

# FUTURE TENSE

BY

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## CHAPTER 1

11:25 AM, present day. Lobby of 101 California Street, San Francisco, California

Lys blinked once when Telos Khūnbish's black BMW pulled up to the curb. She wasn't going to cry. She never did. Not for any reason. Emotion meant you were weak, and if you were weak, people found ways to make you pay. She was done paying. But it was such a relief to see Khūnbish that, for a moment, she teetered on the edge of tears.

While she waited to make sure it was really Khūnbish in the car, a man in a suit strode past her, heading for the glass doors that faced Front Street. He was thirty-ish, good looking and in shape. Company ID dangled from a lanyard clipped to his belt. He kept walking and came within ten feet of her. Too close. He was too close. Panic rose up again. She needed to get away. Away from all these people and their lives.

*He looks left as he steps off the curb, smiling, on his way to meet the woman he loves. A traffic light reflects green in the lenses of his glasses. He doesn't see the car that runs the light.*

Pain streaked along the left side of her face from just behind her eye through to back of her head as she fought to keep her insanity at bay. Blocking her connection shouldn't be this hard, but the last several days had been. . . difficult. Not enough sleep. Not enough to eat. Too much caffeine. Far too much stress. Lys was at the limit of her ability to compensate. She succeeded in smothering the contact. Barely. The barrier was

thin enough that the other lives thrummed in the back of her head like another heartbeat, but out of rhythm and out of control.

The price of her sanity was a headache that forced her to dig in her purse for her sunglasses. Her skull felt like it was in a vice and about to fracture. Dark glasses or not, her ability to insulate herself from other people continued to erode. A sour taste coated the inside of her mouth. She hadn't lost control since her college days, but she was close now.

Around her, office workers streamed out of the elevators, on their way to an early lunch or maybe sent on some errand for their overpaid bosses. More came in to keep appointments, make deliveries or head back to offices or cubicles. A few people stood in the lobby with a cell phone to an ear, talking away without the least privacy. The ones with bluetooth enabled devices looked like psych cases, ranting to invisible people. Voices hammered at her, pounding at the barrier. She cut herself off from everything until they might as well be speaking Swahili as English.

She needed to get out. A place like this wasn't good for someone like her. Not when she was so close to breaking down. Her heart raced so fast that if she ended up in the hospital again, she'd need a cardiologist instead of an ER doc.

What was taking him so long?

*That man who just came off the elevator will ignore the first symptoms; the sense of something off, the clammy sweat, the pinch in the left side of his rib cage. Pain crushes his chest, and he can't get enough air.*

She looked out the glass lobby walls. Maybe it wasn't him. The driver of the Beemer was waiting for a brown delivery van to pull away. The van bulled its way into traffic, and the sleek black car slid into the vacated space. They had a lunch meeting, calendared two weeks ago by her admin. He expected to talk about his upcoming deposition testimony. On the clock and on her client's dime. She ought to feel guilty

about involving Khūnbish in her train wreck of a life.

It occurred to her that if that was Khūnbish, wouldn't he park in one of the downtown garages? Her firm would bill his expenses to the client anyway. He was crazy to risk a ticket and a tow. The Beemer's headlights switched off. The driver got out – yes, it was Khūnbish. Her chest constricted at the same time the tension in her shoulders released. She had a crystal clear view of him pressing his key fob.

It was a fact of life that there were certain men no one messed with, not if you were in your right mind. Telos Khūnbish was one of those men; scary at some primordial, brainstem level.

He paused by his car and lifted a hand like he was blessing the damn thing against Parking Control. A bike messenger zipped past him. From where she stood in the lobby, traffic noise was a dull rumble. Telos headed across the plaza with its series of concrete risers and planters. On a nice day, support staff who made shit money and had to bring their lunch, could eat outside.

She adjusted her sunglasses. He reappeared from between two of the planter structures, heading for the glass lobby doors. His long black hair fell behind his shoulders, twisting slightly in the wind. His goatee, as usual, seemed to be barely getting started.

Lys knew him because she defended high stakes corporate cases involving computer hacking and Khūnbish was her Information Security expert. Though he'd never admitted anything under oath, he was what industry insiders called a gray-hat, that is, someone who navigated between the black-hats who stole corporate databases and credit card numbers and the white-hats who warned companies about their security vulnerabilities.

What mattered about Khūnbish today was that he looked more like a gang member than a tech geek, and oddly enough for a lawyer who billed out at five

hundred dollars an hour, that was exactly what she needed. Someone scary.

Outside, he paused at a trash can, tossed something in, then kept walking. She pushed the lobby door open and headed onto the plaza. The blast of foggy air made her head pound. She smiled, but it felt fake.

His unbuttoned flannel shirt flapped in the breeze and showed off the physique under the close fitting T-shirt he wore underneath.. He didn't fit with the suit and tie crowd, and the bandanna around his head didn't do much to make him look like anything but trouble in a dark alley.

Fuck a suit and tie.

Lys walked outside and made sure she was blocking even though it made the pain worse. Khūnbish slowed when he saw her heading toward him. She reached him and stuck out her hand. "Mr. Khūnbish." She gave him her best Litigation Lawyer smile. "Nice to see you."

"Counselor." He sounded a bit growly, as if he smoked cigars and drank whiskey every day for breakfast. His expression didn't register any curiosity about the reason she'd met him out here. On a personal level, she knew he didn't like her. Not many people did, but she was used to that. He looked Lys up and down, nothing sexual or insulting, and ended up at her face. The way his eyebrows drew together told her she looked worse than she thought. "Everything all right?"

"Of course." Her voice was calm. Serene even. She was in control at all times. Including now when she was about to derail her life, his life, and possibly her career. He cocked his head and shoved his hands into his front pockets. Jesus, her head hurt.

He held her gaze longer than he should have. Her heart thumped because she knew he wasn't going to play along with the *I need your help* bullshit she'd planned. Her stomach did a slow flip-flop because she'd stepped onto a tightrope here with Khūnbish, and there wasn't any net. "Counselor," he said in a low voice, "why are we

standing out here in the cold?”

She waited for a group of people to pass them on their way to Front Street. On a purely selfish level, she'd been right to think of him. He was perfect. She needed someone mean and dangerous, and Khūnbish fit the bill. “I need a ride.”

His eyebrows quirked. “Where to?”

For half a second she considered walking back inside and to hell with everything. But she didn't do that. Right now she didn't like herself very much, but she gave him her address anyway.

“That's Noe Valley.”

“Yes.”

“Why do you need a ride all the way out there?”

“I need to pick up a few things.”

He shot her a look full of suspicion. “If I do give you a ride, I'm sending you a bill.”

“Track your mileage and time, Mr. Khūnbish, and submit it to me personally. Not the firm.”

He blew out a breath. “I don't do favors for anyone without knowing what for and why.”

Words jammed up in her throat so she could hardly breathe let alone talk. “I left Michael. My fiancé.”

“So?”

“He was upset.” She looked him in the eye. “I don't have a car right now.”

“You must have friends.” His voice had a hint of a growl.

“They're Michael's friends.”

“I can call you a cab.”

“That's no good. I might end up with a skinny driver, and I need someone like

you with me. In case Michael's there."

"I get it," he said in the same tight voice as before. "You want someone who can take a beating if your jealous boyfriend shows up."

"No." She hunched her shoulders against the wind. "If he's there, I want someone he'll be afraid to beat up. Someone who'll scare him."

"Muscle for hire." The wind caught his hair. She didn't answer but, then, she didn't need to. "Fuck you, Counselor."

"If I did, would you drive me there afterward?"

His eyes glinted so, whatever he said now, they both knew he was thinking about sex. "No."

"Well," she said. "That's too bad." There went her legal career down the toilet. She turned to head back to her office, but he caught her elbow. A sizzle shot up her arm and headed for regions south. His fingers tightened on her when she brought her arm closer to her body. "Let go of me."

"If you left your boyfriend, where are you staying?"

"That's none of your business."

"It is if I'm doing you a favor."

The wind whipped past her, pulling several strands of hair from her chignon. "You're not."

She flinched when he tucked the strands behind her ear. He wasn't fooled by the shiver she faked to cover for the reaction. "Where did you sleep last night?"

"I didn't sleep last night."

"What happened to your car?"

"It's wrecked."

"How?"

She didn't answer. The wind blew those strands of hair free again.

“Tell me where you were last night, and I’ll drive you to your house and scare the hell out of your boyfriend, too.” He waited and then said, “If you’d rather, I’ll take you up on your offer to get horizontal with me.” The corner of his mouth twitched.

“Just so you know, I like it dirty.”

“San Francisco General.”

“Because?”

She drew in a breath and let it out. “Some idiot in a cheap import changed lanes without looking. That’s the last thing I remember until the paramedics pulled me out of my car.”

“Before or after you left the boyfriend?”

“After.”

He cocked his head toward California Street where his shiny black car was parked.

“Do I have to fuck you?”

“No.” He started walking, and Lys followed him to his car. A meter maid pattered past and didn’t even look at the Beemer. Khūnbish went around to the passenger side door and opened it for her.

Lys got in and sat with her purse on her lap. This was a high end model BMW with plenty of leg room. Newer than her white one, but other than that, more or less the same car. Hers had a black interior, too. Panic eroded her control. The sound of breaking glass and the hollow thump of metal against metal echoed in her head, so clear that she thought there’d been a real accident. But traffic on California Street moved with the usual controlled chaos.

Khūnbish didn’t close the door, and she glanced up to see why. He had a hand on the roof of his car and was leaning down, staring at her with his black, black eyes. A frown put a crease between his eyebrows. She couldn’t tell his pupils from his irises.

She set her purse on the floorboard and gave him a cool look. One thing she'd learned over the years was how to appear calm and controlled when she was neither.

"I won't drive like a maniac," he said, as if he'd read her thoughts. Maybe he had. In her current condition, her state of mind couldn't be that hard to guess.

"Thank you," she said. She gave him a businesslike smile intended to counteract his lingering attention on her. He wasn't her type. At all. "I appreciate that."

"No problem."

He knew, she thought. Somehow, he knew she was breaking apart inside. She kept her smile in place. Denial was everything. He reached in to fasten her seat belt for her. His hair, dark as night, spilled over one shoulder as he did. He was big and rough. Dangerous. Exactly what she needed.

They both looked when a disheveled woman pushed a shopping cart piled with bulging plastic bags in front of his car. She continued going, right into traffic. Horns blared but the woman kept going. She didn't care about anything, did she? Bent over and shuffling, the woman looked sixty, but Lys figured she was probably half that age. Drugs would do that to you. On the street, cars slammed on their brakes or swerved around the woman and her shopping cart.

Lys watched because it was better than looking at Khūnbish. A mistake, it turned out. The vise-grip of her headache cranked up and made her queasy. She breathed through her mouth, but right now, she was wide open to anyone. The inside of her skull burned and she could swear her head was fracturing. She imagined tiny fragments of bone driving into her brain.

*In front of a brick building that isn't being maintained, she hands over grimy bills and in return accepts a dirty, much folded glassine paper. Deftly exchanged with a man whose job it is to peddle poison. The unbelievably intense craving that lives in her is about to kill her.*

"You okay?" Khūnbish asked again. She wasn't sure she heard him speak, but if

he hadn't then he was about to. Same difference, really. His mouth moved, forming the words *You okay?*

She turned her head to him and blinked a few times, waiting for his future to slam into her. There was this odd click between her ears, like a door closing. Nothing happened. "Fine," she said. "I'm fine."

He shaved once a week, he'd once told her in a rare fit of talkativeness, because he was a descendant of Genghis Khan on his father's side, and back in the day the Mongol horde didn't have much facial hair. He'd said that with a straight face. He must be the tallest Mongolian on record, because he was over six feet. Taller than Michael. His skin was fine-grained, smooth. No scars, no fading zits, no razor burn.

She resisted the impulse to brush her fingers over his cheek. She never touched anyone unless the contact couldn't be avoided and then only when she was prepared. He straightened from his lean over her and closed her door. When he was in the car and he'd merged into the madness of downtown traffic, she stared into the rear view mirror, looking for cars coming up too fast.

Lys looked ahead, into traffic and the cars, taxis and buses full of people and the future. Some weird reflection through the windshield made his eyes flicker between black, gray and red. Creepy. She turned her head to the passenger-side window, but that was worse than staring straight forward and seeing him and that weird eye flicker in her peripheral vision. She concentrated on remaining disconnected from the world outside. It had been years since she'd had to work this hard at staying alone in her head.

He flipped on his blinker and looked over his shoulder. He moved into one of those left turn lanes where the city allowed a turn on the green light. Lys tensed up, anticipating a collision. "Relax," he said watching oncoming traffic for a break. "We're not going to get hit. Promise."

Ten and a half years ago, she'd found out she wasn't alone in her unusual

abilities, her life curse, as she liked to call it. She was what Michael, who had been the one to enlighten her, called one of the magekind – a human who could do magic. Her talents were limited. Stunted, Michael had said, but the plain truth was that if she hadn't learned to shut herself down, she'd have gone insane. That act of self-preservation had cost her the magical facility she might have developed had her life been different.

A month after Michael had told her about her gift, they were an item, and before much longer she was practicing magic, without much success, meeting Michael's friends, going to college then law school because if she couldn't do magic, she had to do something else. After law school, she spent her time getting promoted to senior associate at her firm, billing twenty-six hundred hours a month and more just to stay on track for a partnership. And finding out there were people who weren't what they seemed. People who weren't really people.

Dangerous people. Demons who passed for human.

Mages like Michael? They killed those demons.

## CHAPTER 2

The car continued through the afternoon traffic with Lys wondering how much longer she would last before she broke down. Her thoughts refused to focus. The signs that she was losing control over her curse never abated; headache, pressure in her chest, sensitivity to light. Even with her sunglasses on, whispers broke through her disintegrating efforts to keep her mind safely walled away.

She needed solitude. Quiet. Isolation. Instead, she was driving through San Francisco at midday with a guy who spent most of his time skirting the law. She didn't doubt he'd broken a few. Her head throbbed in time with her heartbeat. The pain was wearing on her. Making her weak. Vulnerable.

*He will fall fall fall swiftly into cold hard water.*

Khūnbish kept one hand on the gear shift and drove without saying anything. For whatever reason, he wasn't impinging on her thoughts. The screaming into her brain came from people outside the car; staccato bursts through the breaks in the barrier between her and all the lives out there. Then the Beemer would be out of range and someone new flicked into her consciousness. The images got more explicit and more insistent when they stopped or had to slow down.

*– boyfriend will terrify her –*

She understood that one.

If she lost control she'd go into free fall, and then she'd get something from everyone within ten feet of her, no doubt including Khūnbish. God forbid anyone should touch her and send the full weight of their entire short-term future straight into whatever freakish meld of neurons and gray matter passed for her brain. She might never recover from that.

*Unspeakable heartbreak*

At least you didn't die from a broken heart.

"Lys?"

"What?"

Khūnbish put a hand on her shoulder and she braced herself for the deluge. But nothing happened. Really, nothing. Better than nothing. For one blessed moment the breaks in her control sealed over. "It's okay," he said. "You're going to be okay."

"I'm always okay."

Once he had his hand back on the steering wheel she could feel the breaks again. But she was better than she had been. Now, only a flutter of perception came through instead of the full-bore clatter of knowing. Whatever the cause, she was grateful for the respite.

He stopped for a red light where a knot of people stepped into the crosswalk in front of them. She tensed again. Some of them were bound to get through to her. Telos put a hand on her knee.

"I'm not sleeping with you."

"We'll see." His fingers stayed partially on her bare leg. She didn't get anything from the people in the crosswalk. Not even when they were directly in front of the car. "Better?"

She leaned her head against the backrest again and looked at him. *Not normal.* Telos Khūnbish was not normal. His hand stayed on her thigh, but he wasn't feeling her

up. He flexed his other fingers on the steering wheel then relaxed them again. “Yeah,” she said softly. “Better.”

“Tell me what happened before your car accident.”

“I left Michael, and he didn’t like it.”

“Did he hit you?”

She gave him a thorough once over. He was a physically solid man. Tall. Muscular. Fit. Even Michael would think twice about messing with him. The silence in her head filled up with the sound of metal breaking, no brakes. The guy who rear-ended her never even slowed down.

“You’re with me.” His calm worked into her, soothing her when contact with anyone else would have sent her screaming from the impact of everything she saw. Khūnbish was a blank to her. Not blank, but blocked from his side. He definitely wasn’t normal.

“Thank you.”

Sometime later they were on her street. He pulled into a parking space a few doors down from her house and turned off the motor. He left the keys in the ignition. She didn’t move. Khūnbish turned his torso toward her, one arm draped over the steering wheel. And he looked at her straight on. Wasn’t he just tall, dark and dangerous? That ancient part of her brain quivered in fear, telling her to hunker down or run like hell.

“Let’s get what you need from the house,” he said.

She nodded. She was going to owe him big time.

He took the keys out of the ignition and got out of the car. She watched him walk around the front. She already had her door open when he came around to the sidewalk. Good thing he was there, because she got dizzy when she stood. He caught her forearm and steadied her. “Easy there.”

She stared at his torso while she waited for her head to clear. “What on earth does your shirt say?” She squinted at his chest. “While you were reading my shirt, I hacked your bank account?”

Khūnbish smiled. The thing was, it was only partly a joke, that saying on his shirt. He probably could hack her bank account. According to his CV he had top secret security clearance and right coast clients with three letter acronyms. And those were the ones he could disclose. The left coast clients were scattered up and down the coastline from the Silicon Valley to Redmond, Washington.

“Don’t worry, your money is still there.” He smiled as he put a faint emphasis on *your*. He didn’t let go of her arm, not right away, and they stood there staring at each other. His eyes were completely black. She could drop into them and never come out. Just five minutes of peace, that’s all she wanted. Five minutes of not having anyone’s fate force its way into her head. That was her idea of paradise. For some reason, she could get that from him. He touched her and there was blessed nothing.

They walked to the house, which was on a slope and had two sets of concrete steps with a landing in between. She did feel safer, having Khūnbish at her side. She fumbled around for her keys and eventually found them in a corner of her bag.

She headed up the stairs, keys in her hand. The house belonged to Michael. Not her. She’d never liked it very much. In the last few weeks, she’d come to hate it. At the landing, Khūnbish put a hand on her arm.

“What?” She glanced at him, and he pointed. The upstairs lights were off, but there was a light on downstairs. In the front room. “Oh.” She squeezed her house keys. The last thing he’d said to her the night before she walked out was that he wasn’t going to let her leave him and that if she did, he’d kill her. Michael never said anything he didn’t mean.

Khūnbish spoke softly. “You should have told me he’s a mage.”

His casual admission that he knew anything about mages startled her. Scared the hell out of her actually, but she kept it together. “I didn’t think it would mean anything to you.”

“Well, it does.”

The front door opened, and Michael stepped onto the porch, looking down to where she and Khūnbish stood on the middle landing. Michael’s arms were red up to his elbows. Drops of liquid slid from his fingers to the ground. He shook his head to get his sandy hair off his forehead. Two men she didn’t recognize stood behind him, both of them with their hair buzzed short. One of the men had a large cardboard box that at a sign from Michael he turned upside down. Ashes cascaded to the ground.

Lys watched the particles drift in the air. He’d burned her things.

Michael said, “There’s more, but I trust the demonstration was sufficient.”

Her heart stuttered. “You’re supposed to be in LA.”

“As you can see, I am not.” His attention moved from her to Khūnbish. “There is nothing here for you, Lys.”

“I know,” she said.

He gestured, and the two men started down the stairs. “Kill her. Bring the fiend to me.”

Khūnbish grabbed her elbow. The contact was an electric shock. Their gazes connected and she saw his eyes wide with surprise. Then he said, “Move.”

Long before they made it back to the sidewalk, the two men were running full speed.

## CHAPTER 3

Her ex was a fucking mage.

Telos put himself between Lys and the two magehelds – demons magically enslaved to someone like Michael – as they raced for the street. When she had a few steps on him – she was fast despite running in heels – he skidded to a stop and whipped around to intercept them while Lys sprinted for his car.

The magehelds were practically breathing down his neck. Jesus shit. They were big motherfuckers, and they weren't looking to start a friendship. He didn't have time to do anything but go for a kill, the hell with anything Lys might see that she shouldn't. The air crackled around him as he pulled hard on his magic, pulling up from its source and through his body until the energy electrified him.

He waited until he saw the first mageheld's eyes turn colors, and then he released everything he had on tap. At the same time, he darted in and slipped an arm around the neck of the demon nearest him, braced with his hand and twisted. If he'd miscalculated what it would take to disable the other mageheld, he wanted this one's body to be physically dead. He released his hold and stepped back, taking the time to register only that the corpse dropped bonelessly to the sidewalk.

The kill order for Lys was real. The other mageheld was looping around to get at her, a fact that made him decide she hadn't lured him here for her boyfriend sake's.

Michael came down the steps at a run, not having bothered to wipe off the blood that covered his arms. Idiot. Some vanilla human was going to notice and call the cops.

A shriek tore through the air, high and piercingly loud. Telos reached out with his magic to dampen the sound before the whole neighborhood called the police. He whirled toward Lys, expecting the worst. But it wasn't her who'd screamed. The second mageheld was on its knees, scrabbling at its eyes while Lys stood over him, a small cannister in her outstretched arm.

A breeze sent the mist wafting toward him. She'd maced the freak. While Telos's eyes watered, the mageheld lurched to its feet, stilling digging at its face. Short of its own death, nothing on his earth was going to stop the mageheld from killing Lys.

Telos unloaded everything he had directly into the mageheld's head. The psychic scream deafened him, then simply stopped. He was close enough to see Lys's eyes get big as the mageheld collapsed at her feet. Killing it wasn't enough. Not if he wanted to stay alive, which he did, and not if he wanted to make sure the mage couldn't fuck the demon over worse than he already had.

To stay dead, a mageheld's magic had to be made safe from humans with magic. If Telos allowed the dead mageheld's life force to drift sentient but unable to interact with the corporeal world, he risked Michael taking the magic for himself. For the demonkind, that was hell; to have the living part of your magic trapped like that. He didn't have time, but he knelt at the dead mageheld's side anyway and gave the life there a path home. He did the same for other one, too.

Michael hit the last step, slowed and then walked toward Lys, smiling. He glanced at his arms and muttered something under his breath. The blood flaked away. His words carried power that made the skin on the back of Telos's neck ripple.

Telos straightened and planted himself in front of Lys. Choice made. He didn't trust her, but he trusted her ex even less. The guy wasn't some street mage. He was

trained. Judging from the color of his eyes, an opaque and unnaturally bright blue, he'd recently taken copa, a drug that enhanced a mage's magic. But there was a price. Copa was addictive for the magekind.

"You," Michael said to him in that tone of aristocratic entitlement the magekind tended to have. Telos reacted to the magic the mage was holding; a shiver down his spine, the allure of all that power. "Move aside. This is not your affair."

"Khūnbish! Start the car."

"I don't know what she's told you, but she is too dangerous to be on her own. Uncontrolled."

Without taking his eyes off the mage, Telos pointed his fob toward his car and pressed the button. The motor came to life. He tossed the keys to Lys, and she caught them while she was turning for the Beemer.

The mage was muttering to himself again, and Telos got a chill down his back that quickly turned to searing pain. His heart stuttered as a foul magic spread through his body; the beginning of a spell intended to enslave him.

A demon warlord who called himself Nikodemus had managed to create a fragile peace between the local magekind and demonkind. As a result, the demonkind living in the warlord's territory were forbidden from harming the magekind. The magekind weren't supposed to take new magehelds, but Michael was about to break the peace because in the next five minutes, Telos was going to end up a shaved-headed slave.

His chest burned with the initial effects of Michael's binding spell. If Lys and Michael were working together, he was fucked. He didn't have much longer before he had to stop the attack by whatever means necessary or get the hell out. If it wasn't already too late.

"Khūnbish!"

Lys popped up over the driver's side of his car and tossed something at him; the cannister she'd used on the second mageheld. Michael came closer, still muttering. The mage stretched out an arm, intending to touch him. If he did, that would be the end for him. Michael would finish what he was doing and Telos would be worse than dead. The tearing inside him stopped his heart.

Pepper spay in hand, he lurched out of Michael's immediate reach, but he was already dying and about to be reborn as a slave. The mage's will slid over him like stagnant. With his entire body being ripped apart and reshaped, he got the device oriented and depressed the button.

Michael went down sputtering. The pain stopped, and Telos's heart slammed in his chest. Once. Again. His legs turned to water, but he managed to stay upright. His heart beat returned.

Behind him, a motor revved, and his car shot past him, forward and over the verge. Lys jammed on the brakes in time to pull even with him. The passenger-side door flew open. She was still straightening from her stretch along the seat when he threw himself inside. He was woozy, physically and mentally, but he grabbed the door and slammed it shut.

She hit the gas and they roared down the street at fifty miles an hour.

"What the hell?" she said. She threw one hand in the air.

"Both hands, God damn it!" He kept his magic on tap because he didn't know what was going on or whether he was safe yet.

Her palm slapped on the leather-covered steering wheel. Her magic, completely unregulated and cycling up and down, wreaked havoc on his psychic state.

The car fishtailed when she took the corner at the first intersection. She made the next turn at near reasonable speed, rubbing one arm. "What the hell was Michael doing?" She shuddered. Her breath wheezed, and her eyes were wide open and staring.

Lys in her corporate get-up was a beautiful, elegant icy cold bitch, but right now she looked like an avenging goddess. “I felt that. What the hell was that?”

The loss of her usual cool had the ironic effect of settling him down. She was wide open to him, psychically speaking, and that turned out to be a help. He straightened on the seat. “Thanks.”

“God, Khūnbish, I am so sorry.” Her voice was low and full of emotion. “I should never have brought you. Never.”

He dropped the pepper spray into her purse. Rubbing his chest didn’t relieve the ache in his chest from Michael’s attempt to take him, but he did it anyway. Ugly bit of magic that was.

“I hope his eyeballs are melting in his head,” Lys said. She didn’t sound like the woman he knew. He hadn’t really wanted to do her before when she was offering, but he did now. The sheer heat of her psychic and emotional state was a turn on for someone like him.

“Get us out of here without getting pulled over, Counselor.”

Mentally, she closed up. Shut just about everything down as she eased up on the gas. The ice queen was back. He wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. There weren’t many of the magekind who could completely disguise what they were. Not from him. Up until today, he’d have bet money she was pure vanilla. A human without an atom of magic.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Anywhere for now.” He kept an eye out for cops. Or a tail. Michael was going to send magehelds after them, no question about that. And not necessarily just for him. He had the feeling Michael’s attempt to enslave him was one of opportunity. Oh, Michael would have finished it, but that hadn’t been his primary goal. A mage like Michael wasn’t going to risk having Nikodemus on his ass for one more mageheld.

Even him. The mage wanted Lys. Dead? Maybe. Punished for have the nerve to leave him? Damn straight. “Your accident the other day,” he said. “Whoever hit you was probably one of Michael’s magehelds.”

“Mageheld?” She sent him a confused look. “What’s that?”

“You’re a smart chick.” He stroked his chest. Was she that clueless? “Work it out.”

She thought about it. “Some kind of servant to a mage? But unwilling.”

“Try slave.”

“I have my issues with what Michael does, Khūnbish, but a slave?” She shook her head. “He wouldn’t do that to another person.”

“He would if he didn’t think of them as people.” She was still doing forty-five in a thirty-five. “Pull over. You’re going to get us killed. Let me drive.”

She bowed her head and over corrected after the car drifted because she’d taken her eye off the road. “I’d be grateful if you did.”

They made the switch at the first gas station they came to. He didn’t make any secret about his interest in the way her shirt hiked up her legs when she sat in the passenger seat again. She tugged on her hem. Oh, well. When he was about to pull onto the street, she said, “Those men at Michael’s?”

“They weren’t men.”

“Demons. They were demons, is that right?”

“Magehelds.”

Her phone rang, muffled since it was inside her purse. She grabbed her Blackberry and pushed the talk button. “Michael.” Her voice dropped low and soft on the last syllable. Was that regret he heard? He hoped she wasn’t one of those women who kept forgiving the assholes in their lives. She listened for a while. “Not going to happen.”

Her shoulders climbed toward her ears, and he got flashes of her mental state; unsettled, determined, on the edge of a psychic crash.

## CHAPTER 4

Telos reached over and took the phone away from her. He considered crushing it to bits of plastic, silicon and metal.

She snatched it back. He couldn't help but catch the ragged emotions leaking from her. He was getting turned on again, too. Nothing he couldn't control, though. Lys pressed against the back of the seat and went completely still. After a silence, she dropped the phone into her purse.

"He's not kidding about killing you," he said.

"I know." Her phone rang again. She picked it up and stared hard at the display.

"Don't engage," he said.

"You know what?" she said over the ringtone.

"What?"

"You are absolutely right." Phone in her hand, she pushed the button to roll down her window. Wind whipped through the car. More of her hair came loose from the roll of hair at the back of her head. She stuck her arm out the window and spread her fingers wide. He heard plastic shatter. Lys rolled up the window and said, "I think we can call that refusing to engage." Her smile was a terrifying thing to see. "Don't you?"

He looked over at her and then out the side-window. "I think so."

She looked out the window, too. “I probably shouldn’t have done that. I have a year left on my contract.”

“You can get a new phone.”

She slumped down on her seat, unaware, or uncaring, of the way her skirt stayed where it was. He didn’t feel guilty for looking. She had great legs. “I’d rather have a puppy.”

Telos laughed. “A new phone would be less work and less expensive.”

“True.” Lys tapped her finger on the top rim of the door. “I can expense a new phone.”

They didn’t say anything more for the twenty minutes it took to reach his house at the far edge of Presidio Heights. He pulled into his garage and shut off the engine.

“Where are we?”

“Home.”

She ran her fingers through her windblown hair. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Probably not.” What he ought to do is take her home— or wherever it was she was staying. Someplace obvious probably, and then Michael or one of his other magehelds would find her and whatever happened to her would be his fault. “We should talk.”

“Why?”

He gave her a look. “Why the hell do you think? Let’s start with your boyfriend’s a fucking mage, and you took me to your house without telling me that.”

Her eyes got big and wide. “I didn’t know you’re like him.”

Telos pulled his keys from the ignition. “I’m not like him, Lys.”

“What does that mean?”

He growled, and the sound was just this side of human. “It means we need to

talk.”

“Don’t be an asshole.”

“You first.”

In his living room, she dropped her purse on the floor and slumped on his couch, legs sprawled out. She wasn’t wearing panty hose. Jesus. The ice queen was in his house, and he was thinking dirty thoughts about her.

She looked around. “I didn’t realize hacking paid quite so well.”

“You know what I charge per hour.”

She stretched her arms over her head, arching her back. Her clothes were expensive. Tailored. Rumpled now. He didn’t like her, but he wasn’t blind. She was a good looking woman. Way too uptight for him. At the moment, psychically speaking, he got nothing from her. Nothing. She was as closed off and vanilla. “You’re worth every penny, honey.”

“The big money is in spam. All you need is an open relay on a misconfigured mail server and you can send out millions of pitches to enlarge your dick.”

She pulled the clip from her hair and shook her head before finger combing the honey-blonde mass; there was a lot more than he would have guessed, and having it down completely changed her looks. Jesus F. He was used to her being Ms. Corporate Untouchable, and right now, she just looked fuckable. She quirked her eyebrows at him while she got her hair slicked back. Did she know how she looked with her hair down like that? “You’re a spammer?”

He laughed. “No, but I do okay.”

Lys returned her hair to its clip and flopped back on the couch. Her skirt hitched up to mid-thigh. She held a hand over her eyes. He’d never seen her anything but perfectly put together, and now? He did just fine with women, thank you, but he hadn’t ever had one like her in his house. Some sort of ice queen magekind. He couldn’t get the

image of her with her hair down out of head. She fished a pair of sunglasses out of her purse and put them on. “Do you have any aspirin?”

“Sorry, no.” He shook his head. “Headache?”

“The light hurts my eyes.” Now she looked like a movie star, all frosty-cold beauty. “It’ll settle down in a bit.”

Telos walked over to the wall switch and flipped the main lights off. Like she was a date, and he was looking to get romantic with her. He closed the blinds, too.

“Thanks.”

Back at the couch, he took his time studying her. She stayed in her partial sprawl, eyes still covered by a hand. Her pale blue-gray skirt wasn’t doing its job of covering her legs. Her snow white blouse clung to curves. The top two buttons were unfastened, and he could see the top curve of her breasts. She had pearls in her ears and ash-gray pumps that were not practical for anything but looking hot. She had toned calves, high arches and ankles that looked like they should have broken while she was running from her murdering ex and his magehelds.

She pressed her fingers to her temples and rubbed. Her nails were just long enough to be classy. They were painted icy pink, and that was all the color on her hands. No jewelry. No engagement ring. “I don’t know how much longer I can stand this.”

“If you’re interested, I can help with the pain.”

She took off her sunglasses and blinked a few times. He wondered about her ability to shut down her magic. That kind of control was usually the result of training. A lot of it. “Like before?”

He nodded.

“I’m not a normal person.” Lys tossed the glasses back in her purse.

“I know.”

“You’re okay with that?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “I need to touch you,” he said. He didn’t go for women like her. She was too controlled. Too fastidious for him, but he was seeing himself doing it with her, and in his imagination she wasn’t uptight or fastidious. She was hot and naked and totally wild for him. “Is that a problem?”

Her fingers kept massaging her head, moving out from her temples. She hesitated and looked up at him. “I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“Usually, it’s not good when people touch me.” Her hands stilled and she looked at him dead on. “Can you keep me from getting into your head the way you did before?”

“Maybe.” Telos moved closer to the couch. “What happens if I don’t?”

“You’ll think I’m crazy.”

He shook his head. “After what happened with Michael? I don’t think so.”

She watched him. He didn’t have to have a hook into her head to know she was trying to decide whether to lie. “I see people’s futures.”

“Everyone’s?”

“No.

“Mine?”

“Not yet.” She didn’t sound happy about that. “When you touched me before, I didn’t get anything from you, and I should have.”

“Huh.” No accident, but he kept his silence on that.

“One time, I kept a log of what I was getting from people. Of the twenty events whose outcomes I was able to confirm, I was right nineteen times.”

“You never tried to warn them?”

“Sure I did.” She wasn’t looking at him. Her gaze was fixed on a horizon he’d

never see himself. “Intervening only makes things worse. For everyone. Especially me. I was lucky none of my foster parents had me committed.” Her attention flicked back to the now. She gave a tight smile. “I learned how to block people out. Most of the time. I’d be in an institution otherwise. Or a crazy lady walking the street talking to myself while I push a shopping cart full of my worldly possessions.”

Telos hooked his fingers into his belt loops. Definitely a witch. Untrained though, he’d bet on that. The magekind tested their kids when they were three. The ones who didn’t show any magical promise got adopted out. Or abandoned. From the sound of it, Lys had been one of the abandoned ones. “How long have you been like that?”

She pointed a finger at her ear and made a twirling motion; the universal sign for loony. “As long as I can remember.” Her expression turned somber. “I don’t know if I’m seeing the future or if what I see actually changes someone’s life.” She laughed, but the sound was brittle. “I mean, that really would be crazy, changing people’s lives with the power of my mind.”

“No wonder Michael hooked up with you.”

“Nobody can change the future just because of what pops into their heads,” she said. “Most days I’m sane by a nanometer. Working with Michael helped a lot. It used to. Lately. . .” She bit her lower lip and chewed on it for a while. Telos entertained more dirty thoughts. “I don’t want to talk about Michael. I just want my head to not explode.”

He held out his hand. “Tell me if you have any problem with this. Okay?”

“All right.” She leaned forward, squinting a little as she stretched to put her hand in his. Her skin was pale, her fingers warmer than he expected from a human woman. When she was upright, he released her hand and got close enough to press a fingertip to her forehead. Her eyes fluttered closed. She had some serious defenses. It was like trying to get through an iron wall.

“Relax,” he said.

She pried open one eye. “This is relaxed.”

“Relax more.”

She did, and he made his psychic connection. Like before, he kept himself blocked from her. No need to be subtle now about what he was doing. Her eyes flew open, wide, stark, and her pain lanced through him like it was being delivered by a semi.

Telos siphoned off the reaction as best he could, but her head was a fucking river of agony. Aspirin wouldn't have done a goddamned thing for her. He ended up straddling her, one hand on the back of the couch, the palm of his other hand resting on her forehead while he bled out the agony.

Compared to a trained mage, her magic was stunted, but right now he was in direct contact, and he was bowled over by the way her power folded over and under and around itself. Stunted, but concentrated. He had a predictable reaction to that. Getting this close to her magic? Almost better than sex.

Eventually, he released the link between them. “Better?” he asked.

“Yes.” She released a shaky breath, looking at him through half-closed eyes.

“Yes, much.” She touched his cheek. “Thank you.”

Telos didn't look away. Neither did she.

He was aware of how close they were. Physically. Of her long legs and the curve of her chest, and the buttons down her blouse. Some human women liked the way he looked and since he preferred that kind of woman, he'd perfected the look that attracted what he liked. Lys wasn't it. All those expensive clothes, always perfectly put together. He breathed in. She smelled good. Clean. Something flowery.

“I ever tell you about my name?” When she shook her head, he said, “My Mongolian name.”

“Telos?”

“Khūnbish. It’s the kind of name parents give their kid if they want to keep the gods from noticing him. To avoid bad luck. My name’s like that, but for a different reason.”

“Yeah?”

“Khūnbish means ‘not a human being’.”

He liked the way her eyes stayed on him. “Is that a good name for you?”

“It is. I’m not like Michael. Not a mage.” He brushed a fingertip over the soft skin along the side of her throat. Silky. Smooth human skin. “Not like you, either.”

She tilted her chin to get a better look at him. “I’m one of the smart girls, Not A Human Being.”

“You think you know what I am?” He put his hands around her waist, thumbs in front, fingers around her sides.

“Of course.”

“And that is?”

“You’re a demon.”

She had that right.

## CHAPTER 5

With a crack like ice breaking, one of the hundreds of carved wooden medallions that made up his early warning system snapped in half. That meant he had company of the unwelcome sort. Better than any electronic alarm system, though he had one of those too, just to keep up with appearances.

Lys sat up straight, and he moved so he was sitting beside her. "It's Michael."

"Probably." He walked to the window and took a look. Not good. Not good in any way.

Another of his wards cracked. He glanced to the line of medallions placed around the perimeter of his ceiling and saw that for several of them, the carved faces were no longer smiling. One was outright frozen in a scream. His pulse sped up. Michael wasn't playing around.

He brought up a number he'd had in his phone contacts for a long time. He'd known for the last year or more that he couldn't stay unaffiliated forever. This deal with Michael was pushing his decision. He was fine with that. From what he'd heard, there were worse warlords to tie himself to than Nikodemus. He pressed *call*.

"Are you calling the police?"

"No." The ringing stopped. A woman answered the phone, and that wasn't

right. He put his finger on the button to disconnect the call, but the woman said, “I represent Nikodemus.”

Telos said, “That so?”

“Yeah.” Short and assured.

“I may need help,” he said into the phone.

“Free kin?”

“For now.” He felt a world of understanding in the silence that followed his answer. He was free for the present. Later on? Maybe he wouldn’t be.

“What’s your situation?”

“Just so you know, if any of them get inside, I’m taking down as many as I can. And that includes the mage.”

“Fair enough.” Whoever she was, she understood his situation.

Telos got up and walked to the window as he gave his name, figuring that was a good place to start. Nikodemus would at least have heard about him. The woman whistled softly. “An honor, Telos.”

He looked out the window and did a quick count. “There’s a mage outside my place with six magehelds that I can see,” he said. There were probably more at the back. From the way his wards were going off, there was one on the roof, too.

He turned around and kept his eyes on Lys. “Also an unstable, untrained street-witch inside here with me.” He felt the peculiar nullity from her that he’d previously mistaken for vanilla. Rumor was that Nikodemus didn’t practice the adage that the only good witch was a dead witch. Supposedly, he accepted fealty from the magekind, too, but Telos wasn’t sure he believed that. “The mage says she’s dangerous, but I’m not sending her back if she doesn’t want to go.”

“Any chance she’ll go back on her own?”

“No.” That came out more of a growl than an answer.

After a pause, she said, “Can you trust her?”

He held Lys’s gaze. “Can I trust her?” he said for her benefit. “Yeah. I can trust her.”

“Give me your address,” the woman said. “I’ll get some of my people out there.”

More of the wards went off. “That might not be soon enough. I only counted the ones out front. There’s going to be more than six.”

“Whoever comes will be able to sever you if you get taken.”

He’d heard rumors about that. He didn’t believe a word of it. The only way to free a mageheld was to kill the mage who enslaved the poor fuck. “Is that possible?”

“Yes.” The woman fell silent, too. Not used to being doubted? Or did she usually spout off bullshit and people believed her?

“You better be right.”

“I’ll come there and sever you myself if that’s necessary.”

“Sure you will.”

“You called me, Telos. Either you trust me to take care of this or you don’t, and this goes all kinds of wrong.”

He pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at it. Above him, more medallions turned black. He brought the phone back to his ear. “Who are you?”

“Carson Phillips.”

The name more than rang a bell. “Nikodemus’s witch?”

“Yes.”

He was talking to the demon warlord’s witch. Not just a representative of the warlord. More like his damned other half. And, if rumors were to be believed, the warlord’s lover. Or maybe it was the other way around. Maybe the warlord was her lover.

“Nikodemus will want to talk with you. No obligation.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“You should be able to hold off six magehelds until I get there.”

“I told you, there’s more than six.”

The windows shook harder, and on the other end of the phone call Carson waited for the noise to stop. “If you’re under attack, you do what you have to. I’ve already sent some text messages, but I need to make a couple more calls to get this in motion. You keep the witch alive and safe and whatever happens, I can sever you, I promise you that.”

Carson disconnected, and Telos was left holding his phone, staring at Lys while his house shook.

“Can I help?” Lys asked. Decent of her. Very non-bitchy.

He got close enough to touch the side of her head. “What happens if you stop blocking out all those other minds?”

She leaned her shoulder against the wall. “I see people’s futures. Or change them. Maybe. I’ve never been exactly sure how it works. All I know is that whatever I see in my head, it happens, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. Except try to keep them out in the first place.”

Telos glanced out the window.

She moved to the window and pushed aside the blinds. He knew the moment she lowered her blocks because his spine went cold as ice. The medallions within ten feet of her deformed as they reacted to the magic coming from her. He shut down the wards closest to her so she wouldn’t get caught in the blowback if or when they went off.

Lys closed her eyes and rocked on her feet, a motion that coincided with a tickle that slid down his spine like the blade of a knife. A low sound came from her throat. Her knees buckled, but when he moved to help her she held out a hand to stop him.

“Don’t touch me.”

She positioned herself at the side of the biggest window, making as small a target of herself as she could. Michael and his magehelds weren’t going to miss her magic. Cycling out of control like that, it was setting him off, too. Her shoulders trembled.

After a bit, things calmed down. She put her blocks back in place. She said, “You’re going to kill two of them tonight.”

“Only two?”

She turned to him, pressing her back to the wall. She was nearly as pale as when he’d met her outside her building all those hours ago. Her arms were clasped tight beneath her breasts in an attempt to hide that she was shivering. He could see it, though, and feel, too, the psychic cost of opening herself like that. “The others –” She gestured at the window “ – something’s going to happen to them, too, but they won’t die.” Her mouth thinned. “I don’t understand what I’m getting from them, and usually, I do.”

He took a quick look out the window. Of the six he could see, two weren’t going to be any trouble for him. The other four were big. In the case of the demonkind, size and perfection of the human form tended to be an indication of magical power. If he had to go up against all six at once, his margin for error was going to be small but not unsurmountable. Unless there were more, and he was certain there were.

“Please,” she said. Her voice wavered. “Keep yourself blocked like before.”

“Do you have to see them before you get anything?”

She nodded. Her focus remained outside. “Usually.”

“Which ones?” he asked. She looked at him with a soul that had lived with more pain than anyone should. He said, “Which two do I kill?”

“It never works. Trying to change things. Something always happens.”

“Which two?”

Her eyes were desolate, her pupils hardly more than black dots in the center of her dark blue irids.

“Which ones, Lys?”

She pointed. “The one by the car there. And him. Across the street. Those two.”

Both the smaller ones. His still-forming plan had included going after the biggest ones first, so he wasn’t exactly comforted that she was getting a read on those two. Did that mean he was going to screw up and get taken? “How? Do you know how it happens?”

“Not an accident. And here. In this room. A lot of blood. They’re what you said. Slaves. They hate Michael. It consumes them. But they do whatever he tells them to because they have to.” She put her hands on either side of her head. “Unbearable pain here.”

“Time frame?”

She thought about that. “I’m not sure. Soon, probably.”

“Shit.” He leaned his shoulders against the wall and tried to figure out the most likely scenario. He might have to let himself get taken just to give Carson time to get here. The windows at the back of the house started shaking.

He reached for her. After a hesitation, she leaned against him. She felt good.

“I need to know what happens to me, Lys.”

She shook her head.

“I can’t keep you safe if we don’t know what happens to me.” He held out his hand. “If I die, or worse, we need to have a plan to get you away from Michael.” Telos curled his fingers around hers and brought her to him. His skin rippled with goose bumps. “What about me, Lys?”

She closed her eyes, and he slid into her head and opened himself to her.

Dozens of other images were there, each one playing out in her head. He actually

watched the two smaller magehelds die, one after the other. In the images he saw, he was the one who killed them. The scenes involving him were intense. The colors and emotions were saturated far beyond normal.

*Blood. Searing heat. Bodies falling. A cascade of black hair, crimson droplets in an arc through the air. Falling. His body falling. His heart and chest tearing magic folding in over around taking.*

“Lys” His heart turned over. She tried to get free of him, but he grabbed her face between his hands. “Lys!”

Slowly, her eyes opened. The desolation about killed him. She was a witch. A fucked up, stunted human witch, and it was like her magic had wanted so badly to stay with her that it had crawled up inside her head and folded itself into her brain. A witch, and right now he’d do anything for her. Anything.

“Listen to me.” He brought his mouth close to her, and she lifted her head, and well, he kissed her instead. Hungry, demanding, a full on kiss with his tongue in her mouth, and his hands touching her curves, and hell if she wasn’t kissing him back. He drew back, breathing hard. “I’d rather be dead than mageheld, you understand me? I won’t be anyone’s slave. It’s better if I die.”

Her eyes glittered with tears. “This is my fault.”

He widened his psychic link with her. Nothing major, hardly more than the low level link he’d have if he were with others of his kind, but enough to come in contact with her psychic state the way he had before. He drew away the pain that pulsed through her head, taking it into himself. He broke their physical contact but left the link going. “Better?”

She touched her head. “God, thank you.” Something shook the entire back of the house. Lys’s wide-open eyes met his. “What happens when they get in?”

“Depends on Michael’s orders.”

“He wants me dead.” Her body tensed. “You, too.”

“No, he doesn’t want to kill me.”

She had herself under control. Completely shut down. Vanilla as anything. He still had his link with her. “I’m never wrong.”

“You’re seeing him take me mageheld, Lys. Not killing.”

“Then there isn’t much difference because it feels to me like you’re dead.”

He put one hand on the wall above her shoulder then took her hand, turning her wrist up so he was looking at the blue veins on the tender underside of her arm, thinking things he shouldn’t be. “This is going to work.”

“I could leave. Go back to Michael.”

He snorted. “Hell, no.” He closed his fingers a little more tightly around her wrist. Not hard, just enough for them both to notice. “The people I called, they’ll help you.”

Lys settled. He let go of her arm and put a hand on her hip. Not a grope, he just fit his hand to the curve of her body. When she didn’t avoid the contact, he pulled her closer. He put his other hand on her opposite hip. His heart thudded against his ribs while she slid a palm up the side of his arm. “What if you’re wrong?”

The answer turned out not to matter because his back door shattered.

Michael was here.

## CHAPTER 6

No way, Lys thought when wood shattered somewhere toward the back of the house. She was sick to her stomach with fear, but she ignored it. The explosion rattled the windows and shook the floor. No way was she letting Michael do anything to Telos. She'd kill Michael herself if she had to. Behind her, Telos muttered something. She released her blocks. All of them.

Hot air rolled through the room, raising the hair on her arms. All along the walls and near the ceiling, medallions the size of her palm deformed until more than a few of the faces carved in them looked like they were screaming. The effect was beyond creepy. She clapped her hands over her ears, as if that would stop the shrieking in her head. She kept herself open. For now, she was safe. With Telos blocked off on his own, there wasn't anyone close enough for her to get hooked into.

Telos strode away from her in a whisper of fabric moving and the sharp pull of his magic. Slowly, the noise receded. The windows stopped shaking. Lys braced herself, got ready for the stimuli and the rush of the future inside her head. When she looked up, the faces in the medallions were nearly normal.

In the back of the house, something screamed then cut off abruptly.

Telos stood near the door, hands clenched at his sides. Unless she was imagining

things, and she didn't think she was, his pupils glowed orange. "I don't know how long that will hold," he said in a tight voice. His mouth moved after the words registered in her head. He'd stopped blocking himself from her.

Reality slipped away.

"Do you have a gun?" she asked.

"If I did, it wouldn't stop a mageheld long enough to matter. You have to sever the spine in order to stop them. Or rip out their hearts." She blinked hard, but Telos didn't stay human. Bigger, sharp teeth and talons. His body became a weapon.

The windows rattled again, slowly at first, then faster and faster. Then there was nothing but silence while she watched the faces in the medallions slowly reform to screaming horrors. The medallions around the door cracked. A few crumbled to ash. Several more turned the color of charcoal.

Telos faced her. He didn't have to tell her what he was thinking. She knew because the outcome was obvious. They were going to be facing several magehelds sometime in the next few minutes, and chances were they weren't going to survive. The acrid scent of burnt air wafted through the room. He moved across the room, but the visuals blurred. She was seeing present and future at the same time. She stopped trying to follow any speech but what was in her head.

"Get behind me, Lys. Now." She did, and he tossed her his cell phone. She caught it squarely because she already knew where he was going to throw it. "Hit redial and tell whoever answers they need to get here now."

"Is there another way out?"

"Call, Lys." He positioned himself next to the door. "Do it!"

With the phone in hand, she retreated to the sound of footsteps pounding down the hall. First the ones in her head, then the ones for real. They weren't bothering to sneak up on them, that was for sure. Her fingers shook, and her palms were sweaty, but

she got the phone flipped open without dropping it. Eight men. Demons. Slaves.

Lys pressed the redial button.

Eight men shot through the doorway and slid to a halt just inside. All of them had short hair and all of them focused on Telos. Because he was the threat. Not her. Two of magehelds were smaller than the others. When those two died, there would be six left to kill. Or to kill them.

The inside of Lys's head lit up, scouring, burning, overwhelming her ability to process everything coming at her. Image followed image so quickly she could hardly make sense of them. More medallions cracked and turned black. A cut opened up on the arm of the man who'd come in first. He growled and wiped his arm behind him, but he didn't move from the doorway. Another one yelped and took a step back. Blood continued to drip down the first one's arm. She tore her eyes away from the sight, unable to tell if she was seeing real wounds or future ones.

The phone in her hand rang at the other end of the call she'd initiated. She got it to her ear just in time but had to fight to concentrate on the call and not what was happening with Telos. The center of her chest burned. "Hello?"

Nothing. The phone rang, vibrating in her hand. It stopped.

A woman answered, her voice sharp, clipped. "Telos?"

"They're here," Lys said. She concentrated on speech, on not blocking herself. "Inside the house. Something is going to happen to Telos. Soon. How close are you?"

"Outside."

She whirled and looked out the window. Two bodies lay on the ground. A larger man knelt over the one by the mailbox. Four others stood not far away. But they weren't on guard anymore. One was bent over. Another pressed a hand to his chest like he was having a hard time breathing. A smaller figure, a woman with her back to the window, had her hands on her hips.

“Get in here. Now.” Lys’s voice slid up the register. The images in her head battered at her. She fought to maintain her concentration on the phone call, to not give in to the chaos in her mind.

*A sea of red. Pain. Horror. Hatred. The two largest falling tumbling.*

“Three minutes,” said the woman’s voice.

“Now.”

Outside, the small woman turned and glanced upward, to the window where Lys gripped the phone so hard her fingers hurt. From where Lys stood, the woman looked impossibly dainty. “That’s some serious magic you have,” the woman’s voice said in her ear. “You need to learn some control.”

“Too late. Too late. You will be too late to save him.” Without disconnecting the call, Lys put the phone on the window sill.

Telos had already engaged one of the smaller magehelds. While she ran, in her head, she heard a snap and the mageheld’s body went limp. He threw the body away from him and it hit the wall and slid down, boneless, and then it happened again. For real this time.

Lys ran full speed into the mageheld closest to her and kneed him in the crotch as hard as she could. The images in her head changed. From the corner of her eye, she saw Telos whirl, back in his human form. His hair spread out like a fan. A spatter of blood arced through the air. Not his blood; the mageheld who had engaged him. The second of the two smaller ones. Through that veil of crimson against black she saw Michael walk into the room with two more magehelds behind him. Again. The smell of blood filled the air.

She opened her mouth to shout a warning, but something hit her in the back. Heat sizzled through her head. Thousands of images flashed before her eyes. Telos. Michael. The magehelds. She went down hard, jamming her knees against the floor.

Her stomach threatened to turn inside out.

*Someone roars. Monster. Teeth tearing. Lust. Michael lifts a hand and says words that will rip away the world.*

On the ground, she fought to hold herself together, to keep herself from sliding into madness. Michael was the threat, she thought. Michael needed to be stopped. Her head filled with too many images to track, coming at her too fast. So much blood. She crawled forward, into the future. Screams rang in her ears, deafening her. Overhead, the air sparked.

“Lys!” That was Telos’s voice in her head, pounding in her ears. She lifted her head and saw Telos in her mind, then in life. “Get out.”

The muscles of her back seized up, but she forced herself to move through the pain. Michael was a million miles away, she’d never get to him in time. In her head, Telos was a living presence with an edge of the unhuman. She felt everything that was happening to him; the dark and oily spread of Michael’s magic and the white heat of his determination to stay alive and free.

Telos was losing that battle. She knew it in her heart. Tears burned in her eyes as she kept moving. She was like some mortally wounded animal intent on protecting her mate; all the higher functions of her brain had shut down.

A petite woman with black hair and green eyes appeared in the doorway. A man stood behind her, tall enough to dominate the room. A ball of ice formed at the base of Lys’s spine. Image or reality? She had no idea. They were opaque to her. Minds that did not claw into her.

The woman darted smoothly into the room and touched the mageheld closest to her. It shrieked and went down hard on its ass, hands clutched to its chest.

Telos crashed to the floor.

Something hot splattered her cheek. Burning. Hot with spilled life. She swiped at

her face and her hand came away smeared with blood. Her sense of Telos attenuated. She didn't know what was real and what wasn't.

She wasn't going to let Telos die for her.

She lunged for Michael and in her mind, she got a hand on his knee. He kicked back, but she dug her fingers into his leg until she was sure the bones of her hands were breaking apart. She used her other hand to shield her head. Heat streaked through her body, pain like nothing she'd ever felt. She couldn't get high enough to hit him in the crotch so she pounded away at his knee.

Her awareness of Telos vanished from her head. Her heart shriveled in her chest. Turned to ash. Michael tangled his fingers in Lys's hair while Telos stood rigid before Michael, his mouth open in a scream that had no sound.

*Stop Michael.*

She couldn't fail.

In her mind, she reached for Michael. Anything to stop him. His future was hers to shape. The fire building in her body flamed through her, burning her. Killing her. Hot as the sun. She was made of wax. She was Icharus falling to the hard and unforgiving earth. Tumbling in the chaos of her mind, creating a future where Michael wasn't a god.

*Michael stands triumphant. Telos walks across the room to face the mage and kneel.*

Across the room, the dark-haired woman touched another of the magehelds. Like the other mageheld, this one stumbled. In the same motion, the woman touched the last one to have come in with Michael. The only mind left for Lys to touch was Michael's.

*"Kill the witch," Michael told Telos. "When you're done, kill this one, too."*

*Michael stands triumphant. Carson walks across the room to face him. He smiles and Telos flows so quickly too quickly to stop. The assassin steps in front of Carson and there is*

*nothing more.*

Telos whirled toward the woman. The air crackled with electricity.

The man who'd come in with the petite woman, so elegant with dark eyes and dark hair, moved with incomprehensible speed. He intercepted Telos, slamming him against the wall. Lys saw everything twice. In her head and then in front of her eyes, all of it melting together.

"Durian." The woman spoke in a calm voice. "Do not kill him."

"Do it," Telos said. His lips drew back from his teeth. "Do it before it's too late."

"Quickly, Carson," said Durian.

Carson touched Telos the way she had the others. He convulsed, gasped, then went still. Durian released his grip on him, but kept a hand on his upper arm. Carson turned around. "Mage," she said. "It's over."

Michael yanked on Lys's hair, forcing her to stand. "One more step and she's dead."

Carson stopped, hands on her hips. A telephone headset curled around the outside of her ear. "You were warned, mage. You know the consequences."

"I don't accept a demon's authority over me."

*Michael stands triumphant. Lys faces him. He smiles and holds out a hand. She touches him and the sun inside her incinerates him.*

"I sent a team to your house," Carson said. "By now, you must at least suspect that the magehelds you left there are no longer in your control." She smiled and it was just about the scariest smile Lys had seen. Carson took a step closer to Michael, and, yes, she was small and dainty, but she didn't look like someone you wanted to have mad at you. "Nikodemus authorized a sanction against you. If you don't let her go, you're dead."

Michael wrapped an arm around her throat, tight enough to restrict her air. Telos

lunged then pulled up short when Carson raised a hand. “I wonder which of us is faster?” Michael said. “Me?” His arms tightened around Lys, squeezing off her air. “Or your assassin?”

*Michael stands triumphant.*

The assassin hadn't moved from the door. He stood there, smiling. His smile was eerie because of the way it lit his eyes. Telos vanished from her field of vision. She went up on her toes in an attempt to relieve the pressure on her throat.

*The sun inside her incinerates.*

“No question about it,” Carson said. “My assassin is faster.”

She didn't have any more time and she wasn't going to just stand here and let Michael choke her to death. With the last of her strength, Lys punched back with her elbow, but Michael was already falling away from her. She gulped in air.

“But Telos,” she heard Carson say, “is closer.”

Michael laughed. Lys turned and walked toward him. She no longer knew what was real and what was the future. He smiled and stretched out his hand. She touched him. The way she had once before. Before she knew how to lock herself away.

The heat inside her flashed through her, through her skin, through her mind and into Michael and the world went white.

*The sun incinerates.*

The room shook, and then there was nothing. Telos pulled her to her feet. “You okay?” he asked.

She nodded, though *okay* was a relative term. She hurt everywhere, but she was alive, and that was good. Telos's arm slid around her waist, and she decided she didn't mind that. Michael was on the ground. Not moving. His wide open eyes stared at nothing. She grabbed handfuls of Telos's T-shirt. “How did he die?”

Telos shrugged. “You touched him.”

“It was a clean kill,” the assassin said.

“So,” Carson said. She gave them both a friendly smile. “You two love birds up to meeting Nikodemus while my guy Durian takes care of the clean up here?”

“I’m not doing the dirty work,” Durian said. He had a phone out and was already making a call.

Carson waved a hand. “Whatever. As long as everything’s taken care of.”

Telos turned to the witch. “How does Nikodemus feel about demons who hook up with witches?”

Carson’s smile broadened. “He’s open minded.” Her green eyes moved between Telos and her. “As long as everyone’s a consenting adult.”

Lys said, “I’ll listen to any and all reasonable requests.”

“I hear you’re a lawyer.” Carson kept smiling.

“Yes.”

Durian looked up from the quiet instructions he’d been giving over the phone. “It happens,” he said, “that Nikodemus is looking to build a team of outside counsel. If you’re interested.”

“Can I have a corner office?”

“I am not in charge of the accommodations.”

Lys looked at Telos. “What do you think?”

“Counselor, we’re all safer if you’re on our side.”

Carson smiled again. “Damn right.”