

# P R Y D E

Sin Series, Book One

E.N. Chaffin

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# DEDICATION

This book is for all the readers who want something more than makeout scenes in the stories they read. Also to my Shih Tzu Annie. If I don't thank her, she might glare at me.

*PRIDE is spiritual cancer. It eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense.*

C.S. Lewis

# PROLOGUE

LAVANYA STOPPED SHORT AND hid before any of the traffickers spotted her. They may not have the ability to sense or see her through the pelting rain, but they were trained to detect hunters like her. Missions like these always needed a bit more finesse. Especially with cockroaches like them.

With her back against the large oak, she took out two communication orbs from her coat pocket. She pressed them between her hands and pushed some of her energy into them. She whispered to them, “I wish to hear those men.” Then, she dropped the bigger one.

The orb camouflaged into its surroundings and whizzed through the summer leaves. Lavanya hoped it worked properly. Her informant had assured her it would, but experimental pixie technology was always finicky.

She pushed away some loose strands of her fiery hair and placed the other, smaller orb, inside one ear, just enough to keep it in place.

A crackling filled her ear as the larger orb settled into some shrubbery. She listened.

“Where’s the boss?” one grunted.

“On his way,” another said. “His plane landed half an hour ago and the package is with him.”

“Man! Couldn’t we meet him at the airport? This storm’s killing me.”

“Idiot,” a third, rougher voice said.

A smack sounded through the make-shift earpiece and Lavanya flinched.

“Hey!”

“That’d be too suspicious. Who knows how many hunters would be waiting for us. This is

the safest place to meet.”

The first man grumbled too low for Lavanya to hear, though she had no problem imagining what he said. Nevertheless, she confirmed they did not know she was there.

For the last two years, Lavanya had been sent on solo missions to retrieve kidnapped civilians from the clutches of traffickers, with only a small back-up crew for cleanup. Each mission was successful, if only for the information the spy leaked to her and the guild. Yet, Lavanya couldn't shake the feeling the safety of young, innocent lives wasn't the only reason the spy kept helping. Until she proved otherwise to the guild master, she would save as many lives as possible.

When the traffickers were turned away, Lavanya crept a few feet closer. Thunder shielded the crunch of leaves. She knelt and hid behind a fallen dogwood. She waited. Their small talk droned on. She closed her eyes and pushed her energy into her retinas, activating her Sight. Her eyes shot open and the world appeared in static grey. The men's energies engulfed their bodies. Even from this distance, she easily pinpointed each of them. The two smaller ones gave off stark white tones – humans. The big one let off a forest-green – shapeshifter. She pursed her lips. Too bad energy never let on what subspecies.

They didn't appear to be too much of a hassle. Then, again, there was no telling how many traffickers would be with their boss. If she was not careful, she would fail this mission.

A crystallized stone – her spirit stone – warmed against her skin. She kept the necklace hidden under her shirt and pressed her hand against it. Her sisters were reassuring her. Their power was hers to use. Instead of taking some, she settled the stone. She did not need to take the energy they had stored centuries ago. Especially since the stone had been broken. It was too fragile to use on a daily basis. Better to save it for a disaster, not for a retrieval mission.

The orb in her ear crackled again. Lavanya focused on her prey.

“What does the boss need with a kid anyway? Weren’t we doing more teens now,” the first one said. His finger traced along his gun holster.

“Who cares?” The second one stretched his arms. “As long as we get our cut, it’s fine with me.”

The shapeshifter grumbled. “Bunch of humans- Why did he even hire you two?”

The first spat on the ground. “Look here, monster, you may have fur and claws, but that’s nothing compared to my firepower.” He patted his gun.

The shapeshifter snickered. “By the time it takes you to draw, I’d have your head ripped off.”

“Would you two quit?” the second human said. “It’s bad enough we’re in this storm. Don’t make it worse.”

“Is this kid even worth it?” the first asked.

“Supposed to be. It’s coming all the way from. . .”

Beams of light washed over the men. A black car. Their boss was here.

She readied herself. The dogwood she hid behind twisted the last bit of its life energy around her hand. It mixed with her own, as if to aid her with its dying breath.

The car slowed to a stop a few feet away from the men. The shapeshifter walked towards it as the two humans stayed. The shifter opened the back passenger door. Lavanya had to squint to catch a glimpse of pinkish-red energy. A vampire, though not a powerful one.

Lavanya dug her heeled leather boots into the ground. She took a deep breath and let it out as she pushed her energy into her hidden knives. This was it.

She unsheathed one obsidian knife and shot it straight towards the car. The front tire wheezed and startled the group.

She leapt over the fallen tree and raced towards the two humans. She launched herself into the air, hands grabbing for the twin knives on her back.

“What-”

She hit the first one’s neck with the hilt of her knife. Hard. The human fell, his unholstered gun thrown from his hands. She smacked the second one in the same spot. Two down.

A roar shook the forest. Lavanya spun. The shifter rocketed towards her, his skin tearing off into brown fur. She charged him as muzzle broke through mouth. A grizzly or Kodiak, she thought as she held up her knives, the obsidian blades drenched in purple energy. She flipped the hilt of one and punched blade-first at the side of the shifter’s snout. Roars erupted from his massive form. She spun around and dug her other knife into his hip. He fell to the ground with a thud. The sleeping toxin she had drenched the knife in earlier took immediate effect.

Lavanya jumped to the front of the car and stopped.

Fisher. He was the vampire. He held his prize – the child – in front of him, a knife of his own up to the girl’s throat. Scum.

Fisher’s pink energy flickered with what Lavanya presumed was fear or anger. She could never tell with him.

“You’ve come to ruin my fun again, Endowed one?”

She smiled. “Can’t I have a little of my own?”

Lavanya forced herself to focus on him. She wanted to make sure the child was alright, but if she looked away now it spelt death for her and a life of slavery for the little one. It didn’t help this crime lord was her enemy. He had given her trouble since the first day they met.

Fisher bared his teeth. “Come closer and-”

“And what? You would kill her? I don’t think you’d harm your precious income like that.”

He grinned. "If it means you leave me be, I'd do it."

She kept up her smooth facade. There had to be a way to get the child to safety.

Thunder sounded in the distance. The storm had died down, she realized, as droplets hit her skin. They hissed as they hit her burning necklace. There was a way, her sisters reassured her. There was always a way.

"How about this?" Lavanya sheathed her knives and placed her hands on her hips. "Let the girl go and I'll let you go." She brushed a lock of her hair back, and touched the small orb still in her ear. Its other half crept up behind the vampire. "Easy."

"Or-" he tightened his grip on the girl "-I keep her and you can die!"

Lavanya jumped as claws tore through the air. The shifter was on his feet.

She cursed and landed on the other side of the car.

A shot rang. The orb sprung in front of her and caught the bullet. Its light diminished and it thumped to the mossy ground.

Lavanya glared at the car's driver. A handgun pointed straight at her, golden energy misting from the shadowed figure. Really? This two-bit vampire had a child of the Fey working for him?

"It's over, hunter," Fisher said. "You're done for-"

The child screamed. Lavanya didn't take her eyes off the Fey as something or someone dropped to the ground. The shifter roared.

The gun lowered slightly. Lavanya threw a knife into the car. The Fey hissed and let go of the weapon. She charged and threw a smaller knife. Her foe screamed as the iron blade hit the scaly hand.

She leapt over the car, spun in the air, and landed onto the shifter's back. He roared and spun, trying to buck her off. She held fast to his fur and took out another orb, this one solid pearl.

She yelled in a long-forgotten tongue.

The orb shone and Lavanya pressed it against the shifter. She held on as bands of light wrapped themselves around the shifter and restricted his movement and power. He struggled as his form shrunk. His fur changed into skin; his muzzle morphed into a simple mouth and jaw.

Lavanya stepped off the shapeshifter. "There. Now stay."

She glanced over to where Fisher had once stood. Now, he was on the ground. He trembled as he covered his stomach. Her hand went for his shoulder, but he slapped it away.

"S-stay away, witch."

She opened her mouth but stopped short. Her hand was now covered with blood, tinged with a light pink energy. Vampires didn't bleed. At least not from a small wound.

She glared down at him. His black eyes glared back.

"Fine. I don't have to heal you." She shrugged. She wanted to refute his accusation. She was no witch. Yet, she knew better than to argue with an arrogant soul.

She left him there. He was too weak to fight, let alone run. She would call for help. Later. With the traffickers out of the way, she could focus on what really mattered.

She took the small orb from her ear, its glow dim. She pushed a little more energy into it. "I wish to find that child."

The orb floated from her hand and bobbed around in one direction, then another. Then it stopped.

"You can't find her?" Lavanya asked.

It zoomed its way through the trees and shrubbery.

She ran after it.

She didn't have far to go before it stopped. It hovered around a few bushes. Its glow lit up

the face of the small child.

Lavanya crouched down and offered her hand. Slow. Slow.

The girl didn't give off much energy. Lavanya couldn't tell if she was a human or magus or what. Lavanya shut her eyes and pushed her own energy back into her core. She opened them and the world was its darkened self again.

"Hey there, little one," she said softly. "I'm here to rescue you."

The child bit her lip in response.

"I'm not like those men. I won't hurt you."

"Th-the shadows," the girl whispered.

"No shadows here. Just me. And you."

"And that?" A small finger pointed to the orb.

"It's like a little toy of mine. See?" She moved her finger and the orb followed, floating around the girl's head.

The girl smiled. She edged out of the dark and towards Lavanya. She was too skinny. Her brown skin showed one too many bruises and cuts. Her long, black hair was matted down.

She took Lavanya's hand.

"My name is Lavanya. I protect little ones like you."

"L-like Haumea?"

"Haumea?" Lavanya stood.

"She's the mother."

Lavanya tilted her head to the side. "Something like that, I suppose." She squeezed the girl's hand. "Let me make a quick call. Then, we can leave and get you a bath."

The girl held her hand in both of hers as Lavanya took out her phone. She flipped it open

and pressed '2', then waited.

A man's voice greeted her. "Status report?"

"Nikolai. I'm done." She surveyed the scene behind her. "Send the police to my location. I got five down. All from the Trade. Minor injuries, except for a bear shifter and that vampire jerk we've been tailing. And get our medic out here too. I have a child on my hands."

"The technology team received your coordinates. We're sending aid now."

"Thank you."

"Sure."

Lavanya shut her phone and put it away.

She examined the child. Lavanya had heeled boots on, but the girl didn't even pass her stomach.

"How old are you, little one?"

The girl pressed her lips together and moved away ever so slightly.

"It's alright. You don't have to tell me."

"E-eleven."

"Really now?"

The girl nodded.

"And your name?"

This time the girl hid her face behind her matted hair. Lavanya leaned down to see her big brown eyes, but the girl looked away.

"What would you like to be called?"

Lavanya waited as the girl swayed from one foot to another. Then, she peeked up.

"Kai. Call me, Kai."

“Well, Kai, let’s go wait for backup. Shall we?”

She led Kai through the trees, and searched for a good place to wait for Nikolai’s team.

“How about over there?” Lavanya pointed to a spot. “What do you say– are you alright?”

The girl didn’t speak. Her body shook, her eyes widened, her lips trembled. Lavanya unsheathed a knife and looked around.

Nothing.

She kneeled by the girl’s side. “What’s the matter? What is it?”

The girl shook her head furiously. She whimpered and tried to pull away.

“Kai. Tell me. What’s wrong?”

Lightning lit up the forest. There!

A shadow hurtled towards them.

Lavanya pushed Kai behind her. She attacked.

Thunder rattled the world around them as the creature shrieked its last.

The world stilled.

Was that it? But where did the shadow creature come from? Why did it attack-

Kai screamed.

Lavanya’s chest tightened. She whipped around. The girl laid on the ground, convulsing.

“Kai!” Lavanya fell to her knees. She awakened her Sight and gasped. Black energy surrounded the girl.

She wrapped Kai in her arms. “It’s going to be alright.”

She laid her hand on Kai’s chest. She swirled her energy inside her and pressed some into her hand and into Kai’s body.

Whatever the black energy belonged to hissed at her. It lashed out.

She whipped her energy, hitting it.

It screeched and latched onto her power.

She tried to pull away, but the thing – the creature–

Its claws shot out of the girl’s body and stabbed into Lavanya’s arm.

She cried. She held Kai tight with one arm and pulled her other away. Hard.

Lavanya half gasped, half screamed. The creature was pure shadow. Images of the past flashed in her mind. She knew this creature – this monster. She couldn’t win against it. Not with her own energy.

The creature dug into her arm and energy deeper. It reached for her neck–

A bright, purple light shone. Her spirit stone – her sisters – called her to act.

Lavanya grabbed her spirit stone.

The shadow tore itself away from her arm, but dug itself into Kai’s body. Lavanya cursed. She wrapped her energy around it, but it rooted itself into the girl’s body even more.

She pressed her stone against Kai’s jerking chest, ignoring the girl’s screams. She took a deep breath. She hadn’t done this in years. But she needed to. For Kai.

Lavanya closed her eyes and whispered in the forbidden tongue. She calmed herself as much as she could as the girl shook violently. Just a little of her sisters’ power trickled out of the stone and into the girl. As the last words left Lavanya’s lips, the girl settled down into her arms.

Lavanya held the girl close and cradled her. “You’re going to be fine, Kai.” Yet, she frowned as a black triangle formed on the girl’s wrist. The binding bracelet was complete. She had no other choice but to use the forbidden arts.

“You’re going to be fine,” she lied. “Just fine.”

# ONE

KAI DODGED AS HER opponent's fist swiped at her face. This burly man was getting very annoyed and she loved it.

“Come on!” jeered a voice from the crowd. “Can't even knock out a teenage girl!”

Her opponent growled.

He threw fist after fist after fist. She dodged and dodged and dodged. He was easy to read. Left, left, right, left, right.

He pushed her towards a corner of the ring. Someone else might have been scared at this point. Not her. The rush of fighting thrilled her. She felt alive. She felt strong.

“Get her, Jack!”

“Don't string him along! End it!”

She backed into the ring's ropes. He sneered and barreled towards her-

Kai ducked and shot up between the man's arms. She swung up and hit him square in the jaw. The crowd whistled and jeered as the Endowed one fell. His body thudded on the stage floor. There was no sign of him getting up. Not this time.

“The winner for the fifth time in a row-” Rowdy, the announcer, lifted her sleeved arm into the air “-Kai!”

Boos and cheers rang throughout the gym. Kai's grin grew as her opponent was scooped up by his friends. She was the undefeated champion of this make-shift tournament and she enjoyed every second of it.

“You go, girl!” Curly blonde hair bounced to her side and squeezed her tight.

“C-can’t br-breathe-”

“Whoops.” Goldi let go and patted her back. “Sorry.”

Kai swatted her away playfully. “Trying to kill me when I’m wounded, huh?”

Goldie giggled. “It wouldn’t be too terrible a tactic to use. At least for someone as strong as you are.”

Rowdy brought the weekly fights to a close and the audience dispersed into smaller groups. Some disappointed individuals gave cash to cheerier ones. Kai smirked. They should have thought twice about betting against her. Of course, there was no fun if everyone was on her side.

“Here.” Goldi handed her a clean towel.

Kai wiped her face and short, spiky hair as both of them exited the ring. The sparse crowd parted as they made their way into the locker room. She looked around. Good. No one else was here.

“What’s on the agenda now?”

“Shower, of course.” Kai sat down on a bench and pulled at the ties of her hand wraps.

“I meant with training. The Trial isn’t for another few days - oh, let me do it-” Goldi sat next to her and undid the ties with ease “-but there isn’t another mini-tournament before then.”

“I’ll think of something.” Kai forced herself not to twitch as Goldi’s delicate fingers brushed against her skin, though her flesh burned with every touch. Her scars always acted up after she worked up a sweat.

“There’s not many competitors for the junior league who would want to spar against you, Miss I’ll-knock-your-teeth-in.”

Kai feigned shock. “Is that how you see me?”

“How else would I see you when you keep pounding people into the ground?”

“Not my fault they step into the ring.” Kai nudged the other girl’s shoulder. “Of course, I’ve never fought against you.”

Bluebell eyes rolled and the everlasting smile twitched at the edges. “I don’t do one-on-one combat like you.”

“Saving yourself from embarrassment?”

Goldi lightly shoved into her shoulder.

Kai winced slightly. She would have to make sure to use some of the healing cream she had taken from Lavanya’s stash that night. It was the only thing that helped soothe her burning scars at this point.

She shoved the pain away – just a few more hours – and brought her attention back to Goldi. “You think I could convince a senior hunter to step into the ring?”

Kai wanted as much practice as she could shove into the little time she had left. She knew she was good - she held her own against anyone on her level - but she also knew she was at a disadvantage. The binding mark on her wrist reminded her every day. Unlike everyone else in the guild, she was the only one who had her energy – her power – locked away. She had to work twice as hard and three times as much as anyone else. She just needed a little more time in the ring before the Trial to prove herself. To prove she was strong enough to save people. Just a little more.

Goldi giggled. “As if.” She rolled up the bits of cloth into two neat spools. “One, none of their schedules are open enough to whip you. And two, Lavanya would never allow it.”

“Lavanya would never allow what?”

The two girls looked up as a designer-clad figure sauntered up in a sleek pair of heeled boots.

Goldi jumped up and hugged the woman. “Lava! You’re home! I love the braid. It looks

like a whip of fire. So awesome!”

“Oh, thank you, sweetie.” Lavanya squeezed her back. “I love your hugs.” Green eyes pleaded. “Too bad my own ward never hugs me.”

Kai shook her head. “Eh, Kumu. I'm not a child.”

“Neither is Goldi.”

“I'm not Goldi.” Kai stood and shoved the bandages into her jacket pocket. “I'm gonna take a shower.”

“Wait a minute.” Lavanya pulled out of Goldi's grasp. “I need to talk to you.”

Kai yawned loudly. “About?”

Lavanya glanced at Goldi.

“Oh.” Goldi giggled. “Bye-bye.” She waved and pranced off. Or at least pretended to.

Lavanya smiled and shook her head. “That girl.”

“I know, right?” Kai said. “She can't figure out personal space.”

“We both know you like socializing with her.” Lavanya ruffled Kai's hair.

Kai swatted her away. “No touchy!”

“I wish you'd grow it out again. Or at least style it better.”

“And what's wrong with sporadic spikes?” Kai preened her hair, fluffing it up just right.

“Well . . . you sometimes look like a cactus.”

Kai scrunched her nose. “Well unlike you, goddess of a thousand blades, I can't fight with waist-long hair. Besides, I cut it for a reason.”

Lavanya sighed. “I know. It was a part of your old life. Maybe you can grow it down to your shoulders?”

“No shoulders.”

“Alright. Then how about I buy you a new jacket. That one seems to be getting quite worn out.”

Kai glanced down. Besides a few loose threads and a hole or two at the edges, it seemed fine to her.

She looked up at Lavanya. The woman towered over her – gah, she hated those heels. With those on, she barely came to Lavanya’s shoulders.

Kai tilted her head. “What is it?”

“I’ll be gone tonight. And I’d like you to-”

“On a mission?” Kai perked up. “You’re going on a mission, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but-”

”And I’m coming too. Right?”

Lavanya shook her head. “I’m afraid not.”

Kai huffed and moved around Lavanya. She jerked open her locker. “Why can’t that sack of bones let me go with you?”

“Don’t talk about Radulf in such a manner.”

“Oh, come on!” Kai threw her gym bag on the bench. “How old is the vampire? You can’t tell me that night walker’s body wouldn’t turn to dust without his magic?”

Lavanya chuckled. “At least I know you’re doing some of your homework, although vampires can-”

“Walk in the daylight. I know. I’ve been doing all of my schoolwork.”

“Your teachers told me otherwise.” Lavanya grabbed a clean towel from a nearby stack. “You can’t go with me tonight. I need you to stay here and focus on your studies. Your grades have been slipping.”

“Seriously?” Kai wrenched her bag open, nearly tearing off the zipper. “All the other junior candidates have already gone on missions with their guardians. Why am I the only one who hasn't?”

“You know the reason.” Lavanya offered the towel.

“Because you can't trust me.” Kai snatched it away.

“Because my missions are vital and secretive. If word was to get out about them, it'd be detrimental to the guild's safety.”

“Because you can't trust me.”

“Kai-”

“You know you can trust me, right?” Kai shoved the rolled bandages into the bag.

“I know I can. It's not about that.” Lavanya's tone stayed cool and even. It irked Kai. “My missions can be much more dangerous than those of other guild members.”

“I know how to protect myself.” Kai gestured with a bar of soap. “Have you not seen me in the ring?”

“That, young lady, is a regulated fight without magic.”

“It still counts. And I know how to keep a secret. I'm doing it right now, in fact. I just can't tell you because that would break the secret.” A secret so big, she didn't dare tell herself. “So there. Two essentials to a successful mission.”

Lavanya gently pushed the soap away from her face. “These missions of mine are not designed for a junior hunter, let alone a trainee.”

“What mission is?”

“The simple ones.”

“So the ones every other guardian gets but you? Next, you'll be telling me I can't be in the Trial, because it wasn't designed for someone like me.”

Lavanya stared, unwavering.

“No.”

“Kai, I just don’t think-”

“You can’t do this! Every other trainee is allowed to enter if they want.”

“Only if their guardians approve it first.” Lavanya crossed her arms in front of her chest.

“And I know you’ve been working hard, but I don’t think you’re-”

“Don’t say it!” Kai growled. Her cheeks burned as her stare hardened on Lavanya. “I’ve worked hard for three long years for this one moment. Don’t take that away from me.”

“Fighting an opponent in a ring is different than hunting down a target.” Lavanya stood strong. “I know you’ve trained up your physical strength. I saw your matches. You’re good. In the ring.”

“You and Radulf need to let me out in the field! Let me show you what I can do.”

“Kai-”

“What are you afraid of? Is the little power I have not enough?”

“No more-”

“Then release me.” Kai shoved her left wrist in Lavanya’s face. “Let me learn how to control all of my power instead of hiding from it. I can control the shadow now. I just know it-”

Lavanya knocked Kai’s hand away and hissed in her ear. “Makaio. Enough.”

Kai stiffened. Her lips soldered shut.

Lavanya kept her voice low. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t save you any other way. But I don’t want you to attempt anything w throws your life away just so you can get stronger. Until I find a way to extract the shadow creature from you, patience will be your friend. I promise. I’m working hard so you can have your life back. Just bear with me.”

Kai nodded. She didn't dare look into those guilty green eyes.

Lavanya rubbed her head. "I'll be home as soon as I can. You should study for your midterms. Maybe rope Goldi into having a study sleepover in the library."

"Sure," Kai mumbled.

"See you later."

"See you."

Kai waited until the door shut behind Lavanya. Then, she slumped down on the bench.

Her stomach flipped when Lavanya used her real name. She was weak to allow the woman to even learn that name. Her stomach broiled to find the woman still felt guilty for saving her like she did.

Kai groaned. She laid her head in her arms. She knew it wasn't Lavanya's fault her shifter power had to be bound. The shadow creature that had attacked her had latched onto her magic, her life force. If Lavanya hadn't used the binding spell, Kai would have died. She should be thankful. She wanted to be. But not if it meant she couldn't excel past trainee status in the guild.

A chill drifted over her. Her muscles tensed as the locker room darkened. It was here again.

*You were weak then.* A voice spoke. It came from no person or animal. *You're weak now.* It dripped from the corners and seeped from under the benches. *Let me help you.* It drifted from every dark crevice.

Kai shivered as the cold settled in.

She looked at her wrist. Black ink was wrapped around her wrist, nearly complete save for the triangle directly under her palm. The binding spell's mark. It was still intact. The creature inside of her was still bound. The other creature, the shadow that taunted her now, was a different one.

Kai didn't know for sure, but she guessed with a shadow bound to her, she was a target for other shadows. It had been this way since Lavanya saved her. She had never spoken a word to the woman about it, though. If she had, she would never be able to fight or train at all. She would be treated like a fragile doll and be kept away from anything that could break her. So she kept the taunts and attacks secret from everyone. Kai would get strong enough to handle this on her own. She just knew it.

Kai steadied her breathing. She would not let it control her. Not this time.

She focused on the binding mark. It wasn't broken. It kept the shadow in her at bay. Sure it limited her. She couldn't access all of her shifter abilities. She couldn't even write with her left hand anymore - she had been forced to learn how to write all over again with her right hand. But she took comfort in how it resembled the tattoos warriors would receive back home. It was her battle scar.

As she focused, the room lightened and her body warmed. The shadow's taunts grew softer. The attack ended.

Kai breathed in deep and let out a hefty sigh. "You can quit hiding, Goldi."

The bubbly teen popped out from the shower area. "Why, whatever do you mean? I was just cleaning-"

"I heard you come in the hallway door when Lavanya was nagging. How much did you hear?" Kai knocked her bag onto the floor.

Goldi shrugged. "Not much. It's hard to eavesdrop when water runs through the pipes." She slid onto the bench, right next to Kai. "And I got stuck."

Kai halfheartedly shoved her. "No Trial. No mission. Not for me."

"I'm sorry, girl." Goldi wrapped her arms around her and hugged.

Her arms whined, but Kai ignored them. She enjoyed hugs, though she'd never admit it.

Goldi let go. "So, what are you going to do?"

"Shower."

"Just that?"

Kai's brow rose. "What else? Do you really want to study tonight?"

"Not really." Goldi pressed a slender finger to her rosy lips. "Perhaps you have a scheme up your sleeves. Like usual, you know."

"I'm not in the mood. Besides, what other way can I prove I'm ready for a mission if I can't go on one?"

"You would know. You are the evil mastermind. I'm just the lovable lackey."

"More like a golden goddess if you ask some of the boys."

"I do have that effect on them." Goldi flipped her hair and batted her eyes.

Kai snorted. Then, she grinned as an idea sprung up in her mind. "Bet a lackey like yourself can't unlock Lavanya's car."

Goldi brushed her fingers through her golden curls and plucked out a strand. It gleamed unnaturally in the light as it stood straight up. "Bet you, I can."

# TWO

TONIGHT'S MISSION WAS TO gather information - fast and easy. At least, Lavanya hoped it was. There was no doubt their spy had set up a ruse to deter his enemies and underlings. It meant he kept his dealings with her a secret. But it also meant she had to do all the work to meet him.

Lavanya turned her old, faithful car, Fritz, into a cul-de-sac and parked in between the first two houses. She peeked up at the moon. It wasn't full, but it would give away her position. Oh, joy.

She checked her knives one more time. One on each hip, two on her lower back, and a few others, all hidden under her low collared blouse and fitting jeans. She reached into her glove box and fished out two communication orbs and two smoke bombs. To top off the look, she grabbed some special body butter.

Lavanya unscrewed the top and scooped out the last bit – she had to get more from Chii soon – and spread it along her hairline. The lotion-like glamour spread through her hair and dyed it black. Temporarily, of course. She had to hand it to the Fey child – these orbs and glamour had come a long way since her first experiments.

With the smoke bombs and knives tucked safely away, Lavanya stepped out of her car. “See you soon, Fritz.”

She cupped the communication orbs in her hands. “Alright, little ones.” She pushed a little energy into both. “I wish to know how many people are in the target's house.”

She dropped the larger one. It shot off before it could hit the ground and headed straight for the two-story colonial at the end of the street, camouflaged into its surroundings. She placed

the other orb just far enough in her ear to activate it. It didn't take long for her to hear what was going on. A bash, no doubt. By the number of giggles and drunken shouts, it was a small one.

"I knew it," she said. "He's partying."

It would be nice if she could ever meet her spy in a quaint coffee shop. Or a library. But, no. She had to wait for his signal, decipher his obnoxious clues, and then knock out his so-called guards just to talk to him for a few minutes. It was a good thing Lavanya needed this man's help, or else he would be dead from all this work. Well, dead again.

Lavanya started towards her target, then stopped. She stilled herself and waited.

Had her trunk just opened?

Lavanya stepped lightly towards Fritz and rounded it from the roadside. The orb beeped in her ear, but she ignored it as she peeked around her trunk. Nothing seemed out of place. Nothing except her trunk door.

She stood in front of it and waited. Just a second. Then she jerked the lid up. Her eyes lit on fire as she glared down at a dumbfounded Kai.

"You." She hissed and jerked Kai out by her collar.

"H-hey-"

"Child, you are in so much trouble." Lavanya shut the lid with a force, then regretted the small echo.

Kai tried to scramble out of her grasp as a kitten would its mother's.

"Oh, no." Lavanya tugged Kai towards the backseat door. "You're not going anywhere."

"Would you just let me explain?"

"Explain what?" Lavanya stopped. "That you are on a dangerous mission you had no right or permission to go on? Or that you and Goldi are in so much trouble when we get home?"

“Goldi had nothing to do with this.”

Lavanya let Kai’s collar go and snatched a golden hair from the girl’s shoulder, lifeless in her fingers.

Kai looked away and crossed her arms over her chest. “Your wigs shed.”

“Joke’s on you. I have no blond wigs.”

Kai’s shoulders faltered.

Lavanya took in a deep breath and let it out. “I do not have time for your nonsense.”

“It isn’t-”

“I will deal with you after my mission. Right now, you are not to leave this car.”

“But-”

“Makaio.” Lavanya pointed to the door.

Kai bowed up, but quickly deflated. She jerked open the door, got in, and slammed it shut. Lavanya winced again as the echo sounded.

She took another deep breath. Teenagers.

Lavanya walked towards the colonial. She would have to deal with Kai later. Right now, her mission lay ahead.

She touched the orb inside her ear. “Repeat.”

With each step she took, a beep sounded in her ear, one for each person in the house. Altogether, there were twenty. Sixteen on the bottom floor and four on the second.

This would, hopefully, be the last time she would have to deal with this spy. She was tired of juggling him with her other duties, mainly Kai. The girl’s scheme irritated her, but she understood the want - the need - to do something in the guild. This spy’s information was too vital for the guild. Lavanya had no other choice.

Darren Dubois had been in contact with her and Radulf on and off for years now. He most often spoke in cryptic messages, much to Lavanya's dismay. Yet, he had helped track down and bust some top rank officials in the Trade. Without his information, the Wyrj Guild would have never saved dozens upon dozens of kidnapped children and young adults. Even a few older ones. Even Kai.

It didn't put Lavanya's suspicions to ease. Why would Darren of all people want to take down his own followers? It didn't add up.

She was a house away from her target, when the music infiltrated her thoughts. Any normal – non-magic and more human – party would have attracted the police by now. Either a Fey child had cast a sleeping spell or they had no neighbors.

Lavanya activated her Sight. Through the vibrating windows on the first floor, she saw most of the guests. Some humans, some shapeshifters, and two light pink vampires. No Endowed one or Fey child. Not yet, at least.

She glanced at the second floor. Curtains blocked her way, but they were sheer enough for her to catch a glimpse of a figure saturated in red energy - a powerful vampire. Darren.

She shut her eyes and her energy slipped back to her core. "Let's get this over with." She walked up to the front door and knocked.

No one came at first – must be the deafening music – so she knocked louder.

A second later, the door cracked open.

"Who're you?" a gruff voice asked over the thumping bass.

Lavanya scrutinized the man's physique. Was he supposed to be their bodyguard? Sure he was tall and, though she could not tell from this view, possibly muscular. It didn't mean anything where a trained hunter was concerned. These slave traders must think highly of themselves. Or

they were cheap.

She leaned forward. “I was told there was a party.” She fluttered her lashes and touched her neck with manicured nails. “And there'd be some guests who needed a special meal.”

“If you ain't got a pass, you can't-”

“I do.” She pulled down her blouse on her shoulder and revealed a red heart shape filled halfway with red.

“Ju-just a minute.” He shut the door.

The tattoo was fake, but he didn't need to know. All he saw was a sign she was a bloodletter.

She'd never sign up for the doomed position. Bloodletters allowed vampires to drink their blood – or were forced to. Some who enjoyed it would call themselves blood donors, as if they were doing a service for these Tradesmen.

A moment later and the door opened again, but now she was greeted by a shorter man with coal-black irises.

“Who sent you?” He showed off his dingy fangs with a smug grin.

Lavanya pushed back a lock of hair and showed off the mark once again. “A blood bank of course.”

The vampire licked his lips. “Let's see about that.” He slithered out the door. “May I?”

He touched the half-filled heart. The magic infused into the ink reacted to the vampire's firestone – a core that made vampires what they were – and the tattoo glowed a dull red. It confirmed she had been vetted and didn't have poison in her veins to kill a vampire. At least, he would think so.

The vampire smiled, convinced. “Sure enough, you are legit.”

“Can I come in?”

“As long as I’m first.”

She giggled and waltzed in. She would have to thank Chii for another successful tool.

The vampire shut the door behind them and wrapped his arm around her waist. He led her into the living area where the stench of alcohol and blood violated her nose. The dark lighting and booming music drowned out her senses. Luckily, there were more bloodletters and other slaves than owners. It made her job a bit easier.

The vampire led her to another man. “Special delivery, Rudd.”

Rudd, who was about to bite into a teenager, glanced up. “I already have dinner.”

“But she’s legit, not just a throwaway.” The first pulled at her collar enough to reveal the tattoo.

Rudd smiled, fangs out. “I guess I could have this one for dessert.” He let go of the teenager.

Lavanya kept herself from catching the boy as he crumbled to the ground. Awareness didn’t even cross the dazed look he gave. Drugged.

“Oh, this is a pretty one. I guess Lord Darren does have excellent tastes.” Rudd wrapped his arms around Lavanya and prepared to bite her neck.

“Don’t take it all.” The first vampire nuzzled her shoulders.

Lavanya giggled. Thankfully, Kai didn’t have to see this.

With both distracted, she slipped one of the smoke bombs out of her pocket.

“Quit. That tickles.”

She felt two sets of fangs press into her skin.

Lavanya held her breath. She elbowed the first vampire in the stomach. He cried.

She threw down the smoke bomb and kned Rudd in the stomach.

“You-”

Smoke blasted throughout the room. Owners and slaves alike choked and gasped for clean air.

Lavanya hopped to one side, avoiding Rudd’s fist. He charged for her, but she grabbed his wrist, lifted his body, and threw him across the room. He crashed into the bodyguard and they both went down.

Lavanya took out her handkerchief, pushed a little energy into it, and covered her mouth. She breathed steadily as the sleeping smoke knocked everyone else out. Amazing what a little Endowed magic and 100% cotton fibers could do.

She surveyed the room. Everyone was down. She checked the kitchen, laundry room, and the rest of the first floor. One slave had been making a food tray but was now slumped on the ground. Most of the residents had fallen asleep from her surprise gift. Seventeen in all. One of the four from upstairs must have come down while she dealt with the vampire duo.

Lavanya twirled a manicured nail at the sliding back doors. The communication orb popped out of a bush and flew into the glass, rippling through it without even a scratch, and came to her side.

“I want to know if anyone besides the target is upstairs.” She pointed upwards.

The orb shot up the carpeted stairs without a sound. Lavanya followed it.

She kept alert. Only Darren was supposed to be up there. Supposed to. She wouldn’t be surprised if he had a few slaves by his side. She shuddered at the thought.

She peeked around the corner. No signs of life. She stepped onto the second floor. She swept over the hallway and spotted the orb. It flashed a dull red by an opened door. Someone was in there.

Lavanya unsheathed a knife and leaned against the wall right next to the opening. She listened. Shuffling. Lavanya activated her Sight.

She launched herself into the room, knife up.

No one.

Then.

Lavanya watched as a blanket trembled in the closet. She walked over and picked it up.

A scream let out.

A stark white energy lashed out at her as best it could. A human girl whimpered.

“Little one.” Lavanya lowered her weapon. “You poor thing.” She kept her knife close to her leg – no need to startle the girl any more than she had – and leaned down. “No need to fret.”

She reached out her free hand-

Something latched onto her shoulder and hurled her against the opposite wall.

# THREE

SADIQ FOCUSED ON DARREN. He had to or he was going to lose it. He didn't stop his friend from owning slaves. But this child who trembled in front of him made his blood boil.

“Come now! Do you always have to scowl?” Darren, founder and leader of the Trade, acted a fool once again. Sadiq didn't know how much more he could endure from this man.

“If I did not have to hunt you down every time I needed supplies, maybe I would not scowl at you. Especially if you chose better accommodations at which to hide.”

Darren let out an exasperated sigh. His dirty blond waves caught the moonlight, the only light in the room, as he waved a hand. The drunk woman by his side lifted herself to her feet. She staggered in the dark and escorted herself and the child out of the room. The door shut softly.

“There, now. Happy?” Darren leaned forward and snagged the liquor bottle from the coffee table. His black eyes locked onto Sadiq's own. “No? How about a drink, then?”

“I am not here to drink. I'm here for-”

“Oh, by the old gods, would you drop the tough-guy routine?” Darren groaned. “This is a party – a bash mind you. We're supposed to get drunk, drink pretty women's blood, and have a gay old time.”

Sadiq quirked an eyebrow.

“An old gay old time. That is.” Darren waved his finger in an arch. “Like real old.”

“Your age is showing.”

“Quiet.”

“And we can't get drunk.”

“You never know until you try.”

“You’re a terrible role model.”

“I’m a model, nonetheless.”

Sadiq pushed the irritation down, snatched the bottle from Darren’s hand, and laid back on the couch beside the other. He took a giant swig of whatever-it-was and grimaced.

Coughing, he shoved the bottle towards Darren. “Disgusting.”

“It’s a five-dollar special. I knew I should have sprung for the more expensive brand.”

“You don’t say?” Sadiq settled into his seat. “I knew you grew up in the slums of France, but come on. At least stop drinking filth.”

“Pardon me!” Darren smacked his shoulder. “My homeland is beautiful and certainly has no filth like you suggest.”

“Really? I doubt it from how you turned out.”

Darren swung at his face. Sadiq grabbed the man’s wrist, pulled, and trapped him in a headlock.

“Don’t do it- ahh!”

Sadiq rubbed his fist into Darren’s head. Hard. The man cursed as he tried to pull himself from Sadiq’s grasp. Sadiq chuckled and let him go.

“Jerk.” Darren grumbled, rubbing his head.

“That’s payback for avoiding me, then letting me drink soured grape juice.”

Darren scoffed. “It’s called a challenge.” He poured himself a drink. “Throw a party for as little as possible. I saw it on the internet once. It seemed quite jovial.”

“You need better hobbies.”

“You need to get out more.” Darren nudged Sadiq’s shoulder, his grin once again grown

on his face. “I have a proposition, old friend. One I won’t take no for an answer.”

“Here we go.”

“Now, now, hear me out. I’m having a ball of sorts at week’s end, and I-”

“Didn’t balls drop out of fashion a century ago? I assumed you were done with being old fashioned.” Sadiq waved a hand at Darren. “Your clothes scream gothic teenager, not gothic era.”

Darren swatted at him. “At least I keep up with the times.” Darren gestured to his outfit.

Sadiq wore all black. It was unusual for him, to be honest. He loved silk shirts, especially dark colored ones. He felt it appropriate for this business call.

“Black is classic.”

“It’s a cop out. And they’re making a comeback with the elite.”

“The angst-ridden teenagers or the balls?”

“The balls! I would love to formally invite you. How you’ve been treating me tonight does make me timid to ask-”

“Give it a rest. You’re not hurt.”

“My hair is! And my head!”

“Get over it and tell me about this party of yours. It’s not going to be a dump like this one, will it?”

“Of course, not! It’s for the Trade’s elite. It’s a masquerade. Everyone important, such as yourself and I, is going to be there.”

“Who says I’m coming?”

“You must come!”

“I’m not here to be roped into one of your dances. Again. I’m here for more supplies.”

“Another slave? What happened to the last one? Did the faulty actions of your Mistress-

ah!”

Darren’s cup fell from his hand as Sadiq crushed his wrist. Sadiq smiled- a sickly smile that meant business, not play.

Darren grinned and gritted his teeth. “Intimidation won’t work on me.”

“It is not intimidation. It is a promise.” Sadiq let go.

Darren snapped his wrist back into place, his pale skin returning to its porcelain sheen.

Sadiq flexed his fingers, catching his own almond color in the moonlight. Centuries ago he had darker skin; but between the change and his own time spent in the dark, it had gradually faded. Who knew melanin acted like this when confronted with the vampire gene?

“I was about to say-” Darren started in again- “there will be an interesting prospect at the masquerade.”

Sadiq sat there, unfazed.

“Rashana might be there, and she might bring a slave or two you could ask to buy.”

Sadiq glanced at Darren. He groaned when Darren grinned as wide as he could.

“So you are interested in going?”

“I did not say that.”

“But you would like to talk to her, correct? Or am I mistaken?”

He was right, but Sadiq wasn’t going to give Darren the satisfaction.

“All I ask is you come and show yourself, old friend. Many of us believed you dead after the explosion. And yet, to my surprise, you tracked me down nearly a year ago.”

“I honestly cannot stomach being around the others. Especially Rashana.”

Darren snickered. “That’s not what you said last time. By how you were talking then, she seemed to have stepped on your foot. Hard.”

Again, Darren was right. Spectacular.

“She raided a place that was under your control, correct? Or was it she who killed the woman you had taken a liking to-”

“I imagine you do not want a murder at your masquerade, so I would appreciate you not trying to provoke me.”

Darren laughed. He lightly smacked Sadiq’s shoulder. “I honestly love how easy it is to get you so riled up.”

“Shut it.”

“No, honestly. It’s an honor. You never let your guard down to anyone else. Well, at least anyone I know who’s still alive.”

Sadiq stood. “I’m leaving.”

“Wait, don’t go! What about the party?”

“No more parties. I need to find some supplies for my Mistress.”

Darren grabbed Sadiq’s arm. “You’re coming to the masquerade at least, correct?”

“Quit acting childish.”

“It’ll be held at my night club, Chantel. I’ll be there all week making preparations. You must come!”

“Darren if you don’t-”

Sadiq whipped his head towards the door. A faint rumbling noise sounded from the first floor.

“You know, you’re right.” Darren smiled, patting his shoulder. “You should go and think about my offer.”

Sadiq scrutinized his stiff posture. Something was off.

“In fact, I’ll start looking for another slave for you and your mistress right now. You can tell her I’ll have something ready for her by tomorrow night.”

“Darren-”

The door rattled.

Darren shook his head. “I thought I told those hooligans to keep it down. Seriously? Don’t they ever learn?”

“It is not the music.” Sadiq listened. Masked by the headache-inducing music were the familiar sounds of a fight. “Darren, I believe you have an uninvited guest- Darren?”

Darren was gone. Sadiq rubbed his temples. Coward. Just like the old days.

“I have no reason to stay,” he mumbled. “These people are not under my care.”

A scream sounded through the wall. The child from earlier.

Sadiq cracked the door open. Whoever the intruder was seemed to be in the next room.

He slid out and hugged the wall as he snuck down the hallway. He peered into the room.

A figure leaned over the child. The knife at his side glinted in the moonlight. A hunter.

Sadiq teleported behind him, grabbed his shoulder, and hurled him across the room. The hunter cried out as his- no- her body collided with the wall.

The hunter lifted her knife but Sadiq teleported again. He shoved her against the wall and crushed her wrist. A small whimper escaped.

“Very bold of you-” Sadiq whispered in her ear “-to come prancing into this viper’s den.”

His forearm pressed against her throat. She gasped.

Sadiq felt her energy retreat inward, trying to protect her. He wrapped his own energy around her. He commanded his fangs to grow out. He would drink nearly every drop of blood from her. Then, he would give her as a gift to his Mistress.

His eyes met hers. They were purple. No, they were green. Emerald green.

Sadiq loosened his grip on her.

The hunter's lips trembled in the moonlight. "Sa-Sadiq?"

He stopped.

She knew him? Who was she?

As if answering, the cold, broken necklace he kept safe and hidden underneath his shirt warmed against his skin.

"Lavanya?"

# FOUR

KAI COUNTED THE STARS outside her prison window. Well, car window. Basically the same thing at the moment.

She didn't know who she was madder at. Lavanya for making her sit here like a child or herself for getting caught so easily.

"Ahh! I can't just sit here!" She leaned in between the front seats and popped open the glove box. "Where is it- ah-ha!"

Kai snatched the binoculars from their hiding place. She scoured the two-story house for any clues as to what Lavanya – or anyone else – was doing in there. Nothing.

Her head slumped down.

This turned out to be a great night. She couldn't wait to tell Goldi all about how she had gotten them both in trouble. Oh, joy.

Kai peeked through the binoculars once again. The house Lavanya had slipped into a few minutes ago was plain and ordinary. Nothing too- Woah!

The front window shuddered as something – a body, maybe – smacked into it. What was going down in there?

Her wrist twitched. There was trouble nearby.

Kai leaned back.

Lavanya told her not to go. But what if her guardian needed her? Then again, if she went in, she might get in more trouble than she already was. But she was already in trouble as it was . . .

Kai hopped out. She raced towards the house, thankful some clouds had covered the moon.

She slowed as she reached the front window. She ducked down and peeked through the shades. There wasn't much to see, but there were definitely bodies on the ground. Dead? Hard to tell. A haze too thick stood in her way.

Kai moved to the door and tried the knob. Locked.

Hunched down, she made her way around the house. A latched gate greeted her halfway. Her hand went to her knife, an obsidian blade gifted by Lavanya. She hated to use knives - too impersonal - but with her limited power, there was not much she could do by herself.

She slid the knife between the planks of the gate.

She shuddered as the air frosted.

*You need help.* A voice whispered in her ear. *Or it will end up like last time.*

Her hand shot up and batted at the darkness. A small hiss shot back.

Just ignore the shadow. Ignore it and go on.

She jerked up on her knife and opened the gate.

She scanned the backyard but found no one. Good.

Something shimmered in the light of the sliding doors. Kai halted.

An orb of sorts flew into the glass door. It didn't break the glass, but somehow went into it.

Kai pressed herself against the house and inched closer to the door. The thundering music drowned out everything else. She waited, and counted her breaths.

One. Two. Three.

After an eternity, she peered into the house. Bodies littered the floor. The haze hugged around them. Oh! She'd heard about this- sleeping gas! Neat.

Kai tugged at the door. To her relief, it was unlocked.

She buried her nose into the collar of her jacket and stepped in cautiously, weapon at the ready. Just like Lavanya had taught her.

She scanned her surroundings. The music hid her steps as she made her way into the living room. She was careful not to step on anyone.

No sign of Lavanya. Maybe she was upstairs-

“You.” Kai squeaked as a hand latched onto her ankle. “You hunter. I’ll kill you.”

Kai jerked her ankle out of the man’s grasp. He used her to pull himself up. She elbowed him right in the head. She winced at the impact, but it did the job. He was out.

Kai grinned. Now, to just find-

A scream rang through the house. Kai jerked her head towards the stairs. Lavanya!

She flew up the stairs. She unsheathed her knife as she scanned the hall. Where was Lavanya?

“Very bold of you to come prancing into this viper’s den.”

There! The second door!

Kai hugged the wall. She peeked in and instantly focused on Lavanya. And the man who had her pinned against the wall.

Kai shuddered. Her mouth went dry as, even with her power’s bound state, she felt the rage ooze from his body. This wasn’t a man. This was a monster. A nightwalker. A vampire.

He leaned over Lavanya.

*You’ll lose her.* The shadow creature appeared beside her. Kai forced herself to stay still. *Like you lost him.* That vampire . . . he’ll suck her dry. She needed to do something.

*Attack! Destroy!*

Kai mustered up all the energy she had and willed her body to move. Knife in hand, she

attacked the nightwalker.

He screamed as she struck his lower back. Kai grinned. She had him-

Pain tore through every fiber of her being. She gasped and grabbed her wrist. Ice shot through her.

“Child!” Lavanya drew her to her feet.

Kai didn’t object as Lavanya grabbed her arm and ran out of the room- down the stairs- out of the house.

Kai stumbled. Her breath grew ragged.

“Hurry.” Lavanya pulled her close and forced her to run.

She had to keep up. She needed to. She would die if she didn’t.