

FINDING THE LOST

THE SENTINEL WARS

SHANNON K. BUTCHER



AN ONYX BOOK

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Waiting for the Darkness

Andra forced herself to even out her breathing, stay calm, and focus on getting Sammy out alive. She shut out that unnatural fear and pretended she was just facing down rabid dogs. A terrified corner of her mind giggled at the ridiculous notion, but she ignored it as best she could.

Andra prayed her hands would stop shaking long enough to get a clean shot; then she stood from her crouch and leveled the shotgun at the largest of the beasts. There was still almost a hundred feet between her and them and anything less than a point-blank shot would just piss them off.

So she stood there, just outside the doorway, where they could only come at her one at a time, and waited for the monsters to close the distance. . . .

NOVELS OF THE SENTINEL WARS

Burning Alive

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SHANNON K. BUTCHER



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ONYX

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*For Sara. I'm so glad you showed up
for the meeting that day.*

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Chapter 1

Omaha, Nebraska

July 14

The little boy's frightened whimpers grew weaker by the second. Andra Madison could barely hear him now, even though her ear was pressed to a crack in the brick wall of the abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of Omaha. Those muffled, mewling sobs of fear broke her heart and made her want to tear the monsters who had kidnapped Sammy apart with her bare hands. Or blow them apart with her shotgun. That worked, too.

Even at three in the morning, the July air was still hot and thick with humidity, making it hard to breathe. Then again, maybe that was just her reaction to fear talking. There were at least four monsters in there guarding Sammy—twice as many as she'd ever managed to defeat before. And that battle had been a close call. She wasn't quite sure yet how she was going to get the boy out alive. She'd have to wing it, and pray for the best.

One of the monsters let out a deep growl that sent a jolt of primal fear ripping through her system. Sweat broke out on her forehead as she fought the urge to flee. She planted her boots hard and gritted her teeth until the need to run away washed over her and started to fade. She was left shaking and dripping with sweat, but at least she'd held her ground.

Andra knew just what these creatures were capable of—had seen it with her own eyes on more than one occasion—and the sound they were making now wasn't a good sign. The monsters were getting ready to feed.

The image of Sammy's small body being ripped to shreds by claws and teeth filled her mind and made her stomach heave. She couldn't let that happen. Not this time.

Andra had officially run out of time to scout the building and plan her attack. Plan or not, she had to get little Sammy out of there right now.

She hopped up three cement stairs and twisted the knob on the old warehouse door, but it was locked. Of course. The windows were too high for her to climb through, and she wasn't about to go wasting any time trying to find another way in. There was no time left, and she'd promised Sammy's parents she'd bring their baby home alive.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

She never should have made promises she might not be able to keep, but when faced with so much fear and panic in the pleading eyes of helpless parents—so much love—she couldn't help herself. She'd foolishly wanted to give them hope.

After all the times she'd failed to find a stolen child, or rescue them before it was too late, she should have known better than to make any empty promises.

Andra took a deep breath for courage, said a quick prayer for luck, gripped her shotgun tight, and slammed the heel of her boot against the rotting door. Chunks of splintered wood burst into the giant room where Sammy was being held prisoner. Andra crouched low, using the frame of the door for concealment as she peered into the warehouse, frantically searching for some kind of plan that would get them both out alive.

It was dark in there, with only a few streaks of grimy yellow streetlight flowing in through the

broken windows set high in the walls. The building was old, and it showed every one of its years fallen beams and cracked mortar. Graffiti covered the walls, and trash was heaped in little mounds here and there. The wooden floor was filthy where it wasn't simply missing, leaving ragged holes wherever space lurked below.

Along the far side of the room she saw Sammy. He was tied to one of the few columns still strong enough to hold up the roof. His eyes were huge with fear, and tears streamed down his face, leaving narrow lines of clean skin in their wake. A dirty rag had been stuffed in his mouth, but Andra could hear Sammy's pitiful whimpers coming from behind the gag. He was still alive, thank God. Now all she had to do was get him out of here in the same condition, and back home where he belonged.

Piece of cake. Or it would have been, had it not been for the hungry, salivating monsters standing between her and the boy.

Andra had been hunting these things for eight years and she still had no other word for them besides *monsters*. They were the size of large dogs, with the head of a wolf and the body of a chimpanzee. They had long, sharp claws and teeth to match. Oily, matted black fur covered their bodies, and long strings of glowing yellow saliva dripped from their too-wide jaws. And for reasons Andra still had not figured out, the creatures that kept these things as pets liked to steal children.

She didn't see any of those six-foot-tall insectoid monsters around, but she knew they wouldn't be far away from their precious pets.

Her explosive entry had pulled the monsters' attention away from the little boy and placed it squarely on her—a much better place for it, as far as she was concerned.

They prowled toward her on all fours, their long claws leaving ragged scratches in the old wooden floor.

Fear threatened to make her sluggish, and once again she had to fight back the urge to flee and leave the boy to fend for himself. She wasn't frightened easily, but these things had the ability to make her blood congeal and her breath freeze in her lungs. There was something unnatural about the fear they caused. It was more than just being face-to-face with so many claws and teeth. It was more than simply fearing for her life. There was some instinctive knowledge buried deep inside her that warned her that when she faced these monsters, she was facing something bigger and darker than she was able to imagine. And after all the things she'd seen, she had a pretty vivid imagination.

Andra forced herself to even out her breathing, stay calm, and focus on getting Sammy out alive. She shut out that unnatural fear and pretended she was just facing down rabid dogs. A terrified corner of her mind giggled at the ridiculous notion, but she ignored it as best she could.

Andra prayed her hands would stop shaking long enough to get a clean shot; then she stood from her crouch and leveled the shotgun at the largest of the beasts. There was still almost a hundred feet between her and them, and anything less than a point-blank shot would just piss them off.

So she stood there, just outside the doorway, where they could come at her only one at a time, and waited for the monsters to close the distance.

“We're close,” said Logan.

“How close?” asked Paul. Excitement prowled through his system, making him grip the steering wheel tighter.

He glanced at the Sanguinar as he sped through the run-down industrial area on the edge of Omaha. Logan's eyes gave off an eerie silver glow in the darkness, and he was staring into the distance at something Paul could not see. He wasn't sure Logan knew what he was doing, but he sure as hell

hoped so. Paul's future—his life—hung in the balance.

If they found the woman and she was *the one*, the power that had been building inside him for decades, and the pain it caused, would finally have an outlet.

"We've been driving all over the Midwest for days," griped Madoc from the backseat. "Fuckin' bloodsucker doesn't know what the hell he's doing. He's just jerking you around."

"You didn't have to come with us," said Paul. He didn't care much for the loner in the backseat. He took too many chances and wouldn't have recognized a team player if one had been sitting in his lap. He was the kind of man who left body bags in his wake. His only saving grace was that usually, the bad guys needed more of those body bags than the good guys did.

"Joseph decided otherwise."

"Since when do you follow orders?" asked Paul.

"I've got my reasons," said Madoc.

"Which are?"

"None of your fucking business. And, for the record, just because I'm here doesn't mean I don't think this is a load of shit. If it was so easy for Logan to find female Theronai, then why didn't you know about this particular skill a hundred years ago, before our men started dying off?"

"What if you're wrong?" asked Paul. "What if Logan can track Helen's bloodline and find more women like her?"

In the rearview mirror, Paul saw Madoc sneering at Logan. "We've been so busy following the supposed trail we haven't killed a demon in days. My sword arm's gonna be one big marshmallow by the time you figure out Logan's full of shit. He's leading you on for your blood, man. Don't you get that?"

It might be true. Paul knew it was possible. The Sanguinar were not the most trustworthy of men. Their need for blood made them . . . unpredictable. If Paul hadn't been so desperate to find a woman like Helen, he never would have bargained with Logan.

But he *was* desperate. The pain was becoming unbearable. He wasn't sure why his body didn't explode, why the power he housed didn't just rip through skin and bone and tear him apart. He was up to three hours of meditation every day just to be able to function, to get out of bed each night. He had only a couple of leaves left clinging to his lifemark, and at the rate they'd been falling, he wasn't sure his soul would live more than another ten days. After that, things would get ugly fast.

"Go left here," whispered Logan in a strained voice. "I've found her."

A bright bubble of hope swelled up inside Paul as he gunned the engine and took a hard turn. He blasted right through a stop sign, but it was past three a.m. and no one was around in this aging industrial area. Besides, if the cops wanted to ticket him, they'd have to catch him first.

"You sure?" asked Paul. "You've really found a blooded woman?"

"You're such a fucking sucker," spat Madoc in disgust. "There is no woman. We're going to show up and he's going to give you some story about how we just missed her, just like every other night this week."

Logan didn't respond to Madoc's accusation. His face was serene as he stared off into the night. His eyes flared brighter for a moment and he sucked in a harsh breath. "Hurry, Paul. She's not alone. Sense Synestryn."

Fear of losing the woman who could save him before he even found her made Paul's gut clench. He ground the accelerator to the floorboard just as he saw movement at the end of the street. There wasn't much light, but there was enough for him to make out the shape of a woman standing in a doorway. "There she is!"

“I don’t fucking believe it,” said Madoc.

~~Neither did Paul. Logan had actually tracked down a woman who might be able to save his life.~~

woman with some of the same blood running through her veins as Helen, who was the first female Theronai to have been born in over two hundred years. They still had no idea where Helen had come from, but after seeing the miracle she’d been for Drake, he hardly cared.

Paul screeched to a halt outside the old warehouse, nearly running the SUV into the metal railing that bordered the parking area. His headlights shone on the remains of a wide doorway and the woman standing in it. She was tall—nearly six feet—though maybe her commanding stance and the confident grip on her shotgun made her seem taller.

Paul had already unfolded himself from the car and unsheathed his sword when he saw two Synestryn demons—sgath—charging her, and two more behind them. Shotgun or not, she was no match for that many teeth and claws. They’d slice her to pieces before she had time to pull the trigger twice.

“Get out of there!” he shouted at the woman as he raced up three cracked cement stairs toward her. He could hear the heavy footsteps of Madoc and Logan pounding behind him.

She didn’t turn to look at him, or even bother to acknowledge that she’d heard him. In fact, she showed no sign of the greasy, paralyzing fear the Synestryn usually caused in humans. She appeared to be completely calm, as if she waited for demons to attack her every day.

The sgath closed in to within fifteen feet and showed no signs of slowing. He was still too far away to help her. He was going to see her die before he even had a chance to touch her and learn whether she was meant to be his, whether she could save him.

She fired her shotgun at the closest sgath. Her body rocked slightly against the force of the weapon and the deep boom echoed in the stillness of the night. She’d hit one of the demons. It flew back a couple feet, spraying black blood across the warehouse. Beneath the thick, oily drops, the wooden floor began to sizzle as the caustic blood ate away at it.

If any of that blood had hit her, it would eat away her skin just as easily.

Paul finally reached the woman. He wanted to stop and touch her, but there was no time. Another sgath was right there, only feet away. Whether or not she could save him, the fact that she faced the sgath down without fear proved she was a rare gift and had to be protected at all costs.

Paul shouldered her out of the way and charged through the doorway, sword poised and ready to strike. She hit the wall a little harder than he’d intended and let out a pained grunt, but at least she was out of harm’s way.

An uninjured sgath saw Paul charge and its eyes lit with a sickly green fire of excitement and hunger. It lifted its muzzle and let out a haunting howl to the rest of its kind, likely alerting them to the food that had just arrived. There was nothing the demons liked more than to feed on the flesh and blood of a Sentinel, and Paul and his companions were a walking feast.

It took Andra a couple of seconds to recover from being slammed into the brick wall. Good thing it had been her shoulder that had hit first instead of her head. Otherwise, she’d have been out cold. When this was over, she was going to have a long talk about manners with the man who’d pushed her, but right now she had to get Sammy out of here.

By the time Andra had shaken off the impact, two of the three men who’d shown up were already inside the warehouse. She wasn’t sure who they were, or why they were here, but she wasn’t about to question her good fortune. Or their swords.

The monster she'd shot was still on the floor, but it was moving sluggishly, lapping up pools of its own blood with its long, forked tongue. She knew from experience that if it got enough of its blood back inside, the thing would stand up again, all patched up and good as new.

Andra couldn't help but shudder at the sight. It was one that was going to stick with her for a lot of nights to come.

Great. Like she needed any more nightmare fuel.

Another monster was backing away from the man who'd pushed her. He had dark blond hair and stark, angular features. He wielded a sword a little shorter than his arm, and from the muscular width of his shoulders and the ease with which he moved the weapon, it was obvious that he'd had plenty of practice with it. Thank God he was apparently on her side.

The monster crouched, then sprang up unnaturally fast, but the man was ready for the attack. He ducked below the monster's leap and swung the sword in a powerful arc that sliced open its belly. The man leapt aside gracefully, dodging the spray of filth and gore that spilled from the monster.

The thing landed with a wet, squishy sound and let out a roar of defiance as it tried to regain its footing. The man moved in what appeared to be an almost lazy circle, and his sword gleamed in a dim yellow arc of light. When he came to a stop, the head of the monster lay ten feet away from its body.

Black smoke rose up from where the thing's blood pooled on the wooden floor, burning it. The smoke created a stench so violent that Andra had to fight back the urge to puke.

"How we doing, Madoc?" asked the man, never moving his eyes from the remaining threat.

On the far side of the warehouse, Andra watched the second man—an angry-looking guy with blue features and thick black hair—as he cut down another one of the monsters. He wasn't even breathing hard.

"One down, one to go," he said as he prowled closer to the last monster standing. The thing backed itself into a corner, and Andra was pretty sure that it wasn't going to make it back out alive.

"I smell more closing in," said a deep voice from behind her. Too close.

Andra jumped in surprise and whirled around, pointing her shotgun at the third man in the group. As she laid eyes on him, her brain leaked out her ears and she stood there, staring, unable to do anything else.

He was beautiful. Heart-stopping, seizure-inducing beautiful, with dark hair, bright silvery eyes and a cover-model face. He was a little thin for her taste, but he made it work well enough that she changed her mind right then and there.

He gave her a knowing smile full of bright white teeth and said, "I'm Logan. My friends and I have been looking for you."

Andra gave herself a mental shake and blinked so she could stop staring at him. "I'm not taking on any new cases right now. Kinda got my hands full with Sammy here."

He frowned slightly in confusion and waved an elegant hand. "We'll talk later. Right now, we need to get inside before the rest of the Synestryn show up."

Just then, Andra looked over his shoulder into the surrounding darkness and saw the faint glowing green eyes of more monsters closing in. "Right. Inside."

Andra peered through the door into the warehouse and saw both men slicing and dicing the remaining monsters. They had their hands full at the moment, and Logan didn't look like he'd had much good in a fight as thin as he was. In fact, he looked downright breakable, which revved up her protective instincts.

Andra grabbed Logan and hauled him through the door with her. She picked up the biggest part of the door she'd wrecked and propped it across the open doorway. Thank goodness she'd been hitting

the weights lately or she never would have been able to lift the solid oak slab.

~~“Start shoving these old pallets in the way to slow those things down,” she ordered Logan. “I’m going to get Sammy.”~~

She sprinted across the floor, leaping over a gaping hole in the wood. They had only a few seconds before those new monsters arrived, and with any luck, they could free Sammy and find a back door out of this place before the nasties broke through the barricade.

She reached Sammy, but he was silent and staring off into space, which wasn’t a good sign. His eyes were wide with shock and fear, and he cringed away from her as she approached. Tears still overflowed his eyes, and were so abundant they wet the collar of his pajama shirt.

Andra was wasting precious seconds, but she couldn’t stand the thought of adding to his fear. She found a smile somewhere and forced herself to wear it. “It’s okay, Sammy. Your mom and dad sent me. I’m here to take you home.”

As gently as she could, she removed the dirty rag from his mouth and sliced through the ropes that bound him. It took only seconds, but by the time she was finished, the blond sword-wielding man was standing a few feet away, guarding her back.

The monster she’d shot and barely damaged was now lying in several sloppy pieces strewn across the warehouse floor. He’d done that for her, and from the black blood leaking out of the rest of the monsters, he’d done more as well.

“Are you hurt?” he asked her.

“No, but Sammy doesn’t look good.”

The man nodded once, as if he understood exactly what she meant. Then again, he seemed prepared for a fight like this. Maybe he did know what was going on here.

“I’m Paul. I’m going to get both you and the boy out of here alive.”

It didn’t sound like an empty boast. His words were solid and heavy with confidence.

“So, you’ve done this before, Paul?” she asked him in a conversational tone.

He turned and gave her a wink. “Once or twice. Stay well behind me. Their blood is caustic.”

“I’m going to take Sammy and look for a back door.”

“No. Stay where I can see you. There may be more hiding out in the building.”

Andra thought about arguing and realized he could be right. She wasn’t willing to risk it, especially since Sammy would be with her.

The first monster hit the barricade. The broken door and rotting pallets shifted easily.

Paul moved toward the barricade. The angry-looking man stepped up beside Paul, facing the threat. They both lifted their swords like they knew how to use them. Then again, there was proof of that fact scattered all over the warehouse floor.

The beautiful Logan moved to the back of the warehouse near Andra. “I’m going to go look for another exit. Paul and Madoc have handled worse than this before, but it pays to be prepared.”

“Didn’t you hear what Paul said? There may be more hiding in here.”

“If so, I’ll be able to smell them coming. Don’t worry. I’m not one to risk my life needlessly.” Paul smiled at her again, only this time she was pretty sure she’d seen fangs. Lovely.

Andra picked Sammy up and backed away until they were against the far wall. Whoever these monsters were, they weren’t normal. Until she found out more, she wasn’t going to let Sammy get close to any of them.

He let out a soft, hopeless whimper. Andra looked down and he was staring back at her with unseeing eyes. She’d seen that exact look before on a night much like this one, and every week since for the past eight years.

She was too late. Even if she got him out alive, Sammy was lost forever.

~~The monsters crashed through the barricade—two more of the wolf-chimpanzee things and two~~ the larger, roachlike monsters that kept them as pets. They were easily six feet tall and walked upright on short, spiny legs. Their tiny heads held four beady black eyes that zeroed right in on Sammy.

One of them let out a metallic hiss that sounded like the word *child*, then pointed toward Sammy and Andra. The other nodded, let go of the leash it held, and unfurled a wide pair of wings. It leaped up into the air and landed clinging to one of the warehouse support beams.

The furry monsters charged the pair of men while the second roach thing held back.

Andra set Sammy safely behind her and aimed her shotgun at the roach thing on the beam. She fired and her shot took a big chunk out of where the monster had been. Unfortunately, it had jumped out of the way, avoiding her blast. She scanned the ceiling as she reloaded, looking for it, but it was nowhere in sight. She heard a buzzing noise behind her and whirled around to find the roach thing flying right toward her and the boy.

She didn't have time to finish reloading and get off another shot. She grabbed the barrel of the shotgun and leveled it in front of her face to keep those snapping insect jaws away.

It slammed into her. She heard something crack and pain screamed up her arm. She screamed right back at it, unable to hold in her cry of agony. The weapon clattered to the ground, and Andra tried to bring her hands up to grab ahold of the roach's neck, but her left arm didn't respond. It hung useless at her side, burning with bone-deep pain that made her stomach spin.

She managed to get one hand against the roach's chest, but it was strong. It pushed her back easily, making her boots slide over the wooden floor. Sammy was being pushed back with her, his little body limp and rolling along behind her.

Andra took a quick look over her shoulder and saw that they were speeding toward one of the gaping holes in the floor. Sammy was going to fall first if she didn't do something.

Unfortunately, nothing came to mind.

A roar of outrage billowed up from somewhere in the room, but she couldn't figure out where it had come from, or what it meant. It was all she could do to stand upright and try to slow the thing down.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a metallic gleam flash past her; the roach thing's head flew off and its body started to fall forward.

Every beat of her heart made her arm throb, but she ignored it and put the last of her strength into shoving the roach thing to one side. It toppled over and hit the floor in a dry rattle.

"You okay?" asked Paul. His sword was coated in slime and the roach's head was rolling around near his feet.

She did a quick survey of the warehouse and saw only corpses. All of the monsters were dead thanks to these men. She never would have survived tonight without them.

Andra nodded. "My arm's broken, but I'll live."

Now, if she could just stay upright and not crumple at his feet, that would be great. Very professional.

She focused on Paul in an effort to not think about the pain. His hair had the look of being perpetually mussed. He was several inches taller than Andra, which was no small feat, as she was five ten barefooted. She could tell, even under his clothes, that he was muscular, but not so bulky that it hindered his movements. She'd seen his grace firsthand and had to admire anyone who could move that fast, that smoothly, while still looking like he was using no more effort than he did to walk down the street.

But more than any of that, it was his face that held her interest. He wasn't model beautiful like

Logan. She wasn't even sure she'd call him handsome, but there was something in his face that intrigued her—drew her in. Weary lines framed his mouth as if he'd been through hell, but his stance was strong and steady. He might have suffered, but he hadn't been defeated.

Andra had nothing but respect for a man like that, which was foolish, because she knew nothing about him. The notion that she could read him by looking at his face was just plain stupid. Then again, stupid was the theme for the night.

Whoever he was, he'd saved her life tonight, and for that she was grateful.

"Thank you," she told him.

Paul reached toward her as if he were going to touch her face. "It's my pleasure."

"Don't," shouted Logan. "Not here. It's too dangerous. You know what happened to Drake once he touched Helen."

Paul's hand closed into a fist and he let it fall back to his side.

Maybe it had been her imagination, but the closer his hand got to her, the less her arm hurt. Now that he was backing away, the pain flared up again and she locked her knees to stay upright.

"It's bad, isn't it?" he asked her.

"It's not great," she admitted.

"I can help you," offered Logan. "Mend your arm and take the pain away."

"Touch her blood and you're a dead man," said Paul, his voice rough with menace.

Andra glanced at her arm, panicked that she might be bleeding. The monsters seemed to be able to smell her blood and it sometimes drew them to her. "What blood?"

"That's not what he meant," said Logan. "He's simply being a bit possessive."

"Drake warned us all about what you did to Helen. You're not going to do that to her."

Andra had no idea what they were talking about, but right now, she really didn't give a damn. She wanted to get Sammy out of here and get her arm set so that maybe it would stop making her sick with every throbbing heartbeat. "I really appreciate the fact that all of you were here tonight, and I hate to ask for more help, but there's no way I can drive. Can one of you guys drive my truck to the hospital and drop us off?"

"A hospital won't help the boy," said Logan. "But I can."

Andra didn't trust him. No one that pretty was human. As far as she knew, he was one of *them*.

She stepped in front of Sammy and gave Logan a level stare. "Stay away from him. He's my responsibility and you're not touching him."

"She's got good instincts. I'll give her that," said the angry-looking man.

Logan's voice dropped to a warning tone. "Stay out of this, Madoc. It doesn't concern you."

"It doesn't concern you anymore, either," said Paul. "Your job was to help me find her. Now you have."

"We have a bargain," said Logan.

"And I will uphold my end."

"I know. But what if she isn't the one? You haven't touched her yet."

Andra was hurting too much to keep up with their conversation. She knew she was at the center of it, but she had no idea why. And frankly, she couldn't bring herself to care right now. "Can we please get Sammy to the hospital?"

Logan looked like he was going to say something, but Paul spoke over whatever it was. "Absolutely." He knelt in front of the boy, but was still looking at her. "What's your name?"

"Andra."

"Andra what?" demanded the man they'd called Madoc. He had blunt features that looked like

they'd crack if he tried to smile.

A wave of pain rushed over her and she had to grit her teeth to stay upright. Already, she could feel the skin below her shoulder starting to swell. "Madison," she grated out. "And just so we're clear, I don't even bother asking for my phone number. I don't date guys who carry swords."

Truth was, she didn't date, period. She never had time, not with the recent increase in the disappearances of children across the Midwest. She was lucky if she found time to sleep and eat. More children disappeared every month and she needed to be available to find them.

Not that her efforts had done Sammy any good. Poor little guy was lost now—locked inside the terror that he'd seen tonight. At least she could tell his parents which facilities would care for him best. She'd researched them all.

"Logan," said Paul. "Fix her arm."

"Are you a doctor?" asked Andra.

"Not exactly," said Logan.

"Then you're not touching me. All I need is a lift out of here and we'll be on our way."

"I can mend the bone," said Logan. "It's a simple enough task so soon after a break."

As bizarre as that news was, as leery as she was of taking any more help from these not-quite-human strangers, Andra was tempted to accept their offer. Being in a cast for six weeks didn't sound like a lot of fun to her at all. Taking that much time off work wasn't going to be good for all the missing children, either. "How?"

"I'd simply reach inside you with my mind and put the pieces back together."

Andra was stunned silent for a moment. He sounded serious, a fact that creeped her out even more. "Right. I think I'm ready for that ride now."

"I wouldn't let him touch you if it wasn't safe," said Paul.

She breathed in too deeply and another sharp pain stabbed through her arm. "I don't know who you are, but I'm not sure I want to know more. As far as I'm concerned, this planet is already messed up enough as it is."

"She's not ready to accept us yet, Paul," said Logan. "Give her some time. Once the pain is too much, she'll give in."

Not likely, but then again, they didn't know her very well, so she could forgive his ignorance.

"If you change your mind," said Paul, "let me know."

"I won't. Just load Sammy into my truck, please."

Paul looked down at the boy with such compassion it made her chest ache. Clearly, he didn't know it was too late. *She* had been too late. She'd failed. Again. That failure raked through her, hurting worse than any broken bone ever could.

Maybe it was time to hang up her shotgun. Stop using her ability to find lost children for good this time. She tried to be stoic, but at times like this, it was hard. She wanted so badly to save them all.

"Hey, little guy," Paul said in a deep, soothing voice. One wide, battle-scarred hand ran over the boy's limbs as if checking for injury. On the man's left hand was a strange ring—a simple band that pulsed with color, swirling in an iridescent mix of baby rainbows. Andra had a hard time not staring at it.

"I'm Paul, and I just want you to know that you're safe now. Nothing is going to hurt you. Not while I'm around."

And even as cynical as Andra was—even knowing the things she knew about just how many monsters roamed the night—she believed Paul was telling the truth. That alone was more incredible than the fact that real monsters existed.

Logan pulled in a deep breath through his nose. "We need to hurry with the child. He's pulling away fast." He turned and looked at Madoc. "You should do it."

"No fucking way, leech. I don't mess with kids' minds. They're too easy to scramble."

"Scramble?" asked Andra, shifting her body between Madoc and Sammy. "That doesn't sound so good."

"It's not," said Paul; then he turned his attention to Logan. "If Madoc isn't up to it, I'll take care of the boy."

"You're too weak," said Logan. "I took too much blood from you earlier. Madoc needs to do this."

Madoc shook his head. "I don't have that kind of finesse and you know it. You want me to kill something, I'm your man, but I don't go patching people up. That's your job."

Logan pinned Madoc with a bright stare. "Are you offering to supply the power I need to heal the boy's mind?"

Madoc's face twisted in a snarl and he bared his teeth. "You're not touching my blood. Ever."

Andra looked between the two men, trying to sort out what was going on. If she'd been able to drive, she might have tried to slip out of here with Sammy while they argued. But she couldn't even lift the boy, much less drive, and if she tried, chances were she'd be more likely to kill Sammy than to get him home to his parents. "You can really help Sammy?" she asked Logan. "If all you need is blood, I'll give you some of mine."

"No!" shouted both Paul and Madoc at the same time.

Logan fixed her with a stare that made her feel trapped. Deer-in-the-headlights, doom-speeding-headlights, way trapped. "As tempting as that offer is, I fear these men would cut me down if I so much as plucked a hair from your head. Maybe another time."

She wasn't about to let a couple of brawny guys stand in the way of Sammy's future. Not when there was still a shotgun lying a few feet away. She took a tentative step toward it. She wasn't sure how she was going to finish reloading with only one good arm, but she'd manage somehow. "I want you to help Sammy," she told Logan. "Whatever it takes." If there was hope for him, maybe there was hope for Nika.

Andra crushed that thought flat before it could blossom. She had no room in her life for false hope. She knew just how bleak things really were, and it was best if she stayed a realist, just like she always been.

"Don't you dare touch her blood," growled Paul in a tone that made the fine hairs on her neck stand up. "I'll help the boy."

"Are you sure?" asked Logan. "I took a lot from you tonight so I could find her."

Paul's eyes flicked to Andra so briefly she wasn't sure it had happened. "It was worth it. I'm sure I'm strong enough for this."

"And if you're not?" asked Madoc.

Paul pressed his hand against his chest as if it hurt, then handed Madoc his sword. "Then you know what to do."

Chapter 2

Paul carried Sammy outside into the night and found a patch of rich earth that would aid him healing the boy.

Andra and Logan trailed behind him, while Madoc kept watch over the area, ensuring that they know if company arrived.

Paul wanted nothing more than to touch Andra and find out whether she was the woman he'd been looking for for decades. The only thing holding him back was her safety, as well as Sammy's. He couldn't do anything to mess up this time. This was his last chance. If he did touch her, and he went through that same incapacitating pain Drake had suffered with Helen, there was no way he'd be able to protect them if more Synestryn came.

And they would come; it was just a question of how long they had before it happened and whether or not they would still be here.

The sooner Sammy's mind was cleaned, the faster Paul could get Logan to fix her arm. He knew she had to be in pain. All the color had leached from her face and she was holding herself at an odd angle. Already, the leather sleeve of her jacket was stretching tight over her broken arm.

"You'd better get out of that jacket before you can't," he told her. "The swelling's getting worse."

She gave it a gentle tug, winced, and asked, "Any of you boys have a knife?"

"Allow me," said Logan. A sharp claw extended from the end of his finger, replacing his manicured fingernail.

Andra flinched at the sight, and hissed in pain as the motion jarred her broken bone. "Holy shit. What the hell are you?"

"Hold still. I won't damage you."

"You'd better not," said Paul as he resisted the urge to go to her and reassure her. Keeping his distance was the most maddening form of torture possible. Moments ago, another leaf had fallen from his lifemark, leaving one, and he still wasn't sure whether she was the woman who could save him.

He'd been given two chances before. Even wishing for a third seemed like some kind of sacrilege. Too bad it didn't stop him from wishing anyway.

Andra stripped out of her destroyed leather jacket with a little help from Logan. Although her left arm was puffy and distorted, the rest of her was all sleek muscles and strong, feminine lines. Her clingy shirt showed off small, perfect breasts and muscular abs. He wondered how much time and effort a body like that had cost her and whether or not the man in her life was appropriately appreciative.

He certainly would be, given the chance.

Paul pulled his gaze away from her and focused on Sammy. The child's eyes were open, unblinkingly. Drool leaked from one corner of his mouth and Paul gently wiped it away with the hem of his shirt. "I'm going to help you sleep now, Sammy. But I promise that you won't have any bad dreams. I'm going to take them all away, okay?"

Paul didn't expect an answer; the child was too far gone. He closed the boy's eyes and held his hands there to keep them closed. He focused on the ground under him—warm, seemingly dead after long weeks of drought. He felt the soil and the rocks beneath, felt the roots of nearby trees seeking out nourishment and the tiny, hidden seeds that waited for rain to spark them to life. The earth beneath

him was calm, patient, accepting of whatever came. There was power in that acceptance and Paul pulled some of that power into himself.

Instantly, the pain he lived with daily increased, bearing down on him, grinding at his bones, and he had to clench his teeth against it to keep from crying out. His heart pounded and his head throbbed until he was blind from the sheer force of the pressure of so much more power. His body already held too much energy, but it was energy he couldn't use—only store for someone else's use. Maybe Andra's.

He prayed it was so. He wasn't going to live long enough for another search. It had taken two weeks to find her, and he didn't think he had even one week left.

Paul's skin grew tight and burned, and his eyes felt like they would fly out of his head if he opened his eyelids. He could hear his breath rasping in and out too quickly as his lungs labored against the pain.

Logan was right. He was too weak for this, but it was too late now. He'd pulled in enough power to reach out to Sammy and enter his mind. He was trapped inside the child until he'd done what he came here to do—take away his fear, his memories.

The images inside Sammy were a chaotic swirl of teeth and claws, growls and screams. The boy was barely six, and had no way of making sense of what he'd seen. His child's mind had taken the sensory input, mixed it with his terror, and created an array of images even more terrible than reality. Somewhere deep inside Sammy's mind, he felt the little boy cowering in fear, whimpering, chanting, "No, no, no."

Paul felt his physical body weaken against the strain of his connection with the boy. He wasn't very good at this, but he knew enough to know that if he died while in the boy's mind, it would kill Sammy as well.

Spurred on by that thought, Paul pushed his way through those nightmares until he found the boy's mental hiding place. It was a cardboard box with crooked windows drawn on with brightly colored crayon. One side of the box had been cut open to make a door big enough for Sammy to crawl through.

Paul crouched and peered in the cardboard doorway. "You're going to be okay now. Stay here until you hear me call your name, and when you come out, all the monsters will be gone."

The boy cringed in the corner of the box with his hands over his ears and his eyes squeezed shut, but somehow, Paul felt that he'd been heard.

He rose up and faced all the images that Sammy had created, each one horrific enough to drive the boy mad. They all had to go. Paul captured the first monster in his gaze—much like a sphinx, but with larger teeth and two wolflike heads. Normally, it wouldn't have frightened him, because he knew it wasn't real. But Sammy thought it was real and because of that, it had power.

Paul let himself be afraid—imagined what it must be like for Sammy, so small and helpless. He imagined what it felt like to be ripped away from the safety of his home and parents and tossed into a living nightmare. He let the fear grow inside him until his hands shook and his jaw ached from fighting the need to scream. He accepted Sammy's horror as his own, absorbing it until he'd taken it all into himself, then ruthlessly shoved it into the accepting earth. Burying it deep where it couldn't hurt anyone.

Slowly, the monster disappeared.

Paul was left feeling weak and dizzy, barely able to stand upright within the ethereal context of the boy's mind. He could no longer move, so he pulled in more power—more pain—and forced himself to take just one more step toward the next nightmare. It left him sweating and shaking and made his stomach clench in protest, but he had no choice. The child could not live with these images in his

head.

Andra's arm was swiftly becoming a problem. Every breath shifted her frame enough to send searing jolts of pain through her body. And she was losing feeling in her fingers, which couldn't be good. But none of that really bothered her. What really bothered her was the fact that she was basically helpless. She didn't trust these men, no matter how helpful they seemed. What if they tried to take Sammy away? How would she stop them in a three-against-one fight, with a broken arm and an empty shotgun?

Paul was deep in concentration and Madoc was keeping watch out into the darkness. Logan and his freaky-sharp fingernails hovered nearby, lurking in the shadows. There was something unsettling about his stillness—his unnatural beauty.

"We're not going to hurt you," he said as if reading her thoughts. Then again, she kept looking at her shotgun lying a few feet away, so maybe, rather than being psychic, he simply wasn't an idiot.

"Forgive me if I'm not all cheerful and trusting," she replied.

"You're feeling helpless, no doubt. I can mend your arm if you like."

"How are you going to do that?"

"Magic. Want to see?"

"Not particularly. I've seen enough weirdness for one night, thanks."

Logan shrugged. "Suit yourself. The offer is—" He sniffed the air and she thought she saw his eyes actually put off a silvery glow. He turned to Madoc and said, "We've got company."

Company. That didn't sound good.

"How much time?" demanded Madoc.

"Two minutes. Maybe three."

"There are more of those monsters coming?" she asked Logan.

He nodded.

Shit! She was no good in a fight like this. "How long will it take to fix my arm?"

This time she was sure she saw his eyes glow just a bit—a cold, hungry glow that made her feel like prey. "Only a moment, if you're willing."

"I am. Do it."

"Paul's going to kill you if you take her blood," said Madoc.

"Paul has no say in what happens to me," said Andra. "Get on with it."

"I'll need your blood to regain my strength once we are safely away from here."

"There's going to be plenty of it all over the grass if you don't hurry." She was pretty sure she knew just how he planned on taking her blood. The word *vampire* echoed around in her head, giving her the creeps. Still, if she lived long enough to bleed a little, that was fine with her. She'd make more blood.

Logan spread an elegant, slim hand around the base of her neck and closed his eyes. Heat soaked into her skin, making her shiver. As the heat grew, she started to worry. His skin was too hot. He was going to burn her. She had to pull away.

Just as she thought about moving, she felt his other arm clamp around her waist, pressing her head against his frame. He was stronger than he looked. Much stronger. And she'd been wrong about him being merely thin—he was practically a skeleton under his clothing, all sharp angles and jagged bones.

"I don't have time or the strength to be gentle," he whispered in a strained voice. "I'm sorry."

Andra wasn't sure what he meant until she felt the bone in her arm shift and pain became her who

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