, Kazik appeared the older and wiser of the two and though he wasn't short by any means, the extra few inches that Sevastien had on him didn't quite seem right.

"Sorry to wake you," Kazik said, finally entrusting Sevastien with the wooden spoon, though he didn't take his eyes off of the pot. "He really wanted breakfast."

I laughed a little. "Seems about right," I said, moving toward the table to sit. Kazik finally placed enough trust in Sevastien to leave him alone with the kasha, though I would not have made that same choice. Sevastien hadn't seemed to grow any more child-like during the night, but that didn't make his current state any easier to accept.

Kazik joined me at the table with two steaming mugs in his hands. They were mismatched, one green and the other brown, and one was chipped around the rim, but they had a certain bit of character to them. Kazik kept the chipped one for himself but pushed the green one toward me. The smell of coffee greeted my nose, and I could feel a smile pulling at the corners of my mouth. It was piping hot, but I took a swig anyway, grateful for the taste of burnt water that covered my tongue and started to erase the headache from last night's vodka.

“What’s the plan today?” I asked, setting down my mug and glancing at Kazik. His attention was focused on Sevastien, who was now just standing and looking down at the stove.

“What does it look like, Sevastien?” Kazik asked before rising to survey Sevastien’s progress. A slight scent of burning accosted my nose, smoky and bitter. Kazik started rubbing Sevastien’s shoulder and pulled the pot from the heat.

“It’s okay,” he said, reaching to grab two mismatched bowls and another mug before spooning the thick and slightly charred kasha into the first bowl. “It will still taste just fine.”

Sevastien turned away from the stove and I saw a small tear fall across his cheek. He appeared so dejected that I motioned for him to come sit. He pulled up a chair next to mine and put his head on the table over his folded arms. I started rubbing his hair while Kazik finished spooning kasha into the mug and brought the odd collection of dishware to the table. He kept the mug for himself but placed the bowls in front of Sevastien and I. He knelt down next to Sevastien and whispered in his ear. Sevastien nodded his head slightly, pulling my fingers from it before sitting up and putting a spoonful of kasha into his mouth.

“I have jam if you want,” Kazik said, motioning to my kasha, but I shook my head. There was something about the simplicity of the buckwheat and milk that had always made me happier than any extravagant breakfast that I had at home or at a brunch gathering with Mother. I took a bite, and while there was a slight bitter taste, the thick porridge was welcome.

“So,” I said, trying to draw the conversation back to the topic at hand: unbinding Sevastien and I. “Plan?”

“We should go see Natalya tonight,” Kazik said, scooping a small bit of kasha onto his spoon and blowing on it to cool it before sticking it in his mouth. “She’ll be busy today most likely but-” Kazik’s voice broke off and he looked at me, his gaze firmly fixed on my face.

“What?” I asked, feeling my cheeks to see if I had food on them. I had been taught how to eat properly, but I had been so hungry this morning that maybe I had made a mistake. But Kazik didn’t speak. Instead, he got up, his chair scrapping across the floor and knelt at my feet. I sucked in a breath as he pulled my chair slightly away from the table and angled it closer to him, and my heart jumped in my chest. Without saying anything, Kazik rose up on his knees and reached toward my face. I was glued to my seat, unable to move as Kazik pushed a lock of hair away from my face and started to twirl it in his fingers. His long fingers brushed my cheek and I leaned into it without thinking, their touch soft as a feather floating through the air. Instead of dropping the lock of hair, Kazik pushed his hand lightly through the rest of my curls. My teeth bit down on my lip to keep from releasing a small moan, but as Kazik’s hand passed through my hair a second time, I broke the silence.

“What are you doing?”

Kazik instantly tensed and rose, dropping his hand from my head. He cleared his throat and shoved his hands into his trouser pockets before speaking. His eyes didn’t meet mine as the words passed his lips.

“More of your hair is turning gray,” he stated matter-of-factly, as if nothing had just happened between us. “We need to get to Natalya now.”

A bead of water dripped onto my hair as Kazik, Sevastien, and I crept through the tunnels toward the palace. Small amounts of moisture clung to the walls and ceiling of the tunnels, making the tiled walls shine under the flickering light of dozens and dozens of candles. The air was musty from being underground and I shivered slightly, though the temperature in the tunnels felt similar to being out in the winter air. The tunnels were an architectural marvel for Saint Petersburg, but so many people thought that they were only rumors. Papa had told me so many stories about the tunnels by the light of our fire during long winter nights, but Mother always insisted that they were fictional, a rumor created by the poor to attempt to dethrone the ruling class. Oh, what she would say if I told her they were real. She probably would call me a liar.

As far as I knew, the tunnels extended for miles underneath the city of Saint Petersburg, spanning to all corners of the city, but they all led back to one central point: the palace. Origin stories of the tunnels varied from person to person, but I was a believer that the first tsars had built them and kept the entrances secret. Or as secret as they could, given the fact that this was the second time that I’d been below Saint Petersburg in my short lifetime.

Fully tiled walls and a stone-tiled floor made what should have been a glorified sewage system feel like an extension of the palace. Sconces lined the walls every few feet, each parallel to a sibling on the other wall. They were outfitted with thick candles that gave off enough light to see, but not enough to see overly well. There were still

shadows that hung in dark corners, places where guards could lurk, or traps could lay. Before our first expedition into the palace, Kostya, Volodya, and Kazik had scouted the tunnels, looking for obvious places that potential traps would be located. They had found many, but there was always the threat that there were new ones hiding after the first time we infiltrated.

I pulled Sevastien closer to me and squeezed his fingers through my gloves. I walked in the middle, with Kazik on my right. He led the way with the ease of someone who had made this trip more than a few times. Every time we passed a fork in the passage, I looked at Kazik to see if he would turn. He hadn't spoken a word since we climbed below the city streets or even really since we'd left his apartment. He had been in such a hurry that he hadn't even cleaned up breakfast, instead choosing to leave our full bowls of kasha on the table to solidify in a solid mess. Sevastien had pouted about not finishing his breakfast, and I tried to provide calming words while Kazik led us outside and down a few streets until we found the closest entrance to the tunnels. He had knelt by what looked to be an unimposing sewer drain, but he had stuck his hand down it and rustled around until a *click* sounded and the vent had lifted up, revealing an opening with a ladder. He had motioned me forward and said, "Ladies first," before I had hopped in and slid down the ladder to land on the stone-tiled floor. Sevastien had been behind me, though it had taken some convincing to get him to come into the dark. He had protested, saying that it was scary before Kazik had shushed him from above as he climbed in and closed the vent behind him.

We had been inside for ten minutes and I knew that without Kazik, we would be hopelessly lost, but I wanted to know what had gone on at breakfast. It hadn't felt like he

was just checking my hair for signs of gray. It had felt like there was more to it. *Be confident, Anya*, I thought, remembering the conversation that Kazik and I had had just the night before.

“Are you going to explain this morning?” I asked, trying to keep my voice as quiet as possible to not alert any hidden guards to our presence. I kept one hand locked in Sevastien’s, both because I loved him but also because I wasn’t sure what his current five-year-old brain would do if I let go, but I shoved my other hand deep in my trouser pocket.

“Nothing to explain, milady,” Kazik said. He didn’t look at me and I was so busy staring at him that I almost missed when he turned down another corridor. “You had gray hairs, I pointed them out. Truly, I’m happy to help.”

His voice felt sarcastic, but it felt like there was an edge of irritation to it. *Give it up, Anya*, I thought. *It doesn’t matter*. But some part of me thought that maybe it did. And I wasn’t going to let it rest.

“You didn’t need to play with it,” I added. My voice was growing in volume, but I wanted to make my point. “I’m still with Sevastien.”

Kazik stopped in his tracks and a scoff erupted from his mouth. “Of course, little fox, how could I ever forget that you’re with your delightful child boyfriend.” He motioned to Sevastien, and his words were laced with ice and acid. “I was doing you a favor by pointing out your hair. Don’t twist it to be something else.”

Kazik started walking again, not waiting for me to catch up. But I wasn’t done with this conversation.

“What’s your problem, Kazik?” I asked and I could hear the shrill to my voice. I was picking a fight that I really didn’t want to be having, but I couldn’t hold myself back. I wanted to know. “You’re such a hypocritical jackass. You jump back and forth between kind and cold. Pick a side.”

“Don’t talk about my life like you get it, Anya,” Kazik said, spinning to face me. His voice was raised too, but I could tell he was keeping it from going any higher. There was such anger in his tone, anger that I had never seen before. I couldn’t recall a time before the last twenty-four hours that I had ever seen Kazik show emotions in the way that he was. He was usually aloof and sarcastic, but in the last day he had shown more emotional range than I knew most people in high society to show in a lifetime.

“You either want my help or you don’t,” he said, his expression hard. “Either way, we can’t stay in the tunnels arguing all day.” He walked off, not bothering to look behind to see if I followed.

“Look,” I called after him, pulling Sevastien along as I raced to catch up with Kazik’s long strides. “I’m sorry - ”

But my words were cut short by the sounds of quick footsteps coming from a corridor to our left. My body tensed and I turned to Kazik, hoping for guidance as I heard a group of voices shouting.

“Run,” Kazik said before grabbing my arm and breaking into a sprint.

Chapter 11

“Simply put, a koldun’s magic works to control.”

- *A Brief History of Magic* by Andrei Ivanov

I could feel my heartbeat through my entire body as I ran, pulling Sevastien along behind me while trying to keep up with Kazik, who was taking turns through the tunnel with lightning speed. He looked back every few moments to make sure that Sevastien and I were still behind him, but he didn’t slow down. And neither did the footsteps that I could still hear behind us.

“They’re getting closer,” I said, yanking Sevastien forward as we made a right-hand turn down another dimly light passage.

“I’m aware of that,” Kazik said, throwing his voice over his shoulder. “Painfully aware, in fact.”

“How close are we?” I asked, trying to push myself faster even though every breath burned and my legs were starting to feel like mush.

“Not close enough,” Kazik shot back, lengthening his stride and pushing the pace even faster.

“Tired,” Sevastien panted into my ear. I could feel him beginning to slow, but I knew that I couldn’t let him. If he slowed down, we were as good as dead. Two *kolduns* in the royal tunnels? We might as well have signed our own death certificate. And in blood no less.

“Just a little farther,” I responded, more to convince myself than Sevastien, because I wasn’t sure if he could hear me over my ragged breathing.

“No,” Sevastien said, digging his heels into the ground. My momentum pulled me forward even as Sevastien stayed still. My grip on his arm released and I fell forward, shielding my face with my hands as I fell onto the tiled floor of the tunnels. Pain shot through my arms as I landed on them, but I thankfully heard no crunch from broken bones. I surveyed the damage on my hands, but luckily, they were only scraped across the palms.

“Kazik,” I called, from the ground. He must have heard the sound of my fall, because he was already hurrying back to me. He kept scanning the tunnel behind us, where I could make out separate voices where just moments before I had only heard shouting. I felt my body stiffen with each approaching footstep.

“Come on, boys,” a gruff voice called out. “This way!”

“Anya,” Kazik said, reaching out to grab one of my bleeding palms and hauling me to my feet. “Now would be a really good time to know when you last used magic.”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“Well,” Kazik continued, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his tarnished silver knife, “by my estimation, there are more than three guards currently barreling toward us. And since I know my limit is three people, that would mean that you’re going to have to do some form of magic in order to help us get out of here.”

I shook my head, my fox-red hair falling into my eyes as I did so. “I can’t.”

“You’re going to have to, little fox,” Kazik replied, slicing his knife across the scar-marked skin of his inner arm. “Not sure about you, but I would prefer not to die today.”

My head turned back the way we had come and could make out the figures of five guards, all dressed in their uniforms, swords out. They slowed their pace as they came closer before coming to a stop just a few feet away.

“You’re under arrest,” the tall guard in front huffed, “by order of Tsar Nikolai, Grand Duke of Russia.” The five of them seemed so intimidating, swords out under the candlelight as it glinted off their golden buttons and silver blades. I had seen plenty of these uniforms at society functions, their gold fringed shoulders twirling and their boots gracefully carrying them across the dance floor. In all the times that I had seen the guards at parties, however, their swords were never pointed directly at me.

I took a step back, stopping when my back hit Kazik’s chest. When he spoke, I felt it rattle through his chest.

“I don’t really feel like being under arrest today,” he said, his voice full of the sarcasm that I knew him for. “I think I can speak for both of my friends here when I say that I think we’d rather just continue on our way.”

The guards took a step forward but Kazik didn’t move.

“You savages don’t deserve to live,” the tall guard said, moving closer. He was getting too close for comfort. “We would be doing the entire country a service if we just killed you now.”

“That’s not very nice,” Kazik said, mock dejection in his voice. He snapped his fingers and black vapor twinned their way around them. He flicked them toward the front guard and said, crisp and clear, “*Nepodvizhnost.*”

The front guard stiffened, his arms coming to clap down by his sides. His sword rattled to the floor and every muscle in his body seemed to clench. The guards next to

him on either side looked horrified and shocked, but still they pointed their weapons at us. One of the guards leaned closer to his friend and tried to nudge him, but it did nothing to break the hold that Kazik had over him. Nothing could break that hold unless Kazik wanted it to.

“Right,” Kazik said, pulling the knife over his skin again. “Who’s next?”

The remaining guards regarded at each other and nodded. Then, they were running toward us again, but Kazik was ready. With a double slash to his arm he called out the spell for sleep, which dropped two more guards to the floor before throwing his knife toward the next nearest guard. The knife sunk its way into the guard’s leg, but he pulled it out with a grimace and kept coming closer.

“Anya,” Kazik said, grabbing my arm and pulling me along. “I could really use some help here.”

There were too many thoughts racing through my mind for me to properly focus. *You’re going to hurt someone. You’re going to kill someone, just like you killed Kostya. You can’t do it.* I shook my head, trying to clear all of the thoughts and negative feelings away. I had killed Kostya, but it had been an accident. I hadn’t done it out of malicious intent. I hadn’t meant to harm anyone. I could use my magic. I could use it to help myself, to help Sevastien, to help Kazik. I was more than one mistake. I was more than what I’d done. This was my chance to prove it to myself.

Time slowed around me as I reached into my boot and pulled out my knife, which was warm in my hand. *Hello, old friend,* I thought, bringing the blade to my arm. I pushed up my sleeve and sunk the blade into my skin.

“*Nepodvizhnost*,” I shouted, watching as my black vapor hurtled through the air to attack to the two remaining guards. One went still right before Kazik’s fist connected with his face and the other fell backwards as the spell stiffened his joints. Kazik looked toward me, a sly smile on his face and a look of awe in his eyes.

“*Slushat*,” I continued, walking toward Kazik and the guards closest to him. I flicked my arm out and watched once again as black vapor wound its way into each guards’ ears, making them listen to my magic. Unlike Kazik, my spell took hold of all five guards at once, making my job much easier.

When I reached the tall guard, I bent down so I could see his eyes. While his body was frozen, his eyes weren’t, and I saw his fear swimming there. I tried not to take a small bit of pride in the fact that this man, a man who had wanted to kill us, was now scared of a girl.

“You won’t remember that we were here,” I said, keeping my voice loud enough so that each guard could hear. “You will each go your separate ways. You will not remember that anything happened here. You will not remember anything about this.”

Five voices murmured in unison. “I will not remember anything about this.”

I rose to my feet and strode over to Kazik, who flicked the guard in front of him in the nose. “Nice work, little fox,” he said before going to retrieve his knife. “Didn’t think you still had it in you.”

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn’t help but smile a little myself. It had been months since I’d performed any magic, not counting the healing spell I’d done on Sevastien. It hadn’t occurred to me how much I missed doing magic. How much I missed feeling powerful. How much I missed doing something that was my own and that I was good at.

“Let’s just get to this *vedma* before something else goes wrong,” I said before walking to Sevastien and taking his hand.

Chapter 12

“Because the vedma believe that the koldun defiled their magic when they turned it to their own purposes, the two sorcerers do not have contact. If they do have contact, it is not a joyous occasion.” – A Brief History of Magic by Andrei Ivanov

The final passage that Kazik led us into was surprisingly well-lit. There were at least double the number of candles in here than in the other tunnels we had run through, and the ladder wasn't so much a ladder but a series of very sturdy steps that included a handrail that seemed incredibly out of place.

Kazik felt along the wall, running his hands up and down the tiles until he came upon a latch near the middle step. With a satisfying *click*, a door dropped open at the top of the steps, but no light trickled in the way it had done when we had first entered the tunnels. Instead, the world was still pitch black above us.

“This is it?” I asked, looking to Kazik for reassurance. He gave me one nod of his head before ascending the staircase, leaving Sevastien and I alone. When he reached the top of the steps, he pushed into the dark, almost as if he was trying to move something. The way that he held his body looked as though he was trying to move something. With a sharp breath, he pushed something up and over, and I could see bright white light from the doorway. Kazik didn't glance back at Sevastien and I before he climbed up the remaining steps and disappeared.

“Are you ready?” I asked, turning to Sevastien. I expected him to be staring at the bright doorway with awe, the way that he had regarded at the streetlamps last night, with a childlike innocence that permeated the world around him. But instead, he was crying, large tears rolling down his cheeks.

“What’s wrong, my love?” I asked, taking both of his hands in mine and leading him to the first step, where I sat and motioned for him to sit beside me. There wasn’t so much as a creak from the wood stair as it adjusted to our weight. “What is it?”

This was apparently the wrong thing to say, because now tears were streaming down Sevastien’s face. His body shook in large sobs and I reached out to wrap my arm around his shoulders.

“There’s no need to cry,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm and gentle when irritating was rising in my blood. We didn’t have the time to sit and cry, particularly when we had already been accosted by guards once and I had no desire to have that happen a second time.

“I want to go home,” Sevastien said. His voice was distorted by sobs and his nose was beginning to run. “I want my mother.”

I pulled Sevastien’s head onto my shoulder and let him cry for a moment before speaking.

“We’re going to get you back to your mother soon,” I said, raising my hand to run my fingers through his hair. “You’ll be back home in no time.”

“Really?” Sevastien responded, raising his head to look at me. “I can go home soon?”

“Of course.” I rose and grabbed Sevastien’s hands again to pull him to his feet. “We just have to visit with someone first.”

Sevastien nodded and got up, starting to walk up the stairs before turning to look at me one more time.

“Who are you?” he asked. My heart dropped a small fraction, but I tried to keep my expression light.

“I’m Anya,” I replied. “I’m your girlfriend.”

Confusion crossed Sevastien’s face, but he didn’t respond. Instead, he climbed up the stairs and, like Kazik, disappeared into the light.

I took a deep breath. Every time Sevastien said or did something, I was shocked by how much of a child he had become. Only a few days ago, we had been walking through gardens, waltzing through ballrooms at parties, and discussing our future. Now it was hard for me to imagine what a future with the two of us even looked like anymore. What if this *vedma* wasn’t able to help? What if Sevastien was stuck like this forever? And what was I going to say to try and explain all of this when I brought Sevastien back to his family? I couldn’t tell them the truth, and I couldn’t tell my parents either. If they didn’t disown me for kidnapping another person, they would certainly have a poor reaction to finding out that I was a *koldun*. And this certainly wasn’t the way that I wanted them to find out that important piece of information.

“You planning to sit there all day?”

I jolted from where I’d been standing and daydreaming. Kazik had poked his head out of the doorway and was smirking down at me, his blond hair almost translucent from being haloed by the white light.

“Yeah,” I said, taking a step up the stairs and clenching my hands in the pockets of my trousers. Breaking the bond between Sevastien and I and healing him was the most important thing that I needed to focus on right now. No sense focusing on the future when I wasn’t yet successful in the present.

I stepped out of the tunnels and into one of the most gorgeous rooms that I had ever seen in my life. The dazzling light was coming from three large windows that took up almost an entire wall. These windows looked out onto a courtyard filled with more snow-covered trees and plants than most gardens ever had, including Mother's at home. In addition to all the light coming in from the windows, a few white orbs floated through the air, casting a bright light on everything around them. The walls around me were painted a robin's egg blue and managed to make the room even brighter as light reflected off of them. A high ceiling was met with crown molding painted white and gold, and various paintings hung on the walls, all of which were in ornate golden frames that seemed to sparkle.

"Lovely, isn't it?" Kazik's voice sounded from nearby. He was sprawled in a beautiful chair made of blue and cream brocade with gold arms and legs. His feet were propped up on a table, next to a vase of fresh roses, which shouldn't have been possible in the dead of winter. To his right was a white marble fireplace, which burned despite no wood being present to keep it alive.

"Don't put your feet on the table!" I shrieked before putting my hands to my mouth and mumbling a quick "sorry." Mother had trained me over and over again to never put your feet on the table, and Kazik's boots were going to get dirt all over the lovely mahogany.

Kazik laughed but didn't move his feet.

"Make sure to close the door behind you," he said, pulling his arms above his head and leaning back in his chair so that two legs were off the ground.

I knelt to where I had just entered from the trap door and found that there was a groove dug in the wood for me to grab onto. I shut it with another *click* and unfolded the corner of a cream and gold rug so that the door was hidden from sight.

“If you could that back, that would also be wonderful,” Kazik said, pointing to a small mahogany side table that had been pushed to the side. Assuming that that was what Kazik had pushed to allow us entry to the room, I moved the table back over the trap door and continued to gaze around the room in longing.

“It’s gorgeous here,” I remarked, walking over to a massive desk and running my fingers over the books that lay there. *Eugene Onegin*, *Fathers and Sons*, and even some works from the English author, Jane Austen, were present. No dust lay on the covers or on the pages, which was common in many of the sitting rooms that I had been in. Someone clearly loved these books and read them often enough to keep them clean. That, or they had a very attentive maid.

“Natalya is treated as part of the royal family,” Kazik said, “in most aspects.”

“Most aspects?” I asked, turning to see Sevastien curled up on a sofa, snoring.

“She’s not allowed to leave the palace,” Kazik continued, pulling his cigarette case from his pocket and lighting one. “She is a sort of, *pet* for the Tsar and his family.” He emphasized the word “pet,” almost spitting it out. It was clear how he felt on the subject.

“Why can’t she leave?” Curiosity was getting the better of me, but I wanted to know the whole story behind this woman who was supposed to help me. I sank into the chair next to Kazik, grateful that it wasn’t hard as a rock like the chairs in Mother’s sitting room. These were clearly meant for lounging in.

“Tsar Nikolai doesn’t want anyone to know that he has a personal *vedma*,” Kazik said. “That and he doesn’t want her to be injured or stolen, in case someone found out about her.”

“I didn’t know that it was frowned upon for the Tsar to have a *vedma* working for him,” I replied, pursing my lips slightly. While *kolduns* were clearly against the law, the world cherished *vedmas* and the work that they did to help those in need.

“It isn’t,” Kazik said, exhaling a large puff of smoke, “but appearing as though you need someone’s help to remain healthy and whole is. Tsar Nikolai likes to keep a certain image.”

“Like you,” I remarked, not thinking before I spoke. Kazik tensed ever so slightly before shrugging and taking another pull from his cigarette. An awkward silence hung between us, but Kazik was clearly comfortable in it.

“Where is Natalya, then?” I asked. I wasn’t a fan of silences of any kind. Mother had taught me that they were a fault of being a bad conversationalist. Apparently, I had taken that to heart.

“Good question,” Kazik said, dropping his cigarette into a dish on the table and standing. “Natalya!” he called, and I shushed him, looking around in anticipation of guards descending from the ceiling and taking us directly to our death.

“These quarters are distant from the rest of the royal family,” Kazik added, walking away from me and toward a hallway. “You can scream, and no one tends to notice.” He winked at me and I scoffed back at him before he vanished down the hall.

Sevastien continued to snore on from his sofa, and I found myself relaxing ever so slightly. I was used to places like this, filled with extravagance and luxurious furnishings.

I had grown up in a home filled with gilded edges and not a speck of dust. But this sitting room felt much homier than my estate did. It had a touch of something that I couldn't quite place, like a forgotten memory or a dream that I had woken up from too soon. It almost felt like it was magic.

“Oh, Kazimir,” a distant voice said. “I wasn't expecting you.” The voice was old and slightly croaky, but it had an alertness to it. It was the voice of someone who had seen and experienced the world but still had a lot of love to give.

“We ran into a bit of a snag last night, Natalya Vladomirovna,” I heard Kazik say, his voice soft and sweet like flowers. “I meant to send word that we were coming, but it became very urgent.”

“That's quite alright, child,” the voice said. “And please, only Natalya, child. No need to be so formal.”

I heard Kazik chuckle before I saw him round the corner. He walked slowly and an elderly woman clutched his arm. She was dressed in a gown almost as elaborate as the room we were standing in. Light pink taffeta cascaded into full skirts, and the entire dress was embellished with lace trim and pearls. As Natalya came closer, I saw that her skin was fair but was marked with crow's feet by her eyes and wrinkles across her forehead and near her mouth. Her hair was white, and it was swept up in a chignon to match the formality of her dress. Her shoulders were slightly hunched, but she had a proud demeanor to her. It was clear that she was walking arm-in-arm with Kazik for politeness, but that she could have stepped out on her own if she needed to.

“Oh, Kazimir,” Natalya said, her voice mirthful. “I see that you brought a girl with you.”

Kazik smirked again before nodding at me to come forward.

“Natalya, this is Anya Petrovna,” he said, presenting me in a formal matter.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Natalya Vladomirovna,” I said, reaching for my skirts to drop into a curtsy before remembering that I was wearing trousers. I awkwardly curtsied anyway and Kazik bit back a laugh.

“Well met, my child,” Natalya said, reaching a hand out to me. I took it in between my own and noticed the warmth of her fingers. “But please, call me Natalya. I never had a good relationship with my father anyway.” A smile lit up her eyes and I saw that they were a lovely blue that almost matched the color of the walls. Her smile seemed to bring me peace, because I felt my body relaxing for the first time since Sevastien had fallen ill.

“Take a seat,” Natalya said, motioning toward the chairs that Kazik and I had vacated. “It appears that there is one more that I have to meet.”

“That’s Sevastien,” I chimed in, looking toward his sleeping form. “He’s actually who we came to talk to you about.”

“I know, Anya,” Natalya said, her voice still bright. “But I would like to meet him all the same.”

Kazik walked Natalya over to where Sevastien lay on the couch and nudged him in the shoulder. When that didn’t work to wake him, he went ahead and punched him in the arm. Sevastien startled awake in a flurry of limbs, an imprint from his sleeve had found its way onto his face.

“Hello, Sevastien,” Natalya said, leaning down and reaching out a hand to him the same way that she had done to me.

“Hello,” Sevastien said, his voice quiet and timid. “Who are you?”

“My name is Natalya,” she said, grabbing one of his hands from his lap. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

Sevastien stared at her blankly for a moment before a smile broke across his face. He looked thrilled and excited like a puppy, and my heart ached for a moment. I had never seen him make that expression before. He had been happy, but never this level of exuberant.

Natalya rose and turned to address Kazik and me again.

“Kazimir, will you run and grab the tea set, please?” Kazik nodded and walked back down the hall that he had just come from. Natalya smiled at me and once again grabbed my hands.

“I find that most problems are easier to discuss over some tea.”

Chapter 13

“The domain of the vedma is healing magic and balance. They are able to balance and influence the energies of people and things around them in a positive way.” – A Brief

History of Magic by Andrei Ivanov

Natalya placed a steaming cup of black tea in front of me and I breathed in deeply. Black tea was a favorite of mine, as it was for Papa. Our nights playing chess had always resulted in a cup of tea or two, mine with two sugars and Papa’s plain. The one time that I had tried to have my tea without milk or sugar, I had had to choke it down. Papa had laughed as I wiped at my mouth with my handkerchief, trying to pretend that I liked the watery taste without the hint of sweetness that I had grown accustomed to.

“Everyone enjoys things in a different way, Anya,” Papa had said, sliding the porcelain sugar bowl toward me. I had accepted it gratefully and dumped three sugars into my cup, just to make sure that my tea was sweet enough for me.

“But I want to be just like you, Papa,” I had said, only seven-years-old. I had been so sure of myself then. There hadn’t been any magic to cloud my visions of the future. All I had wanted was to make my father proud.

Mother had gone through a series of governesses for me already; she was convinced that I was still a tomboy because she hadn’t found the right person to teach me. I had known from a young age that I didn’t want to learn to sit quietly and waltz across dance floors. I wanted to learn about the world, to read novels, and play chess better than Papa.

Sitting in Natalya's sitting room, I smiled as I added two sugars to my tea. I hoped that I would still make Papa proud someday. My magic might be too much for the rest of the world, but I think Papa would understand.

Kazik sat down next to me on the sofa, his cup of tea in his hand. He reached for the sugar and added a cube before pouring milk into his tea as well. *Balanced*, I thought. Natalya offered a cup to Sevastien, who hastily grabbed for the sugar dish and added about five sugar cubes to his tea.

"He's going to be a mess in fifteen minutes," Kazik said under his breath. When I turned to him in confusion, he pointed at Sevastien's cup. "Haven't you ever seen a kid on sugar?"

I rolled my eyes, but I smiled, grateful for Kazik making a joke to settle my nerves about the situation. Even if he was painfully annoying.

"So, child," Natalya said, sinking into a chair across from us and near enough to Sevastien to keep him from grabbing more sugar cubes. "Tell me your story."

"Well," I said, taking a deep breath and preparing myself to spill the entire story about Sevastien and I being linked together, "Sevastien and I are linked together and he's dying -"

"No, child," Natalya said, stirring her tea and shaking her head. "I meant your whole story."

I was confused. "My whole story?"

"Where are you from?" Natalya replied. "How did you discover your magic? How did you get roped in with this young lad?" She motioned to Kazik when she asked the last question.

“I’m not sure I understand,” I responded, trying to wrap my head around Natalya’s request. “You want me to tell you my life’s story?”

“Oh, yes,” she stated, matter-of-factly. “It is teatime, you know.”

Kazik leaned closer to me and whispered into my ear. “She did this to me, too.”

I sat back against the couch and took a large sip of my tea.

“If I tell you my story,” I said, setting my teacup on the table in front of me, next to a vase of fresh roses, “will you tell me yours?”

Natalya looked at me then, her blue eyes crisp and clear despite her age. “Of course, child.”

I nodded and twiddled my thumbs in my lap. Suddenly, Kazik dropped a well-worn coin in my lap.

“It helps when you’re nervous,” he said, taking another sip of tea.

“Thank you,” I said, turning the coin over in my hands. It was worn on both sides, but it was clearly a 15-kopeck. The once silver edges were tarnished a black-green and it was clear that this momento had been through a lot.

“I want it back when you’re done,” Kazik said with a smirk.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Natalya said, putting a hand on Sevastien’s shoulder as he fell back into sleep, having ignored his tea completely.

“I was born to Ivan Sergeyovich Petrov and Katerina Grigoryevna Petrova seventeen springs ago,” I began, twirling the coin in my hands. “I’m their only child, but I had always hoped that I would have a sibling. I’ve always wanted a sister or a brother.”

“They’re not that great,” Kazik mumbled, but a smiled turned up the corners of his mouth.

“My mother raised me to be a good society girl,” I continued. “But all I ever wanted to do was travel and read. She eventually broke me to her ways, because I learned it was easier to go along with what she wanted than it was to fight. And Papa asked me to.

“My papa works in the government and I don’t see him very often, but he’s probably my favorite person in the entire world. He would always save me from Mother’s expectations and my failure to meet them. I grew up going to parties and society functions and hating all of them. I guess it was kind of fate that I met Adrik.”

Natalya nodded her head in understanding but said nothing. Kazik was silent next to me, for once. No sarcastic or witty comments crossed his lips.

“I met Adrik when I was twelve,” I said, hanging my head to look at my lap. My knuckles were white from clenching my hands, and when I opened them, I saw that the coin had left an imprint on my skin. I exhaled sharply, trying to get some of the weight to lift off of my heart.

“I was at a market with my latest governess. Papa and I had convinced Mother that I was old enough to see Saint Petersburg, but she told me it wasn’t proper for me to go alone. I can’t even remember my governess’s name because she didn’t stay long because when we were at the market and I wanted to explore on my own, so I lost her in the crowd. I was wandering aimlessly, not really paying attention, and I found Adrik. Literally. I remember running into his legs and just mumbling apologies and trying to back up, but there were so many people.

“Adrik had looked at me like he was confused, and I remember being so scared. He was scary to me, all gaunt cheekbones and harsh lines and the strangest eyes I had

ever seen. But I remember that he was dressed well, so I think I was slightly partial to that. All the people I knew had dressed really well. And after a moment, Adrik smiled at me and asked me my name. He told me that I was special, that I had power that a lot of people would be jealous of. I don't know how he knew I had power, and I couldn't remember why I believed him. I should have sprinted in the other direction. I suppose if I'm realistic, he was using magic on me and I was just so shocked by it all to notice."

I looked over at Natalya, who continued to nod, listening intently. Sevastien continued to snore on, hopefully in some happy dream. I stole a quick glance at Kazik before continuing my story, but I instantly wished I hadn't. His face was pale, paler than it normally was, and his jaw was set in a hard line. He looked angry and shocked at the same time.

I cleared my throat before continuing. "He asked me if I wanted to visit a magical place, and I had just nodded, but I said that I needed to let my governess know where I was going. So Adrik and I found her, and I watched him perform a spell on her so that she would just wait in the market until I came back. I was shocked but in awe, and I wanted to run away and go home, but I also wanted to stay and see what magic Adrik said that I had. So, I followed him to the Unclean, and Adrik showed me how to do magic." I paused, feeling unsure of whether I should be telling this to someone who was so intimately connected to the tsar. I glanced toward Kazik and he gave me a little nod as if encouraging me to continue.

"I'd never felt like I had before I started doing magic. It was like something was finally right in my life. I was *doing* something, and it was for myself and I had never been able to do that before. My entire life had been played out for me by my mother and by the

world that I lived in, but I finally had something that was mine. And I was good at it. Magic was easy for me. It came so naturally to me and I felt so proud that I was able to do something that other people would kill for. Adrik was so proud of me, and I think that that pride made me work even harder. I think that I was searching for a sense of belonging. Mother made it clear I was a disappointment, but in the Unclean I felt like I was worth something. If I couldn't be a lady right, at least I could be a *koldun* correctly."

My words were spilling out of my mouth like a tidal wave. I had no control over anything I was saying, and I couldn't stop.

"I wanted to prove my worth so badly that I took Adrik's praise as the most important thing in my life. I wanted to make him happy, and I knew the best way to do that was to do what he wanted and do it well. I didn't really start thinking about what I was doing until..."

Tears were starting to weave their way across my cheeks. I brushed them off roughly and went back to twirling Kazik's coin in my hand. No one said anything as I took a moment to try and compose myself enough to finish my story. It hurt, but it also felt cathartic to get everything off my chest. It was like I was purging all of the bad from my soul, like I could change my past just by saying all of it out loud.

"I didn't really think about all the bad that I was doing until I killed Kostya." The words left my lips and I looked up at Natalya. Her face was expressionless, and I was worried that I had said something wrong, that by admitting that I was a murderer I wouldn't be worthy of receiving her help. But I kept going. "Even going into the palace to kill the royal family hadn't seemed that wrong to me until I had left. It had just seemed like something that would help everyone, because then we could all practice our magic

out in the open. I hadn't thought of all the things that I was doing as bad. I just thought of them as being for a greater purpose because that's what Adrik told me they were for. If I just did all the things that Adrik asked, the world would be better for it. But when I killed Kostya," I said, the words catching in my throat, "it was like my eyes were finally open. They saw that I had only been doing things that were evil, that even if I thought I was doing good, I was really hurting. I was hurting people and myself and I told myself that I would never practice magic again, even if I was giving up a piece of myself that meant freedom. I was giving up a bit of myself, but I felt like I needed to."

I brushed another tear off of my cheek and looked at Natalya again. She was regarding me with a sad smile, but she reached out a hand to me. I took her wrinkled hand in mine and she squeezed it tightly, surprising me with her strength.

"We all do things in life that we regret," she said, her voice calm and almost whisper quiet. "That doesn't mean that there is something wrong with us. Life is simply full of decisions and sometimes we accidentally make the wrong ones."

"I don't know why I killed him," I replied, a small sob making its way out of my throat. "It was like an instinct, and I'm worried that if I felt an instinct to kill him then I might kill someone else."

Suddenly, Kazik stood up. He walked down the hallway quickly and was out of sight before I understood what had happened. He hadn't moved the entire time that I had been speaking, so his sudden outburst surprised me.

"Is he okay?" I asked, staring in the direction that he had disappeared.

"That is a very loaded question," Natalya replied, still holding tight to my hand. "I believe that Kazimir has a lot happening in his life right now." Hearing Natalya refer to

Kazik by his full first name seemed to distance him somehow, like the name was the wrong piece to a puzzle.

“How well do you know him?” My question surprised me, much like me telling my full story had surprised me. I was starting to wonder how much of Kazik I knew and how much of that was even the truth of him. There were layers to him that I was only starting to realize were there, and I wondered why he wasn’t more open with who he really was.

“That is a question for another time.” Natalya patted my hand before releasing me from her grip and pouring herself another cup of tea. “I believe that you wanted to hear my story.”

I nodded and leaned back in my chair, grateful for the opportunity to not have to speak for a few moments. I reached for my teacup and took a sip of my now lukewarm tea, the sweetness of it hitting my teeth.

“I always loved plants,” Natalya began, taking a teaspoon and stirring the contents of her cup. “I often think about the garden that I had as a child. My little sister and I grew all sorts of plants and flowers there, and I remember spending so much time tending to them. It was a small little thing, but the happiness that it brought me exceeded anything else that I knew.

“My family and I lived in a small farming village near the Volga, and I grew up helping my mother around the house while my father and older brothers worked in the field with the rest of the men. We lived a simple life, but it was a life that I loved and that meant the world to me. I had everything that I needed.”

“When did you learn that you were a *vedma*?” I asked, hoping that I wasn’t interrupting Natalya’s story.

“When I was 15,” Natalya replied. “My mother fell ill, and we didn’t have the money to call a doctor. So, I saved her.

“Being a *vedma* is knowing how to pull and balance energies. It’s a manipulation of a different sort than what you and Kazimir can do. I am able to read the energies of people and things around me and I adjust them. That’s how young *vedmas* can make plants grow and strong *vedmas* can heal the sick.”

“Your mother survived though?” I asked, feeling my heart swell with hope. If it was possible for her to save her mother, it might be possible for her to save Sevastien.

“She did,” Natalya said, “but what my mother had was only a mortal illness. It sounds like Sevastien is suffering from something a little more complicated.”

My heart dropped in my chest, but I tried to keep my expression neutral, especially as Kazik walked back into the room and sunk into a chair across from me.

“But, is there a chance that you can save him anyway?” My voice rose as hope ballooned in my chest.

Natalya sighed and set her teacup back on the table. It made a small *clink* as it came in contact with her saucer.

“That is a very complicated question,” she replied. “From what Kazik has told me, this is a magical illness.”

I nodded my head slowly and saw Kazik do the same.

“He can’t remember anything,” I said, “and he started coughing up blood a few days ago. He sleeps a lot and I’m not sure if that’s because he’s trying to fight the illness or if his body is shutting down.”

Natalya was quiet for a moment.

“I think we might have more luck coming to an answer if we went to my library.” She raised a hand toward Kazik who took it and helped Natalya rise. She was graceful in her movements, and I wondered just how old Natalya was. Her body looked fragile, but she was able to carry on complex conversations.

“Natalya,” I asked, my voice shaking slightly, “how old are you?”

She smiled a knowing smile, her eyes lighting up with mischief.

“Ninety-seven,” she said. “But didn’t your mother ever tell you not to ask a woman her age?” She motioned for me to rise, woke Sevastien, and walked off down the hallway.

Sevastien’s hand was clammy in mine as we followed Natalya and Kazik. I felt like we had been walking for miles, though the distance was short. We only passed two doorways, both of which were closed. The walls of the hall were the same pale blue that Natalya’s sitting room was, and but it did little to calm me. My heart was oscillating between panic at the thought of losing Sevastien’s life and my own and also excitement at the thought that someone would be able to help me out of the mess that I was in. It was making it hard to breathe, and I fought to keep my breaths even. I really hoped that nobody noticed that I was panicking.

“You’re hurting my hand,” Sevastien said, shaking his hand and trying to get out of my grip. I dropped his hand like a hot stone, not realizing how strong my hold was. I was more than nervous if I was squeezing that hard. I rubbed my palm across my trousers to try and wipe some of the sweat away and almost ran into Kazik, who has stopped in front of a gorgeous set of double doors.

Painted cream with gold accents around the outside, it looked like the entrance to a fairy kingdom. As I wondered at them, Natalya reached forward and placed a hand on top of a golden filigree. They glowed under her touch before swinging open. When they did, my breath caught in my throat.

The library was larger than the sitting room, larger than my room at home, even larger than many ballrooms that I had been in. The walls were the same sky blue and cream that the rest of Natalya’s suites were, but these seemed to glow. It was as if there was something magic about this room, something more magic than the rest. Ornatly carved gold trim lined the ceiling and the upper walls, and the color seemed to reflect off of itself to create a dazzling effect. Frescos in bright tones of yellow, green, and blue spanned the ceiling, interrupted only by three massive crystal chandeliers. Massive marble columns were scattered throughout the room, large arched windows let in glowing sunlight, and a spiral staircase hid in the corner. But what truly took my breath away were the books.

I had never seen a two-story library before, but standing in one now, I couldn’t imagine a better way to store books. The spiral staircase led to the second level of the library, which was almost like a balcony of precious ideas. Texts lined every wall, their spines the most beautiful artwork that I could imagine. Every inch of the room was

covered in books, from floor to ceiling, and rolling ladders were placed at certain shelves for easier access to the uppermost titles. As I looked around, I couldn't help but feel a little better. This was a place of knowledge, a room of calm and joy. I had begged for a library to be added to our home, but Mother had insisted that I didn't need another reason to waste my time reading.

"This is," I started, but I found myself unable to find the right words to describe what I was seeing. Exquisite didn't quite capture the spirit, majestic didn't quite fit. This library was something that I could have only imagined in my dreams.

"Breath-taking," Kazik whispered from nearby. He walked along a shelf, his fingers trailing along the spines of the books. He seemed to be in a trance, each footfall silent but determined.

"How many books are here?" I asked, looking toward Natalya. She had taken a seat in a nearby armchair and was watching Kazik and I as we gawked at the library. Sevastien had sat down at her feet, looking once again like a puppy.

"Thousands," she said, gesturing around her. "A mix of literature and magic."

I pulled a green leather-bound book off a nearby shelf. The title, *Wuthering Heights*, jumped out at me, etched in gold in the cover. I hugged it to my chest before placing it back on its rightful place on the shelf, next to its siblings.

"How did you ever collect this many?" My voice was a whisper, as if I didn't want to disturb the thousands of stories that lined the shelves. "I can't believe that there are even this many books in the world."

"Gifts from the tsar, mostly," Natalya said, matter-of-factly. "The second floor is dedicated to grimoires and books on magic. Every time one is confiscated, it ends up in

my library. I call myself a bit of a magical historian. But some of the novels were purchased by me, and I still have my old grimoire. It's sentimental."

Footsteps sounded on the staircase and I saw Kazik climbing to the second floor. He hadn't said anything since his "breath-taking" comment, and I wondered if he was having the same reaction to the place that I was. I had grown up reading, sneaking novels into the gardens and hiding at society functions when I was younger with a novel. I had made friends without countless servants who hid me from my mother while I read "just one more chapter." I had grown up to be a bookworm, and I was wondering if Kazik had too. I had seen him reading a fair few times at Adrik's, but I had never asked him about it. Had his father taught him how like mine had? Did he have a story that he loved more than the others? Had he ever stayed up all night until his candle burnt out because he became too invested in the story? There was so much about him that I didn't know, that I hadn't even considered to ask.

"Sit, darling," Natalya said, motioning for a chair next to her as she rose. "I have to find a few things."

Natalya strode over to the staircase and began her ascent. I watched each step on the edge of my seat, worried that she would fall, but she didn't. Natalya was stronger than she looked. What spells did she perform to keep herself that youthful at such an old age? When she reached the top of the stairs, Natalya walked over to Kazik and laid a hand on his shoulder. She said something to him that I couldn't hear from the first floor, and Kazik nodded before hurrying down the stairs. Natalya began pulling tomes off of the shelves and cradling them in her arms.

“Have you been here before?” I asked as Kazik took the seat next to me that Natalya had occupied.

Kazik shook his head. “I’ve never had the need.”

I pursed my lips at that comment and cocked my head a bit in confusion. How many times has he been here and for what reasons? I opened my mouth to ask, but Kazik spoke first.

“Do you have a favorite?” Kazik asked. “A novel, I mean.” The question felt out of the blue, because never once had we talked about anything personal like that, but it also felt right since we were sitting in the library. And hadn’t I just wondered the exact same thing about him?

I pondered that for a few moments, trying to decide which story I enjoyed enough to call it my favorite. “*Little Women*,” I said finally, confident that that was the correct choice.

“Makes sense with the marriages,” Kazik said, the sarcasm back in his voice. It was clear that he was teasing, but I wanted to set him straight.

“It’s the siblings, actually,” I replied, sitting a little straighter in my chair. “I’ve always wanted a sister.”

“They’re miserable,” Kazik said, “but they’re also wonderful.”

“You have sisters?” The question was stupid, but I wanted the clarification anyway.

“Two,” Kazik responded. “Zoya and Alena. Zoya’s fifteen and Alena’s about to turn ten. They’re a lot to handle.” When Kazik mentioned his sisters, his whole face seemed to light up. His pale skin radiated a warmth I hadn’t seen before, like so many

other things that I was learning. He ran a hand through his hair, and I could see a heartfelt smile from behind his arm.

“I had no idea,” I said.

“You wouldn’t have,” Kazik replied. “I don’t talk about them.”

“Why not?” I asked. If I was prying, I didn’t care. I was possessed with the sudden urge to know about Kazik and his family, and if that made me pushy, then so be it.

Kazik sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger. He leaned forward in his chair, and for a moment I didn’t think that he would answer.

“Because it’s just easier if I don’t.” His tone was resigned and left no room for further conversation. I nodded and sunk my hands into my pockets to do something to diffuse the awkward feeling that had settled on the room. My right hand felt something cold and small, and when I pulled it out, I realized that it was Kazik’s coin that he had let me use earlier. I must have put it in my pocket while Natalya was talking to me.

“Here,” I said, gratefully breaking the tension in the room that had settled like a curtain. I held out the kopeck to Kazik and his eyebrows shot up in surprise, scrunching up like two thick, brown caterpillars.

“Thanks,” he replied, voice rough. He spun the token between his fingers, the worn silver becoming a blur as he passed it over and under each of his fingers. “I didn’t think you’d remember to give it back.”

I shrugged my shoulders and settled into my chair. I felt uneasy, like I had just done something wrong somehow by asking Kazik about his family and by giving him his

coin. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him spin the coin once more before tucking it into his trouser pocket.

Thunk. My body lurched in surprise as Natalya dropped a pile of books onto a nearby table. She must have come downstairs when Kazik and I were talking.

“These ought to do the trick,” she said, grabbing one massive tome off of the pile and turning to the table of contents. Six different books were stacked on the table, their brown leather spines and covers in various stages of age. I reached for one titled *The Dark Magic of Kolduns* and felt the worn leather of the grimoire underneath my fingers like a soft caress.

“What exactly are we looking for?” I expected Natalya to answer, but she was too busy flipping through the pages of the text she had opened. She looked like a hurricane as the pages flew by. It was shocking that none of them had torn yet.

“No, no, no,” Natalya whispered as she continued her rapid page-through of the book. I stood up to get a closer look at what she was rifling through and heard Kazik do the same. Sevastien stayed in his spot on the floor.

“Ah!” Natalya’s voice was triumphant as she stopped her turning and pointed to a page. “This is what I was hoping to find.”

I leaned closer and saw entries on magical illnesses and maladies. The pages were yellowed with age and had that classic old book smell. The page itself seemed to discuss memory loss illnesses and how they were connected to magic.

“Huh,” Natalya intoned, closing the book with a snap and picking up another. She didn’t explain as she paged through the next book in the same manner that she did the first.

“Can you explain what you’re trying to find?” I asked, my voice timid. Disrupting her investigative process seemed like a poor choice, but I needed to have some answer as to what was going on.

“I’m want to see what magical illnesses cause memory loss and if they are fatal,” she said, turning the pages even quicker than before. “Unfortunately, every one seems to be fatal, but there is something different about this disease than the others that I’m noticing.”

“What?”

“Magical illnesses are known to only happen to magicians. They’re usually the result of a spell gone bad or the residual negative energy of *koldun* magic, and they don’t spread like normal mundane illnesses. I’m looking to see if there has ever been an instance of a magical malady happening to someone without magic.”

“But I’ve heard that this illness has been happening to both,” I said, turning to Kazik who nodded.

“We’ve been hearing a lot about it in the Unclean,” he added. “It’s been affecting *koldun* with less magic and also some of the people in the slums.”

Natalya’s face turned grim as she stopped on a page, scanned it, then slammed the cover shut. She opened the next volume and repeated her process before turning to us.

“If that’s the case, then this illness is a creation.”

“A what?” My voice was shaky when I spoke. Whatever a creation was, it didn’t sound like it was going to be positive, and I really needed something positive to happen right now.

Natalya closed the book she was looking at gently and turned toward us.

“All *koldun* magic is a creation of some sort,” she said. “*Vedma* magic is a balancing of forces, but *koldun* magic threw the idea of balance out the window. All the spells that you can do with your magic were at one point created. And that is, unfortunately, what this illness must be.”

I grabbed onto the edge of the table, desperate to have something between my fingers. I wanted to touch something solid, something that wasn't going to drop from under my feet.

“So, you're saying that someone made this illness?” Kazik was the one that spoke. His hands were shoved into his pockets, but his whole body seemed tensed.

“It could have potentially been an accident,” Natalya replied, “but I've never heard of something of this magnitude being accidental. It takes a lot of magic to craft a spell from nothing, and to create an illness takes a lot more than the average *koldun* would have. The problem with making something, whether that be an illness or anything else, is that because *koldun* magic goes against the balance of positive magic, these new spells are incredibly unstable. They tend to run wild and are almost uncontrollable.”

I felt like I had been punched in the stomach. Someone fabricated this illness. Someone wanted people to lose their memories and die. But the thought that this illness was created by someone powerful made everything a lot worse. *Adrik*. The thought sent a shiver up my spine, the very suggestion that he had created something like this was revolting, but not unimaginable.

“It was Adrik,” I blurted out, the name like acid on my lips. “It had to have been him.”

Kazik pinched the bridge of his nose again and exhaled loudly. “I hate to say that you’re right,” he said, “but we know what he’s capable of.”

“How do we cure it?” I asked, voice determined. “If Adrik made this, there has to be a way to fix it.”

Natalya looked at me, her eyes filled with sorrow and she reached out a hand to me. I took it gratefully, thankful to have someone to hold on to.

“The problem, my dear,” she said, her voice quiet, “is that the only person that can stop it is the person that created it.”

Chapter 14

“Magical artifacts are rare, but they do exist. They are mostly crafted by koldun and are utilized to enhance their magic in some fashion.” – A Brief History of Magic by Andrei

Ivanov

I’ve never fainted in my life, but there are been plenty of times that I wished that I had. It always seemed like a convenient way to exit a situation and hopefully wake up to a better mess later. This was one of those times.

“Let me make sure I heard this right,” I said, trying to grasp reality. “Only the person who created the illness can stop the illness.”

“Yes,” Natalya said.

Okay. This wasn’t good. This wasn’t good because there was no way in hell that Adrik would ever fix Sevastien, given the fact that he had basically doomed me to the same fate. But I also didn’t know for sure that Adrik had made this illness. I mean, I suspected that he had, but I had no concrete proof. Nothing tied him to having done this. But I knew him, maybe better than any of his other pupils had. I had seen him at his worst, and I hated knowing that this is something he would do. The question kept lingering in my mind was why. Did he intend for it to kill Tsar Nikolai and fulfill what I hadn’t been able to do? Or was he hoping it would make its way to me and cause me a painful, humiliating death?

“Was he really still that mad that I didn’t kill Tsar Nikolai?” I directed my question to Kazik, even though I already knew the answer. Adrik had told me so yesterday.

“Yeah,” Kazik replied. He wasn’t looking at me; his gaze was stuck on the book in front of Natalya. “It was all that he would talk about for months. He gave the rest of us hell, but we all knew that it was displaced because you weren’t there.”

I grabbed at my hair, pulling on it to try and ground myself. I don’t know why this hadn’t occurred to me. With everything that I had done for Adrik, every bloody errand that I had gone on for him, every hour that I had spent learning magic so that I could help him, I thought that he would just let me go. But I guess that was never the case.

“So, I guess that’s it then,” I said, and I could feel tears starting to run down my cheeks. I wiped them angrily away. “There’s nothing we can do.”

“Actually,” Natalya chimed in, her voice jarring me back to reality, “there is another possible option.”

“What?” I was willing to cling tooth and nail to any hope that I was offered.

Natalya held up a wrinkled finger as if to quiet me and pulled another book off of the stack. When she opened it, dust flew into the air in a gray cloud and I tried unsuccessfully to fight back a cough. Kazik waved his hand in the air, trying to dissipate the dust. Natalya started flicking through pages the same way that she had done with the other books, but it only lasted a few moments before she gave a cheerful “A-ha!” and shoved the book toward me.

“This is our second option.” She said it like we were in this mess together, and it gave me a lot of comfort to know that I wasn’t alone. That is, I had comfort until I saw that the book depicted knife.

“Death is the second option?” Kazik deadpanned as he also took in the drawing of the knife on the page. It was a gorgeous blade, prettier than the weapons that we kept on

us at all times. Intricately etched spirals curled up the length of the hilt to end in flowers by the base of the blade, and each flower looked like it had a tiny stone in its center. The blade itself had the phrase, “Magic is Balance,” etched into the blade. It was a beautiful illustration, and if this was only what a drawing of the knife looked like, I wondered what the real deal was like.

“Not quite,” Natalya corrected. “Have either of you heard of the *Dusha* blade before?” When neither of us made a sound, Natalya continued.

“Shortly after *kolduns* and *vedmas* parted ways, a few members of both sides realized that our power had limits, that there were ways that both sides could go wrong. They wanted to create an undo of sorts, for when spells grew to be too complex to fix with common magic.

“So,” Natalya continued, “they came up with the idea to fuse *vedma* and *koldun* power into something that could be used to cancel out certain magic. It was more of a fail-safe for the *vedmas*, in case something was to go wrong and a *koldun* suddenly started causing a mess. While you are the more powerful sorcerers, your magic has a tendency to self-destruct and go wrong.”

“Noted,” Kazik said, and I thought I could detect a hint of a smile to his voice, though my eyes were trained on the drawing of the knife. I was trying to study its every detail.

“A *vedma* and a *koldun* came together and cast a very, very powerful enchantment on this knife. It became known as the *Dusha* blade, and it has the power to undo even the most powerful enchantments.”

“What’s the catch?” It was a blunt question, but I wanted to know exactly what I was getting into.

“The *Dusha* blade only works if the person that a spell is working on dies,” Natalya said. “But before you interrupt me again, the death isn’t permanent. The blade works to sever the magical connection between a person and an enchantment through death, but they are brought back to life by the balance of powers. The enchantment dies, but the person lives on. If Sevastien was to be killed with the *Dusha* blade, both the illness and the link between you would be gone.”

It sounded too good to be true. Eradicating both spells with one action seemed too simple, and a simple solution to a problem this large shouldn’t be possible.

“Where can we find it?” Kazik asked. “I’m assuming you’re showing us a picture because you don’t actually have it with you.”

Natalya’s face fell ever so slightly. “I don’t,” she said. “And the one problem with the *Dusha* blade is that no one knows where it is. It disappeared from history a number of years ago.”

“There’s the catch,” I said under my breath. The threat of more tears was stinging my eyes, but I bit my lip in an attempt to hold them back. There went that hope, that last tiny belief that I could throw myself behind. Gone before it was even realized.

“It was historically kept by a *vedma* and a *koldun* who had a close relationship, but as time wore on, those relationships grew fewer and fewer. I’m sorry.”

“How complicated was the spell?” Kazik interrupted, his voice determined. “The spell that created the *Dusha* blade.”

“Very complicated,” Natalya replied. “It took a considerable amount of effort, but that isn’t the hardest part about it. The two sorcerers have to be at the exact same level of magic. If you and I were to try and perform this spell, my power would overwhelm yours and it wouldn’t work. There has to be a balance between the abilities of the sorcerers, because that mimics the balance of dark and light in the world.”

“Very symbolic,” Kazik said under his breath.

“But if we were able to find a *vedma* and a *koldun* of the same level who would agree to work with each other, would it be possible to perform the spell?” I leaned forward and pulled the book in front of me. Kazik leaned closer to get a look at the picture as well, running his fingers along the page as if committing the image to memory before looking back at Natalya.

“It would be possible, but not without risk. The sorcerers who created the *Dusha* blade were fabled to almost lose their magic in the process.”

“But it would be possible?” I asked unrelenting. Kazik looked up at me almost incredulously, as if he was surprised with my forceful questions. But it wasn’t just Sevastien’s life on the line; my own was caught up in the balance as well. And I didn’t have any intent to die before I could show Adrik a piece of mind for what he had done.

“Yes.” The word rang out in the expanse that was the library, but it didn’t feel like hope anymore. It felt like a judgement, a pronouncement that while it was possible to create a second *Dusha* blade, it wasn’t something that was likely. It seemed like it would be as likely as trying to find a needle in a haystack.

I nodded and Kazik reached for another book from the pile. I heard him ask Natalya what else she could tell us about the *Dusha* blade, but my attention had shifted.

Sevastien was still sitting on the floor, drawing shapes and figures with his index finger. I knelt down in front of him, resting my arms on my knees and looked at him. He continued his art, indifferent to my presence. His finger spun circles on the white and grey tiled floor.

“What are you drawing?” I asked. Sevastien continued his motions, and at first, I didn’t think that he would answer me. He looked so peaceful, so carefree.

“Circles,” he said eventually, quietly. “I’m bored.”

He had been so quiet the entire time that we had been in the library, let alone in Natalya’s suite, that I had forgotten he was here for a bit. I supposed that he would be bored. We were all adults, discussing a future that concerned him, but Sevastien wasn’t a part of it. He couldn’t be, because right now he had the intellect of a child. I wondered if this was what it was like to be a parent, making decisions that you hoped would benefit your children without their consent.

I reached down and cupped Sevastien’s cheek, feeling the softness of his skin against my palm. He moved away and looked back at the ground, but not before pulling his coat higher up on his neck. It looked as if he was trying to cover his head. My chest tightened, but I didn’t say anything. Sevastien wasn’t the same person right now. He was the boy I was in love with, but he also wasn’t. I needed to break the link between us and save him from the illness before it killed us both.

I rose, rolling through the balls of my feet and feeling my Achilles tendons relax as I did so. Natalya and Kazik were still deep in conversation, speaking in hushed, low tones that were difficult for me to hear. Nevertheless, I leaned on the table and tried to listen.

“I can give you the basis of the enchantment, but it really is up to the discretion of the two sorcerers how they want to frame the spell,” Natalya said, reaching across the table for a piece of paper and a pencil. She began scribbling words onto the page, the lead scratching its way across the page.

I touched Kazik on the shoulder and felt his body tense. “Sevastien said he’s bored.”

Kazik rolled his eyes so far that I thought he could probably see his own brain. “Would his most esteemed highness like for me to perform a Shakespearean sonnet to keep him entertained?”

I glared at him, hoping that my look was as sharp as my knife. I addressed my attention to Natalya. “What would your recommendation be for this?” My voice sounded hollow.

Natalya finished writing and handed Kazik the page.

“I wrote the enchantment down for you but tell whoever you might find to do this spell that they are able to make some modifications. And let them know that it’s dangerous.” Natalya was lecturing Kazik and me like a disappointed mother. “My first recommendation would be to try and remedy the situation with whoever did this to you, but I have a feeling that that isn’t going to work. This spell would be the next best step.”

An idea sprang to life in my mind. “Is there a possibility that anyone at the *volshebnyy* market might know where this blade is?” People who I had done business with started appearing in my mind before Natalya even answered.

“It’s a possibility,” she said, “especially if you have connections. And I know Kazik has friends at the market.” She raised her thin white eyebrows up at Kazik, which he seemed to take it all in stride.

“I have connections everywhere,” he said, folding the paper Natalya had given us carefully and placing it in his trouser pocket. “It’s all part of the job.”

I reached out a hand to Natalya and took her wrinkled one in both of mine. I squeezed it tight and gave her the warmest smile that I could muster.

“Thank you for all your help,” I said. To my surprise, Natalya drew me into a hug. My head rested just above her shoulder, and she squeezed me tightly. It felt like a moment that I should have shared with my mother, and I was grateful that I got to experience the feeling at all.

“Take care of him,” Natalya whispered into my ear. I pulled back ever so slightly, looking down at Natalya. I scrunched my eyebrows and frowned.

“Who?” I asked, but before she could respond, Kazik was pulling Sevastien to his feet and grabbing his jacket from a nearby chair.

“Take care of yourself, Natalya,” Kazik said, coming up to hug Natalya as well. He rested his chin on the top of her white hair and smiled. “Thanks for all your help.”

“Any time, child,” she replied, pulling away. “Though next time, maybe you can stop in for something a little less life-threatening.”

Kazik put on devil-may-care smile, his teeth on full display. I noticed that his front tooth had a small chip in it.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Kazik teased before striding off toward the double doors.

Our second trip through the tunnels was much less eventful than our first. We didn't speak as we climbed down the ladder from Natalya's and were able to get back to Kazik's apartment completely unnoticed. I breathed a sigh of relief when I finally stepped out from underground and into the grimy, sewage smelling street near Kazik's home. The walk back to his place was equally as silent as our trip through the tunnel. Kazik led the way, his long strides setting a quick pace that I had to speed walk to keep up with. Sevastien had refused to hold my hand once we emerged onto the street and instead followed closely behind Kazik's left side. He once again resembled a puppy.

When we got back to the apartment, I sunk into a chair at the kitchen table and finally allowed myself to process what had happened. Natalya had given us a way to fix things. Sure, the *Dusha* blade might be lost right now, but it sounded like Kazik knew two sorcerers who might be willing to help us make a second blade. And if we could do that, Sevastien and I would be safe. I hesitated to even think that word, knowing that if everything went wrong that I would die before I even turned eighteen. Thinking that sobered me to the necessity of obtaining a *Dusha* blade of any sort.

"I need to go to the Unclean to see Adrik," Kazik said, striding over to a well-worn dresser near his bed and rummaging through it. "I'm already late."

I was shocked that Kazik could even think of going to Adrik at all, especially at a time like this. We needed to come up with a plan of how we were going to find people to help us either create or find a new *Dusha* blade, and we needed to do it fast. I wasn't sure how much longer Sevastien and I had, but I assumed that it was days at most. And how could he even go back to Adrik, after everything that he had done?

“But we need a plan,” I responded, watching as he found a different sweater in his dresser. He threw his coat on the bed and stripped off his grey one. I wanted to turn my eyes away, but I found myself transfixed on Kazik’s back. Thick white scars crisscrossed over his skin, but these weren’t like the scars that we both had on our arms. These were pronounced, clearly rising above the surrounding skin and as big as my index finger. These hadn’t been healed by magic, not like the scars that we made every day when we worked our spells. These were massive, painful, and intentional.

I sucked in a gasp, and Kazik turned his head over his shoulder to see me staring. He hastily pulled on a new sweater, a black one this time with holes at the collar instead of the sleeves. He grabbed his jacket from the bed and slung it on his arm before practically sprinting to the door.

“Kazik!” I took hold his arm as he passed me and held on tight, even as he tried to pull out of my grasp. “Who did that to you?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he mumbled, refusing to look at me. His gaze was on his shoes.

“Was it Adrik?” I asked, my stomach flipping. My other hand was clenched in a fist on the table, and I could feel my fingernails digging into my palm. “Was it him?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Kazik said. With one quick movement he pulled out of my grasp and was once again walking toward the door.

“It does matter,” I shouted at him as I rose. I wasn’t going to let him go back if Adrik really had hurt him. “Why are you going back if he did that to you?”

Kazik slipped his arms into his coat and reached for a hat on the nearby coat rack. “You wouldn’t understand, Anya,” he said, his voice filled with suppressed rage. “Let it go.”

“No,” I said, walking toward him. I pushed him out of the way and blocked the door with my body, taking away his only way out unless he felt like crawling through his window and scaling the side of the building to get to the street below. “You don’t need to go back. We need to come up with a plan to get rid of him, not help him do whatever it is that he’s doing. You can’t help him anymore.”

“I don’t have a choice!” The force of Kazik’s voice ricocheted through the apartment, and I thought that I could hear plates clattering in the cupboard. I had never heard Kazik shout before. I’d never even heard him raise his voice. I was caught off guard and felt myself shrink back against the door, as if it would offer me any protection against Kazik’s rage.

“I don’t have a choice, Anya,” Kazik repeated, this time resigned. He covered his eyes with his hand and threw his other hand onto the wall to keep him propped up. He looked like a martyred man, broken and bleeding with no one and nothing to turn to. Kazik stood there, hand on his face and leaning against the wall for a what felt like an hour before breaking the silence.

“Please, Anya.” It was a tortured sound, listening to Kazik speak. “Please let me go.”

I reached up and placed my hand on his shoulder. “Not until you tell me what’s going on.” When he didn’t respond, I moved my hand onto the skin of his neck. A shiver went through his body, and even though we had just been out in the freezing cold of the city, his skin was warm to the touch.

“Kazik,” I implored, reaching up to peel his fingers away from his eyes. “Tell me what’s wrong.” When he finally dropped his hand away from his face, his expression

looked tortured. There was such sadness there that it was almost overflowing. Kazik looked like he had seen a thousand lifetimes, and it hurt me that I didn't know what had happened. I brought my thumb to his eyebrow and gently stroked the side of his face. Kazik closed his eyes, and I noticed how long his eyelashes were. We were standing so close that I could see each individual freckle on the bridge of his nose.

“Have you ever felt trapped?” The question was so quiet that, at first, I thought that I had imagined it. But I had watched as Kazik's lips move to form it and watched again as he opened his eyes and looked at me. His ice blue eyes felt like they were looking deep into the depths of my soul and trying to understand every piece of me. They weren't just looking at who I was on the outside, but who I was past the dresses and the magic and the life I had lived. It was like he was actually looking at *me*, and not the cages that I had built around myself.

“Yes,” I whispered, continuing to run my thumb along the side of his face. My fingers itched to touch his hair, to know what his white-blonde locks would feel like under my fingertips, but I refrained.

“I'm trapped,” he replied, “in more ways than one.” He brought his hand up to catch my wrist and pulled my hand away from his face, stopping the parade of my thumb. Letting go of me, Kazik took a step backward and grabbed his hat from the coat rack.

“Kazik,” I said, trying to step forward, but he backed up another step before stepping around me and opening the door.

“I'll be back tonight,” he said, looking over my head. “Don't wait up.” He closed the door quietly behind him and left me wondering what exactly had happened.

Chapter 15

“Don’t let other people make you feel. It only leads to problems.” – Koldun proverb

I spent half of the night pacing Kazik’s apartment and ignoring his advice not to wait up for him. I wanted to know why he felt trapped, why he felt that he needed to go back to Adrik’s tent. I spent my entire evening trying to come up with a logical explanation to his choice to go back, but the only thing that was logical was that he was trying to discover any information that he could about Adrik, but that didn’t make sense either. There were plenty of other ways that we could find information on the illness and on what Adrik had done.

Sevastien broke my pacing complaining about hunger, so I scrapped together a small dinner of whatever I could find in Kazik’s miniscule kitchen. In truth, I had never really learned how to cook. There had been plenty of servants in the house to make dinner, and every time I had ventured into the kitchen as a child, I was given a cookie and told to run back to my books. I managed to scrounge up a few slices of cheese and a loaf of bread and made Sevastien a sandwich before sending him to bed. He started snoring shortly after laying down, and I was once again lost in my own thoughts.

What had *I* been doing to Kazik? I had stroked his face and had wanted to run my hands through his hair. Why? That was hardly the way that I should behave, particularly given the fact that I was with Sevastien and we were hopefully going to get married if I managed to save us both from an untimely death at the hands of Adrik. So why had I felt so compelled to comfort Kazik, someone who I knew so little about even though we had quite a history of working together? It didn’t make any sense. I didn’t make any sense.

I sliced myself a piece of bread and nibbled on it as I watched Sevastien's chest rise and fall under Kazik's patchwork quilt. In his sleep, Sevastien wrinkled his nose and rolled over, and I remembered the day that we had first met. The snow had finally begun to melt in the city, and the trees in my garden were starting to bud. Life was beginning to poke through the cold dead of winter, and it seemed like it was destiny that I met Sevastien then.

He and his father came to a ball that my mother had been hosting. She spent the weeks leading up to it in a frenzy of anxiety and nerves, and I tried to stay out of her way. But the party was beautiful, because while my mother was a control-freak of the highest degree, she could throw an amazing party.

I descended the stairs, one hand gripping the railing and another tangled in my skirts so that I wouldn't trip down the stairs when I saw him. He had the most beautiful green eyes that I had ever seen, so big and bright that they looked like the emeralds in a pair of Mother's earrings. I stumbled a bit on the last step and my face had grown hot with a blush. Too embarrassed to speak to this mysterious boy with the green eyes and the golden hair, I dashed into the ballroom and sat with the other society girls and played the event over and over in my head, cursing myself for looking like such an idiot.

The orchestra started to tune up for their next song and I settled into my seat, content to sit and be bored for the remainder of the evening when a softly spoken voice drifted my way.

"May I have this dance?" I turned to see the boy from the entryway standing next to me, hand extended toward me in an invitation. I was too nervous to speak, the

butterflies in my stomach buzzing with the thought of dancing with such a beautiful boy. But I nodded and let Sevastien sweep me onto the dance floor.

We talked for the rest of the evening, and time seemed to rush past. He told me about his family, his mother and sister that he adored and his father who was always encouraging him to take risks and be himself. He told me what he hoped to follow in his father's footsteps and work in government. He told me many things, and I had sat and listened, bewitched by the sound of his voice and the aura that he seemed to give off. Everything about him seemed perfect. Which made it so hard to look at him now.

I came back to reality and stuffed my last chunk of bread into my mouth, relishing the sweet flavor. Then, I took off my boots and settled into bed beside Sevastien and hoped that I would dream about what forever with him would look like.

I almost punched Kazik when I woke up, because his face was six inches from mine.

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead," he said, smirking as I scrambled awake. My eyes felt like they had crusted shut and I was pretty sure that there was dried drool on my check.

"The hell, Kazik," I said, irritated that my sleep had been interrupted.

Kazik dragged a chair over by the bed and sat on it backward with his arms rest on the back of it. He looked infuriatingly put together wearing a black button down that didn't have a single hole or tear in it. His trousers were slightly too short and exposed a pair of burgundy socks that just peaked out over the tops of his boots. Sevastien was sitting at the table, eating what looked like a better sandwich than the one I had made him

last night. He was dressed in a sweater that clearly belonged to Kazik but that didn't quite fit right on Sevastien. The arms were slightly too long and had the same tears on the cuffs that I was noticing was characteristic of most of Kazik's clothing. Seeing Sevastien in something that was even slightly threadbare was a strange sight; I had never seen him in anything that wasn't tailored to perfection.

"What time is it?" I asked, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. I groaned and stretched my arms above my head, cracking my back and my neck as I did so. My head felt hazy and I had to hold myself up to keep from falling back into bed. Sunlight was pouring in from Kazik's windows, so it must have been late morning at least.

"Almost one in the afternoon," Kazik said, pointing to a clock that sat in the kitchen. I squinted my eyes and saw that Kazik was, unfortunately, right.

"Ugh," I groaned again, laying back on the bed and throwing the pillow that I had been using over my eyes. "Why did you let me sleep so long?"

Kazik barked out a laugh. "First you're complaining that I work you up and now you're complaining that I didn't wake you up soon enough? Sounds like you have some issues to work out, little fox."

I threw the pillow at him, but he ducked out of the way and it hit Sevastien in the back of the head.

"No fair," Sevastien said, his voice full of tears. I was worried he was going to cry but Kazik was already on his feet rushing to comfort him. He knelt down next to Sevastien and said something to him in a soothing tone. Figuring that it was a good idea to finally wake up and start the day, I got out of the bed and headed to the bathroom to splash some water on my face.

I looked into the mirror and almost screamed.

My hair was no longer red with a few grey streaks in it. My once brilliant crimson locks were now outnumbered by grey, though there was still some red poking through. My eyebrows were still red, but even their color was starting to fade. I covered my mouth with my hand, trying to take in the sight.

“Well, if that’s what you’re going to look like as an old lady, I’d say that you’re doing pretty good,” Kazik quipped from the kitchen.

“Were you not going to tell me about this?” I asked, storming back into the kitchen. I was combing through my hair with my fingers, desperate to get it into a braid so that I wouldn’t have to catch any glimpses of it in my peripheral during the day.

“I don’t know what you’re so worried about,” Kazik said, shoving a piece of bread into his mouth. “I think it looks fine, besides the fact that it means you’re getting ready to kick the bucket.”

My heart dropped to the floor. Despite being so noticeable, I kept forgetting that my hair was a sign that I was running out of time. I hadn’t noticed any other symptoms of my slow march toward death. Everything had simply been cosmetic. How much time did I have before my hair turned fully grey? And how many days would I have after that? And if this had all happened, had I just been missing all of the physical signs? I thought back to waking up, remembering feeling dizzy and having to hold myself up. Was this the beginning of it all?

“We’re going to the *volshebnyy* market,” I stated. “Today.”

Kazik nodded and shoved another piece of bread into his mouth before getting up.

“Yes, my lady,” he said. “But I think we should leave Sevastien home.”

As much as I wanted to argue and say that we needed him with, I knew that Kazik was right. Bringing Sevastien into practically empty tunnels was one thing, but dragging him along to a crowded market place where he would inevitably get lost and confused was a terrible idea. I nodded to Kazik, but I was still apprehensive about leaving him here.

“Isn’t there another place that we could leave him?” I asked. I hated referring to Sevastien like he was a possession that we could just leave somewhere, but that’s what he was beginning to feel like. Dragging him along and trying to save his life and mine was becoming increasingly more frustrating, especially when he didn’t understand what was going on.

“Unless you want to break back into his house and put him there, I think that this is our best option.”

“Does anyone know that you live here?” I asked. I wanted to make sure that I was covering all of my bases and that Sevastien was going to be safe before I took off for an extended period of time.

“Only you, me, and my landlord,” Kazik said. “Unless we’re counting Sevastien, but I don’t think we can count him for much right now.”

Sevastien was currently splashing his hand around in a bowl of water, so we definitely couldn’t count him for much.

“Okay,” I said, releasing a sigh. I felt like my stomach was doing somersaults. I didn’t like uncertainty, and I really didn’t like this situation, but here we were.

I went over to the coat rack to grab my cloak and was about to walk over to talk to Sevastien, but Kazik beat me to it.

“Hey buddy,” Kazik said, kneeling down so that he was at eye level with Sevastien. He put a hand gently on his shoulder, and Sevastien turned to look at him. His lips turned up in a smile and he practically beamed at Kazik. It was like watching a young child look up at their father.

“Hi,” Sevastien responded. “Are we going to do something fun today?” Kazik shook his head and I saw Sevastien deflate.

“Anya and I are actually going to run an errand,” Kazik said. “We want you to stay here so that you’re safe. Can you stay here for us? It would make me really happy.”

Sevastien perked up at that and nodded enthusiastically.

“I’m going to leave the bread out for you to eat,” Kazik said, jerking his head toward the kitchen. “There’s some more cheese in the icebox as well. If anyone knocks or comes to the door, don’t answer. Don’t answer no matter what happens.” Kazik’s tone was serious as he said his last sentence. “Can you promise me that, buddy?”

“Yes,” Sevastien said resolutely. Kazik ruffled his hair and stood up, striding over toward me and grabbing his coat and hat from the coat rack. Sevastien went back to splashing around in his bowl, and I felt a small piece of my heart chip away.

“You’re very good with him,” I said to Kazik as he grabbed a scarf off of the coat rack and wrapped it around his neck. He shoved his hands in his coat pockets and turned to look at Sevastien again.

“He’s a good kid,” he said, watching as he grabbed a spoon from the table and started stirring around in the bowl. “It’s a shame we won’t have the same relationship when he’s cured.”

When Sevastien was healthy again, everything would go back to normal. We could start planning our wedding. We could find a place where we wanted to live, and we could go back to designing our forever. But there was something about seeing him like a child, watching as he splashed around in water and drew circles on the floor that took away that excitement for me. Knowing that he would never remember what any of this was like to deal with made it harder to imagine how our relationship would be when he was healthy again. Would I be able to let him be my rock when I had seen him as nothing more than a child? Would I ever be able to get that image out of my mind?

“Do you want to say something to him before we go?” Kazik asked, pulling me back to the present and away from my daydream.

I regarded Sevastien for a moment. He looked too happy for me to shatter his fun with a moment of confusion. He wouldn't let me kiss him, and he didn't seem like he would want a hug. I shook my head and turned toward the door.

“Let's just go and get this over with,” I said, stepping into the hallway, leaving Kazik to lock Sevastien in behind us.

Chapter 16

*“There is a place that people go
Not matter if it rains or snows
Where magic is and magic does
As it always has and always was”*

- Children’s Rhyme

Throughout all of my years working with Adrik, I had been to the *volshebnyy* market more times than I could count. Adrik often gave me lists of supplies to buy, people to visit, or favors to cash in, and I would gladly go. In all honesty, the *volshebnyy* market was my favorite magical place that I had ever been to. I had spent hours wandering through the different booths, talking to the different vendors, and even purchasing things for my own magical collection. Most of my grimoires had been bought from vendors here, and I had even bought my latest knife from Vladimir’s armory stall.

The *volshebnyy* market was beautiful, and it was one of the only places where you could watch magic work together. While *vedmas* and *kolduns* usually kept away from each other, the *volshebnyy* market was the one place where both kinds of sorcerers could come to purchase supplies. Because of this, it was dynamic and ever changing. And like the Unclean, it could only be accessed by those with magical abilities, so it was a safe place to hide from the king’s guards if you were a *koldun*.

The entrance was a bit of a distance from the Unclean, but for once the weather seemed to be cooperating in Saint Petersburg. It was cold, but the sun was out and shone bright in the sky. The heat of it warmed my face, and I smiled, sensing that it was going

to be a good day. Kazik and I set out quickly, cheeks already turning pink from the cold and making a good pace. As we turned down cobblestone streets and got farther and farther from the Unclean, more people were out and about. Children were chasing each other in games of tag, their breath rushing out in front of them in clouds. Their parents kept close by, holding loaves of bread and other parcels from their mundane market. The *volshebnyy* was near a popular mundane market, making it easy to come and go without suspicion.

We reached the entrance, and I pulled out the knife from pocket. A quick cut and a mumbled word gained me entrance, and Kazik was quickly behind. I didn't know how a *vedma* got in, but I assumed it was a similar process with less blood.

Stepping into the hustle and bustle was always like getting hit by a train in the best way. Sounds and smells assaulted my ears and I breathed in, already smelling the fresh pastries that were made daily in the market. Under the beautiful sun, the market was cast in a golden glow. Stalls lined both sides of the street, some covered and some open to the elements, and the streets stretched and twisted for what felt like miles. There was typically some segregation between the two types of magic, and sometimes you had to hunt to find exactly what you were looking for. The front half of the *volshebnyy* was traditionally dominated by *vedma*, their light and calming magic more inviting to those first entering the market than the darker magic that the *kolduns* practiced. The back half was reserved for more darker things, though there was plenty of overlap in the middle. Venders shouted about their wares, advertising grimoires, potions to help counteract different ailments, offering their services for a small fee. It was good to be back

somewhere that I knew. The familiarity enveloped me in a hug and refused to let me go, and I was grateful for it.

I took a step forward, my boot leaving a footprint behind in the snow. It was warmer here in the *volshebnyy* than it was in the Unclean. Because of all the *vedma* present, efforts were taken to make this place clean and inviting, so it was always moderately heated. Coats and cloaks were still needed, but at least I didn't have to sniffle constantly from a runny nose.

Kazik stood next to me, his hands shoved into his pockets and his posture nonchalant. His hair was ruffled and messy, as though he hadn't had the time to brush through it this morning. He was biting his lip and his eyes darted back and forth quickly, like a scared rabbit in a cage. It took me a moment to remember that this wasn't like every other trip that we had taken to the market. Kazik wasn't supposed to be seen with me anymore, since I was no longer a member of Adrik's pack. Adrik had obviously made that very clear, and it was probably dangerous for him to be sighted with me. I was the enemy now, in the eyes of those who lived by Adrik's code.

I took a steadying breath and spoke under my breath, the words just loud enough to hear. "I'm going to Vladimir's to see if he knows anything." I took a few steps forward, but Kazik kept pace with me.

"I'm going to pay a visit on some friends," he said, his voice low and husky. For once, he was keeping pace with me and not the other way around. "They'll be on the main thoroughfare, where the *vedma* and *koldun* sides meet. Come find me when you're done." With that, Kazik peeled off to the right and I was alone.

I strolled along the main thoroughfare for a few blocks, taking in the sights and smells around me. *Cheburek* were being cooked by an old *babushka* and her daughter on the corner, and a line was out in front of their stall. *Vedmas* haggled over prices of herbs and potions at stalls, vendors yelling as loud as they could that they had the best deals in the city, the best quality in the city, the best service in the city. Children smiled from ear to ear as they ran along, their older brothers and sisters running to catch up and with them and drag them back before their mother noticed that they were all missing. If one family member was a *vedma*, it was praised. The whole family would take weekly trips to the market for groceries and supplies. The *vedma* side was cheerful, bubbly, and alive. Women caught on friendly gossip while men shared cigarettes and ate their share of pastries. It was beautiful to watch. Their magic wasn't something to be ashamed of. It wasn't something to hide.

In the *vedma* part of the market, I could pretend to be someone that I wasn't. Most of the *volshhebnyy* knew who I was through Adrik, but the unspoken rule of the market made sure that no violence was carried out. It kept the balance. I was able to stroll through the peace without fear that it would all shatter around me. There had been plenty of times that I had wished that I had gotten a different gift. It didn't have to be magic; I often wished that I would have been good at dancing or writing, so that I wouldn't feel this intense guilt on my chest anymore.

I passed a corner stall selling hot tea and took a left down a slightly darker alley off of the main thoroughfare. Instantly, the atmosphere changed, and I could feel a chill run down my spine. Here was the place that I had spent most of my time. I was entering the deep *koldun* side.

To say that the market had two sides wouldn't be entirely accurate. It really had three. There was the *vedma* side and the *koldun* side for starters, each taking half of the shared space and converging in the middle. Both sides spread across multiple streets, but there was a third side, deep into the *koldun* ordained territory. If you were just a *koldun* on a regular shopping trip, you stayed to the main thoroughfare. But if you needed something a little more specific, you ventured into the darkest parts to find what you were looking for.

There were always a surprising number of people in the alley today. After being gone for so long, I had forgotten just how many of us Saint Petersburg kept hidden from the world. I pulled my hood closer against my greying hair, trying to keep myself from being too noticeable. If Kazik was nervous to be around me in the *vedma* section, I could only wonder what had been said about me in the *koldun* section.

My feet crunched through snow and I cringed with each step. I wanted to make my way in and out of this section of the market as quickly as I could, before I was noticed, and word got around to Adrik that I was still alive. He had ears and eyes everywhere.

I saw my target up ahead and picked up my pace, hastening my way toward the wooden storefront that was Vladimir's Arms and Objects. Plenty of my time here had been spent ogling over new knives, shiny blades, and throwing stars here while I was on errands for Adrik. But today I was on my own mission.

I peeked up from under the hood of my cloak and saw that Vladimir was talking to a customer, his cheeks pink from the cold and his thick dark hair swept back from his face. I sunk into the shadows of an alcove and watched as he demonstrated a switchblade

before handing it over to the customer in exchange for a handful of coins. With a bow, Vladimir thanked the customer before placing turning to count the coins. My turn had arrived.

“*Kak dela*, Vladimir?” I asked, approaching Vladimir quietly. Vladimir looked at me for a moment, his brown eyes full of confusion before a sly smile lit up his face, revealing one of his missing canine teeth.

“Anya,” he said, reaching out to give me a hug. I accepted and could smell the cigarettes on his coat before I pulled away. “I never thought you’d come back.”

His eyes were searching mine, as if he was trying to see if there was anything wrong with me. Vladimir had always been kind in a way that not many *koldun* were, and I counted him as a friend. He had been an exception to Adrik’s “no friends” rule. I pulled down my hood and Vladimir’s eyes went wide in shock. He lifted a dirt-smudged hand to his face and an expletive fell from his mouth.

“My God,” he said, voice thin. I pulled the hood back up over my hair, hiding the gray of my braid. “What happened?”

I considered how much I could tell him. While he was my friend, I wasn’t sure just how much of the story I should tell anyone who wasn’t essential. Kazik was bearing the weight of everything along with me, but I needed to take more of the weight off of my own shoulders and I couldn’t keep putting it on his.

“Have people here been hit by an illness?” I asked, making my way into Vladimir’s stall and sitting in the far corner underneath a collection of razer blades. Vladimir pulled up a chair and sat across from me, his eyes full of worry. He looked the same as he always did, his face soft at all the edges like a big hug, his hands covered in

dust and dirt that covered the multitude of nasty-looking scars that crisscrossed his palms, fingers, and the backs of his hands. The scars weren't just from magic, but also from a life dealing in weapons, both common and highly valued. He told me once that when he was a teenager, he practiced throwing knives so often that he would come back into his house with blood running down his palms.

“A few that I know of,” Vladimir responded. “Is that what’s happening to you?”

“Partially,” I said, before launching into the entire tale, leaving out the parts where Kazik was involved. If Kazik didn't feel comfortable coming with me to Vladimir's he certainly wouldn't want me to talk about his involvement in my mess.

Vladimir exhaled, his breath puffing out in a cloud between us. “You're saying that you need a knife that can sever the life connection between you and your boyfriend before you both die from this illness?”

I nodded and pursed my lips. Hearing someone else put those words into the open was doing little to calm my nerves. But I had come to Vladimir because if anyone could find the *Dusha* blade, it was him. While his main business in the market was trading and selling weapons and knives for the *kolduns*, he also specialized in the finding and trading of rare weapons. I had come to him on plenty of occasions for Adrik when he wanted something so specific that only Vladimir could find it.

Vladimir rubbed a hand across his face, streaking dust across his cheek. “I can't say that I know any more about this blade than you do, Anya. I've never heard of it before, but I can be on the lookout for it if that will help?”

My stomach felt like it had landed at my feet. Vladimir was the only person who I thought even had a possibility of finding the *Dusha* blade. There were other vendors I could try in the market, but no one was as skilled at what they did as Vladimir was.

“Yeah,” I said, trying to regain any composure that I could muster. “Yeah, that would be good.”

Vladimir reached out and put a hand on my knee. He squeezed gently and I could tell the gesture was supposed to be reassuring and comforting, but it wasn't having that affect when it was paired with the sad smile on his face.

“Do you know how much longer?” he asked, gesturing to my covered head with his other hand. I shook my head.

“A few more days, if I'm lucky,” I said. “I'm just trying to make the most of it.”

I rose to my feet and Vladimir followed, but he put up a hand to stop me when I tried to walk toward the exit of his stall. He turned toward a shelf of particularly beautiful knives, their blades and handles ornately carved in gold before selecting one and handing it to me.

“For whatever last few spells that you do,” he said, placing the blade hilt first in my palm. Three raised roses were attached to the blade, each a vibrant red the color of fresh blood. Thick green vines studded with thorns climbed their way up the blade, but it was still surprisingly easy to grip, even with all the raised detailing. The base of the hilt and the blade were each a polished gold, no sign of tarnish in sight. It was pure beauty.

“Thank you, Vladimir,” I said, my eyes starting to well up with tears. I slipped the knife into my other boot, keeping it separate from my well-worn and loved blade before

going in for another hug. My head rested against his chest, and I bit back tears as I squeezed with all my might. To Vladimir's credit, he squeezed back.

Finding Kazik in the crowd proved to be more difficult than I thought it was going to be. I pushed my way through hordes of people, trying not to step on the toes of any small children or accidentally hit anyone, but I couldn't spot Kazik anywhere.

I felt like I had been walking up and down the main thoroughfare for hours trying to catch a glimpse of white-blond hair in the mass of people. He had said to meet him at the convergence between the *vedma* and the *koldun*, but I had crossed that point a dozen times and had had no luck in spotting him. After passing the fountain that marked the transition point one last time, I sat on the lip of the pool and stared out at the sea of never-ending people and the rows of stalls. My leg started shaking in an effort to control the nerves that were tensing in my body, but I was so on-edge that I couldn't sit still. Had Kazik left me here? It didn't seem like his plan, especially after helping me meet with Natalya. But more important than that, what was I going to do now after hearing disappointing news about the *Dusha* blade?

A deep belly-laugh tore its way across the market. My gaze snapped to the location of the sound, and I could have died right then from relief. Kazik was laughing so hard that he was clutching his stomach, his lips pulled back to reveal a magnificent smile. I felt a tingling down to my toes and a smile found its way onto my face as I rose from my seat and started walking toward him. Until I saw a girl with chocolate brown hair smirking next to him and my stomach dropped.

She was standing so close to Kazik, it was clear that she was the one that had brought out his laughter. It was also clear that they knew each other very well, because the girl said something else and Kazik continued to laugh, wiping tears from his eyes as he did so. He looked so happy. I'd never seen him like that before. But I got a weird feeling in the pit of my stomach. I didn't want this girl to be making him laugh like that.

I marched up to the stall, trying to school my features into my most "I'm indifferent to the situation" look, but that was interrupted by the fact that I had to say had to throw half a dozen "I'm sorry" statements over my shoulder as I walked. By the time I reached Kazik and the brunette girl, they were well aware of my presence.

"You finally made it," Kazik said, in way of greeting. "I thought you up and left me."

"I got lost," I said, my tone cold. "You didn't exactly give me much to go on to find this place." Kazik looked at me with concern. I wondered if he could tell that I was annoyed, or he was just confused by my reaction. I hoped that he knew I was irritated. He cleared his throat and pinched the bridge of his nose before gesturing to the brunette girl, who was now standing across from me.

"Anya," Kazik said, "meet Irina, one of my closest friends." Irina bowed her head in greeting, but her hazel eyes never stopped scrutinizing my face. Up close, I could see that her skin was dotted with freckles, most of them concentrated across her nose and cheeks. She was a good head taller than me, but still an inch or two shorter than Kazik. Around her throat, a rectangular emerald caught the light. I wondered exactly what someone had to do to become one of Kazik's closest friends, but taking in the beauty of Irina, I assumed that her beauty didn't hurt.

“Charmed,” Irina said, her voice flat even as she inclined her head to get a better look at me and one of her full eyebrows at me. “I’ve heard quite a bit about you.”

I blinked in surprise but before I got a chance to speak, Kazik was talking again.

“And somewhere around here, is her brother, Petya.” Kazik jumped over the front of the stall and walked toward the back, and I marveled at how confident he was in his actions and how comfortable he was with this standoffish girl to just enter her market stall without asking.

“Petya,” Kazik hollered toward through a door in the back, and a boy I could only assume was Petya poked his head out.

“You’re going to startle off customers,” Petya said, his voice soft like new silk. He looked away from Kazik and toward me, and I was astounded by just how much he looked like his sister. The same hazel eyes pondered me, and the same map of freckles dotted his nose and cheeks. His hair was a slightly lighter shade of brown than his sister’s as it peaked out from underneath his hat. He was softer around the edges than his sister, whose entire personality seemed sharp. Petya appeared to be flexible in all the areas that Irina was rigid.

“Hello,” he said, walking toward me and reaching out his hand. I took his gloved one in mine and shook it. “Petya Mikhailovich.”

“Anya Ivanovna,” I replied. I looked at Kazik, hoping for an explanation of why I was being introduced to his friends. He walked up behind Irina and Petya and wrapped his arms around their shoulders.

“How about I make us some tea in the back and explain the real reason that I showed up today?” he said, his voice smooth.

Irina turned her face toward his. “You mean you didn’t show up just to pester us? What a shame.” Her tone didn’t change as she spoke, but her mouth turned up at the corners ever so slightly. Kazik winked at her and she rolled her eyes in return. I hoped that my cheeks weren’t flaming red. Kazik strode off in the direction of the door that Petya had just exited, with Irina right after him. Petya gestured to me to go first and I followed after Irina, though I wished I could be anywhere but here.

Chapter 17

“The trademark of any koldun is their knife. Kolduns often grow sentimental and treat their knives like they’re treasure of a sort. And to an extent, they are, as a koldun’s blood eventually settles into the knife itself and carries some magic with it, always.” – A Brief

History of Magic by Andrei Ivanov

“We need a knife,” Kazik said, pacing across the dirt floor of the back room so rapidly that I thought he was going to wear a rut into the dirt. He had elected to stand while Irina, Petya, and I sat on worn wooden chairs next to a massive safe.

“I don’t know if you noticed,” Irina said, leaning back in her chair, “but we sell jewelry.”

In my brief time in their stall, I had realized that Irina and Petya were jewelers, but only of a sort. It must be magic jewelry that they sold, because there was no way that the emerald around Irina’s neck was simply for fashion.

Kazik rolled his eyes and shook his head, even though a smile lit up his face. I felt a pang in my gut as I watched Irina smirk back, and I tried to keep jealousy from rearing its ugly head. It didn’t matter what Kazik did or who he was connected to. I didn’t have any attachment to him, besides being incredibly grateful that he was helping me. But images of him in the apartment last night, my hand resting on his face, desperately wanting to touch his hair. I wondered what his lips would have felt like on mine.

Snap out of it, Anya. You have a boyfriend. Reminding myself of Sevastien was enough to bring me back. A reality where I was going to die soon if we couldn’t figure it out was facing me.

“Thank you for your helpful observation, Irina,” Kazik said with a hint of laughter in his voice, “but I’m not asking you to find a knife. I’m asking you and Petya to help us make one.”

“What?” I asked, confusion clouding my mind more than Kazik already had.

“Why them?”

Now it was Irina’s turn to roll her eyes. I glanced at Petya, but even he had a smirk on his face, making him look mysterious in a way that he hadn’t before.

“Little fox,” Kazik said, gesturing toward Irina and Petya, “I think I’ve found the answer to your conundrum.”

I glanced between Irina and Petya for a second before everything hit me. The dark hair, the near identical height, the freckles that crossed across both of their cheeks.

“You’re twins,” I said, my words a mere whisper as I tried to comprehend everything.

“Not just that,” Kazik said, smiling fully now. “They’re sorcerers too. Meet your equally matched *vedma* and *koldun*.” I didn’t even need Kazik to point to which twin was which. It was like everything had snapped into place. I could feel the magic of the twins in their very demeanors, the way that Petya seemed calm and reserved, soft at the edges like a *vedma* healing spell, while Irina was sharp like the knives that she used to cut her skin and perform *koldun* magic.

“Shit,” I said, barely feeling like I could keep it in. This could be the answer to everything.

“Do you want to fill me in on what exactly my brother and I are signing up for?”

My joy burst as Irina spoke, bringing me back to Earth.

Kazik looked toward her, his face going solemn. He took a deep breath before speaking.

“Anya has gotten herself into a bit of a bind,” Kazik began, and I didn’t even have the strength to try and correct him. He was right, after all. Kazik looked at me and motioned for me to push off my hood. My hand hesitated at my ear before sweeping the hood of my cape off of my hair and releasing my grey and red-speckled braid.

Petya leaned forward, surveying me with his calm gaze and furrowing his eyebrows. Irina simply cocked her head at me like she found me troublesome.

“That’s quite a hair color,” she stated before looking back to Kazik. “Still doesn’t explain what’s wrong with her.”

“She’s dying.” It was Petya who spoke, his voice quiet while his gaze was intent. He reached out a hand toward my hair as if in question, and when I nodded, he undid my braid and pulled a lock of hair between his fingers. My gaze and mind went immediately to Kazik, but he didn’t make eye contact, instead keeping his gaze trained on his coin twirling between his fingertips.

“I felt something off in your energy when I met you,” Petya said, addressing me directly. “I couldn’t be quite sure what it was, but your hair helped fill in the gaps. You’re dying. Someone is draining your life away.”

I pulled back slightly, causing Petya to drop my strand of hair. His eyes spoke an apology that didn’t rise to his lips. I hadn’t considered the link between Sevastien and me in that way before. It had felt like a sharing of life forces, a joining of sorts where we both were holding onto each other. But Petya saw it for what it really was. Sevastien was

becoming a parasite, slowly killing me from the inside out, and my hair and slightly physical exhaustion were symptoms of it.

“My boyfriend,” I croaked out, trying to keep myself from shedding a tear. “He was dying, and I went to someone for help, but he tricked me. Now we’re linked together and we’re both dying.”

“So, you need our help,” Petya replied, his eyes staring into mine. He had such an intense gaze for someone so calm, but it felt like support and not like judgement, and for that I was grateful. I nodded, and looked back at Kazik, who had slipped the coin back into his pocket.

“Not just any help,” Kazik said as he glanced between the three of us. “We went to another *vedma*, and she said there was nothing that she could do. We need something called the *Dusha* blade.”

Irina and Petya looked at him confused until he explained what Natalya had told us about the *Dusha* blade. I watched as Irina’s face subtly changed, her mouth turning down at the corners and her hazel eyes narrowing. Petya’s face remained unchanged but he still had a kind look to him.

“Absolutely not,” Irina said, glaring at Kazik now. She pointed a finger at him, and she managed to make a simple gesture look menacing. “I’m not letting you put my little brother in danger.”

“I’m younger by two minutes,” Petya said under his breath, but the comment didn’t bring a smile to my face given the circumstances.

“Consider it cashing in a favor, Irina,” Kazik pleaded. “We’re running out of options here, and I’ve helped you two more than I can count.”

“Just because you’ve gotten me out a few inconveniences doesn’t equate to cashing in a favor this large.” Irina’s voice was fire. “Because this seems like a large favor, Kazik. And we don’t even know if we’re going to be able to pull this off.”

“But if you could,” I said, rising to my feet and standing next to Kazik, drawing confidence from him, “or if you even thought that you could, what would change your mind?” I was taking this situation into my own hands now. Kazik had allowed me to meet Irina and Petya, but it was up to me to see if I could even seal the deal here. This was my job now.

Irina shook her head, tendrils of chestnut brown hair brushing over her shoulders. “You can’t change my mind on this one. Not when my brother’s life is on the line.” She gave Kazik a look that said “Don’t test me” before turning toward the door out of the back room.

“I’m in.” Petya’s voice was so soft that I didn’t think that I heard him correctly at first. I thought that my mind was finally catching up to my hair, aging so quickly that I was losing my grasp on reality. But Petya took a step toward Kazik and me, and Irina stopped in her tracks.

“I’m willing to help,” Petya continued, locking his gaze on me. Flecks of gold glistened in his eyes as he nodded toward me and Kazik in turn, and I swore that I heard Kazik sigh almost inaudibly in relief. “If there’s a way to help you, Anya, I want to try and find it.”

“You don’t know her, Petya.” Irina threw her words out like a knife, but they didn’t seem to hit their target because Petya remained unmoved. She took a few steps toward her brother and laid a hand on his arm.

“We don’t have any reason to trust her. If it was Kazik in trouble, it would be different,” Irina said. Her words were gentler than anything that I had heard her say before, and it was clear to me just how much these two meant to each other, how much all siblings must mean to each other.

“A friend of Kazik’s is a friend of ours, Rina,” Petya said, placing a hand over his sister’s. “Her energy is kind. I can feel it.” Irina shook her head and began twisting at her necklace.

“I’m not asking you to do this for nothing,” I said, trying to bring some authority into my tone. “We can make a deal.”

“We don’t want your money,” Irina replied.

“What can I do for you in exchange for your help?” I had never been a diplomat, but Papa had always told me how important it was to make trades and alliances. That was how the entire political system worked.

Irina appeared to think for a moment before leveling me with her gaze. It was a challenge and this time I refused to back down.

“Train me,” she said. I once again thought I was losing my mind, because I didn’t understand her request in the slightest. “Kazik says that you’re the strongest *koldun* that he knows. I want you to teach me what you know.”

“Not how I thought this was going to go,” Kazik whispered under his breath, and I snapped my head to catch him smirking at his shoes. I exhaled loudly, trying to get all of the stress of the situation to leave my body.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll try and teach you what I know.”

Irina nodded and walked back out into the stall. I released the tension that was thrumming through my entire body. Kazik inched closer to me as if he was going to catch me if I fell, and I was grateful for the support.

“How do you think that went, Petya?” Kazik asked, his voice mirthful.

“Knowing my sister,” Petya replied, “I would say that went pretty well.” A smile rose to his face, and I was overcome with an urge to hug him.

“You can hug me,” Petya said, his smile growing to show his teeth. Before I had a chance to question how he seemingly read my mind, he said, “It was written all over your face.”

I wrapped my arms around Petya and felt calm filter through my body. I wondered if this was part of Petya’s *vedma* magic, but I realized that it didn’t matter. The possibility of not dying was something that I hadn’t truly hoped for until right now.

“Thank you,” I whispered into his ear before releasing him. I looked over and saw that Kazik had grown particularly interested in a silver bracelet that was lying on a nearby table. He picked it up and spun it around with the same dexterity that he had with his coin.

“I’ll take a hug from you too, Kazik, if you want one,” Petya said before chuckling. Kazik snorted and started belly laughing so hard that I almost didn’t hear the crashing of plates and screaming coming from the market before Irina burst in.

“You need to leave,” she said to Kazik and I, fear plain to see in her eyes. “Now.”

Kazik gaped at her in confusion and shock before a crash rang through the air and the stall around us shook with the force of it.

“*Kolduns* are attacking the market,” Irina said in a rush, “and I think they’re coming for you.”

Chapter 18

“Not all good comes to the patient” – *vedma* proverb

It was clear that Irina was right about the *koldun* in the market coming after us as soon as we walked out of the back, I made unfortunate eye contact with a particularly ragged looking boy who shouted, “That’s her,” before running toward me, along with about fifteen other people who all looked intent on murder, or at least bodily harm.

“Meet us at the apartment tonight,” Kazik said to Petya and Irina. “As soon as all this calms down.” The twins nodded in synch before Kazik grabbed my wrist and the two of us sprinted out of the stall and into the mass of people in the market.

“I’m glad we didn’t bring Sevastien,” I remarked as Kazik and I tried to weave our way through the people of the market. As the group of angry *kolduns* got closer, the crowd tried to part to let them through. This didn’t quite have the intended effect, as people kept running into each other and not being able to get out of the way fast enough. Kazik and I narrowly missed being hit in the face by a wayward elbow as we ran, my wrist still in Kazik’s grip as he led the way. I looked over my shoulder and saw that the leader of the group was gaining on us, with the rest of the *kolduns* not far behind. As I caught a glimpse of the leader again, I saw that he was the boy from the Unclean that I had seen when I went to make my deal with Adrik, and I felt my gut flip.

“Any chance you have a knife on you?” I called ahead to Kazik. My two knives were in my boots and weren’t much use to me now. I’d have to stop running to pull one out, which would only give the crowd a chance to narrow the distance between us.

Kazik twisted his other arm around to me and placed a rusted switchblade into my hand. I flicked it out in one swift movement, grateful that the blade was well oiled and did a quick cut across my wrist. I didn't wait to see blood before I started speaking.

"*Bor'ba*," I called while locking eyes on the leader of the group. He stopped in his tracks, almost falling forward with the force of his momentum, as did four other members of the group as my magic grabbed hold of them. I imagined them with knives out, attacking their own people and pushed my image through my magic until I saw the people I had targeted turn simultaneous and draw their knives. Yells of confusion hit the air, but I wasn't listening anymore. I pushed past the burning in my legs and ran faster, until Kazik and I were out of the market and out of sight.

I doubled over, hands on my knees, and took big gulps of air to calm the burning of my lungs. I coughed after sucking in the cold air.

"We made it," I said in between pants. I looked up to see Kazik in a similar position, but he had a shit-eating grin on his face.

"What?" I asked, straightening up to look at him. His hair was wind whipped but his eyes were bright and clear, mimicking the blue of the cloudless sky.

He shook his head, his smile growing larger before he burst out laughing. "That was incredible," Kazik said. "Did you see the looks on their faces when you made them turn on each other?"

I felt myself smile too. Kazik watched me with excited eyes as I joined him in laughing. The *kolduns* in the market would still be brawling, but there was something about the way that we were able to escape and Kazik's infectious joy that made me feel like I was floating.

“You were amazing,” Kazik said, looking down at me. He wasn’t laughing anymore, but a smile that spread from cheek to cheek was settled onto his face. I looked up at him and his face became more serious, though there was still the ghost of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. His eyes darkened ever so slightly, and he brought a hand up to my face.

Before I had a chance to pull away, Kazik’s lips were on mine.

Kazik’s kiss was fervent, like making a narrow escape from the market had awakened a passion inside him that was dying to get out. He cupped my face in both of his gloved hands and walked me backward until my back touched the hard brick of a building in the street. My fingers reached up and ran through his hair. It was soft, just like I had imagined it would be. Soft and light like feathers. I pulled strands of it between my fingers and pulled Kazik’s head closer to mine. He obliged and kissed me harder, the press of his lips rough against my own.

Kissing Kazik was like an invasion of all of my senses at once. I couldn’t breathe and I didn’t want to. Kazik was the breath in my lungs now, every kiss keeping me alive. This was all I could think about, the only thing that mattered. The press of his lips on mine, the feel of his hands as they moved from my face to my neck to my back. He was in my head and all that I could think about. Kazik. Kazik. Kazik.

“Anya,” he whispered against my lips.. Hearing my name on his lips shocked me back to the present, and I stiffened. Kazik noticed immediately and took a step back, making me release my grip on his hair.

This was wrong. This was so wrong. I shouldn’t be kissing Kazik in the street when Sevastien was waiting for us, waiting for me to come home and make him better.

Sevastien was the one that I should be kissing. Sevastien and I were going to get married. How could I treat our love like nothing by kissing Kazik? I tried to rationalize it in my brain. It was just the heat of the moment. There was nothing to it. It didn't mean anything.

But Sevastien had never said my name the way that Kazik had. Everything that I had with Sevastien was kind and calm, like riding a gondola through a canal on a sunny day. It was beautiful and wonderful. It was the kind of love that I wanted. The kind that I needed.

"Anya, I'm so sorry," Kazik said, looking at me with pleading eyes. There was still a hint of the desire that had come over him just moments ago, but it was hidden under what seemed to be a layer of fear of what I might say next.

I pulled my cloak tighter around my neck to try and gather myself again.

"Let's get back to Sevastien," I said, my voice quiet. Kazik nodded shortly, his expression hardened and his jaw clenched at the mention of Sevastien's name. He started walking, and I fell in step with him, silently thinking about what I had just done.

The tension between Kazik and me could be cut with a butter knife by the time we reached the apartment. No fancy blade needed for that. A light dusting of snow had started to fall and had accumulated on the shoulders of Kazik's coat and on the cobblestones ahead of us. The sun had hidden behind a cloud and had taken its warmth with it, leaving us in gray weather that matched the mood between us. I looked over at Kazik as we stopped outside the front door to the apartment building, but his gaze remained on his feet.

“I need to go and see if Adrik knows anything about what happened in the market,” he said. His voice was quiet and there was no ounce of sarcasm or playfulness in it. It was as cold as the snow falling into his hair.

“Okay,” I said, not sure what else I could say. My instinct was to go with him and see if he needed help, since the mob at the market wouldn’t have chased after him if he hadn’t been with me, but that wasn’t a possibility. If we had been spotted at the market, which was always crowded and bustling, then we would most definitely be spotted together in the relative isolation of the Unclean. Everyone was out for themselves in the Unclean; it was a world of its own.

I walked a few steps toward the front door of the building before turning back toward Kazik.

“Can I have the key?”

His body was turned away from me, but I could see the small movement of his head as he nodded and ruffled through his pockets. I took a step back toward him and reached out my hand and felt the cold metal of the brass key drop into my palm. I went back toward the door, hurrying to get the key in the lock so I could go warm myself by Kazik’s stove.

“I’m really sorry, Anya,” Kazik said. His back was still to me, but he had turned his head slightly over his shoulder so that his words would reach me. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“It’s fine,” I said, blurting the words out. They sounded harsh compared to Kazik’s. “It just won’t happen again.” My breath came out in a puff, and I found myself inhaling the cold air to try and steady myself and my nerves.

“Of course.” Kazik pulled the collar of his coat closer around his neck and strode off in the direction of the Unclean, his boots making barely any sound as he moved. I opened the front door of the apartment building and made my way to Kazik’s place, but it wasn’t until I walked into the kitchen that I realized he hadn’t said goodbye.

I slid into the apartment and felt grateful for the heat of the stove. My eyes first went to the kitchen table and then to the bed, but eventually found Sevastien sitting on the floor by the stove. He seemed to be playing with a toy of some sort, though why Kazik had toys in his apartment I wasn’t quite sure.

“Hi, darling,” I said, locking the door behind me and approaching Sevastien with hesitant steps. My stomach had a pit in it thinking about the kiss with Kazik in the alley, but I tried to plaster a smile on my face anyway as I sat next to my golden boy. I was still wearing my coat because even though I was inside I still felt cold down to my bones. He looked up when I sat down, but his expression was perplexed.

“Do I know you?” The question shouldn’t have caught me off-guard, but it did anyway. It seemed like Sevastien was getting worse along with me. If he didn’t remember who I was again, that didn’t bode well for whatever amount of time that we had left to break the link between us and save him from the disease.

“I’m Anya,” I said, raising the corner of my mouth up in what I hoped looked like a warm smile. “I’m your ... friend.” I hesitated before saying “friend,” because I couldn’t quite make “girlfriend” pass my lips. Sevastien was like a child now, shy and innocent. Burdening him with the idea of a girlfriend when he couldn’t remember who I was seemed like a poor idea at the moment, and I couldn’t say that I felt much like a girlfriend to him now at all.

“Okay,” Sevastien said, looking down at the toys at his feet. “Do you want to play with me?”

I nodded and finally got a good look at the toys that Sevastien was playing with. It was a set of nesting dolls, seven in total. They were each painted differently, and it was clear to see that they were a family. The largest was clearly the father, with a thick beard painted on and wrinkles around his brown eyes. The mother was next, her brown hair pieced through with bits of gray and a dimple on the right side of her smile. Then came a boy, with blonde hair as white as fresh winter snow. It was Kazik, but a much younger Kazik. One where the world hadn't taken its toll on him yet. The painted Kazik looked peaceful, which was a state that I normally didn't see the real Kazik in. A girl with brown hair and a smattering of freckles and a birthmark on the left side of her face came next. She must have been one of the younger sisters that Kazik had been talking about. *Zoya*, I thought, bringing the conversation that Kazik and I had had to the front of my mind. Two boys followed, though one was larger than the other. They were painted exactly the same, with shaggy brown hair and blue eyes. Finally, I picked up the smallest doll. This must have been Alena. She was the only other blonde in the family, though her hair wasn't quite as white as her brother's. I put the dolls back down and looked to Sevastien again.

“What are we playing?” I asked.

Over the next hour, Sevastien and I played with the dolls according to the story that Sevastien had created. I felt a little bit of my worries fade away, but there was a nagging bit of me that kept reminding me that this wasn't the Sevastien that I knew so well. This Sevastien was like a child, was a child currently with his mind, but he also had similar mannerisms to the Sevastien that I knew. He was careful with the dolls, making

sure to not set them down too hard or to get them too close to the fire. He was always talking, making sure that I understood exactly the story that was supposed to be told with the dolls and correcting me when I went off the script that he had given me. It reminded me of all the late nights that we had spent together at society functions, me listening as Sevastien talked on and on about his day. I had never really considered the fact that I never said what was on my mind when we were together. Never had Sevastien asked me to tell him about my day. It wasn't because he didn't care, I knew that he did, but simply that he was busy. He had had a lot on his mind all of the time, and it was easier to talk about himself.

Without warning, thoughts of my memories with Kazik crept in. He always let me talk about myself. He *made* me talk about myself, even when I didn't want to. And while he was also careful with things, like Sevastien, he also was reckless. He had a wildness to him that ran contrary to the perfect calm and composure of Sevastien. The two were total opposites in every way. But if I was with Sevastien, why was I so compelled to compare him to Kazik and find all the ways that Sevastien wasn't what I wanted?

Sevastien was explaining to me how the boys of the family were going hunting in his game when a rapid thumping sounded. I jumped up and motioned for Sevastien to stay quiet, not knowing who was at the door, before I heard Irina call out.

“Anya, open the door!” she said. “Kazik’s hurt.”

My blood went cold and I rushed forward, fumbling with the lock for what felt like an eternity before it finally opened. Irina and Petya stood on the threshold holding Kazik in between them. His head was thrown back and blood was streaming down the side

of his face. Irina pushed through and she and Petya placed Kazik on the bed before grabbing a rag from the kitchen and getting it wet.

“What happened?” I asked, shutting and turning the key in the lock behind me before going over to the bed. Kazik looked like he had been in a particularly bad fight. His lip was split and bleeding and a nasty gash made its way from his hairline down to the base of his chin. His nose was crooked and it was clear that someone had broken it. Petya pulled up a chair and grabbed Kazik’s hand before closing his eyes. He took a deep breath and started on what I could only hope were going to be some healing spells.

“We found him like this,” Irina said, coming over with the rag to wipe the blood off Kazik’s face. “He was unconscious outside of the Unclean. We took the long way here to see if there was any activity going on similar to what happened at the market and he was just lying in the street.”

I pulled my hands up to my face in shock because this had Adrik’s handiwork written all over it. He had never laid a hand on me, calling me his little fox, but that hadn’t stopped him from taking out his aggression on others when things didn’t go according to his plans. I could only pray that Adrik had only hurt him physically and not mentally as well.

Petya exhaled sharply and Kazik opened his eyes. He rolled over and spat out blood onto the rug before turning back to us.

“Bet I look gorgeous now,” he said. He tried to smile but he winced instead and kept his mouth closed.

“What happened?” I asked, feeling my blood heat up. “It was Adrik, wasn’t it?”

Kazik nodded and I got up and started walking to the door. I was going to kill him, hurt him in every way that I knew how. Adrik's time in the Unclean and on this earth was over.

"There's more than that," Kazik said. I turned back toward him. "Adrik and his minions have taken over the government. The tsar and his family are in captivity."

It was at this moment that I finally got my wish and fainted.

Chapter 19

“The safety and prosperity of the Russian people is the most important thing to me. I will serve you all until my dying day.” – Coronation Speech of Tsar Nikolai

“Does she normally do this?” Petya’s soft voice sounded in my ear.

“Eh, every few weeks,” Kazik joked. I felt like I had just smacked my head, which I suppose was fair because I was lying on the floor of Kazik’s apartment.

“You fainted,” Petya said, reaching out his hands toward me. I took them and he helped pull me to my feet. Kazik was still in bed, but he was at least sitting up. Irina was sitting dangerously close to Kazik’s side. Her hand rested on the headboard of his bed, and I looked toward Petya to avoid the carefree way that her hand rested there.

“How long was I out?” I asked. I rubbed my head and felt a sizable bump starting to form.

“Two weeks,” Kazik chimed in. “You’re actually dead.” I rolled my eyes.

“Only a few minutes,” Petya said, giving me his arm and leading me to the chair that he had been sitting at to heal Kazik. I sunk into it, hoping that it would help pull some of the weight off of my shoulders at the news I had heard about Adrik, but no such luck. It was still weighing on my shoulders.

Adrik had taken control of the government. The tsar was imprisoned, along with his family. And here I was, dying and feeling absolutely powerless to stop it.

This was the thing that I had feared most when I had left Adrik’s tutelage. I knew that he was capable of great things. They may be what someone sane called mad or impossible, but Adrik was a cut above everyone else I knew in sheer willpower and

determination alone. Couple that with his depth of magic, and it was a perfect storm. I hoped that when I had refused to kill the tsar that Adrik would give up. That he would simply move on from whatever delirious plan that he was planning. I had never known more than the small bits and pieces that he told me.

“We’ll be living in a new world,” he had said. “A world where we can practice our magic and be free to do what we want.”

I had known that his plan had required governmental power in addition to magical ability, but he had never told me so much directly, so I had chosen to believe that there was still good somewhere inside of him. But knowing that he had doomed me and Sevastien to death and beaten Kazik had shown me that there truly was no good left in him. There was nothing left to save.

Petya pulled a chair across the room and brought it to the other side of Kazik’s bed, the legs of the chair creaking as he did so. He reached for Kazik’s hand and closed his eyes again, sinking back into his magic. Kazik’s face started to gain some color back and I felt myself relax ever so slightly.

“I need details,” I said, addressing Kazik directly. He nodded and tried to sit up further in his bed, but he winced and sunk back to his previous state. Petya glared at him, which was the meanest thing that I had seen the boy do in the short time that I had seen him.

“Your ribs are broken, you idiot,” Petya scolded. “My powers are strong but they’re not instantaneous.”

Kazik rolled his eyes at Petya and gave him a sardonic smile. “You know just how to make me feel better, Petya. It’s truly a talent.”

I cleared my throat to try and draw the conversation back to my question. If we were going to move forward and create some semblance of a plan of attack, I needed to know exactly what had happened to Kazik and exactly what Adrik had said.

“Care to tell us what happened?” I asked. I looked from Irina to Petya to Kazik and saw that the twins were looking at Kazik inquisitively as well. I wasn’t the only one curious about how Kazik had ended up unconscious in an alley, but I wondered if the twins had seen this sort of thing from Kazik before.

“Adrik knows,” Kazik said, gesturing toward the various injuries that graced his face, “clearly.”

“We gathered that,” Irina deadpanned.

“When I made it to the Unclean, Adrik was waiting for me. Or, I suppose two palace guards were waiting for me, under Adrik’s magic. They brought me into Adrik’s tent and had a good time beating the shit out of me. As you can see.”

“Did Adrik say anything important?” I asked. “Did he say anything at all?”

“We didn’t exactly sit down for a cup of tea, but he told me that he was responsible for the mob that tried to attack us at the market. He said that Vladimir informed him that you were there, and he made the assumption that I was with you, which was corroborated by someone else. He didn’t say who.” Kazik took a shaky breath. “He said that he assumed that I was working with you from the start, but he hoped that I was going to sabotage any attempts you had to fix your situation. Then he told me that I shouldn’t be double dealing the new tsar of Russia, at which point I may or may not have laughed at him until one of the guards broke my nose.”

Petya leaned forward and placed a hand on Kazik’s nose and yanked it to the left.

“Damn it, Petya,” Kazik said, drawing his hands up to his face. “Could you give me some warning next time?”

“I tried to give you warning the last time I had to fix your nose, and you refused to let me touch it until you’d gone to sleep,” Petya replied. He turned to me and winked. “It’s better if I don’t warn him.”

I smiled a bit but my stomach still felt like it was going to give me back my breakfast.

“Did Adrik mention anything more about him being the new tsar?” I asked, hoping against all hopes that the guards had knocked Kazik a little too hard in the head and that he was just imagining things.

“He told me that this was all just payback for you ruining his plans last time. He said that things worked so much better without you there to mess things up and that if you somehow managed to survive, he would use his new executive power to make sure that you disappeared,” Kazik said. “Apparently he and a few people snuck into the palace early this morning through the tunnels and took control. The whole royal family is in captivity and the news is set to be released soon that Adrik is really the one in power.”

This wasn’t ideal. This was so far from ideal that I no longer knew what ideal was. I had always known in the back of my mind that Adrik’s retaliation would happen someday. Hope had crept in after a few months with no contact that I might be able to make it out of his clutches and start a new life. But that wasn’t how anything worked with Adrik, because he was a spider, constantly spinning his web, and I was just the small insect that had gotten trapped in it.

I shook my head and stood up. If I was going to think this through, I needed to be moving. The floorboards of Kazik's apartment creaked under my weight as I passed back and forth between the bed and the kitchen table. Sevastien was still happily playing with the nesting dolls by the stove, completely unaware that his life potentially got even more complicated.

"Okay," I said, running through everything that had happened today. My mind went back to the market and my conversation with Vladimir. I didn't want to believe that he had sold me out to Adrik, but I had told him that Adrik was the cause of my rapidly changing hair color and life force. While his concern for me had seemed genuine, and probably was, his allegiance to Adrik must have won out in the end. But if he had sold me out to Adrik, had he told me the truth about the *dusha* blade? Was it possible that he knew exactly where it was, and that it was with the one person who had doomed me from the start?

"I think Adrik has the *dusha* blade," I blurted out, my words racing from my lips. Kazik and the twins stared at me like I'd lost it. Irina gave me an incredulous look that questioned just how hard I had hit my head when I fainted.

"Think about it," I continued. "If Adrik is the one who most likely created the illness, then I'm willing to put money on the idea that he has the one thing that could cure it."

Kazik whistled. "How much are you willing to bet, rich girl?"

I ignored him and kept pressing forward, trying to convince both them and myself that I had the right idea and that I wasn't just throwing lunatic ideas out into the open.

“Vladimir said that he didn’t know anything about the *dusha* blade when I asked him at the market, but what if that was just a lie? He sold me out to Adrik, so what would keep him from lying about the blade too?” I was on a roll now, my thoughts churning out of my brain like the train from St. Petersburg to Moscow. “I’d be willing to bet that Adrik has the blade all along, just to keep me from trying to stay alive and stop him from this insane plan that he’s finally enacting. *That’s* why he sent the mob after us in the market. He doesn’t want me alive to stop him.”

Adrik had trained me since I was twelve. He had honed my powers, strengthened my abilities, and knew just what I was capable of. I was the strongest *koldun* he had ever trained and there was a reason that he had chosen me to originally be the one to kill the tsar and his family. It’s because I was the strongest, the only one that could potentially stand against Adrik. That’s why he wanted me out of the equation. But there was still a part of the puzzle that didn’t make sense. He knew I was strong, but I knew that I wasn’t strong enough to take him out. Not on my own.

“I’m not saying that you’re right,” Kazik said, “but if you are, what are we going to do about it?”

“I thought we were here to make this *dusha* blade,” Irina said, kicking her feet up onto the bed next to Kazik’s arm. He moved his arm so she would have more room and then rested it on her outstretched legs. I tried not to notice.

“I still need you to try and make a *dusha* blade in case I’m wrong,” I said, “but I want to go into the Unclean and see if Adrik really does have the blade.”

“You’re going to go back to the Unclean,” Kazik said, “where you’re known as a wanted woman just to prove that your theory is correct?” I nodded in response and Kazik chuckled. “And they say I’m the crazy one.”

I turned my attention on Kazik again.

“Did you ever see Adrik with a knife like the one that Natalya showed us?”

Kazik scoffed. “Yes, because Adrik always tells me every detail of his evil master plan.” I glared at him and hoped that he knew that now was not a time to be funny. He cleared his throat before trying again.

“I never saw him with anything like it. But that doesn’t mean that it couldn’t be in the armory. Or in his personal quarters.”

Either spot would be a great place to hide the *dusha* blade. The armory rivaled Vladimir’s stall for inventory, though most of the blades and weapons came from him. Adrik was insistent that each of his students learn how to fight, in case our magic ever gave out on us. We all had strong abilities, but we couldn’t fight with our magic indefinitely. Just like with physical strength, with enough effort, our magic waned until it gave out. Only rest would bring it back, and Adrik wanted us prepared for any situation. What that ultimately meant was that Adrik had an impressive collection of knives, throwing stars, and axes, among other weapons, just sitting in the armory at any given time.

His private quarters were another matter entirely. No one was ever allowed in there, under any circumstances, ever. It was the golden rule of Adrik’s tent and no one that I knew had ever dared to test it to see just how serious he was about enforcing it. Rumor among some of the *kolduns* who had been with Adrik for a long time was that a

lover of Adrik's had been murdered there while the two of them were asleep. Since I had never seen Adrik with a man or a woman in a romantic way, I highly doubted that this was true. What I did think was true was that the man was in love with the idea of control and secrecy, and that translated into a private world we weren't allowed to ever enter.

"We're going back," I said. Kazik looked at me in shock for a moment, then collected his expression.

"When?"

"Tomorrow. If he's really taken control of the tsar, he'll be at the palace. I think that the attack on you was a one-time thing to prove a point."

"And what will we be doing while you're being stupid?" Irina asked. I glanced down and saw that Kazik's arm still rested on her leg, but I kept my attention focused on Irina.

"You're going to work on trying to create a different *dusha* blade. Natalya gave us the spell to attempt it." Kazik moved his arm from its resting place on Irina's legs and dug in his coat pocket until he found the piece of paper. He passed it to Irina to look at who then passed it to Petya. Petya scrutinized it for a long moment before turning to me.

"What do you want us to use for a knife?" he asked.

I reached down and pulled the beautiful knife that Vladimir had given me out of my boot. It shared similar characteristics with the original *dusha* blade that Kazik and I had seen in the drawing in Natalya's library. As ironic as it was, it would be fitting for the purpose. And I was more than willing to get it off my body after the betrayal from Vladimir. Petya took it from me and set it on my vacated chair before rising and walking to the kitchen and calling over his shoulder.

“Now that we have an action plan, who’s hungry?”

Chapter 20

“Where there is heart, there is hope.” – Vedma proverb

I couldn't sleep. Irina and Petya had left several hours ago and Sevastien had fallen into bed and instantly began snoring next to Kazik. Though Petya had told Kazik that he was absolutely not supposed to leave the bed, Kazik had claimed that broken ribs wouldn't stop him from being a gentleman and had settled on a blanket on the floor so that I could sleep in the bed next to Sevastien. Kazik had winced as he laid down and I could only imagine the pain that he was feeling. Petya had said that he would be back to normal in a few days with his magic; I only hoped that I would be alive to see Kazik healed in a few days.

I rolled onto my side another time. It wasn't trying to sleep next to Sevastien that was the problem. Since he had the emotional maturity of a toddler, I felt nothing toward him but a sibling bond. Maybe that was the problem recently. Maybe I was spending too much time dwelling on what Sevastien was like now and not remembering what he would be back to when he was wasn't suffering from a disease. But that didn't address the fact that when Kazik and Irina were sitting next to each other and when she had rested her legs on his that I had felt jealous. I had felt it down to the very bottom of my stomach like a monster preparing to jump out and attack. I wondered if my newfound feelings for Kazik were due to my own weakening life force or if I was seeing a new side to him that was genuinely worth loving. The new side to the pale-haired sharp-eyed boy had taken me by surprise, but it wasn't unwelcome. He was my opposite in a lot of ways, something that Sevastien wasn't.

The floorboards squeaked to the right of the bed and I froze. I heard a rustling and a sharp inhalation of breath as Kazik sat up on the floor, his body illuminated ever so slightly by the glow of the fire in the stove. I watched, pretending to be asleep, as he rose, lit a candle, and padded over to the door. He looked back toward the bed before slipping out of the door and closing it quietly behind him.

My body moved before my brain even thought about what I was doing. I rolled out of bed and winced when I felt the cold of the hardwood floors under my toes. Even with the stove keeping the apartment relatively warm at night, the heat never reached the floor and my feet always suffered. I went straight for the door, grabbed my cloak on the way out in case I had to go outside the building, and stepped out the door.

Whatever I had been expecting, it wasn't seeing Kazik leaning out of an open window at the end of the hall. He turned to me, surprise crossing his face, as the door behind my shut with a click. I'm grateful that he didn't fall out of the window, but I suppose for a boy who can hang upside down in trees, I shouldn't have been worried.

"Hi," I said, embarrassed as I realized what this situation looked like. I had just followed Kazik out of the apartment to catch him doing what? His personal life was his business, not mine, and I was suddenly prying into it. "Sorry, I'll go." The words rushed out of my mouth as I turned back to the door.

"No need," Kazik said, his voice floating down the hall like snow on a breeze. He sounded tired to his very soul. His face was lit up by the moon coming through the window, and I wondered if it was possible that he was simply made from moonlight. His already white hair looked silver and his eyes reflected the light. It occurred to me, not for the first time, how truly beautiful he was.

I tread slowly toward the window. Outside, everything was still. There were no children playing in the street, no bright laughs. It was as if the world had truly gone to sleep, leaving Kazik and I the only people awake to witness it.

Kazik finally broke the silence. “Did I wake you?” I assumed he meant when he left, so I shook my head.

“I couldn’t sleep either,” I replied. “How are you feeling?”

If I hadn’t been looking for a wince, I wouldn’t have noticed the small one that hit Kazik as he shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m alright,” he said. “Petya did a good job.”

I reached for any thread of conversation that I could follow and took it. “He seems like a good guy.”

“He is. His sister too.” I tried not to wince at the mention of Irina, even though Kazik didn’t say her name directly. The image of the two of them earlier today was still ingrained in my mind, legs lying on top of each other. Jealousy was raring her ugly head.

“Are you two together?” I asked before I could stop myself. My cheeks were heating up as a blush spread across my face. The question settled in the air like a thick smoke and I looked down at my feet, too afraid to see Kazik’s reaction.

A chuckle cleared the smoke away and I looked up to see a big smile crossing Kazik’s face from ear to ear.

“God, no,” Kazik said. “Irina is like a third sister to me.” He laughed again, looking more at ease than I had seen him in days. “I’ve considered asking the twins to come to family Christmas several times, so I promise that nothing is going on there.”

“What stops you?” I asked. “From inviting them to Christmas, I mean.” Kazik’s pale face darkened and I wondered again if I had asked the wrong question. Unlike my question about Irina, no humor was present on Kazik’s face when he responded.

“Because I haven’t been home for Christmas in a long time,” Kazik said. “I haven’t been allowed to leave.”

The weight of his words felt like an attack to my heart. To not be able to go home for Christmas was like not being able to go home for anything.

“Why?” I asked, staring into Kazik’s eyes as if I would force him to answer with the weight of my gaze alone. He took a long exhale that rattled his body. He winced when he inhaled, and I had to keep myself from reaching out to him to reassure him that everything was okay.

“Not all of us were able to grow up with financial security, Anya,” Kazik said, turning his gaze back out the window. “While I was able to grow up happy, surrounded by family that I loved and who loved me in return, sometimes that’s just not enough to put food on the table or provide blankets when there’s a blizzard.”

“I saw your *matryoshka*,” I said, thinking back to only a few hours ago when I played dolls with Sevastien in front of the fire. “One of the dolls looked like you.”

Kazik’s mouth rose up on one side in a sad attempt at a smile. “My *dedushka* painted those for my family before he died. My entire immediate family, painted onto a set of dolls that could be destroyed at any time.” He shook his blonde head, disrupting the moonlight that had settled into his hair. “They’re the only version of my family that I’ve gotten to see in years.”

“Are they...?” I couldn’t bring myself to finish the statement. The thought of Kazik having a dead family and no one else to turn to was a sorrow that I didn’t want to imagine.

“No, they’re all alive,” Kazik said, taking away my fear for a few moments. “But I haven’t seen them since I came to Saint Petersburg seven years ago.”

“You weren’t born in the city?” I had always assumed that Kazik was another native of the city, given the way that he melted into crowds at the *volshebnyy* with such ease and seemed to glide around affluent parts of Saint Petersburg. It had never occurred to me that he might be from somewhere else.

“I was born in a farming village, about an hour train ride from here,” Kazik said, sliding his weight down the wall until he was sitting on the floor underneath the window frame. “The oldest of five. My father always imagined that I would run the farm someday.” Kazik ran a hand through his hair and a tear dropped from his eye. “But things never seem to work out the way that we plan them, do they?”

I didn’t speak. Kazik didn’t seem to be done telling his story, and I was glad that I didn’t when he kept speaking.

“My father lost his right arm in an accident when I was ten,” Kazik continued, wiping the tear from his eye. “I was just old enough to remember the doctor leaving my parents’ bedroom and telling them that there wasn’t anything that could be done. My father would never be able to use his arm again. It was gone from the elbow down.” Another tear fell from Kazik’s eye, but he let this one roll down his cheek. “My mother tried to get him out of bed for weeks, but father was too embarrassed. Imagine knowing

that you're the sole provider for your family and now you can't even do the job that you were supposed to. That's how I'm sure my father felt.

“As the oldest, I knew that it was up to me to fill in the gaps that my father couldn't. But I was only a child and I had no idea what I was supposed to do. I didn't know how to hitch a horse to a plow. I didn't know where to buy seed. My mother raised me, and I was a mother's boy to the core. I was supposed to learn about the family farm the next year, but instead my mother insisted that I be a kid. I'm grateful for that now.”

“How did you end up here?” I could feel tears pooling behind my eyes for Kazik's lost childhood. My childhood was a life of cushioned luxury compared to his.

Kazik shoved his hand into his pocket and pulled out his worn coin. He twirled it between his fingers, staring at it intently before speaking.

“My younger brother and sister were fighting in the barn,” he said. Through the conversation, his voice had gotten softer and softer until now it was barely a whisper on the wind. “Zoya had accused Ruslan of stealing her toy. Looking back, it was a stupid fight and I should have just let them wear off their anger. They were upset about father too. But it was my job to take worries off mother, so I got involved. I told Ruslan to give the toy back and he pushed me. I scraped my elbow on something, Zoya tried to shove Ruslan, and I just remember yelling at them to stop. And when they did and I saw the look in their eyes, I ran for my mother.” Kazik inhaled sharply and the coin stalled between two fingers. He looked at me and I saw a thousand years of pain in his eyes. I had never used my power on my parents. In fact, I had never even known that I was a *koldun* until Adrik had found me. It had never occurred to me that Kazik could have had a different experience, even a different life, than the one that I had had. I felt a tear

threatening to escape from my eye, but I held it back because this wasn't my story to cry over.

“When I told my mother, she didn't know what to do. Even in the villages, *kolduns* are still feared. We'd never had any magic in our family and she just didn't know what to do. But I knew that I couldn't stay at my home. I couldn't look at my siblings and see the fear that I could make them do anything at any time, even if they didn't want to. I slept in the barn that night and convinced my mother that the next day I should come to Saint Petersburg to see if someone would hire me,” Kazik said.

“And you found Adrik,” I added, my voice cracking slightly.

Kazik nodded. “More like he found me. It's like he knew I would be at the train station. I stepped off the train with my small luggage in hand and he was just *there*. He told me he would train me and pay me if I worked for him and I was only a child so I said yes without asking for conditions.” The coin started to move again. “He told me I wasn't allowed to see my family because it would jeopardize my training. I could get letters but that was all. So at least I know that they're fed and healthy. As much as I hate the man, I can't say that Adrik is cheap. He kept his end of the bargain, but he should have never made a bargain with a ten-year-old.”

Horror rocked through me. “Did you ever try to leave?”

“Of course,” Kazik replied. “But I always changed my mind halfway to the train station. I suppose there was some magic involved. I was just another pawn in Adrik's game of chess.”

I wondered then if we all were, if we were all just pieces that he used and abused to win whatever ultimate game that he was trying to play. I felt a tear finally drop onto

my cheek and Kazik brushed it away before it made its way down my cheek. The callouses of his thumb were rough against my skin but they were comforting. I turned the corners of my mouth into what I hoped was at least a shadow of a smile.

“It hasn’t all been bad,” Kazik continued. “I got to meet you.”

My breath caught in my throat and my heart skipped a beat in my chest. A shiver worked its way through my body, starting at my toes and working its way up to the very tips of the hairs on my head, but I tried to keep my body still. What was he saying? I must have been imagining this; perhaps my mind was finally wearing down from the link between Sevastien and I and I was beginning to hallucinate. Never in a million years would I have imagined Kazik saying he was glad to have met me.

I couldn’t see the color of his cheeks in the moonlight, but I imagined that they were pink as Kazik turned his face away from me and looked down at the worn floorboards.

“I’m sorry,” he started, his words tripping over themselves to get out of his mouth, “I know that’s a lot to hear with everything that’s going on with you and Sevastien and now is clearly not the right place to be telling you this but I felt like if I didn’t tell you now I would never have the opportunity again and I just felt you needed to know.” He glanced up at me with the look of a boy looking for acceptance, and I felt something break inside of me.

“Is that why you offered to help?” I asked, looking into the icy depths of Kazik’s eyes that felt like they were starting to melt at the edges. “You wanted to help because you cared for me?”

Kazik scoffed and ran a hand through his hair, messing it up even further. “I think it’s a little deeper than that.” He took a moment, as if he was composing himself for a story that was harder than the one he had just shared, before speaking again.

“I had been living in Saint Petersburg for a year before you showed up. Adrik took me when I was 12 too, and it started fine. It was just me learning how to use my magic and Adrik was teaching me and I felt like I was doing something right for once. But then he became angry and mean and abusive. You can’t think that the first time he hit me was when you refused to kill the tsar.” My flesh burned at Kazik’s words, but I kept myself from speaking as he continued.

“Soon I was running errands for Adrik, doing things that I can’t imagine a child doing. I was threatening people, hurting people just so that *I* wouldn’t be hurt when I returned. I returned to Adrik empty-handed once and I never did it again. When I was told that I couldn’t go home, a part of me shattered into a million pieces. I felt like I had lost the last bit of myself because my family had been everything to me and now I wasn’t even allowed to visit them for a weekend. I knew they were still safe because I was providing for them, but it’s not the same to get a letter saying that your sisters were growing up and that your brothers were learning how to run the farm. I wasn’t able to see them grow and change and become the people they were always meant to be. Day by day I was slipping deeper and deeper into a dark hole that felt like it would consume me. And I was going to let it consume me. But then you showed up, and it was like I could see light. This amazing light that I didn’t completely understand at the time but I knew that it was what I needed to pull me free from the hell that I had put myself in.

“I remember the first time that I saw you. I heard Adrik’s footsteps coming into the tent and I didn’t want to be seen because he wasn’t supposed to be home yet and I hadn’t finished my tasks for the day so I hid up in the rafters where I hoped that he couldn’t find me. I’ve always had an affinity for tall places.” My memories flashed to Kazik upside down in trees. My mouth curved upward slightly at the edges, but Kazik continued speaking.

“You walked in, all bright eyes and confidence and you reminded me so much of home that a part of the darkness that had settled in me seemed to fade away. It was the first time that I had seen someone have *life* in the Unclean. Kostya and Volodya had moments where they didn’t seem completely lost, but they were nothing compared to you. When you showed up, it was like color came back into the grey that surrounded the Unclean. It was hope, and it didn’t just affect me. It affected everyone. You made everyone happy, Anya. I made a promise to myself that I would stick around so I could know you, even if Adrik didn’t want me to.”

The only person you can trust here is me. Adrik had said those words day in and day out, every time I showed even a shred of hope of making friends with any of his other minions. I had trusted him blindly and that had been the biggest mistake of my life. It was clear that he only wanted me to put my trust in him so that he was all I had. When I refused to kill the tsar, I knew that no one would help me. I was on my own and it was partially my own fault. I had let Adrik into my head and I had let him convince me that he was all I needed. I hadn’t made friends because I thought that Adrik was all I needed. He was the one who would look out for me. He was the one who would guide me through my magic. He had become an advisor that I trusted with everything, when I should have

been running as far from him as fast as I could. I should have been running toward the people who were receiving the same treatment that I was. We should have been there for each other. But we were all pawns in Adrik's games. That's all we ever had been. He taught us only so that he could use us.

Kazik drew me out of my daze. "I kept my distance because I knew that was the only way that I could be near you at all. As time went on and I watched you grow, all confidence and courage and fire that matched your hair, I felt myself more drawn to you than ever. You were a comet in my life, and I was simply trying to hang onto your tail. But it became more than that. I started to feel more." He coughed then, as if the words were stuck in his throat. "I have never cared about someone the way I care about you. I've never felt a stronger love than what I feel for you." His eyes were daggers into my heart. I had never expected those words from Kazik, but I found that I was glad to hear them, even if they made me feel more conflicted than ever. How could I feel so much for Kazik when I was supposed to love Sevastien?

"I could never tell you," Kazik continued. "Obviously. If we weren't allowed to be friends, I certainly wasn't about to tell you that I felt so much for you. Adrik knew, though. Even narcissistic though he may be, the man is perceptive. And he was so possessive of the people that he considered to be his; you and I were both simply people that belonged to him and couldn't have attachments with anyone else. So Adrik had me go on more solo errands, made me spend more and more time away from the Unclean and from you. And I had to watch as you fell more deeply into his web.

"Until the time came when you were supposed to kill the tsar. You were the strongest out of all of us, so you were the obvious choice, but it also felt like Adrik had

picked you as a final blow to me. If you were capable of killing just because Adrik wanted you to, you would be too deeply caught in his web. There would be no way to draw you out. But you didn't kill the tsar."

"But I killed Kostya," I whispered. There was a burning behind my eyes as I tried to hold back the tears, but they began to fall anyway. Callouses brushed across my cheek as Kazik wiped away tear after tear with his fingers and held my cheek cupped in his hand. "I'm just like Adrik after all. I'm terrible and dangerous and evil because I killed someone that I knew and that I hoped could be a friend."

Kazik sighed and his breath came out in a puff as the cool air overtook it. "You are not like Adrik, in any way. Because you feel remorse. You feel guilt and pain for an accident that happened in a split second. Adrik would never feel that. He never feels anything at all."

"But my magic is what killed Kostya. He was just doing his job and I betrayed him."

"His job was a bad job. Our magic can be used for evil, terrible things. But it can also be used for good. You not only saved a person when you chose not to kill the tsar. You saved an entire country from a fate worse than death with Adrik at the helm."

"That doesn't change the way that I feel," I replied. "And it doesn't change the fact that Adrik has what he always wanted right now and we have no idea how to stop it."

Kazik pushed a stray piece of hair behind my ear. "Healing takes time. But having the courage to use your magic again after everything that you went through, that takes an enormous amount of strength. And as for Adrik, you're not facing him alone. We're just going to take it one step at a time."

Kazik leaned down and pressed a kiss on top of my head and a final tear made its way down my cheek. He was right. I hadn't practiced magic for months after Kostya. I had thought that all that there was to my magic was evil. That's what the world around me chose to see. But there was so much that I could do that was positive with the gift that I had been given. And there was strength in being able to embrace something again that I once viewed as a curse. I might not be completely whole, but I was on the right path.

I reached out and caught Kazik's hand, intertwining his fingers with mine. His thumb stroked the back of my hand and he looked at me as snow was blown through the window. He still looked like a piece of moonlight, but now he had a smile on his face.

"Thank you," I said, leaning my head down to rest it on his shoulder. "For what you said and for everything you've done to help me."

Kazik rested his head on mine and pulled our hands into his lap. "Thank you for letting me be part of it."

I didn't know what I was going to do about my feelings for Kazik and Sevastien. But what I did know was that I tired and just wanted to rest. And so, Kazik and I sat under the window in silence, watching the snow drift in and enjoying a brief and welcome moment of quiet.

Chapter 21

“Magic isn’t an infinite resource. Each koldun and vedma has a limit to their magic.

Once they hit that point, the only thing that can restore their magic to them is rest.”

- *A Brief History of Magic* by Andrei Ivanov

“Damn it!” Irina screamed, pushing a sweaty lock of hair off her forehead.

“Again.”

The scene in Kazik’s apartment was truly a sight to behold. We had pushed all of the furniture to the sides of the room to make space for the massive circle of candles that now dripped puddles of wax onto the floor. The white candles continued to burn, but they were the clearest sign of our struggles, as only about two inches of each candle remained and the rest collected around it on the floor. Inside the circle, stuck into the wood, was the blade that Vladimir had given me in the market. Its gold color was untarnished and the detailed roses and thorns glinted in the light, which was surprising considering the scorched floorboards that the knife was stuck into.

“Looks like I won’t be getting my security deposit back,” Kazik had remarked after the first attempt at the spell, trying to make light of the situation. After the fifteenth attempt at the spell, as Irina and Petya grew increasingly more drained of energy and frustrated, it looked as if not only were we not going to be capable of crafting a new *dusha* blade, we also were ruining Kazik’s shabby apartment in the process.

“Irina,” Kazik said, taking a step toward her from across the room, abandoning the safety in his chair by the window. “I think it’s time to take a break.”

She whirled on him like a tornado and Kazik threw his hands up.

“Or not,” he said, retreating back to his chair. “In fact, I think it would be a terrible idea to take a break.”

Irina attempted to take a calming breath, but it did little to change her physical or mental appearance. When Irina had entered the apartment five hours ago, her hair had been intricately braided down her back and her blue dress had been without a single wrinkle. Now, her hair was disheveled and drenched in sweat. Her skirts had been singed by the force of the magic that she and Petya had been working on all day. Her arm wouldn't heal anymore due to the sheer amount of magic that she was using, and droplets of blood were drying on the hardwood floor. Petya stood opposite her across the circle, and he didn't look any better. His white shirt was completely soaked through and his face was ashen. He panted as though he couldn't catch his breath, and it was clear that the twins were at their breaking point. They were simply running out of magic.

I glanced over at Kazik, but he simply shook his head. It was becoming increasingly clear that neither Irina nor Petya were going to give up. Petya had proven to be the one that I wasn't expecting. After five attempts, I had assumed that he would convince Irina to take a break. But it seemed that he was just as desperate to craft the new *dusha* blade, because he had not uttered a word of complaint throughout the entire process. He only had determination in his eyes as he turned back toward his sister and squared his shoulders.

“Again,” he said. Irina nodded and squared her body as well.

While Natalya had given us the basics of the spell needed to craft the *dusha* blade, we had the unfortunate freedom of figuring out the rest of it. The words were easy enough, but Irina and Petya were left to determine exactly how to balance their magic

evenly, how to stand, and even if we should have a candle circle, which we established that we did.

Now, I watched the twins and tensed, preparing for another disaster and hoping that after this they would finally take a break.

“On my count,” Petya said, closing his eyes and intertwining his hands together as if he was praying. “One, two, three.”

On the count of three, the twins began chanting the words that Natalya had given us. The spell spoke of balance and great power, but also a harmony and unity that could overcome all others. As I watched, the familiar black smoke that appeared whenever Kazik and I did magic appeared around Irina. It hugged her body like she was made of it, curving around her outstretched hands and around her neck. Because she was still bleeding from the last few attempts, there had been no need to draw any new blood. Across the circle, Petya appeared to be glowing. I had never witnessed such intense *vedma* magic up close. A *vedma* had been invited to my home once or twice when I was a child with a particularly stubborn illness, but they had never performed anything more advanced than a healing spell. Petya, on the other hand, was attempting to balance magic. His cheeks flushed, taking away his ashen appearance, and he stretched his arms toward the circle at the same moment that Irina pushed her magic toward the dagger in the middle of the candles.

It was at this part of the spell that everything seemed to go wrong each time. Instead of melding together like we imagined the magic was supposed to do, the light and the dark battled for control of the blade. As smoke and light rushed toward the dagger, they briefly mixed before exploding on extended contact. Flames scorched at the

floorboards and the entire room smelled like ashes. Soot hung in the air as the explosion subsided, but no one flinched when the spell didn't succeed, and the flames engulfed the circle but didn't exit. Magic held them there, its grip tight and unyielding. Such were the ways of magic. It could be as flexible and sinewy as a fox one moment and solid and stubborn like a rock the next.

Irina released a frustrated growl in her throat before kicking over some of the candles on the edge of the circles. Their flames extinguished mid-fall, but there wasn't much that we had to be worried about them ruining. The floorboards were already in an unrepairable state.

"Are we sure that the spell isn't working?" I asked, trying to sound calm without being patronizing toward Irina, who I thought could lash out at any moment. "There was so much that Natalya didn't know, so maybe it actually worked after all."

"Well, we can stab your boyfriend and see what happens if you want to test your theory," Irina snapped back before turning on her heel and stomping out the door, probably bothering any downstairs neighbors that Kazik had that didn't already hate us. She slammed the door behind her, and I looked between Petya and Kazik for some sort of explanation.

"Welp," Kazik said, pushing himself up and out of his chair, "I guess I'll go after her then." Petya nodded at him and knelt down to start blowing out the candles. The message was loud and clear; we were done trying to do the impossible for the day.

"Is she going to be okay?" I asked as Kazik pulled on his shoes and reached for his hat. Kazik shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly, but Petya spoke up.

“My sister and I are opposites in a lot of ways, but we both feel the same way about failure. Irina’s just a little more open about her feelings,” Petya said. He looked over at me and gave me a small smile that clearly cost him a lot of effort. “She just needs to blow off some steam.”

“Which is why she now gets to deal with my glorious presence and can yell at me for as long as she feels is necessary,” Kazik said, pulling his coat over his arms and flashing us a grin before reaching to open the door.

“Let me go instead.” The words were out and I was already grabbing for my cloak. Kazik and Petya both raised their eyebrows at me, but I ignored their reluctance.

“Irina wouldn’t be frustrated right now if she hadn’t had to do this spell, and the only reason she’s doing this is because of me.” I walked toward the door and nudged Kazik out of the way with my shoulder, feeling my breath hitch slightly at being so close to him. We hadn’t discussed last night and now certainly wasn’t the right time.

Petya shook his head as he continued to blow out the candles. “If she rips off your head, we warned you.”

“But if we hear screaming, we’ll come to the rescue,” Kazik said, reaching around me and opening the door.

“Thanks,” I said, stepping out of the door and grabbing the doorknob to pull it shut behind me.

“Come back in one piece.” Kazik’s mouth was right next to my ear and he whispered the words as if they were a prayer. A shiver coursed through my body and I made a barely perceptible nod before walking out of the door and closing it behind me.

Walking outside was like getting hit by a million tiny glass knives. The air bit at my cheeks and hurt my lungs as I tried to breath. I blinked back tears and tried to look around even though the wind ripped around me. Irina was leaning against a building across the street from Kazik's apartment, looking nonchalant even though it was clear that she was freezing. She must have left her coat in the apartment, because she was only in her dress, her sweaty hair now freezing to her face. A cigarette was posed between her fingers, and I was surprised that it was still lit, given the wind.

I rushed over to her but wasn't sure quite what to do when I got to her side. I stood there awkwardly while she took drags off of her cigarette before she turned and regarded me with her deep brown eyes.

“Are you at least going to offer to share your cloak?”

Flustered, I pulled my cloak around her shoulders, so it covered both of us. She held out her cigarette to me and I took it. I brought the cigarette to my lips and inhaled, letting the smoke into my lungs and proceeding to cough relentlessly before handing it back to Irina. Her laughter mingled with my coughing and the sound rang through the alley.

“I take it you don't smoke often,” Irina said, a chuckle still in her voice. I shook my head as I tried to collect my breath. The heat from the cigarette smoke still burned in my throat, but I tried to pull myself together.

“It's not my favorite.” I finally got the words out after clearing my throat for what felt like the millionth time. Irina took another puff and shrugged her shoulders.

“It’s not everyone’s vice,” she said, blowing a cloud of smoke into the air where it was instantly blown away by the wind. The wind also seemed to blow away the conversation, because we were once again standing in complete silence.

“Are you alright?” I asked, trying to chip away at the quiet that wrapped around us. “I can only imagine what the spell is taking from you.”

Irina pursed her lips and looked up to the window of Kazik’s apartment. Her body seemed to stiffen ever so slightly.

“I’ll be fine,” she said. She was still looking up at Kazik’s window, and I wondered if Kazik or Petya was sitting at the window waiting for us. I couldn’t see either of them, but Irina knew them better than I did. It wouldn’t surprise me if she could feel Petya’s energy and if he could feel hers.

“I really appreciate you helping me.” The words tumbled out of my mouth like snow rushing down a mountain. “I know that you don’t know me and you have no reason to help but I’m incredibly grateful.” I was desperate to create a steady flow of speech with this intimidating girl. Any conversation was better than standing in tense silence that I feared I had created by asking how she was doing.

Irina dropped her cigarette but to the cobblestone street and ground it under the toe of her shoe. I expected her to use her now free hand to pull her side of the cloak in closer, but she made no effort to do so.

“I did it mostly for Kazik,” Irina said after a moment that felt like a lifetime. “Though part of myself knows that I did it a little for me too.”

I furrowed my eyebrows and tried to catch Irina’s gaze, but she defied me.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Irina shook her head slightly. “Kazik is like my brother,” she said. “Except, he’s a brother that I’m not magically connected to. Not that I don’t love Petya, because I do. I love him more than myself but being connected like we are is a bit difficult. We feel the same things but show them differently. We think the same things. With Kazik, it’s nice because I have no link to him whatsoever and it makes me feel free in a sense.”

“I thought that you two were together when I first met you,” I said. “You had such a natural rhythm.”

Irina chuckled. “No, we are absolutely not together. For one thing, Kazik has always been hung up on you.” I must have gapped at her because she laughed even harder. “You seem to have been the only one that didn’t know. And while Kazik is a great guy, I was never interested. Men are not for me.”

My jaw dropped. “So you’re ...”

“Yes, I’m interested in women,” Irina said nonchalantly. “But don’t flatter yourself. You’re not my type.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to Irina’s declaration. Her being gay didn’t bother me, because people deserve to be whoever they are meant to be. Learning to love my magic again had taught me that. Before I had to decide what to say, Irina continued.

“I’ve known Kazik for the last three years. He came into my life in a time when Petya and I really needed someone,” Irina said. “We watched each other grow up, the three of us against the world. Except Kazik was always running off to the Unclean and to Adrik.

“I used to resent that he had to go. Petya and I knew what he was going through, all of the things that Adrik made him do and all of the things that he had to see. I tried to

talk to my mother about taking care of Kazik too and truly making him part of the family, but money has been tight for us just like it's tight for everyone, and she told me we couldn't make it work. So he went back every day. But whenever he showed back up, whether it was the next day or two weeks later, he would always talk about you."

I felt my cheeks flush, but this time it wasn't because of the roaring winds. Irina turned and gave me a small smile.

"So, when Kazik and you came to us and asked for our help, part of me was furious for him trying to get Petya and I involved in something so dangerous. You saw that part. But another part of me thought that this was my chance to see if you were really as great as Kazik made you out to be. I needed to see if you were worth him," Irina said, staring at me intently with her hazel eyes. "And a final part of me wanted to learn from you."

"Learn from me?" I parroted, unable to break Irina's gaze.

"I've always had a longing to know things," Irina said. "My mother told me growing up that knowledge is power, so I wanted to become the most powerful person that I could. When I met Kazik, I was so excited that there was finally a *koldun* who my mother allowed to get close to my brother and I. My mother is *vedma*, just like Petya, so I couldn't learn from her in the way that he did, and she certainly wouldn't let me learn from anyone in the market. You know the reputation that we have." She gestured between the two of us, disturbing the cloak that was so precariously wrapped around us both. I thought about Adrik and the people that I had met in the Unclean, and I nodded. If Papa knew who my mentor had been for so many years, he wouldn't have been happy either.

“Kazik taught me what he could for a while,” Irina continued, “and I loved every minute of it. I caught up to Petya’s skill level, and I felt like I was an equal with my twin again. But Kazik kept mentioning this girl who was so powerful. More powerful than he was.” A smirk reached to the corners of her eyes. “Granted, I haven’t seen you do much magic besides what you did in the market, but I can tell that he was right. So I want to learn, because while I might not have half the power that you do, I would like to know as much as I can.”

Irina finally broke the look between us and stared down at the cobblestone street under her heels. Seeing Irina even remotely shy was something I had never expected. She was fire, grace, and uncompromising will. But she was also just a girl, growing up in the same world of magic that I had, but lacking a teacher. And if she wanted a teacher, I would be a better one than Adrik had been to me. I would teach her how to use our gifts for good instead of for pain.

“Our first lesson,” I said, leaning in closer to grab her hand, “is to never give up.”

Chapter 22

Insert Quote Here

Learning not to give up, unlike what Irina had anticipated, didn't have to do with pushing herself past her breaking point.

"But I want to keep trying," Irina persisted, a hard edge back in her eyes that I now knew came from determination and not anger. "Another try and we've got it."

I shook my head. "You and Petya have both hit your limits," I said while looking over at Petya, who sat in Kazik's chair by the window and chugged water with the voracity of a horse that had been ridden for hours. "Magic can only be pushed so far. You have to give yourself time to reset."

"Besides," Kazik said, stepping out of the kitchen with another glass of water and handing it to Irina, "Anya and I have a job of our own to do."

"I think I speak for both my sister and I when I say that your plan is utterly stupid in every single way," Petya said, pitching in from the window.

"Stupid is as stupid does," Kazik replied with a smile. "You know I only come up with the best plans."

"Are you referencing the time that you came knocking on our door with a gunshot wound in your side or the other time when you couldn't see because someone had spelled you blind?" Petya asked.

I could feel my eyes popping out of my head as I turned to stare at Kazik, who only shrugged and ruffled up his hair.

"All part of the ultimate plan," he said.

"And what is the end goal of said plan?" Irina chimed in.

“I’m still working out all the kinks,” Kazik replied. He turned to me and offered his arm. “Shall we, little fox?”

I swatted his arm away and pointed my finger at Irina sternly. “If Petya tells me that you keep throwing your magic at that blade, I’ll be saying some choice words when I get back.”

“My brother would never betray me like that,” Irina deadpanned, though her eyes sparkled.

“Try me, Rina,” Petya said, kicking his feet up so they sat on the windowsill.

I grabbed my knife from the kitchen table and slid it back into its home in my boot before grabbing my cloak off a nearby chair. I threw it over my shoulders, but Kazik shook his head at me and offered me his jacket.

“You need to blend in,” he said. He rummaged in one of his dresser drawers until he pulled out a weathered wool cap. Small tears speckled the black fabric and it looked like it had seen better days. Kazik pulled my braid onto the top of my head and tucked the cap on over it. From the mirror that sat on the top of dresser, I looked like a boy with feminine features.

“Perfect,” Kazik declared before grabbing Petya’s coat off the coatrack. He pulled the collar up around his neck and grabbed a scarf that he tied around the bottom half of his face. His disguise wasn’t as effective as mine, but hopefully it would do to get us into the Unclean and to Adrik’s tents with as minimal trouble as possible.

“If we’re not back in two hours,” I said, stepping toward the door before pausing my speech. What would Irina and Petya do if we didn’t come back? They couldn’t call the police, because *koldun* magic was punishable by death, and they certainly couldn’t

risk coming into the Unclean after us and asking after two suspicious persons. If something happened to more people because of me, whether I was dead or alive, I would never forgive myself.

“You’ll be back,” Petya said calmly, his voice like silk against my ears. I wasn’t sure if he had put *vedma* magic behind his words, but if he had I was grateful. My heart was starting to race as my nerves rose, and I found myself clenching my fists by my sides. I shoved my hands into Kazik’s coat pockets, and my fingers brushed something smooth. It was the coin that Kazik had given me to fiddle with at Natalya’s. I squeezed it between my thumb and forefinger, enjoying the feel of the well-worn metal.

Kazik and I said our goodbyes to Irina and Petya and left Sevastien in their care. He continued to play in front of the furnace with Kazik’s *matryoshkas*, looking to the world like he didn’t have a care in the world. In a sense, he didn’t, because all of the weight of his problems lay on my shoulders.

“Are you sure that this is a good idea?” Kazik asked as we stepped outside of the apartment building and walking toward the Unclean.

I sighed, feeling the air leave my lungs in one long breath. “No,” I said. The word was a declaration, not just of my fear that we were walking straight into a trap, but also of my fear of dying. The thought that I only had a few days left to live hadn’t hit me until this very moment. Worrying about how I was going to save Sevastien had taken up all of the space inside my mind. But now, with the possibility of salvation in the form of a knife, the most unlikely of all ways to be saved, growing smaller and smaller in front of me, my thoughts keep turning back to what will happen when I’m gone. Will Kazik tell Mother and Papa about my death? Will Mother even care or will she be grateful that her

daughter, the one that never measured up to her expectations, is out of her hair? Will Papa sit on my bed and cry, wishing that I was still there like when I was a small child? And what of Sevastien's parents? Will his mother ever know the truth about what happened to her son? Will Kazik have to go and explain that one as well?

"If I die," I said, the words like a whisper as they passed my lips, "will you tell my Papa what happened? Will you tell him all of it?"

Kazik stopped and looked at me, his ice blue eyes clear. He didn't reach for me, didn't try to hold me and tell me that I wasn't going to die, that I was going to live a long life because everything was going to be okay. His eyes were filled with understanding. Where Sevastien would have pulled me to him and crushed my ribs in a hug while he told me over and over again that I wasn't going to die, Kazik wouldn't because Kazik understood. He understood that sometimes life isn't the way that it should be and that there is no fairness within the dark parts of life. He understood that in the deepest parts of his soul, and so did I.

"If you die," he said, his voice low and even, "I'll tell your parents everything that I know to be true. I'll tell them that their daughter was the strongest person I ever knew. I'll tell them that when she was faced with tough choices, she tried first and foremost to help the people that she loved. I'll tell them that there was no one in this world whose days she didn't light up. And I'll tell them she died like a fighter, because she never gave up."

I blinked a tear out of my eye and felt it roll down my cheek until I brushed it away, not wanting it to freeze to my face in the brutal wind.

“Thank you,” I said, though my throat felt like it was being constricted from the inside. I was holding back tears, but Kazik gave me a small smile.

“But there’s no sense worrying about that now,” he said, “because we have a knife to steal.”

He offered his arm to me, and instead of pushing it away, I grabbed onto it gratefully and we walked into the unknown.

The sound of our feet scuffing across the cobblestones felt like the only sound in the Unclean when we arrived. As we stepped past the veil of magic that protected the Unclean from the rest of the world, the hairs on the back of my neck rose and a chill fell through my body. I released my grip on Kazik’s arm and wrapped my arms around myself instead, trying to keep the damp chill out. It had always been cold in this place of dark magic, but it was colder now, and as I surveyed my surroundings, I noticed that the fires that had dotted the landscape and given warmth were no longer burning.

“Are you okay?” Kazik whispered, leaning in close to my ear so that I could hear his words. I shook my head, because a feeling of dread sunk in my gut like a heavy stone. There were few people congregating around any of the tents, and the ones that did looked pale and sickly, just like I must have looked. I pulled Kazik’s jacket tighter around my chin and wondered if the disease was killing them slowly as well.

“Let’s just get this done,” I said under my breath, hoping Kazik could hear me as I started walking in the direction of Adrik’s tents. Sneaking was more what I did, if I’m being honest. My eyes dashed back and forth, looking for anything that might be a

surprise or a trap. Every time I turned my head, I swore that I saw a familiar face or a pair of milky eyes, but when I looked a second time, there was never anyone there.

When we reached the outskirts of Adrik's tent, I froze in my tracks. Two palace guards stood outside the tent, swords at their hips and gazes straight ahead. They stood so still that it was like they weren't breathing, but occasionally puffs of their breath could be seen in the frigid air around us. They had no right to be here. In truth, they shouldn't have been able to get into the Unclean without any magical ability, but Adrik also shouldn't be able to take over the government, and yet here we are.

"How do you want to handle this?" Kazik's voice in my ear made me jump. I had been so lost in my own thoughts that I had forgotten that he was even following me. I took a steadying breath but kept my eyes locked on the two men in front of the tent.

"They're clearly spelled to be here," I replied, running through all the possibilities in my head. "I don't know how Adrik got them in here, but they clearly are under someone's control, which means that someone expects us."

"Let's hope no one's waiting," Kazik said, pulling out his knife, but I reached out and pushed down his arm.

"I've got this," I said, reaching down and pulling my own knife out of my boot. I pulled it out of its sheath and quickly drew it across my palm.

"*Slushat*," I whispered, trying to project my words toward the two guards. We needed to keep our voices down to avoid any unnecessary attention, because if there were guards here, that meant that there were probably other prying eyes lurking around corners as well.

My words traveled like a leaf on the wind and I saw the bodies of the guards tense up as they heard them. I said a silent prayer to whatever higher power there was that was watching out for Kazik and I as we slunk forward, coats pulled every closer to our faces to avoid being recognized. When we got to the entrance to the tent, I motioned for Kazik to continue inside and begin the search for the blade. I stood behind the first guard, a tall man with deep brown hair, and whispered into his ear while using his body to block me from view.

“No one is here,” I said. “No one entered the tent, and no one left it. You didn’t see us.” I waited for the guard to give a subtle nod before I moved onto the next guard and gave him the same message. Only then did I follow Kazik into the tent and head in the direction of the armory.

Of all the rooms in Adrik’s tent, I had never been a lover of the armory. Volodya and Kostya had spent hours here, practicing throwing knives and dotting on their favorite blades, but I had never been a fan of the practices. It had taken me long enough to even be comfortable using a knife for my magic, and I never wanted to spend my days surrounded by weapons capable of pain. I had preferred to stay in the main room, reading a book or practicing a new spell. Adrik had never protested my preference for books over weapons, and I had always been grateful for it. It was one of the only things I was grateful to him for.

Standing in the armory now, though, many of the weapons had been taken down from the walls and shelves where they once lived. Kazik was already at work examining blade after blade while comparing them with the drawing that Natalya had given us back at the palace. My thoughts briefly flashed to Natalya’s fate now that the palace was

occupied by Adrik and his thugs. I could only hope that she had escaped or was safe at the very least.

A knife clanged to the floor as Kazik grumbled under his breath. I felt myself tense and my heart pick up speed, but no one came running. The tent was quiet, though that wasn't unusual. Most days Adrik wanted his lodgings to be so quiet that a pin could be heard as it dropped to the floor.

"Anything," I asked, rushing to Kazik's side and beginning my own examination of the blades on the walls. He shook his head sharply before replying.

"Start on the other side," he said. "I've already taken care of these over here."

I did as I was told and Kazik and I made quick work of the remaining weapons. None even vaguely resembled the blade that Natalya had drawn.

"I'm going to check the main space," Kazik said after placing the last knife back on the shelf. "We should be getting out of here in a few minutes. I don't know how long we will be here unnoticed."

I swallowed and nodded, knowing that while my spell on the two guards would hold for a considerable time, there was bound to be someone waiting for us when we emerged if we didn't get out of here quick.

"I'm going to check Adrik's room," I said. "If there's anywhere that he might be keeping anything that could help us, it would be there."

Kazik gave me a grim nod as he rushed to the main quarters. No one, not even Adrik's most seasoned apprentices and thugs were allowed even close to his personal rooms. There had been whispers between us about what he kept secret in his rooms, but

no one had the courage to ask or to go prying around. We knew that the punishment for such a grave crime would be death if we were lucky.

My footsteps sounded like the stomps of elephants to my ears and I could feel my heart pumping blood throughout my body. I reached the end of the hall in the farthest corner of the tents and saw the deep burgundy velvet curtains that sectioned off Adrik's rooms. I reached out and tried to push aside the curtains, but they wouldn't budge. Instead, my fingers hit a wall of thick, cold air that engulfed my fingers. When I pulled them back, I saw that the tips were covered in frost. Adrik hadn't merely used fear as a tactic to keep us out of his rooms; he had used his magic as well. I pushed against the magical wall again but felt nothing budge under my touch.

I stepped back and regarded the situation before me. If there was anywhere that the *dusha* blade was going to be, it was in Adrik's rooms, and the fact that they were warded against easy entry added to my impression that what I was looking for was in those rooms. I pulled my knife across my skin and took a deep breath before letting the blood pool across my arm. I had a feeling deep in my gut that this spell was going to take a fair amount of blood to break, so I wiped my hand across the cut, spreading the blood across my hands before placing them on the invisible wall. The warm liquid turned cold and sticky instantly upon contact with the wall, but I was already diving into the spell and letting the magic flow through my body.

When I first learned about my magic and how to control it, Adrik taught me that there are two types to *koldun* magic. The first is the one that we are most known for: manipulation of others through words. However, the second is more linked to our *vedma* past. While *koldun* are never adept healers in the way that *vedma* are, we are capable of

crafting spells of other sorts, such as the one that Adrik had worked on his quarters. They took more power and more focus to craft than the manipulation spells, but they are still a powerful tool in the *koldun* arsenal. As I dove into the spell that Adrik had created, I found myself humming a melancholy tune that seemed to mimic the vibrations the spell was giving off as I untangled it.

Pushing my way into the magic initially felt like falling into a frozen river when the ice gives way. I had to steel my mind and hands to stay in control of my magic, but as I pushed forward the cold bothered me less and less. Instead of a wall of ice, I was instead greeted by a tangle of magical webs to untwist and part to make a path large enough for me to get through. Adrik had crafted the spell to recognize his blood so that the webs would part for him to enter, and now I was attempting to force my own entry. With every knot I untangled, another seemed to reform in its place. Still, I pushed deeper, feeling my magic rise to meet the challenge before me. My body hummed along with my vocal cords, and I felt my face and body heat from the exertion. I lost track of my surroundings and what was going on around me; all I could see, feel, and sense was magic, and magic was all I was.

I coaxed the webs to part, gracing them with my tendrils of magic and singing them a lullaby that told them I was friendly. Gradually the knots stopped forming, and a hole just large enough for me to pass through opened in the web of the spell. I stepped forward out of the spell, and felt the knots tangle back after me, blocking anyone else from following in my path. As I came back to my senses, I stumbled and fell to my knees, my vision suddenly turning white at the edges. The unfamiliar feeling of absent magic filled me, and I realized that unraveling Adrik's spell enough to let me in had

almost depleted my reservoirs of magic. Once, I would have been able to continue casting spells after such a challenge as the one I had just undergone without difficulty, but with my health failing and my life force draining, my magic was apparently also going with it.

As my vision cleared and I found myself able to stand once more, I surveyed the room around me. It was almost exactly what I would have expected of Adrik's bedroom. The only light present in the large, dark room were three light spheres that floated in place, never drifting around like they normally would. A large four-poster bed was pushed against one of the walls, and the space beside it was lined with shelves and shelves of books, vials of mysterious liquids, and other items I couldn't completely see in the dim light. A large desk with multiple drawers sat in the middle of the room, and notebooks were stacked haphazardly across the surface. As I crossed the room toward the desk, my footsteps were absorbed by more of Adrik's favorite Persian rugs, which were apparently also a staple in his personal chambers just as they were in the other quarters.

I crept to the desk, treading carefully as to not trip on anything that might be hiding on the floor. My eyes refused to adjust completely to the darkness I was surrounded in, and I was left hoping that nothing large was going to catch my foot and send me sprawling. A sound of pain briefly left my mouth as my foot connected with the edge of the desk, but I bit my lip and kept a majority of the sound in. Sitting on the desk was the remains of a candle in a puddle of wax. Next to it lay a pack of matches, and I struggled to light one in order to gain some more light in the dim space and see the rest of what lay on Adrik's desk.

When the candle was finally lit after what felt like a dozen matches, the items on the desk came into better focus. There were indeed dozens of journals stacked across the

desk, each bound in a leather that was cracked and worn. Clearly these had seen plenty of wear, and many were supple under my touch as I ran my fingers across their spines. I picked the first one off the top and opened it to the first page, not entirely sure what to expect.

Adrik's writing was near illegible, almost as if he had been writing in the dark without the aid of a candle. I wondered again whether the cloudiness of his eyes affected his sight, but as I looked closer, words began to jump out at me. The candle flickered across the text and I brought my face closer to try and pick out more words.

Double the dosage seems to have a prolonged effect, though intensity is not affected.

The sentence jumped out at me, and I stared for a few moments trying to decipher exactly what Adrik meant. What was the dosage? What was he taking? Was this an experiment he was performing on himself or someone else? I wouldn't put it past him to try and experiment on another person.

Perhaps different types of enhancers will have differing effects on intensity.

My blood went cold. Adrik was using magic enhancers. He was using the very thing that I had been told to avoid.

It made sense that Adrik was using magic enhancers. Whispers of their negative effects coursed through the very air of the *volshbnyy* market and the Unclean. Kostya had told me countless stories about the terrifying effects of enhancers, stories of *koldun*'s blood literally boiling them from the inside out and others going insane from their brief glimpse at ultimate power. Still, magic enhancers continued to be sold in the darkest and strangest places of the *volshbnyy* market for those who felt like tempting fate for a few

moments of extreme power. Adrik had clearly been using them, and when I considered his unnerving eyes, I supposed that must be the side effect of his use.

I rose suddenly, an idea filling my mind. If Adrik was investigating the effects of enhancers, which he must have been doing for years given the amount of journals on his desk, then he must have some left somewhere, and where else would he trust those enhancers to be hidden but a room that was warded against everyone but him? I yanked open the first drawer on his desk and rummaged through the contents. Nothing. I moved to the next drawer down and found only loose papers. On my investigation through the third drawer, I felt a notch in the bottom. I yanked out the false bottom and was greeted by two small bags of white powder. I felt my eyes grow wide, my shock surprising even me. I had never imagined that I would be desperate enough to consider taking an enhancer, but desperate times called for desperate measures. I pocketed the two bags and shoved the drawer back in. Reminding myself why I was even in Adrik's room in the first place, I looked around the rest of the room and began searching the various bookshelves for the *dusha* blade. I found nothing.

"Any?" Kazik's voice quiet voice called out, probably muted by the wards that were now back on the entrance to Adrik's rooms. "We need to go."

I blew out the candle and rushed to the door, tripping over a lone grimoire that lay on the floor and barely managing to catch myself before I fell. I reached the wards and reached toward them, feeling their cold embrace before they parted to let me through. Kazik stood outside the rooms and when I emerged his eyebrows raised practically to his hairline.

"For an old lady," he said, "you still have some skill."

I rolled my eyes, but I appreciated the humor even now.

“Did you find anything,” I asked. Kazik shook his head and I felt my heart fall. Kazik didn’t ask me the same question in return, most likely reading my reaction and knowing that I also was unsuccessful. Unless Irina and Petya could manage what was seeming to be the impossible, I was out of luck.

“Let’s go,” I said, “before anyone knows that we’re here.”

We sped toward the entrance to the tent, trying to stay light on our feet even as our spirits were heavy. My goodbyes were starting to form in my head, all of the things that I wanted to say before I died, but my thoughts were interrupted as we stepped into the final hall and were greeted by an unfortunate sight.

“Well, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes,” Kazik said, his tone full of malice. “I do believe I owe you a few broken ribs.”

“You can try,” Volodya said, inspecting his nails as he stood before us and fifteen palace guards, “but I don’t think you’ll be successful.”

Chapter 23

Insert Quote Here

My heart dropped into the pit of my stomach and my blood ran cold. Volodya stood before us, his caramel brown hair pulled back in a low ponytail by his neck and a bandolier of knives across his chest. Despite being shorter than Kazik by a few inches and closer to my height, Volodya's broad shoulders made him intimidating in his own right. I had sparred against him to know that his style of magic was more violent than most; where I used my magic as an extension of myself, Volodya used his magic to create soldiers and turn people's bodies against them, which explained the group of guards behind him.

Kazik took a step forward, but I shot out my arm and pushed him back.

"How'd you know we were here?" I asked while trying to analyze the situation and find a way out. The guards were clearly being controlled, though I doubted that all of them were being controlled by Volodya. While he had a great degree of power, he didn't have the ability to keep 15 people under his control. Either he was using one of Adrik's enhancers, which I doubted because Adrik had always been greedy and kept what benefitted him to himself, or there was another person somewhere close by controlling the others.

"You should know by now that there are eyes everywhere, little fox," Volodya said. He pulled one of his knives from his bandolier and began flipping it casually in front of him. I watched as the blade tumbled end over end in the air and tensed every time he caught it, hoping that it wouldn't draw blood.

“So, what’s your plan?” Kazik asked. Every muscle in his neck was tensed, and his words were hard. “Are you finally going to kill us, or are you just here to play with your food like a snake?”

Volodya’s lips turned up at the corners, creating a smile that I never knew was so full of malice. Looking at Volodya as he stood before me now, I couldn’t imagine that there had ever been a time when he had shown me a single moment of kindness. I couldn’t see the boy that I had grown up with. Every good part of him had drained away, replaced by Adrik’s teachings of pain and hostility. There was nothing kind left in his eyes, and a part of me wondered what the final breaking point for Volodya had been that Kazik and I had missed.

“You, Kazik,” Volodya said, the knife suddenly still in his hand, “are insignificant, so you’re going to die. But Anya, is going to come with me.”

“Why?” I asked. My eyes began to flit around desperately, trying to find a way to escape. The only way out was to fight, and I wasn’t sure that I had the energy to do that anymore. Breaking and reforming the spell to get into Adrik’s tent had left me drained, both physically and magically, and I didn’t think I had the power left in me to control even one of the guards standing behind Volodya.

Volodya shrugged and brought the knife in his hand to his skin. “Adrik has his reasons. They aren’t always for us to know.”

I reached for my own knife, my reflexes coming to my aid when my own mind wasn’t functioning, but Kazik was a step ahead of me. Instead of grabbing his knife to perform a spell, Kazik threw it with all his might at Volodya and it found its target right in his eye.

Volodya screamed and Kazik grabbed me by my shoulders and pushed me forward. All I could do was stare. Blood poured from Voldya's eye and as he tried to pull it out more blood gushed forward.

"After them!" he screamed at the guards behind him. Five guards began running after us immediately, but the others took a second to follow. Whoever was controlling them must have been just as stunned by Kazik's actions as I had been, because even when the guards did start running, their movements were choppy and disjointed, which was a sign of unfocused magic.

Grey tents and empty fire barrels flashed around me as I ran. The exit felt so far away, and I could feel my physical strength fading with each step I took.

"Just a little farther," Kazik said. His words were encouraging, but I could hear that they were also coming through clenched teeth. We could only run for so long, and I could only hope that we could make it not only to the exit but also to Kazik's apartment before someone stopped us.

We rounded the final corner between us and the exit and my heart sank completely in my chest. More palace guards blocked the only way in and the only way out of the Unclean.

