

## DESTINED - EXCERPT

### PROLOGUE

*Zoey*

I think my mom is dead.

I tested the words silently. They felt wrong, unnatural, as if I was trying to comprehend the world turning upside down or the sun rising in the west.

I drew a deep, sobbing breath and rolled onto my side, reaching for another tissue in the box that was on the floor next to the bed.

Stark muttered and frowned and moved restlessly.

Slowly and carefully, I got out of bed, grabbed Stark's giant sweatshirt from where he'd tossed it, pulled it on, and curled up on the beanbag chair that sat near the wall of our little tunnel room.

The beanbag made that smushy noise that always reminds me of the balls in those inflatable kid party houses, and Stark frowned and mumbled something again. I blew my nose. Quietly. Stop crying stop crying stop crying! It won't help. It won't bring Mom back. I blinked a bunch of times, and wiped my nose again. Maybe it had just been a dream. But even as I thought the words my heart knew the truth. Nyx had pulled me from my dreams to show me a vision of Mom entering the Otherworld. That meant Mom had died. Mom told Nyx that she was sorry for letting me down, I reminded myself as tears leaked down my cheeks again.

"She'd said she loved me," I whispered.

I had hardly made any noise, but Stark tossed and turned restlessly, and muttered, "Stop!"

I clamped my lips together, even though I knew my whisper wasn't what was messing with his sleep. Stark was my Warrior, my Guardian, and my boyfriend. No, boyfriend is too simple a word. There's a bond between Stark and me that goes deeper than dating and sex and all the stuff that comes and goes with normal relationships. That's why he was so restless. He could feel my sadness—even in his dreams he knew I was crying and hurt and scared and—

Stark pushed the blanket off his chest and I could see that his hand was clenched into a fist. My gaze went to his face. He was still asleep, but his forehead was furrowed and he was frowning.

I closed my eyes and drew a deep, centering breath. "Spirit," I whispered. "Please come to me." Instantly I felt the element brush against my skin. "Help me. No, actually, help Stark by shielding my sadness from him." And maybe, I added silently, you could help shield some of my sadness from me, too. Even if it's just for a little while. I drew another deep breath as spirit moved within and around me, swirling over to the bed. Opening my eyes I could actually see a ripple in the air surrounding Stark. His skin appeared to glow as the element settled against him like a diaphanous blanket. I felt warm and glanced down at my arms and saw that the same soft glow was resting against my skin. Stark exhaled a long sigh with me as spirit worked a little soothing magick, and for the first time in hours I felt a little, tiny bit of my sadness lift.

"Thank you, spirit," I whispered and crossed my arms, hugging myself tight. Wrapped in the comforting touch of the element I felt closest to, I was actually a little sleepy. It was then that a different kind of warmth penetrated my consciousness. Slowly, not wanting to disturb the comforting spell the element was working, I unwrapped my arms from around myself and touched my chest.

Why is my seer stone warm? The small, round stone was dangling from its silver chain, resting between my breasts. I hadn't taken it off since Sgiach had gifted it to me before I'd left the beautiful, magickal Isle of Skye.

Wonderingly, I pulled the stone out from under the sweatshirt, running my fingers over its smooth, marble surface. It still reminded me of a coconut-flavored Life Saver, but the Skye marble glittered with an unearthly light, as if the element I had invoked had made it alive—as if the warmth I felt was because it pulsed with life.

Queen Sgiach's voice echoed through my memory: "A seer stone is in tune with only the most ancient of magicks: the kind I protect on my isle. I am gifting you with it so that you might, indeed, recognize the Old Ones if any still exist in the outside world . . ."

As her words replayed in my mind the stone turned slowly, almost lazily. The hole in its center was like a mini-telescope. As it shifted around I could see Stark illuminated through it, and my world shifted, too, narrowed, then everything changed.

Maybe it was because spirit was so close to me at that moment, but what I saw didn't feel anything like the mind-blowing first time I'd looked through the stone on Skye and had ended up passing out.

But that didn't mean it was any less unsettling.

Stark was there, lying on his back, most of his chest bare. The glow of spirit was gone. In its place I saw another image. It was indistinct, though, and I couldn't make out his features. It was like someone's shadow. Stark's arm twitched and his hand opened. The shadow's hand opened. As I watched the Guardian sword—the massive long sword that had come to Stark in the Otherworld—took form in Stark's hand. I gasped in surprise and the phantom-like Warrior turned his head in my direction and closed his hand around the sword.

Instantly the Guardian sword shifted, changed, and became a long black spear—dangerous, lethal, tipped in blood that looked way too familiar to me. Fear spiked through me.

"No!" I cried. "Spirit, strengthen Stark! Make that thing go away!" With a noise like the beating wings of a giant bird, the apparition disappeared, the seer stone went cold, and Stark sat straight up, frowning at me.

"What are you doing over there?" He rubbed his eyes. "Why are you making so much noise?"

I opened my mouth to try to explain the bizarre thing I'd just seen when he sighed heavily and lay back down, flipping open the covers and motioning sleepily for me. "Come here. I can't sleep unless you're cuddled up with me. And I really need to get some sleep."

"Okay, yeah, me, too," I said, and on shaky legs I hurried to him and curled against his side, my head resting on his shoulder. "Hey, uh, something weird just happened," I began, but when I tilted my head so that I could see into his eyes, Stark's lips met mine. The surprise didn't last long, and I slid into the kiss. It felt good—so good to be close to him. His arms went around me. I pressed myself against him while his lips followed the curve of my neck. "I thought you said you needed some sleep." My voice sounded breathless.

"I need you more," he said.

"Yeah," I said. "Me, too."

We lost ourselves in each other then. Stark's touch chased away death and despair and fear. Together we reminded each other of life and love and happiness. Afterward we finally slept and the seer stone lay cold and forgotten on my breast between us.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Aurox*

The human male's flesh had been soft, pulpy.

It had been a surprise how easy it had been to destroy him—to end the beating of his feeble heart.

"Take me to North Tulsa. I want to go out into the night," she'd said. That was the command that began their evening.

“Yes, Goddess,” he’d responded instantly, coming alive from the corner of the rooftop balcony that he’d made his own.

“Do not call me Goddess. Call me . . .” She’d looked contemplative. “. . . Priestess.” Her full lips, slick and reddened, turned up. “I believe it is best if everyone should simply call me Priestess—at least for a short while.”

Aurox had fisted his hand over his heart in a gesture he instinctively knew was ancient, though it somehow felt awkward and forced. “Yes, Priestess.”

Priestess had brushed by him, gesturing imperiously for him to follow her.

He had followed.

He’d been created to follow. To take her orders. To obey her commands.

They’d entered something Priestess had called car, and the world had flown. Priestess had commanded him to understand the workings of it.

He’d watched and learned, just as she’d commanded.

Then they’d stopped and exited the car.

The street had smelled of death and rot, corruption and filth.

“Priestess this place is not—”

“Protect me!” she’d snapped. “But do not be protective of me. I will always go where I wish, when I wish, and do exactly what I wish. It is your job, no, your purpose to defeat my enemies. It is my destiny to create enemies. Watch. React when I command you to protect. That is all I require of you.”

“Yes, Priestess,” he’d said.

The modern world was a confusing place. So many shifting sounds. So much he did not know. He would do as Priestess commanded. He would fulfill his reason for creation and—

A male had stepped out, blocking Priestess’s way.

“You way too pretty to be in this here alley so late with nothin’ but one boy keepin’ ya company.” His eyes widened, as he took in Priestess’s tattoos. “So, vampyre, you stoppin’ here to get you a little snack from this boy? How ’bout you give me that purse then you and me, we’ll talk ’bout what it’s like to be with a real man?”

Priestess sighed and sounded bored. “You’re wrong on both counts: I am not simply a vampyre, and this is no boy.”

“Hey, what you mean by that?”

Priestess ignored the man and looked over her shoulder at Aurox.

“Now you should protect me. Show me what kind of weapon I command.”

He obeyed her without conscious thought. Aurox closed on the man with no hesitation. In one swift movement, Aurox plunged his thumbs into the man’s staring eyeballs, which made the screaming begin.

The man’s terror washed over him, feeding him. As simply as drawing a breath, Aurox inhaled the pain he was causing. The power of the man’s terror swelled through him, pumping hot and cold. Aurox felt his hands hardening, changing, becoming more. What had been normal fingers became claws. He pulled them from the man’s eyes when the blood began to seep from his ears. With the borrowed power of pain and fear, Aurox lifted the man, slamming him against the wall of the nearest building.

The man screamed again.

What a wonderful, terrible thrill! Aurox felt more of the change ripple through his body. Mere human feet became cloven hooves. The muscles of his legs thickened. His chest heaved and split the shirt he had been wearing. And most wonderful of all, Aurox felt the thick deadly horns that swelled from his head.

By the time the man's three friends ran into the alley to help him, he had stopped screaming.

Aurox dropped the man to the filth and turned to place himself between Priestess and those who might believe they could cause her harm.

"What the fuck?" The first man skidded to a halt.

"I ain't never seen nothin' like that," said the second man.

Aurox was already absorbing the fear that was beginning to radiate from them. His skin pulsed with the cold fire of it.

"Is they horns? Ah, hell no! I'm outta here." The third man turned and scurried back the way he had come. The other two began to back slowly away, eyes wide, shocked and staring.

Aurox looked to Priestess. "What is your command?" In some distant part of his mind, he wondered at the sound of his voice—how it had become so guttural, so bestial.

"Their pain makes you stronger." Priestess looked pleased. "And different, more fierce." She looked at the two retreating men and her full upper lip lifted in a sneer. "Isn't that interesting . . . Kill them."

Aurox moved so quickly the nearest man had no chance to escape. He gored him through his chest, lifting him so that he writhed and shrieked and soiled himself.

This made Aurox even more powerful.

With a mighty toss of his head, the skewered man flew into the building to land, crumpled and silent, beside the first man.

The other man didn't run away. Instead he pulled out a long, dangerous looking knife and charged at Aurox.

Aurox feinted to the side and then, when the man overcompensated, he stomped a cloven hoof through his foot, ripping off his face as the man fell forward.

Breathing hard, Aurox stood over the bodies of his vanquished enemies. He turned to Priestess.

"Very good," she said in her emotionless voice. "Let us leave this place before the authorities descend."

Aurox followed her. He walked heavily, his hoofs gouging furrows in the dirty alley. He fisted his claws at his side as he tried to make sense of the emotional storm that flowed through his body, taking with it the power that had fueled his battle frenzy.

Weak. He felt weak. And more. There was something else.

"What is it?" she snapped at him when he hesitated before entering the car again.

He shook his head. "I do not know. I feel—"

She laughed. "You don't feel at all. You're obviously overthinking this. My knife doesn't feel. My gun doesn't feel. You're my weapon; you kill. Deal with it."

"Yes, Priestess." Aurox got in the car and let the world speed past him. I do not think. I do not feel. I am a weapon.

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*Aurox*

"Why are you standing here looking at me?" Priestess asked him, staring at him with eyes of green ice.

“I await your command, Priestess,” he said automatically, wondering how it was possible to have displeased her. They had just returned to her lair at the top of the magnificent building called Mayo. Aurox had walked to the balcony and simply stood there, quietly, gazing at Priestess.

She blew out a long breath. “I have no command for you at this moment. And must you always stare at me?”

Aurox looked away, focusing on the lights of the city and how they glittered alluringly against the night sky.

“I await your command, Priestess,” he repeated.

“Oh, by all the gods! Who would have known the Vessel created for me would be as mindless as he is beautiful?”

Aurox felt the change in the atmosphere before Darkness materialized from smoke and shadow and night.

“Mindless, beautiful, and deadly . . .”

The voice rang in his head. The enormous white bull formed fully before him. His breath was fetid, yet sweet. His gaze was horrible and wonderful at the same time. He was mystery and magick and mayhem together.

Aurox dropped to his knees before the creature.

“Get off your knees. Get up and go back there . . .” She waved her hand in a dismissive gesture toward the shadows that edged the far recesses of the rooftop.

“No, I’d rather he stayed. I enjoy gazing on my creations.”

Aurox didn’t know what to say. This creature commanded his attention, but Priestess commanded his body.

“Creations?” Priestess put a special emphasis on the last part of the word as she moved languidly toward the massive bull. “Do you often make gifts like this to your followers?”

The bull’s laughter was terrible, but Aurox noticed Priestess didn’t flinch at all—that instead she seemed to be drawn closer and closer to the creature as he spoke.

“How interesting! You are actually questioning me. Are you jealous, my heartless one?”

Priestess stroked the bull’s horn. “Do I need to be?”

The bull nuzzled her. Where his muzzle touched Priestess the silk of her gown shriveled, exposing smooth, naked flesh underneath.

“Tell me, what do you believe is the purpose of my gift to you?” The bull answered Priestess’s question with one of his own.

Priestess blinked and shook her head, as if she was confused. Then her gaze found Aurox, still on his knees. “My lord, his purpose is protection, and I am ready to do as you bid to thank you for him.”

“I will accept your lush offerings, but I must explain to you that Aurox is not simply a weapon of protection. Aurox has one purpose, and that is to create chaos.”

Priestess inhaled a deep, shocked breath. She blinked rapidly, and her gaze went from the bull to him, and then returned to the bull.

“Truly?” she asked in a soft, reverent voice. “Through this one creature I can command chaos?”

The bull’s white eyes were like a sick, setting moon. “Truly. He is, indeed, one creature, but his power is vast. He has the ability to leave disaster in his wake. He is the Vessel that is the manifestation of your deepest dreams, and are they not for utter and complete chaos?”

"Yes, oh yes," Priestess breathed the words. She leaned against the bull's neck, stroking his side.

"Ah, and what is it you will do with chaos now that it is at your command? Will you take down the cities of humans and rule as vampyre queen?"

Priestess's smile was beautiful and horrible. "Not queen. Goddess."

"Goddess? But there is a Goddess of Vampyres. You know that all too well. You used to be in her service."

"You mean Nyx? The Goddess who allows her minions free choice and a will of their own? The Goddess who will not intercede because she believes so strongly in the myth of freewill?"

Aurox thought he could hear a smile in the beast's voice, and wondered how that was possible. "I do mean Nyx, Goddess of Vampyres and Night. Would you use chaos to challenge her?"

"No. I would use chaos to defeat her. What if chaos threatens the very fabric of the world? Would Nyx not step in and defy her own rules to save her children? And by doing so wouldn't the Goddess rescind her edict that grants humans freewill and betray herself? What would happen then to her divine reign if Nyx changes what is destined to be?"

"I cannot say, as that has never before happened." The bull snorted as if in amusement. "But it is a surprisingly interesting question—and you know how much I enjoy being surprised."

"I only hope that I can continue to surprise you over and over again, my lord."

"Only is such a small word . . ." the bull said.

Aurox continued to kneel on the rooftop long after Priestess and the bull had departed, leaving him discarded and forgotten. He stayed where he had been left, staring up at the sky.

## CHAPTER TWO

*Zoey*

"A short bus? Really?" All I could do was shake my head and stare at the squatty yellow thing that said house of night in fresh black letters across its side. "I mean, it's nice that my call to Thanatos worked so fast and we're being allowed to go back to school, but *a short bus*?"

"Twin! They sent the retard bus for us!" Erin said, giggling.

"Twin, that's really mean," Shaunee said.

"I know, Twin. I can't believe Neferet's so f-ing evil she sent the retard bus for us," Erin continued.

"No, I don't mean Neferet's being mean. I mean it's mean to say *retard*," Shaunee explained, rolling her eyes at her Twin.

"I think Shaunee's correct, *and* you should consider expanding your vocabulary. You're using mean too many times; it's redundant," Damien said.

Shaunee, Erin, Stevie Rae, Rephaim, and I stared wide-eyed at Damien. I knew we were all thinking it was great to hear him obsessing about vocabulary again, but we didn't want to say anything because we were all scared he might burst into tears and retreat back into the soggy depression that had been haunting him since Jack's death.

Aphrodite and Darius chose that moment to emerge from the depot's basement and as per usual, Aphrodite bridged the gap between decorum and disaster by invoking her one tried and true rule: Care About How It Looks.

"Oh, for shit's sake. I'm not getting in *that*. The short bus is for 'tards," Aphrodite said with a snort and a hair toss.

"Y'all, it's not that bad. I mean, obviously it's a new bus. Check out the fresh black House of Night lettering," Stevie Rae said.

"It might as well say Social Suicide," Aphrodite said, frowning at Stevie Rae.

"I'm not lettin' you rain on my parade. I *like* school," Stevie Rae said. She stepped up into the bus, grinning at the Son of Erebus Warrior who had, unsmilingly, opened the door for her.

"Priestess." He greeted her somberly with a nod, and then, totally ignoring our own Son of Erebus Warrior, Darius, he looked at me and, with even a more clipped nod said, "Zoey, I am to notify you and Stevie Rae that there will be a school Council Meeting, which will convene in a thirty minutes. You are both to attend."

"Okay, well, Stark's letting everyone else know you're here, so we'll be ready to leave in just a sec," I said, smiling at him like his face didn't look like a storm cloud.

"Hey, y'all, it still smells new!" Stevie Rae yelled. I could see her short blond curls bobbing as she gawked around inside. Then she popped back out and skipped down the stairs to take Rephaim's hand and grin up at him. "Wanna sit in the backseat with me? It's real bouncy!"

"Seriously," Aphrodite said. "That bus is perfect for you; you're a retard. And I hate to be the one to break it to you—oh wait, that's a lie; I don't really hate it—but even though the Vamp High Council has clearly put the pressure on Neferet and forced her to bus us back to the House of Night, birdboy is still not welcome there. Did you forget in the afterglow of whatever you two could have been doing in the one-point-two seconds between sunset and now that he wasn't a bird?"

I saw Stevie Rae tighten her hand clamp on Rephaim. "I'll have you know it's been more than one-point-two seconds since sunset, none of your business what we've been doin', *and* Rephaim's goin' to school. Just like the rest of us."

Aphrodite's blond brows went up to her hairline. "You're not kidding, are you?"

"No," Stevie Rae said firmly. "And you should understand that better than anyone else."

"Me? Understand? What in the hell are you talking about?"

"You're not a fledgling, red or regular. You're not a vampire. You're maybe not even a human."

" 'Cause she's a hag," I heard Shaunee whisper.

"From Hell," Erin whispered back.

Aphrodite narrowed her eyes at the Twins, but Stevie Rae wasn't done.

"Just like Rephaim, you're something that's not quite normal, but Nyx has given her blessing to you—even if none of the rest of us understands why the heck she'd do that. Anyway, you're goin' to school. I'm goin' to school. So's Rephaim. The end."

"Stevie Rae has a point," Stark said as he joined us in the parking lot outside the depot, the rest of the red fledgling kids trailing along behind him. "Neferet's not gonna like it, but Nyx forgave and blessed Rephaim."

"In front of the entire school," Stevie Rae added quickly.

"They know that," Rephaim murmured to her. He looked from her to the rest of us, his gaze finally settling on me. "What do you think?" he surprised me by asking. "Should I try to go to the House of Night, or would that just be causing trouble for no reason?"

Everyone gawked at me. With a quick glance at the stony-faced Son of Erebus Warrior in the bus, I said, "Uh, would you guys go ahead and get on the bus? I need to talk to my . . . uh . . ." I trailed off with a gesture that took in Aphrodite, Stevie Rae, and the rest of my closest friends.

"Your circle," Stevie Rae said, smiling at me. "You're goin' to talk to your circle."

"And their accoutrements," Damien added, nodding at Aphrodite, Darius, and Kramisha.

I grinned. "I like that! Okay, would you guys get on the bus while I talk to my circle and their accoutrements, please?"

"I ain't sure I like being called *accoutrements*," Kramisha said, narrowing her eyes at me.

"It means—" Stevie Rae began, but Kramisha interrupted her with a shake of her head. "I know what it mean. I'm sayin' I ain't sure I like it."

"Could you journal about it later and right now shut up and follow Zoey so we can get this over with?" Aphrodite said while Kramisha sucked air and glared. "And for the record," she pointed at everyone except Darius. "You are a Nerd Herd. I am your token Popular and Perfect."

The Twins looked like they were taking verbal aim at Aphrodite so I said, "Guys, focus. Rephaim's question is important." Thankfully, that shut everyone up and I motioned for my circle, accoutrements, and Aphrodite to follow me down the sidewalk and out of hearing range as the red fledglings clambered into the bus and I frantically tried to think about Rephaim's very important question.

My mind felt mushy. Last night had been awful. I glanced at Stark and felt my cheeks getting warm. Okay, well, not all of it had been awful, but still, hard questions filled my head. I mentally shook myself. I wasn't just a kid anymore. I was the first Fledgling High Priestess and all these guys looked up to me and expected me to Know the Right Answers (well, to everything except geometry, Spanish translations, and parallel-parking issues).

*Please, Nyx, let me say the right thing.* I sent up a quick, silent prayer, then met Rephaim's gaze and realized suddenly it wasn't my answer we needed.

"What do you want?" I asked him.

"Well, he wants—" Stevie Rae began, but my raised hand silenced my BFF. "No," I said. "This can't be what you say Rephaim wants, or even what you want for him. I need Rephaim's answer. So, what is it? What do you want?" I repeated.

Rephaim met my gaze steadily. "I want to be normal," he said.

Aphrodite snorted. "Sadly, normal plus teenager equals going to stupid school."

"School isn't stupid," Damian said, and then he turned to Rephaim. "But she's right about the normal part. Going to school is what normal kids do."

"Yep," Shaunee said.

"Sucks, but yep," Erin said. "Although it is an excellent fashion parade."

"Right you are, Twin," Shaunee said.

"What does that mean?" Rephaim asked Stevie Rae.

She smiled at him. "Basically that you should be goin' to school with us."

He smiled back at her, love and warmth filling his face. When he looked from Stevie Rae to me, that wonderful expression was still there, and I couldn't help smiling back at him.

"If normal means going to school, then that's what I would really like to do. If it doesn't cause too much of a problem."

"It'll cause problems, make no mistake about that," Darius said.

"You don't think he should go?" I asked.

"I did not say that. I agree with you that it is his choice, his decision, but Rephaim, you should understand that it would be easier if you chose to stay here—out of the way—at least until we see what Neferet and Kalona's next moves will be."

I thought I saw Rephaim cringe at the mention of his dad, but he nodded and said, "I do understand, but I'm tired of hiding alone in the darkness." He looked down at Stevie Rae again and then back at us. "And Stevie Rae may need me."

"Okay, you know this whole 'let's let the birdboy decide' and 'Stevie Rae may need me' stuff is all real happy-schmappy in theory, but in reality we're gonna be walking onto a campus where the batshit crazy High Priestess hates us, and will use anything she can to bring us, and by that I mean you specifically, Z, down. Not to mention Dragon, the *Leader* of the Sons of Erebus Warriors, is



definitely not acting right since his mate was killed by the guy we're bringing back onto campus. Neferet's going use Rephaim against us. Dragon is going to back her. Shit is going to hit the fan." "Well," I said. "It won't be the first time."

"Uh, may I say something?" Damien's hand was raised like he was in class and wanted to be called on.

"Yes, honey, and you don't have to raise your hand," I said.

"Oh, okay, thanks. What I wanted to say is we need to remember that when Nyx appeared at the House of Night, forgave and blessed Rephaim, she basically gave us permission to include Rephaim in our world. Neferet can't go against that—at least not openly. And neither can Dragon. How much they don't like it is beside the point."

"But they did go against it," Stark said. "Neferet asked Dragon if he'd accept Rephaim, and he said no, so she kicked him off campus. Stevie Rae called bullshit on that, and that's why we all ended up leaving."

"Yeah, and just because the High Council managed to pressure Neferet into letting us come back to class, it doesn't mean we're really going to be accepted. I can promise you that she and Dragon, and probably a lot of other people aren't going to be cool with this." Aphrodite fluttered her fingers at Rephaim.

Damien spoke before I could say anything. "Well, the truth is neither Neferet nor Dragon can supersede the Goddess's wishes."

"Super what?" Shaunee asked.

"Seed who?" Erin added.

"It means to replace," Stevie Rae explained for Damien. "And that's a real interestin' point, Damien. No one can supersede the Goddess, not even a High Priestess."

"Can you imagine what the tight-assed High Council would say about that?" Aphrodite rolled her eyes. "Litter of kittens—they'd have several litters of flying kittens. Each."

I blinked and had the sudden urge to hug Aphrodite. Well, the urge passed quickly, but still.

"Aphrodite," I said. "You are a genius! And so is Damien."

"Of course I am," Aphrodite said smugly.

"You're going to tell on Neferet and Dragon to the High Council, aren't you?" Damien said.

"I think 'telling on' them is not the right way to put it. Uh, you have your laptop with you, don't ya?" I asked.

Damien patted the man purse slung over his shoulder. "Of course. It's in my satchel."

"Man purse," Shaunee said.

"Just sayin'," Erin added.

"It's a European satchel," Damien said firmly.

"If it has feathers . . ." Erin said.

"And quacks . . ." Shaunee said.

"Whatever it is, I'm glad it means you have your computer with you." I jumped in before Damien could big word them. "You do have Skype downloaded on it, don't you?"

"Yes," he said.

"Good. I need to borrow it for the Council Meeting, if that's okay with you?"

"No problem," Damien said, raising his brows questioningly at me.

"What are you thinkin'?" Stevie Rae asked his question for him.

"Well, when I talked to Thanatos about helping us get back to school, I didn't mention that little thing about the fact that we're kinda, sorta branching off with our own House of Night here, but that we'll still be going to class and such at our original House of Night."

"We're gonna have to think of a great new name for our place," Shaunee said.

"Ooooh! Right you are, Twin," Erin said.

"Hey, it's the depot, so how about the Pot Lot House of Night," Shaunee said.

I looked at them. Shook my head and said a firm, "No to the Pot Lot." Then I went back to my original point. "But I do need to do a whole Skype conference with the Vamp High Council to get permission for what we want to do. A school Council Meeting seems a good time to do that, especially since I'm sure Neferet will love it if I ask that she bear witness to my call."

"Z, that sounds like a crap plan. Neferet *will* love talking to the High Council and figuring out a way to twist everything you say to make you look like Insane Teenager," Aprodite said.

"That's kinda my point," I said. "I'm not gonna be Insane Teenager. I'm gonna be the Fledgling High Priestess who gives the High Council all the details about the amazing, miraculous gift Nyx has given our Red High Priestess's Consort, Rephaïm, and that he's super excited to be starting school at the Tulsa House of Night. I'm sure they'll even want to congratulate Neferet on being such an awesome High Priestess who can handle all the changes going on here."

"That's devious. I like it," Aphrodite said. "You put Neferet and even Dragon in a position where if they say 'hell no we're not accepting the birdboy,' or even bitch and complain a little about it, they look massively bad—what with Nyx showing up and miracling."

"This still isn't going to be an easy road," Stark said.

Rephaïm met his gaze steadily. "No matter how rough it is, it's a better road than the one that leads to darkness and hatred and death. And I think you know exactly what I mean."

"I do," Stark said, returning his gaze unflinchingly.

"So do I," Stevie Rae said.

"Me, too," I added.

"We're in agreement then. Rephaïm returns to the House of Night with us," Darius said.

"Okay, wait. Does this mean we have to get in the damn short bus?" Aphrodite asked.

"Yes!" we all said together.

Laughing and feeling lighter than I had in days, I clambered on the short bus with my friends, and bumped my shoulder against Stark as we took our seats. He barely glanced at me. It was about then that I realized he really hadn't had much to say to me (or anyone) since we'd woken up. Remembering how close we'd been—how he'd touched me and made the world seem all right again—had me chewing my lip and feeling super confused. I snuck another glance at him. He was staring out the window. He looked tired. Really tired.

"Hey, what's up with you?" I asked as the bus bounced its way along Cincinnati Street heading toward midtown

"Me? Nothin'."

"Seriously, you look really tired. Are you feeling okay?"

"Zoey, you woke me up and kept me up through most of the day yesterday. Then you made that call to Thanatos to get the whole 'return to school' thing in motion, which was not exactly a calm, quiet conversation. I'd just got to sleep when you yelled whatever and woke me up again. Making love

was great." He paused and for a second smiled and looked almost normal. Then he opened his mouth and ruined it by saying, "Afterward you did some serious tossing and turning before you passed out. I couldn't get back to sleep. So I'm tired. That's all."

I blinked at him. Twice. And tried not to feel like he'd just slapped me in my face. Keeping my voice down because I didn't want to deal with all my friends knowing, I said, "Okay, putting aside the whole I-had-to-call-Thanatos-to-get-us-back-to-school thing, which is what I shoulda done 'cause I'm the High Priestess in charge, and the fact that *you* came on to *me* when all I meant to do was cuddle and sleep, *my mom is dead, Stark*. Nyx let me see her enter the Otherworld. As of right now I don't know how or why that happened. I'm trying like hell to act semi-normal. I haven't even talked to my grandma yet."

"That's right, you haven't. I told you that you should have called her right away—or at least called your mom. What if it was all just a dream?"

I looked at Stark in utter disbelief, struggling to keep my voice and my emotions under control. "You are the one person in this world who should understand better than anyone else that I can tell the difference between *really* seeing the Otherworld and dreaming it."  
"Yeah, I know, but—"

"But are you saying I should have gone through all of that and not disturbed your precious sleep? Well, except to have sex with you!"

I clamped my mouth shut and tried to look normal when I saw Aphrodite turn around and glance back at me with a question mark on her face.

Stark blew out a long breath. "No, that's not what I mean. I'm sorry, Z." Then he took my hand in his. "Seriously. I'm sounding like a jerk."

"Yeah, you are," I said.

"Sorry, again," he said, and then he butted my shoulder with his. "Can we rewind this conversation?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Here goes—I'm tired and it's making me stupid. And about your mom, we don't know what really happened and I think it's freaking both of us out. But no matter what I love you, even if I'm a jerk. Okay? Better?"

"Okay. Yeah. Better," I said.

Still letting him hold my hand I looked out of the window as we took the left on Fifteenth Street, passed Gumpy's Garden, which always made the air smell like piñon wood, and traveled down Cherry Street. By the time we were on Utica, and passing Twenty-first, I was completely distracted by worry about my mom and my grandma—and wondering if maybe Stark could be right to question what I thought had been my vision. I mean—I hadn't heard from Grandma. What if it had all been a bad dream . . .

"It's always so pretty." Damien's voice drifted back from the front seat he'd automatically chosen as his own. "When you look at it from here, it's so hard to believe that such horrible, heartbreaking things could happen there."

I heard the sob in his voice, squeezed Stark's hand once before letting it go, and then lurched up the aisle to sit beside Damien.

"Hey," I said, sliding my arm through his. "You have to remember that wonderful, heartmaking things happen there, too. Don't ever forget that's where you met Jack and fell in love with him."

Damien stared at me and I thought he looked sad but really, really wise.

"How are you doing without Heath?"

"I miss him," I said honestly. Then something made me add, "But I don't want to be like Dragon, eaten up by sadness."

"Me, either," Damien said softly. "Even though sometimes it's hard not to be."

"It hasn't been very long."

Clamping his lips tightly together, as if to keep himself from crying, he nodded his head.

"You'll get through this," I said. "And so will I. We will. Together," I said firmly.

Then we were going through the iron gate that had the crescent moon crest on the middle of it, and driving around to the side entrance of the school.

"School Council Meeting begins at seven thirty," said the Son of Erebus Warrior as the bus came to a halt. "Classes begin at eight o'clock sharp, just like they should."

"Thank you," I said to him like he'd actually been friendly (or at least respectful). Then I glanced at my phone: 7:20 p.m. Ten minutes until the meeting and forty before school started. I stood up and looked back at the group of obviously nervous kids.

"Okay," I said. "Just go to your old homerooms and wait there for what to do next. Stevie Rae, Stark and I are going to the Council Meeting and, as they'd say on the Isle of Skye, get Rephaim's and your permanent schedules sorted."

"How 'bout me? Ain't I comin' to the Meeting?" Kramisha asked. "It's usually borin', but I bet today it'll be better than usual."

"You're right," I said. "It's about time they started to automatically include you, along with Stevie Rae and me."

"Where do I go?" Rephaim asked from the back of the bus.

I was thinking, trying to figure out where the heck he should go when Damien stood up beside me. "You can come with me—at least for today. If that's okay with Zoey and Stevie Rae."

I smiled at Damien. I don't think I'd ever been so proud of him. Everyone would be worried about him and handling him like he could break down into hysteria at any second, so if he latched onto Rephaim, no way would anyone question him—they'd be too scared of upsetting Damien.

"Thank you," I said.

"That's a real good idea, Damien," Stevie Rae said.

"All right. Try to act normal," I said. "And I'll see you guys back here after school."

"My first hour was Spells and Rituals," I heard Aphrodite mutter to Darius. "And there's that new vamp teaching it who looks like she's twelve. This should be fun."

"Remember," Stevie Rae said, giving Aphrodite a hard look she totally ignored, "be nice."

We filed off the bus. I could see how difficult it was for Stevie Rae to let Rephaim go with Damien. We didn't really know what he could be walking into, but we did understand that the chances of him being accepted and treated like the normal kid he longed to be were slim to none.

When Stevie Rae, Stark, and Kramisha and I were alone I said, "Ready to enter the lion's den?"

"I'm thinkin' it's more like headin' into a nasty wasp nest," Kramisha said. "But I'm ready."

"Me, too. Let's cowboy up and get this done."

"Deal," I said.

"Deal," they repeated.

And we walked into a future that was already making my stomach clench and feel like a raging IBS episode was going to hit me at any moment.

*Ah, hell.*