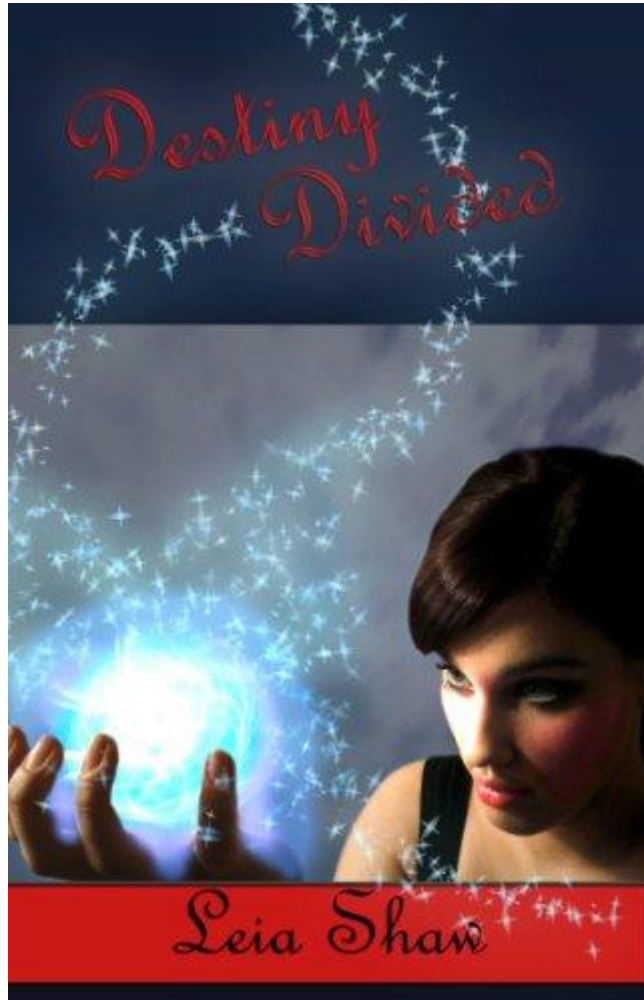


Night Owl Reviews: Free Chapter

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Destiny Divided By Leia Shaw

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Prologue

Jasmine stared at the newborn baby in the bassinette next to her hospital bed. Her baby. The rosy cheeked bundle with the funny little coned head had been sleeping peacefully the past two hours. Jasmine had never loved anything more in her entire life. And now she had to do the hardest thing imaginable. She had to let her go.

“Are you sure you have to do this, Jasmine?” Selena asked. Her cousin sat next to her on the bed holding her hand. Jasmine looked down realizing Selena hadn’t let her go in more than an hour. She smiled at her best friend.

“Yes, Selly. I don’t want her in our world. If I leave now, she’ll be adopted by a nice family. A *normal* family. It’s the only hope we have to protect her from the Dark King.” Jasmine thought back on the day her precious daughter had been conceived. The man she’d been in love with for years, a sorcerer from Wales, had just been married. To someone else.

Jasmine had sat at the wedding bar feeling depressed and lonely until she’d been joined by an attractive man. He was witty and charming and soon she’d found herself completely captivated. She had been a little drunk and when the man offered to drive her back to the hotel, she agreed. He had seduced her easily – a broken heart and alcohol never mixed well – and they had one passionate night. The next morning, he was gone. Still recovering from the heartbreak of losing her first love, Jasmine had figured it was better not to launch into a relationship anyway, so she hadn’t pursued the man. She hadn’t even known his name. Three months later a pregnancy test had confirmed what she’d suspected. She’d made phone calls to various sorcerer friends but still couldn’t trace the father.

She’d all but given up when an oracle had come to visit her witch coven. The oracle had been called for information regarding the war that had been waging for almost five hundred years between the Underworld and the sorcerers of Wales. The sorcerers had been pushing for the witch’s alliance. In the end they had turned them down because witches were naturally mistrustful, especially so with sorcerers, who viewed themselves as superior to other

supernaturals. Although Jasmine had been friends with sorcerers, and was unlucky in love with one, she'd always felt they were hiding something under their holier than thou pretenses.

The seventeen year old oracle had set her eyes upon the newly pregnant Jasmine and casually said, "*Your baby is destined for darkness.*" She had given Jasmine a once over then turned to the stunned coven and asked if anyone had a piece of gum.

Jasmine had laughed nervously because she hadn't told the rest of her coven about the pregnancy. She could still remember the looks on their faces. Jasmine had confirmed the pregnancy to her curious sisters then brushed off the oracle's ominous prediction. She had told Selena later that day, "*There should be a law that oracles need to have their driver's license before they go spouting off prophecies whenever they wish.*" Selena had laughed but Jasmine could see the concern behind her eyes.

Three months later the man who'd impregnated her had appeared in her room accompanied by a terrifying vampire. He had tried to kill Jasmine but her coven protected her and the man disappeared as quickly as he had come. That was when Jasmine had started to take the prediction seriously. It was also when she'd learned who he was. Adwyth Hun, King of the Underworld. Three months later, Selena gave birth to his baby.

She shuddered, thinking upon the memories.

"I still think we can protect her," Selena said, squeezing Jasmine's hand for the fiftieth time. "The witches have alliances. We can keep her safe."

Before Selena could finish getting the words out Jasmine was already shaking her head.

"Please, Jasmine. Think about this," she begged.

Gaia bless her. She truly is a best friend. "I already have, Selly. Over and over again," Jasmine answered. She peered down at the sleeping baby. A single tear rolled down her cheek. "Eirian Sage will never know who she is."

Twenty-Five Years Later

James had just finished a lecture on modern depictions of mythological creatures at the small liberal arts college in Eastern Massachusetts when he paused and peered around the room. He was met with more than forty blank expressions. Two students had actually fallen asleep. He sighed. *Americans*.

James loved teaching, and he was grateful to have a job, but he wasn't fond of America. He missed his home country of Wales. The rocky shorelines, the rolling hills, the people. His people. He was respected in Wales. The only respect he'd received in America was from the female students with their silly crushes. He'd heard them whisper that his accent was "sexalicious", whatever that meant. Most people assumed Professor James Elias was British, the accents sounded similar. At least those who'd thought he was from England were close, since the two countries were neighbors. But on more than one occasion he'd had a student approach him and ask, "*Uhh, dude...are you from Russia?*" Or some other absurd country.

Frustrated and discouraged James closed his books and dismissed the class. The only student who'd looked like she had been paying attention was the mysterious brunette who had always sat in the back and was the first to leave. Yet she had no books, no folders or pads of paper. She simply slipped in, and then slipped out. James had watched her during the second half of his lecture. While most students were either dull-faced or snoozing, she had sat on the edge of her seat chewing her bottom lip. She didn't look like a typical college student, other than perhaps her age. There was something different about her that James couldn't quite put his finger on. She was...weathered. Stress showed on her face and body. Despite hanging on his every word, she seemed tired. Even her clothing, though stylish for the times, looked old and worn.

Students began filing out of the large hall. Interestingly, the girl hadn't left early as usual. She closed in on the tight circle of students who were chatting and walking to the door. His eyebrows shot up when he saw her pocket a cell phone she plucked from another student's backpack. He took a mental note of the owner of the phone then continued watching. She bumped into another student, a girl this time, smiled and apologized while slipping the girl's MP3 player into her back pocket.

James crossed his arms over his chest while he watched her steal from two other students. *The little thief!* He started forward to confront her when a student stepped in his path.

“Professor?” James’ eyes left the girl for a moment while he addressed the boy in front of him. “I have a question about the term paper.”

He nodded then briefly scanned the room for the thief, but she was gone. “Umm...right then,” he said focusing his attention back to the boy. “What’s your question?”

James would look for the girl later.

Sage emptied the contents of her backpack onto a desk in her makeshift bedroom in the basement of the school. Two phones, an MP3 player, and twenty bucks. *Not too bad*, she thought as she dumped her looted treasures into a shoebox then pulled out a wad of cash. She counted it then kicked the table in frustration. Still not enough for an apartment even in the scummiest parts of town. She’d been stealing, working, and saving for two months but wasn’t even close. Maybe she could cut back on meals. She sighed. Would it really matter even if she had enough? She had no one to co-sign. She didn’t have bank references. She’d look sketchy to anyone who looked closely enough.

If only the classes she’d been sneaking into actually added up to a degree. Then she’d be able to get a real job, making enough money to support herself. *I wonder how hard it is to forge a degree.*

She tucked the cash back into her jeans pocket then looked at the old metal filing cabinet that held her meager belongings. *If you’d stop buying books then you’d save more*, she scolded herself. Then shook her head angrily. She hated arguing with herself. For once, she wished she had someone to argue with. Mostly she wished for Erin, her sister though not by blood.

“Sage?” Her boss’s voice boomed from above. “Are you down there?”

She shoved the shoebox in the cabinet and closed the metal doors, snapping the padlock in place. Then she ran upstairs.

“You’re late again,” he said when she reached the top of the basement stairs. But Sage could tell that he wasn’t really angry.

“Come on, Tony, you need someone to keep you on your toes,” she said to the middle aged Italian man who looked more like he should be in the mafia. Scary on the outside, yes, but on the inside he was a mushy teddy bear. And he’d proven to be an ally Sage sorely needed. He’d brought her home-cooked meals his wife made every week. He knew she was poor and struggling, but he didn’t know she was actually living in the building she cleaned every night. In the basement to be exact. She’d be fired if the school found out and there wouldn’t be anything Tony could do about it. “Aren’t you glad it’s someone as charming as me?” She batted her eyes and gave her best angelic smile.

Tony grumbled but stopped when he met her gaze. She could see concern wash over his features. She frowned. *Do I look that bad?* “How are you doing today, *tesora*?” He called her ‘tesora’, an Italian term of endearment, whenever he felt sad for her. She hated being pitied. But with Tony, she tolerated it. He was her only friend at the moment.

“Just peachy, Tony,” she answered, trying to sound perkier than she felt. He raised his eyebrows, clearly seeing through the lie. Quickly changing topics she asked, “Should I do the west side again?”

“Sure.” He opened the janitor closet to get out the carts with their supplies. “Oh, good news. We have some students starting next week on their student loan employment program. You won’t have to work so hard at night anymore.” He smiled at her like he’d done her a favor. Her heart sunk at what this “good news” really meant. Less hours. Which meant less paycheck. “Then you can concentrate on your studies and get that degree!”

She plastered on a fake smile. “Oh. Yeah, great news.”

Tony was still smiling when he pushed a cart towards her. “Maybe if we’re fast tonight you can get some sleep before your first class. What did you say you were taking Friday mornings?”

“Umm...British Literature,” she lied easily. Tomorrow she would be at the pawn shop. Maybe she’d make it in time for Mysticism in the afternoon.

Her face must have paled because he looked concerned again. “Have you eaten tonight, Sage?”

“Yes,” she lied again. She hated lying to the old man. But it had to be done. And she was no stranger to it.

“All right.” He looked like he didn’t believe her again. “Tomorrow my wife’s making chicken cacciatore. I’ll bring you leftovers.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it. I love your wife’s cooking.” That wasn’t a lie. She was an amazing cook. But Sage wasn’t picky either. “Tell Isobel I said thank you.”

After Tony left for his side of campus, Sage stared at the mop, then the long empty hallway before her. She took a deep breath and held back a groan. *No point complaining. It won’t make it any better.*

James had checked and double-checked his Mythology student roster and he still didn’t know who the mysterious thieving girl was. There was no trace of her. James was intrigued. There was nothing like a mystery to rattle his dull existence at the school, though the rest of his life had been anything but boring. But he couldn’t decide if he was angry at the girl for sneaking into classes she’d clearly not registered for, or if he admired her obvious passion for learning. Either way he couldn’t deny his budding curiosity. As he scanned the student roster one more time he vowed he’d get to the bottom of it soon. Next class he would follow her and demand to know who she was.

When he heard the building quieting around him, he realized he had lost track of time. He packed up his briefcase and flew out his office door hurrying to get home after a long day. He walked briskly down the hallway, turned the corner towards the front door, and ran straight into a slender girl with a mop, practically barreling her over. His body stiffened when he felt electricity surge through him upon contact. He staggered back. *A supernatural?* He re-checked the sensation. Yes, she was definitely a supernatural, he could feel it in his bones.

James picked the mop off the floor and handed it to the stunned girl. “I’m sorry,” he said. Then he saw her face. *The thief.* He narrowed his gaze. The thief who’d been sneaking into his class was a supernatural? Things were really getting interesting.

“Thank you,” she said taking the mop from his outstretched hand. She went back to mopping but stopped when she realized he was glaring at her. Her eyes reluctantly met his. He crossed his arms over his chest, an action he found intimidated people.

“You were in my class yesterday,” he said. At her shrug he demanded, “Who are you?” She flitted her eyes to the three exits in the hallway. He saw her body tense to run.

“Don’t run. I’m not going to hurt you,” he said in a softer voice. “I just want to know your name.”

She was still debating whether to run; James could see it in her eyes. But what she didn’t know was that no one could outrun James. Just when he thought she would flee, the florescent light above him burst, raining shards of glass while he covered his head with his bag. He looked up at the broken light then back to the girl. Coincidence? He thought he saw traces of a smirk on her face. Still she was tensed to run.

“Don’t run,” he said again, more urgent this time. She tightened her eyes and a light broke behind him. Then every light in the hallway popped one by one sending glass clattering to the floor. *Bloody hell!* James had turned to watch the lights burst and when he turned back around, the girl was gone. He sighed. Of course she ran. Now he would have to hunt her.

Holy fuck! Sage paced the length of the basement storage room. She hadn’t meant to burst every light in the goddamn hallway. Just one or two to scare the curious man away. She couldn’t deny that her powers were getting stronger and more out of control. And she’d be lying if she said it didn’t scare her. But she didn’t know what to do about it. She didn’t even know how she got her powers in the first place. The only person who’d known about the mysterious things that happened when she was angry or scared was Erin. And she’d been taken from her long ago. Sage continued to pace as she contemplated her next move. She couldn’t go back upstairs yet. Not until she was sure the professor would be gone. She recognized him from two of the classes she’d been sitting in on but she couldn’t recall his name. She knew the girls adored him. She

couldn't blame them; he certainly wasn't bad on the eyes. He was young, for a professor. His chiseled features, pale skin, and neatly groomed appearance reminded her of European nobility.

"I told you not to run," a British accent said from behind her.

She whirled around to meet him. The professor stood in the doorway of her 'bedroom', his posture tense. Had he always been that tall? "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Following you," he said calmly. If there was one thing Sage knew, it was how to read body language. His voice may have been calm but his body was not. "I told you not to run," he said again.

He took several steps towards her. Unexpectedly, she found herself staring into his light blue eyes for half a second longer than normal. She gave her head an inward shake. His strawberry blonde hair was cut short and styled in perfectly random spikes, as if he were about to shoot a hair gel commercial. Something about him screamed un-married and lonely, but the last thing she needed was someone following her every move. She had to get rid of him. Fast. Out of habit her eyes darted around the room looking for exits and weapons.

He watched her carefully then said, "I can see you're thinking about running again. Do you not believe that I'll follow you?"

Deciding she couldn't run, she figured her best plan was to talk her way out of this. "So you're admitting you're going to stalk me? I could call the police for this."

His eyebrows shot up. "*You're* going to call the police on *me*?"

Of course not. She nodded, backing away.

"Well in that case, you better give me back my wallet before they get here," he said, sounding too casual.

Panic struck. *Shit, shit, shit, shit.* "I have no idea what you're talking about." A lie. She'd taken it when he bumped into her in the hallway.

"Right." He cast her an unconvinced glare. "You also might not want to mention that you're taking classes without being registered."

She shrugged. "So I sit in on a few classes. What's the big deal?"

"Nothing, if that's all you did. Care to hand over the phone and MP3 player you stole from the students in my Mythology class today?"

Cover blown. She took a deep breath. “All right,” she said, maintaining her pride. “You know my secrets. So why are you here?”

He paused to look around the room, narrowing in on her bed. He stepped closer and ran his hand along a nearby bookshelf. She tried to view the room as he would. The basement was huge, but she’d only taken a small corner of it. She’d moved boxes and furniture to hide the spot she’d been sleeping in, but she still had a clear view of the door. Her bed was an old bed frame with no mattress, but she’d stacked up blankets she’d spent precious money on to have something soft to sleep on.

Without the time to hide her things, it was obvious she slept there. The rest of the basement was filled with unused desks, chairs of every size, old bookshelves, cabinets, and lots of dusty boxes.

“I’m here to find out who’s been robbing my students and sneaking into the back of my class.”

Sage watched him nervously. She was protective of her space and the man was putting her on edge. “I suppose you want me to do the right thing and return the items?” *People and their morals.* “If I do, will you not tell anyone about this?”

He smiled arrogantly. “We’ll see.”

We’ll see? When she looked in his eyes she knew he figured out that she had everything to lose and not a leg to stand on. “Do you respond to cash bribes then?”

He laughed. Fury lumped in her chest and she tried to swallow it back. *I am so done with this.* In an aggravated tone she said, “If you’re done bugging the hell out of me for no reason, would you kindly leave? I have work to do.”

“No,” he said and took a big step towards her.

“No?” Anger rose as she clenched her fists trying to push back the power that wanted to be released. “I’m warning you, don’t get me angry.”

“Why not? Are you going to break the lights again?” His casual tone only fueled her rage. He clearly didn’t take her seriously. He would learn.

She gave him a blank expression. “Faulty wiring.”

He arched a brow. “Really? All right. I’ll go along with it for now.” He stepped around a desk, moving closer to Sage and eyeing the locked cabinet she kept her belongings in. *Don’t*

even think about it. “Do you live here...Sage Peterson?” he asked squinting his eyes as he read her work badge.

She grabbed her badge and tucked it into her shirt. “I can't see how that's any of your business.” He yanked on the padlock. “Don't touch that!” she yelled in a panic, then mentally kicked herself. She should know better. The sure fire way to reveal something hidden is to draw attention to it. This man was rattling her to the core. And she was beginning to despise him.

He studied her face but released the lock. “Does the school know you're squatting?”

Her nostrils flared and she narrowed her gaze. The emergency lights flickered once. He gave them a fleeting glance then set his eyes back on hers. “Not if you don't tell them,” she said. “Now leave me alone.”

“We need to talk.”

She shook her head emphatically. “I have nothing to say to you.”

He pulled a chair out of a corner and placed it in the center of the open space. “Where are you from?”

She raised her brows in disbelief. “I just said I have nothing to say to you!”

“Right,” he said, nodding as if he'd expected her to say that. “Are we going to have to do this the hard way then?”

Sage had to force herself not to gulp. *Really Sage, since when have you been scared of anyone?* She wasn't scared, she told herself, just unsettled. This professor was not someone she could intimidate easily, which was screwing with the last ten years of how she'd learned to deal with people.

“Look. I know you're probably upset that I stole from your students, and I won't do it anymore. But you really need to leave. I don't want to hurt you.” *But I might be changing my mind soon enough.*

“Hurt me?” he said, clearly amused.

She scowled. “I may be small but I've hurt bigger men than you. Don't come any closer.” He took a confident step towards her. *Crap! He's gonna make me do it.* “I'm warning you. I really don't like being backed into a corner.”

This time he *smiled* as he took a step closer.

“You asked for it,” she said letting her anger take over. She felt the familiar electricity run through her body then congregate in her palms. The blue neon light burst into her hands and she formed a ball between them. She glared at the man with a smirk, waiting for his frightened expression. But he was eerily calm.

“Impressive,” he said. “Now what?”

She tightened her eyes and took a deep breath. *Please don't miss. Please don't miss.* She squared her shoulders, took aim, and then released the ball of light towards him. As soon as the energy left her fingertips she ducked and covered her head. The light soared across the room, missing her target, then ricocheted off the metal cabinet and blew up a wooden chair between them. A couple pieces of the chair bounced off the professor but he barely seemed to notice. Sage slowly stood, analyzing his reaction. He looked a little surprised but not nearly enough.

She furrowed her brow and said with stern resolution, “If you won't leave, at least step aside so I can.” To her surprise, he stepped closer. “I'll do it again,” she warned.

He shrugged. Seeing no other option, she launched another lightening ball. This time it headed straight towards him. But he simply put up a hand and pushed it away. Then he stepped closer. Panicked she launched another, but he flicked that one away too. Her eyes went wide. *What the hell?* She tried to pull up more light but her hands only sparked. He took another step, putting himself only a few feet away. Too close for comfort. She tried again and the florescent lights above them flickered but she had no energy to launch. *Damn it! Sucky time to run out of juice!*

The professor sneered. “Fickle, your powers, eh?”

She peered around the room for an escape but she was cornered. She would have to rely on a different kind of fighting. One she was also familiar with. As soon as he was close enough, she backed up her foot ready to drive it into his balls. Without warning she was shoved into the wall behind her, the professor only inches from her face. His hands wrapped tightly around her wrists and forced them into the wall behind to her.

He leaned in close and whispered, “We need to talk.”

He pulled her away from the wall then sat her on the chair he'd placed in the center of the room earlier. He let go of her wrists but before she could move, he was behind her with a hand

around her throat. He didn't tighten, but the threat was there. "Don't move," he said so sharply she heeded his command.

Then she watched a strange stream of light snake from his index finger and wrap around her body pinning her arms to her side. The light made a sort of magical rope that tied her to the chair. No matter how much she struggled, she couldn't get free.

"There," he said shaking the light free from his finger. "That's better." He took a seat opposite her on the bed. *Her* bed. She gritted her teeth. "As I was saying...we need to talk about your powers."

Sage knew she was at his mercy. Always a survivor, she decided to surrender and hope he would let her go if she played nice. Or at least buy her some time to form a new plan. "Okay. Yes. I have certain...abilities. But I don't know how they work or where they come from. I'll give back the stuff I stole just please don't tell anyone. I'm tired of running..." She trailed off.

He furrowed his brow in confusion. "Do you really not know what you are?"

He was shocked. And she was shocked by his shock. "Do you?"

"Of course," he scoffed. "You're a sorceress."

A flood of emotion overwhelmed her. A sorceress. She didn't know much about it, but at least it was a name. Something that explained what had been happening to her, and around her, for as long as she could remember. Sage had first recognized her power at the age of five when a blender her foster mother used to make a seaweed breakfast smoothie had exploded. Sage had wanted Lucky Charms. She'd won that battle.

Sage had long since believed that anything was possible. Growing up she'd been called a witch by everyone around her. She hadn't been able to maintain friendships because as soon as she'd gotten mad, bad things would happen. She had been tossed out of home after home because she was "bad". In high school, students, and even teachers, had whispered rumors of witchcraft behind her back. Sorcery was not a stretch from witchcraft. But more importantly, there were more of her out there. She was almost giddy with excitement.

"A sorceress," she said out loud. She could get used to the sound of that.

"Yes," he said. "A very powerful one, apparently." He glared at her with contempt, knocking the wind out of her newly flown sails. "But I can tell you're untrained. Most of us have been guided by teachers and mentors since we were very young. We've had years to learn how to

control our powers. It's a good thing your aim is shite because the first Bolt you sent could have killed me." His expression was biting.

A Bolt? At his unbending glare she yelled, "Well nobody taught me!"

"Obviously," he answered. "Who are your parents?"

"I don't know," she admitted, a hint of sorrow in her voice. She felt the rope tighten across her chest. She looked up at him in panic.

"I'm not playing games, Sage. I want names."

She creased her brow in confusion. "I told you I don't know!"

The rope started crushing her chest until she could barely breathe. He was speaking to her again but the words sounded far away, like she was under water. She pleaded with her eyes but he was fading.

When she awoke she was coughing and sputtering. Cold water drenched her face but at least she could breathe again. When she recognized where she was, anger and fear surged through her.

"You made me black out?!" she yelled, struggling against the enchanted rope. "Are you trying to kill me?!"

"It's really quite simple, Sage," he answered in clipped tones. "Answer the questions and we won't have a problem."

"I already told you I don't know who my parents are! I'm not lying! My mother left me at the hospital to be adopted right when I was born. I had a name and that was it." She dropped her head, feeling helpless and broken. She would have cried if she hadn't banned it years ago. This was the most vulnerable she had felt in a long time. God, she hated it.

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely. "I can see now that you're not lying." She sent him an icy glare. "If I let you loose, do you promise not to run away?"

She nodded. She didn't have a choice anyway. This man, that she now guessed was a sorcerer, was clearly more powerful than she.

"I'm going to remove the rope. Don't move from that chair," he told her firmly. "If you try to run, I *will* catch you. Understand?"

It really couldn't get any more humiliating. "Yes," she said, sounding bored instead of defeated, like she felt. The lighted rope released her and she stretched out her arms. If it was a

normal person guarding her, she'd have either run or fought. But since the arrogant spawn of Satan stood by her instead, she knew she wouldn't stand a chance against him. So, for the first time in her life, Sage sucked up her pride and allowed someone to tell her what to do.

She used the back of her hand to try to wipe the water out of her eyes. The professor sighed then approached her with the corner of his trench coat. She flinched back with a horrified expression. Ignoring her weak protests he stepped in front of her, his abdomen at eye level.

"Hands down," he said impatiently. She clutched the chair angrily as he wiped her face and neck with his coat. Despite his tone, he was gentle.

"Here's the thing, Sage," he said when he was done. "There are rules for our kind. You can't go around using magic anytime you please. That's not how it works and it's going to get you in a lot of trouble. More than you realize. You're only lucky it hasn't caught up to you so far."

"Well, I've never known anyone else like me. How am I supposed to know all the rules for your magical wizard world? I can barely follow *people* rules in my own world."

"I know. And that's why I've decided to train you." He said it with so much resolution that Sage thought he was joking at first.

"Excuse me?" She raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think I want to be trained? And by you, no less?"

He stood over her with folded arms. "I don't really see how you have a choice."

"Umm...yes, I do. It's called 'no'. No, I will not be *trained*," she exaggerated the word, "by you. I'm not a dog."

"How will you know what the rules are for our kind?" he challenged.

"I don't know. Don't you have a book or something?"

"What happens when your powers get out of your control? You need someone watching your back."

"Yes, that's just what I want," she answered bitterly. "*You* watching my back. Did you forget the part where you suffocated me until I blacked out?"

He took a deep breath. "What if I told you that I could make you more powerful?" This piqued her interest. Momentarily. "You could be ten times stronger, Sage. With some guidance and practice-"

“No thanks,” she snapped. “I’ll figure it out on my own.”

He didn’t seem shocked by her refusal, which made Sage uneasy. “You’ll lose your job after they see the broken lights upstairs.” She looked down at her hands still clutching the chair tightly. Her knuckles were white with tension. “It’s going to start getting cold soon. If this isn’t your first time on this side of the country you know the winters can be rough.”

She snapped her head up at him. “How do you know I don’t have somewhere else to stay?” *Pompous, arrogant jerk!*

He ignored her question and raked his gaze over her body. She shifted uncomfortably in the chair. “When’s the last time you ate?”

“Lunch,” she told him proudly.

“And before that?”

She looked down again. She couldn’t remember but didn’t want him knowing that. He clicked his tongue like he already knew it.

“Come with me, Sage. I’ll give you a warm place to sleep and regular meals. All you have to do is allow me to teach you how to use your powers responsibly.”

She’d grown up with the old adage: if something seemed too good to be true, it usually was. “What’s your angle?” Now she raked her gaze over him. “If you think I’ll sleep with you, you can forget it. I’d rather starve.”

“No angle. Just a sense of obligation. You’re dangerous and need to be controlled before you hurt somebody,” he said evenly. “I don’t want that on my conscience.”

“*Controlled?* Who the hell do you think-”

“Don’t be stubborn,” he said, not even phased that he interrupted her. “You look like you’re half starved.” She grimaced. She’d always been proud of her curves. She looked down at herself realizing her jeans were hanging loosely on her hips. She huffed in irritation. “Don’t let your pride get in the way of taking something good that’s offered.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“Nor I you. But what do you have to lose?”

Everything. And nothing. “What about my job?” she asked.

“You’ll have to leave of course.” At her disapproving expression he amended, “But you’ll be able to get a better job. One that doesn’t involve scrubbing toilets.”

I can't believe I'm considering this. The allure of the food alone was almost enough for her to agree. Even if it meant living with a stranger. She'd done that before anyhow. Even though the professor bugged the hell out of her, she could tell he wasn't a sleazy pervert. And maybe that was the best she was going to get. With a warm bed and free food, she could concentrate on saving money to finally take some classes that actually counted towards a degree. One step closer to a normal life.

"All right. But just so you know, I sleep with one eye open. So don't try anything."

"What makes you think you're my type?"

She scowled. *And now he insults me? Bastard.*

"Just give me a few minutes to get my things," she told him. She gestured to the hallway and waited for him to leave. He didn't budge. "Privacy?"

"My wallet?"

Oh. That. She sighed then pulled it out of her back pocket. He opened it then looked at her blankly.

"There was twenty dollars in here," he said.

She sighed again, took the twenty out of her other pocket, and slapped it into his palm. He grabbed her hand and pulled her close. "You have no need to steal anymore, Sorceress," he whispered in her ear.

She smirked. How little he knew about her world.

After packing her meager belongings, Sage trudged up the stairs following the professor to his car. For some reason, she got the distinct feeling she was saying hello to physical comforts but goodbye to freedom.

"You know, you never told me your name," she said.

He answered over his shoulder, "You don't know my name? After all my classes you've taken?"

"I was kinda sorta busy trying not to get caught. Not to mention attempting to *learn* something," she answered defensively then muttered under her breath, "Not like all of the idiots there just wasting Mommy and Daddy's money."

He turned to look at her and said, "Now *that* we can agree on." They were at his car, a black Mazda 3, perfectly polished and clean. "Professor Elias." He stuck out his hand to shake

hers. She arched a disbelieving brow and he took away his un-shaken hand to unlock the doors. “But you can call me James.” He looked down at her duffle bag. “Is that all you have?”

She nodded. He raised his brows but tossed the bag in the car. “Oh! I almost forgot,” she said. “I need to say goodbye to someone.” *How could I forget Tony?*

“Who? The rat you shared a bed with?”

Sage’s nostrils flared and she huffed in a breath. *How dare he make fun of where I come from!* She felt the sudden urge to hurt him. Her palms sparked and a gust of wind flew by causing goose bumps to rise on her bare arms. James looked momentarily stunned before turning his gaze to Sage’s increasing anger. His eyes flickered across the parking lot but Sage knew it was empty. Night classes were small and already in session.

“Calm down,” he ordered. Blue light grew in her palms. His eyes darkened with angry threats. “Stop this,” he ordered again. *Seriously?* She focused the light between her hands, forming it into a ball. A smirk formed uncontrollably on her lips but she wiped it away quickly. “Sage, extinguish that Bolt or I will have to intervene. And you won’t like it when I do.”

“Do you really think *ordering* me to calm down is going to work?” she said. “If this is your teaching method, I’m better off on my own.”

He took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose as if struggling to compose himself. Then he surprised her by saying, “You’re right. I’m sorry. Just calm down. Please.”

Slowly she began to relax, her breath steadied and her heart rate slowed. “Don’t make fun of my circumstances again,” she told him sternly as the light in her hands faded. “I’ve done the best that I can.” Hot tears threatened to fall but she pulled them back. Damn. She’d been with James less than an hour and he’d managed to almost make her cry twice. She was disappointed in herself more than she was angry with him.

He took a hesitant step towards her, one hand reached out. “I won’t. I swear it.”

She looked at his hand with disgust and a strong gust of wind blew through Sage’s hair making her shudder. She closed her eyes and the wind stopped. James’ forehead creased. “Are you-”

“Sage?” a familiar voice yelled from behind her. She swung around to see Tony’s puzzled face from the entrance of the school’s main building. Sage gave James one last icy glare then ran to Tony.

“What are you doing?” Tony asked when she reached him. The wind was gone but a slow drizzle had begun.

“I’m sorry, Tony. I...I...have to leave,” she said looking back at James, who was now sitting in the car. “I know this is last minute and I feel terrible but...” *But what, Sage? A stranger offered you food and shelter and now you’re selling out?* She gave her head an inward shake. *Survival. It’s always about survival.*

Tony looked from Sage’s agonized face to James’ solemn expression and asked, “Are you in trouble, Sage? Is that man bothering you?”

She shook her head. “He’s...he’s going to take care of me. It’s an opportunity I just...can’t pass up.” Tony’s expression grew concerned. “I’ll be okay. Really. You know me. I’m always fine. I can take care of myself.”

Tony didn’t seem convinced but he nodded. “If you need anything, you know you can come to me, right?” Sage smiled. “And if that man hurts you in anyway, I’ve got a guy who can take care of that.”

She choked on a laugh. “What, do you have a hit man on speed dial, Tony?”

She smiled at her own joke but it faded when she saw that Tony didn’t smile back. *Oh my God, he does have a hit man on speed dial!* “Well, thank you...for the job. For the food. For everything.” They stood awkwardly for a moment then Sage threw her arms around his neck. Tony wrapped his arms around her waist and she realized he was the closest thing she’d ever had to a father, even though she’d only known him a few months. But her life had been full of loss. Tony was just one more person to add to the list. And honestly, it didn’t break her heart.

The ride to James’ home was silent but short. He lived only a few miles from the campus. It was a quiet rural neighborhood with the houses spread far apart. She couldn’t tell much more about it in the dark. James pulled into the driveway of a small but quaint blue house.

“Welcome home,” he said. She couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic but she gave him a cutting glare. He opened the back door and carried her bag towards the house. *At least he’s not a complete ass.*

“What do you have in this bag?” he asked. “Rocks?”

Nope, still an ass.

“None of your business,” she snapped, attempting to grab it back but he put an arm out to stop her.

Once inside he flipped on the lights and they were in a smallish kitchen. Attached was a living room with wide windows on three sides. Not bad for a bachelor. She assumed he was unmarried. It didn’t seem likely a woman would take too kindly to her husband bringing home a twenty-five year old girl like a lost puppy. James walked her through the kitchen and down a hallway. He pointed out a bathroom, then flung open a door across the hall.

“This will be your room.” He dropped her bag inside. It was small but cozy. There was a full size bed with a quilt that looked like a grandmother stitched it. The only other thing in the room was a small desk with a reading lamp and office chair. “Is it okay?”

She glared at him. “Really? You plucked me out of a school storage cellar and you’re asking me if the accommodations are suitable?”

He stared awkwardly at the floor. “Look. We got off on the wrong foot.” *No kidding, you tried to strangle me with a magic rope*, she wanted to yell. “But I want you to know you can trust me.”

She had to stop herself from bursting out loud laughing. Trust? In one day? That was not something she could afford. With anyone. Especially not a demanding male who was clearly used to being in control. Well, she had control issues too. And when it came to a battle of wills, she always won. “The room is fine,” she said. “Believe me, I’ve slept in worse than even that basement.”

He gave her a puzzled look. He opened his mouth to say something but she cut him off. “Okay. I’m tired. So...I guess I’ll see you in the morning.” She started to close the door but he stopped it with a foot.

“Do you have any questions?” He seemed to be making an attempt at kindness, which was all the more maddening.

As if on cue, Sage’s stomach growled. “Umm...food? I *do* need to eat. Unless there’s some kind of magic sorcery pill that will provide all my nutritional needs.” She paused, tapping her chin. “Actually, even then I’d still need to eat.”

“Relax. I’m not going to starve you. We will discuss all those details in the morning.”

She felt an odd sense of dread about these details. Too tired to worry about it, she nodded.

“Do you want to eat something right now?” he asked harshly, seeming upset with himself he hadn’t thought of it sooner.

She shook her head. “I’m tired. I can wait till the morning.”

He studied her face with furrowed brows and just when she thought he was going to insist she eat something, she snapped, “Goodnight,” then slammed the door.

Sage sat on the edge of the bed fingering the quilt as she processed what had just happened. Life had taught Sage to be adaptable and resourceful. This was proving to be another situation where she needed to access those skills to survive. And maybe not just survive this time. Maybe she would thrive. Even though she didn’t care for the man whom she now depended on for everything, he appeared to be ready to feed her and teach her. She could adjust. She *would* adjust, just like always. If she could learn more about her abilities – how to harness them and control them – maybe that would be her ticket to a normal life. Just thinking of the possibilities made Sage smile as she drifted off to her first full night of sleep in years.

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