

KENZIE KELLY



BORN OF
ASHES

EMPYREAN BOOK 2

BORN OF ASHES

Empyrean #2

Copyright © 2019 by Kenzie Kelly.

Website & Newsletter: <http://www.kenzie-kelly.com>

Twitter: [@exlibriskenzie](https://twitter.com/exlibriskenzie)

Instagram: [@exlibriskenzie](https://www.instagram.com/exlibriskenzie)

Facebook: [kenzie.kelly](https://www.facebook.com/kenzie.kelly)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Book and Cover design by author

Background image: NASA, ESA and the Hubble Heritage Team (STScIAURA)-ESA/Hubble Collaboration
Brushes by Obsidian Dawn <http://www.obsidiandawn.com>



For Mom, who makes me laugh so hard we get in trouble at the doctor's office.

For the big'un and the little'un, who are using their computer time at school to brainstorm ideas for mommy's books.

And for Jason, who knows who he married and only complains a little when I bring home another cat. I'm so glad we found each other. Twice.

ONE

“WAIT, HE ACTUALLY lives in a cave? I thought that was just a rumor.”

Wyatt’s head was down, watching his footing, and he bounced off Rex, who had stopped to stare at the gaping black maw that marked the entrance to the bear shifter’s lair. Wyatt adjusted his pack to regain his balance. “I thought all bears lived in caves,” he teased.

“You know we don’t. You’ve been to my mom’s.” Rex gave his teammate a hurt look.

“You seriously need to get a sense of humor.”

“I will when you get funny.”

The ghost who led them up the steep trail stopped to chuckle back at the pair, giving Wyatt a look clearly telegraphing she thought Rex had a point. He resisted the urge to tell her to be quiet because she couldn’t actually talk, being incorporeal and thus without

functioning vocal cords. It wasn't polite to point out ghosts lack of form, especially when this one had been so helpful.

They had hiked up the mountain for the better part of a day and abandoned any notion of doing so quietly long ago. Pine trees dotted the mountainside, their needles making progress slick and slow. Their boots fell heavy to the ground as they made their way through the forest. The bear they were after was a renowned tracker and had spent years as a Supernatural Enforcement Team elite finder. Coupled with a silvertip grizzly's acute sense of smell, he probably knew they were on the mountain when they were still fumbling around in the valley looking for a path. It still startled them to hear the distinct sound of a shotgun being cocked in the woods to their right, especially since they couldn't locate the source of the sound.

Wyatt looked to the ghost, but she was scanning the woods the same way as Rex.

"You better have a damn good reason for waking me up."

The deep voice seemed to bounce around, giving Wyatt no better clue of where it was coming from. Rex's nose twitched, and the metal cup hanging off his backpack clinked as his butt hit the ground. He shrugged out of the pack's straps and crossed his legs, putting his hands palm up on his knees.

Wyatt backed up a step. Rex was no small bear, and for him to submit immediately, even while not in bear form, meant this man was very, very dangerous.

Wyatt turned open palms in what he assumed was the right general direction. "Adam?" He got a grunt in response, which he assumed was confirmation they had the right person. "Drake sent us to find you."

"Consider me found. That done, you can make your way down off my mountain."

A quick glance showed Wyatt's ghostly friend had disappeared. Great, no backup of any kind. Not that she would have been much help. "We can't. I'm sorry. I really wish we could." At this moment, there really was nothing he wanted more. "But Drake needs you, and if we come back without you, it won't be pretty. As scary as you probably are, he's scarier."

“I told you to leave. You can do so on your own feet or in the belly of whatever decides to pick you clean after I fill you full of buckshot. I don’t care either way.”

Now the voice seemed to come from the left. Wyatt swung his head in that direction.

“You have five seconds to decide.”

“Drake said he’s cashing in his favor.”

Wyatt heard a deep sigh rumble through the trees before the man appeared, almost directly in front of them. He took an involuntary step back. Adam looked like a tree that moved. A lumberjack tree. He was wearing a red plaid button-down he hadn’t bothered buttoning and jeans. Bare feet, shaggy light brown hair, and two-day-old stubble made it clear they had actually woken him up. It had to be late afternoon, but he wasn’t about to judge a man for sleeping late, especially one who looked like he would enjoy snapping their bones in half.

“What does he need me for? I don’t work for him anymore.” He swung the shotgun up and rested it on one shoulder.

Wyatt relaxed but kept his hands visible and open. “He didn’t say. Just told me to tell you he was cashing in the favor you owe him.” After a minute ticked by, it was clear Wyatt was going to have to break an incredibly long and uncomfortable silence. “My name is Wyatt. I’m Green Team’s tracker.” He waved in the direction of his partner. “This is Rex, our enforcer.”

Adam barely glanced at the other man. “Not doing much enforcing, are you, cub?”

Rex silently shook his head.

The big man sighed again and rubbed his jaw while looking at the mouth of his cave. Wyatt shifted nervously as Adam swung his gaze back to look him in the eye. He seemed to come to some sort of decision. “I’ll get my boots.”

THE TRIP THROUGH Coedwig, the domain of the shifters, to Adam's mountain cave had taken Wyatt and Rex four days. The realm was large, but not as big as some of the others, and admittedly they'd been in no special hurry. Each of eight realms that housed the various supernaturals were arranged around a central hub—Ymdroi, quarters of the ruling council, as well as the home of the Supernatural Enforcement Team (SET) compound, which was their current destination.

The trip there had been easy, full of laughter and good-natured joking. They were comfortable with each other, having trained together as part of Green Team for a couple of years, becoming good friends in the process.

The journey back was in stark contrast. Silent. Every time Wyatt tried to strike up a conversation, Adam simply squinted his eyes at him, and Rex shushed him. Wyatt had spent enough time with Rex's family to know the silence wasn't a bear trait. His friend's house was a riot of color and sound that could be overwhelming.

Adam appeared to be in his mid-thirties, but supernatural appearances could be deceiving. Wyatt knew that Rex was more than seventy-five years old, though he looked to be in his early twenties. Even though Wyatt was human, his magic kept his body younger than his actual twenty-three years. The rest of Green Team often teased him for looking fifteen. From what he had learned, Adam was a former member of SET, but Wyatt had studied the last century of team history without seeing him mentioned. That meant he was well past one hundred years old.

You wouldn't know it from the pace he set. The only one not having trouble keeping up was the ghost. She had reappeared after Adam retrieved his boots and hadn't left the big man's side since.

Wyatt was a psychic, but what gave him the tracker role on his team was his ability to see and communicate with ghosts. They were generally friendly and accommodating when asked to help locate a particular person or thing. His talent allowed him to call forth the particular ghost who would be able to help.

Since Drake had no idea where Adam had disappeared after he left SET and the other teams were busy with their own assignments, the task of finding him fell to the most junior among them—the Green Team. While the rest of their team took some time off,

Wyatt and Rex were sent to locate Adam. Drake had told them the field experience would do them good.

So far Wyatt couldn't say it had been all that educational. Instead, he had filled his time watching Adam stalk silently ahead of them, marveling at the way he moved and trying to work out how he managed to stay silent. In the mountains, the ground was covered with deadfall, but he never cracked a twig or swished a leaf. He didn't slip on the pine straw but wasn't planting his boots like Wyatt and Rex. He moved as silently as the ghost who stayed by his side.

Wyatt knew Adam meant something to her but had learned when he was just a child it was best not to tell the living about the dead who shadowed them. It only led to renewed heartbreak or even violence. He wondered how long she would stay with them. He had already thanked her for helping them, and that usually signaled the end of their presence. Not her though. He got the impression she always stayed with Adam, and he had merely called her away only long enough to lead them back to him.

With the fast pace Adam set they reached the portal into Ymdroi after barely three days. Both Wyatt and Rex breathed a sigh of relief.

BY THE TIME Adam arrived in Ymdroi he was calm enough to not immediately tear something apart. It took the entire journey for him to reach this state, which was largely why he stayed silent during the journey. He wasn't much of a conversationalist to begin with, and being pulled from solitude didn't put him in a talkative mood. Drake had better have a damn good reason for calling in his favor.

For more than eighty years, Ymdroi and the compound it housed had been his home. Despite being away for the better part of two centuries, he needed no directions to find his way. He led the young team members like ducklings through the outer halls surrounding the council floor as they made their way to the entrance of the SET

compound. Empyrean's population knew the Supernatural Enforcement Team was stationed in Ymdroi, but only a few high-ranking officials knew exactly where.

Adam stopped midway down a corridor and put his hand against the wall. A panel, hidden in plain sight, lit up as it scanned his prints. The three were not surprised when the floor shuddered to life beneath them, slowly sinking before coming to a stop several levels below. Once a team member, always a team member, and unless something drastic happened, their access to the compound was never revoked. After another panel scan, another door opened, revealing a small room with a door on the other side—a door that was usually guarded by a pair of heavily armed satyrs, but was now flanked by six. Adam noted the increase in security but didn't comment as he waited for the door to slide open.

He made his way to the main conference room, assuming his ducklings would follow. He was surprised to see that Wyatt and Rex had disappeared after taking a seat in one of the ten executive chairs surrounding a large table. He leaned back and got comfortable, deliberately staring at the camera he knew was hidden above the door.

He didn't have to wait long.

A solid wall of a man, Drake didn't walk so much as shake the earth with his steps. Most male dragonkin were solid, but Drake was built like a tank.

A wide grin split his face as he approached, clasping wrists with the seated bear. "As I live and breathe. I didn't think they would actually find you, much less get you to come."

"Didn't think I had much of a choice with you calling in your favor." Adam tried to keep a stern look on his face but couldn't quite manage it. "It is good to see you."

"And you. It's been too long." Drake arranged himself into a chair before turning back to his friend. "Mom and Dad will want to see you before you go."

Adam glanced out the door as a pair of satyrs walked by. "You didn't bring me here for a social call."

"Right to business. I see you haven't changed." Drake stood up to close the door, which clicked with a soft whoosh, letting both men know the soundproofing had activated. When he sat again, his expression turned darkly serious. "I need you to find

someone. The task is urgent, and your mission must be kept completely secret. Even the council is being kept in the dark about this one.”

That piqued Adam’s interest. In all his time, he’d never heard of an assignment being so black ops the council wasn’t involved. “You have three finders, including Wyatt—and I still can’t figure out how he found me. If he’s the lowest ranking, the other two must be damn good. Why not them?”

“They are all good, but not good enough.” Drake sat back in his chair and shook his head. “All three have been out, and all three have come back empty-handed.” Drake ran a hand through his hair and let that sink in. “The target is a harpy.”

Adam sat forward in his chair and narrowed his eyes at Drake. “A harpy?”

Drake nodded.

“As in the colony of winged females which have been hidden since Empyrean was formed?”

Drake gave another nod and a small smile. “I see I have your attention.”

Adam sat back in his chair. “I’m definitely interested. It’s an unusual challenge. Who is she?”

“A psychometrist.”

Adam squinted in confusion. “Ulima’s not a harpy.”

“You are quite right.”

“There’s a second psychometrist? I thought there could only be one.”

Psychometrists were able to glean information from items. Adam’s understanding was they saw memories like visions recorded within an object. Imagine being able to hold a rock and see all it had witnessed. It was a powerful ability, and supernatural magic liked to be balanced. The most powerful talents were extremely rare.

“We did too, until we took her this.” Drake opened a small case and slid a palm-sized object to him.

Adam carefully picked up the roughly tear-shaped disk, watching as reds and oranges chased each other across the surface. It was about an inch thick and heavier than its size would suggest. “A dragon scale.”

It wasn't a question, but Drake answered anyway. “Yes.”

“A red dragon. Yours or your parents?”

Red dragons bonded almost exclusively to royalty. Drake was the Prince of Empyrean, son of the current king and queen.

Drake shook his head. “None of the above.”

Adam's head snapped up, his eyes going wide. If the scale didn't belong to any of the current royal bonded dragons, it only left one possibility. “Aulus's dragon.”

“We believe so.”

Aulus was Drake's brother who had been imprisoned since he attempted a coup that resulted in hundreds of dragon deaths. The king and queen had locked him away, unable to deliver a more permanent justice on their firstborn son.

Adam looked again at the scale. “Your parents know where Aulus and his dragon are and could ask for any information they need. What do they hope to learn from this?”

Drake leaned back in his chair and sighed. “That's the thing, Adam. They do know where my brother is, since they put him there. As for his dragon ... Well, to be honest, they have no idea what became of him.”

Stoic might have been Adam's default nature, but he was floored, and his expression reflected it. He scrubbed at the stubble on his jaw as his mind whirled. If Aulus's dragon was unaccounted for, then the possibility existed his dragon could find and release him.

Drake saw the comprehension dawning on his face. “You understand now why we need to know what became of it. Why it's imperative we find the dragon.”

He did. The majority of the supernatural population was quite happy in Empyrean, with humans none the wiser of their existence. Despite humans persecuting, enslaving, and even killing supernaturals, humans weren't vilified among them. They recognized the primitive beliefs that fueled such actions and the strides made in science and

philosophy that would mitigate those kinds of reactions. It was still widely believed humans weren't ready to know of their existence, but most thought the two worlds could be reintegrated at some point in the future.

To that end, when the persecution and hunting became widespread, supernaturals banded together and used their magic to create Empyrean, a sanctuary realm to house them safely—parallel but separate from the realm of mortals.

Aulus had fought against the creation of Empyrean and the segregation of supernaturals and humans from the moment the idea was created. It was manifest destiny, he believed, for humans to exist solely to serve the most powerful of the supernatural population. And he was willing to do whatever was necessary to accomplish that end. Including a coup that left the majority of the dragon population dead.

After his arrest and imprisonment, the movement he'd created spawned two factions: The Empyrean Coalition, which touted a peaceful reintegration and whose public mission statement was “working toward an earth for supernaturals” and the Terfysgol, who used any means necessary to encourage supernaturals to take what they believed was their rightful place as the rulers of men. The methods they used were often violent, always anonymous, and never subtle.

Most of those in the council and members of SET suspected the two groups were connected. They presumed one was the public face and the other the private strong arm. They just hadn't been able to prove the association since the Empyrean Coalition's methods were political and Terfysgol's violent. Terfysgol members were also masters of keeping their identities secret, so a link between members had proved impossible.

The presumption was the two groups worked both angles toward the same ultimate goal—supernaturals living on the mortal realm openly—and shared top tier leadership. It didn't matter which approach worked, as long as one of them did.

Given freedom, one could only guess Aulus would pick up where he left off. If he returned to lead, Terfysgol and the Empyrean Coalition might very well gain the strength needed to succeed.

“It's worse than you may know.” Drake sighed and tipped his chair back.

“How can it be worse?”

“SET was engaged in a large-scale battle with Terfysgol a few months ago. The leader didn’t survive, but we did get several members who gave us useful info. We have finally been able to establish a tenuous link between Terfysgol and the larger Empyrean Coalition. Selena is still denying all knowledge or involvement of the terrorist arm operating within her organization, but fewer people believe her.”

“Selena is still in charge of the Coalition? I always thought she wasn’t politically minded enough to hold leadership.”

“I agree. She may not actually be privy to the inner workings. She may not even know that Terfysgol is part of and funded by the Coalition. Plausible deniability and all that. What we’ve learned is there’s another who’s actually in charge, and Selena is the polite front hiding the underbelly of the organization.”

“Who’s in charge?”

“That’s why it’s worse. We don’t know. Undercover operatives are in place, but none of them are high enough to pinpoint a name. Since the battle, Terfysgol has closed ranks. Even those who were trusted before are under suspicion, including most of our spies. Whoever it is, they are extremely paranoid. What we do know is the effort to find and free Aulus has been redoubled and is now the sole focus of both organizations.”

Adam sat forward and rested his forearms on his thighs. “With both the political and militant arms of the Coalition working toward the same goal, it’s likely they’ll find him.”

Drake nodded. “According to my parents, freeing him will be harder, but finding him is the first step and will certainly boost morale and motivation in their ranks.”

Adam hung his head and took a moment to process the shifted politics of the centuries-old struggle.

He saw the merit in Drake’s plan. A psychometrist could glean things from the scale, maybe even see the location of its owner.

“Why this harpy and not Ulima?”

“She is no longer strong enough to learn the scale’s secrets. Her mind burned just getting close to it.”

“How does she know this harpy exists?”

“When the girl’s powers manifested, the harpy queen sent for Ulima to guide her in how to harness them.”

Adam idly shifted the scale, watching the play of colors as he thought. “If Ulima knows where the colony is, why did your finders fail?”

“She doesn’t. They met on neutral ground. Ulima never learned their home’s location.”

“What makes you think I can find them?”

“Turns out a psychometry tradition is to trade personal items. It didn’t show Ulima where the harpy is, but we’re hoping it can show you.”

“Have you forgotten? I use my nose to track, not magic. An item owned is no good to me. There won’t be enough scent on it for me to trace.”

Drake put the scale back in the case and stood. “How about a feather?”

“WE CAN NO longer hide behind Selena.”

Dalziel couldn’t see who was talking, but he didn’t think it mattered much. A crowd had gathered around Gwyllyn, who was currently standing on a dais in the center of the room.

“I disagree.” Her elegant voice quieted the mumbling without the need to be loud. “SET is only aware that there is someone above Selena who controls both the Coalition and Terfysgol. They don’t know who it is, and as long as that truth remains we can still operate from the shadows.”

Grumbling broke out as they considered her theory.

“They will find out eventually. When that happens, they will hunt us.” This from a centaur near the fringe of the pack.

“No.” She turned to confront him directly. “They will hunt the leader. They will hunt only me.”

Several high-ranking members of the subversive organization nodded in agreement, thinking they could keep their identities secret even if hers was revealed.

Dalziel snorted. He couldn't help himself, but thankfully only those standing nearest to him heard. Were these creatures actually that stupid? Didn't they realize Gwyllyn would do whatever was in her power to keep to the shadows? Didn't they know SET would use the lower ranking among them to discover the tier above, and so on and so forth until they reached her? He knew they were thinking if caught they could give her up. None of them realized she would kill them long before they got the chance.

He supposed they were that stupid. He didn't know whether he was happy to be smarter. As she continued to calm them and solidify her power as leader, he had to admit she was incredibly charismatic. He'd be willing to follow her if he didn't see her darker side—the side she kept hidden from everyone but her trusted inner circle. Goodie for him to be included in it.

He shifted, his stone feet scraping the marble floor. She turned sharp eyes toward him, and he bowed his head. No one was to take away from her when she was holding court, even with an accidental noise.

Of course, now that he'd been reprimanded for fidgeting, he felt the need even keener. He kept his feet planted and stretched his wings instead, shrugging them up without pushing them out. If he spread them like he itched to do, it would definitely not go unnoticed.

“What does Aulus say about being found out?” The squeaky voice of some sort of fae called out from below her.

She looked down her nose at him without responding.

“You don’t know.” The amazed boom of a giant rang through the crowd, setting off a mass of furious chatter. Stunned by his own revelation, the giant continued to work out the truth, “You aren’t in contact with him. You never were.”

The volume of the crowd was almost at the point of painful to Dalziel’s ears. And his ears weren’t particularly sensitive.

“Quiet!” Gwyllyn had to raise her voice to regain their attention, and she absolutely hated doing anything that shattered her carefully constructed image.

Dalziel winced, knowing that would come back to haunt him later.

“This changes nothing. I have led in his stead for centuries. I will continue to do so until we locate and free him. Besides, they don’t have absolute proof Terfysgol and the Emyrean Coalition are linked. If they did, they would have beat down the doors at EC headquarters and tortured everyone inside for information.”

The gathering was only partially mollified, but it did seem she’d averted its growing violence.

“To speed our location of Aulus, I have set in motion a plan that will have our enemies do the work for us. Soon we will know where he is hidden. With that knowledge, it will be an easy matter to set him free.”

The fae, whose exact race Dalziel didn’t know, spoke again. “So you say. How are we to trust you now that we know you’ve lied to us these many years?”

“Have I led you wrong?”

She waited for shakes from as many heads as she could get. “Then despite not being in direct contact with him, you will still follow me. I am still his consort. I still know how to lead in his stead.”

No question. Just assumed obedience. Remarkably, it always worked for her.

She dismissed the crowd as an afterthought, walking away with her head held high and her spine straight. “That is all.”

She strode past, snapping her fingers in his face for him to follow. He suppressed a sigh and fell in line, followed by her other bodyguards, Fritz and Namir.

She slid more than walked down the long hall separating her chambers from the outer rooms. Dragonkin weren't known for being particularly graceful, but she had worked since birth to cultivate that bearing.

Dalziel was recruited not long after Gwyllyn took in Eleri. The girl was a tiny thing back then, and remained petite, but Gwyllyn chose him to guard her. Not only because he was skilled in close personal protection, but also because being a gargoyle made him nearly indestructible. Gwyllyn claimed she was Aulus's daughter, named herself guardian, and vowed to raise the girl "as her own." In truth, she kept the babe at first to see if whatever power she manifested might have a use. Then she became enamored of having someone who idolized her without question.

He didn't think Eleri was actually Aulus's daughter. The most telling was Gwyllyn herself. She was in love with Aulus to a desperate degree. The child was clearly not hers, and there was no way she would keep the get of him and another woman. She was far too jealous to stand that constant reminder.

Small things over the years also pointed to Eleri being more fae than dragonkin. The largest was her ability. She was a powerful seer, her visions precise and fully formed where most others were murky riddles. It made her a valuable asset, one that Gwyllyn kept even when outsiders questioned her parentage when it became obvious she was not dragonkin.

Eleri was an obedient child for much of her toddler years. As she grew older, she grew smarter, which meant she became a difficult child—headstrong and questioning. She often challenged her adopted mother, and Gwyllyn did not do well with challenge. Gwyllyn began pulling away from her, spending less time with her, so Eleri's childish fascination with her gargoyle protector grew into affection. Now he saw her as a daughter sent to him by the fates, meant to assuage him for the daughter they'd taken from him.

As his bond with Eleri grew, his loyalty to Gwyllyn faded. He had never been a true believer in her cause, as this was simply a job like any other. There weren't many opportunities for creatures of stone who looked like upright alligators with wings. Some of his kind had successfully gone into the mortal world, blending in with the parapet

creatures meant to resemble them, but he was too large, too brutish, and too impatient for a similar route, so he took security jobs in Empyrean.

In the beginning, it was personal protection for those who were deserving. He had a moral compass then. It had disappeared when his mate and daughter were taken from him. He had abandoned all notions of there being good in the world, but he couldn't change his nature entirely. He still refused jobs where he'd be directly responsible for causing suffering, but his restrictions had eased. He'd become less altruistic and more mercenary, which is how he ended up in Gwyllyn's employ, acting as a bodyguard and eventual nanny. Over the years he became more protector to Eleri than bodyguard for Gwyllyn. He'd never actively stand aside when his employer faced danger, but he knew he would shield Eleri's life with his own, putting her above all others.

More than once, he'd realized that should the larger woman cause physical harm to his adopted daughter, she'd need more protection—from him.

Luckily, he hadn't yet needed to make that call.

As soon as the door to her chamber clicked shut, Gwyllyn dropped her public facade.

“That idiot rat! I knew he couldn't keep himself under control. Once given a tiny smidge of power, he went and fucked up my entire plan!” She flopped dramatically into a high-backed chair—she insisted it be called her throne—and tapped the arms with rapid fingers. “If he weren't dead I'd kill him myself and relish his blood on my hands.”

Dalziel almost snorted aloud. Gwyllyn would never bloody her own hands.

“It's a good thing we were able to find Xizer's scale when we did. Dropping it into the idiot hands of SET was a stroke of genius.”

If you do say so yourself. Dalziel couldn't stop himself and risked an eye roll.

Fritz moved surprisingly quick for a giant, falling to one knee in supplication before her. “You are wise. I'm sure your control will lead us to a glorious victory.”

Dalziel was going to hurt his eyes if he kept rolling them back in his head. As he'd grown more distant from Gwyllyn, Fritz had grown more infatuated. He was now completely in love with her and would do anything for her.

She reached out and patted his head, precisely like she would a loyal dog. Namir, the third henchman on her roster, never missed an opportunity to curry favor and stepped up to bow low.

“I agree, Your Highness. Soon we will present Aulus back to the world, and you will rule over both realms by his side.”

Dalziel threw up a little, burping out the remnants of a fish-heavy lunch. He’d never been fond of the djinn, with his slimy voice and slithering demeanor. It wasn’t lost on him that he was the one who resembled a reptile, but Namir embodied all the negative traits associated with being cold-blooded.

Gwyllyn looked at him, and Dalziel wondered if she expected some sort of similar expression of adoration. It wouldn’t happen. Instead he gave her a raised brow and a slight tilt of his head. He would stand by her as long as the payment was good, but if she expected more, she would be disappointed.

She gave him an unladylike snort. He tried not to smirk, and only half succeeded.

“We must make sure that scale reaches the psychometrist and that she is able to complete the task of finding Xizer. Aulus will be easy to locate with his dragon. Fritz, I want you to spread the word among Terfysgol’s current operatives. They are not to impede SET’s progress in this task, and they are to help from the shadows if needed.” Fritz scurried to obey immediately, but she stopped him. “And Fritz?”

“Yes, my queen?”

“Make sure they understand if they slow SET down in any way, I will not be happy.”

Fritz bowed so low his forehead almost scraped the ground. She gave him a smile, and Dalziel thought he’d die of joy.

Gwyllyn turned to the djinn. “Namir, shadow whoever SET sends out as best as you can. I want daily reports on their progress.”

She paused to look at Dalziel.

“You will stay here, guarding me while they are away.” She stressed that he should guard her. The underlying message of “not Eleri” was well understood.

He tilted his nose down in acknowledgment. He knew he had been demoted to the ranks of those not entirely trusted, and she would keep him close because of it.

Namir scuttled away to begin his task.

As soon as they'd left the room Gwyllyn snapped out of her chair and began to pace. "Idiots, all of them."

Dalziel said nothing.

"At least they are easily led." She cut her eyes at him, but he knew from past experience no response was expected or necessary. "I want you to push Eleri for another vision. Finding the scale was a big advantage, but we need to know if it will lead us to Xizer—and if Xizer can lead us to Aulus. Barring that, having a way to find Aulus directly would be good."

"I will encourage her to try again."

Gwyllyn narrowed her eyes at him, most likely trying to decide if he was using a tone not entirely respectful. When she couldn't work it out one way or the other she continued, "See that you do. I'd rather not interact with her in my current frame of mind."

A subtle threat, but a threat, nonetheless. He knew that she was telling him if she had to ask Eleri for another vision, she'd do so in the most painful way possible. Even if she'd never laid a hand on the slip of a girl, there were many other ways to inflict pain, and she knew all of Eleri's tender spots.

He waited for Gwyllyn to fall into her own thoughts. Soon enough, she startled at seeing him still in the room, even though he knew if he'd left without being dismissed, she'd go into a rage.

"Well? Go!" She flipped a hand at him for emphasis.

He turned and lumbered down the hall toward Eleri, a smile splitting his mouth in anticipation of the fresh air she'd bring to his otherwise stale day.