

Siren's Call

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Prologue

Is this love? Kai wondered, watching Tommy from the back of the bar. Tall speakers standing next to her blared hopped-up zydeco. Above the frenzied dancing, the air rolled blue with smoke. The only lights, besides those shining on the booze, were two huge red globes set on brass pillars in the corners, which cast weird shadows.

Or maybe it wasn't the shadows that were weird, but the folks here. Kai was human—just special—while many in the crowd were *xita*, or *other*.

Kai had been around enough not to gape and stare, but she knew that at least half the masks the beings here wore were really faces, like the man with a pelican beak, or the woman with twigs and leaves growing out of her hair.

Tommy fit here, with his gleaming blue eyes and white-white skin that slid so smoothly under Kai's darker fingers—like sand over water, he'd tease. He liked the noise and the crowds, and laughed at the drunk tourists as they glided through the throngs on Bourbon Street. He wasn't freaked by the two half-mannequins, perched like vultures above the bar, who wore sailors hats, too much makeup, and moved all on their own.

Kai didn't usually go to places run by the *xita*. They were too different, too odd, even for New Orleans. And she'd been warned, often enough, that they were dangerous for humans.

Yet, here she was, following Tommy again, in a new sundress and fancy sandals, her long black hair pulled up into a ponytail.

Was it love? Or just lust that kept drawing her back? They'd been dating for more than a year now. She wished she knew, that some certainty would strike her with all the power of a summer thunderstorm.

Instead, she drifted between this and that.

A tall, thin man with a pinched face, wearing a casual beige suit, sidled up to Kai.

"Wanna dance?" he asked, his voice whispering soft and smooth.

Kai didn't know what he was—she got the impression of orange sands and white rocks, baking under a blazing sun.

"No, thank you," Kai said politely. She should go back and sit with Tommy at the bar. She just loved looking at him, though, admiring his muscles outlined by his tight, navy blue T-shirt, that fine ass of his in jeans.

"Next time, Miss," the gentleman said as he glided away, sliding through the crowd with inhuman ease.

Not in this lifetime. No matter how polite the gentleman had been, he was barely human, and Kai preferred to date closer to her kind.

With a sigh, Kai pushed her way through the crowd of drunken, fully human frat boys who'd accidentally found their way here and would never be able to find this bar again, then past the three rank street kids who knew what they were seeing, but would never tell, and back up to Tommy.

“Babe!” Tommy said, sliding an arm over Kai’s bare shoulders, pulling her in for a quick kiss.

Kai shivered, despite the heated night air. Being this close to Tommy always made something inside her pop and sizzle, especially as she slid her arms around his waist. But he tasted like whisky, not beer. What was he drinking?

Tommy rested his forehead against Kai’s, a comforting weight and push. She closed her eyes, then opened them again, nervous and untrusting in this *xita* place.

“Just a few more,” Tommy said. “Then we can go.”

Kai pulled back so she could glare. “A few more what? Bars?” Maybe it was just lust, because Kai was already tired of everything: the heat, the press of people, the loud drunks, the music throbbing like a second, speedy heartbeat in her chest. More than one empty shot glass were already lined up next to a full one in front of Tommy’s seat. Why was he drinking the hard stuff, and not his usual beer?

“No, no babe,” Tommy said. He slid his hands down her bare shoulders to her elbows and back up again, leaving behind chills and sparks. “Just a couple more wishes.”

Kai stiffened in surprise. “Wishes?” She’d known Tommy wasn’t fully human, but the only impression she’d gotten from him was a white rose, blooming full and thick, with dark green petals and thorns. But she’d never asked—she’d learned early on that wasn’t polite.

Tommy shrugged, but said defensively, “It ain’t like they can’t have more. I just sip a bit, taste, and move on.”

Kai nodded. It explained why they frequently went to tourist traps and dive bars, where the discontented would wish the hardest.

“Why here?” Kai asked, looking around. Where would she find a wish here? Despite the too-loud music, Kai found a touch of quiet in herself, and let her gaze be tugged around. There—two girls with their arms around each other, slow dancing in the corner, oblivious to everything around them.

When Kai looked back, Tommy grinned at her. “Y’all are better than any bloodhound,” he told her. He gave a hum that was part purr. Kai felt it under her fingers, warm and snug around Tommy’s waist.

Kai glanced back at the girls. They weren’t lessened in any way she could see. They still danced tight and close. Neither faltered, or even slowed.

Tommy slid his hands from Kai’s shoulders, picked up his drink, then slammed it back. He’d signaled for another before Kai could say anything.

“I thought we were leaving,” Kai said, pulling back further from Tommy and crossing her arms over her chest. This always happened. He’d tell her they were leaving and then they’d end up staying. Why did she let him do this?

“Don’t be like that,” Tommy said, sliding his arm around Kai’s waist and pulling her back closer. “It wasn’t just them I was talking about,” Tommy admitted.

Kai looked around the bar, seeking other dreamers. But the bar was too loud, the crowd too tightly packed. She couldn’t find anyone else here wishing as hard as the girls. She’d have to

walk back out into the street before her talent for finding would flare again.

“No, not anyone in the crowd,” Tommy said. He slammed down his next shot.

What the hell? Tommy didn’t usually drink anything harder than beer, and only a few.

“Them,” Tommy said, looking up at the two mannequins.

Kai glanced up. She didn’t know what the hell those things were, but they weren’t even vaguely human. Now that she was focused on them, she got the impression of bones piled high in a desolate canyon.

“They think you’re good for me,” Tommy said. He raised his empty shot glass in salute to first one, then the other.

The one on the right winked at Kai. Even over the smell of the smoke and spilled beer, Kai got a whiff of the limestone of graves.

“Who are they?” Kai asked, leaning closer to Tommy. They frightened her: So far from human that she couldn’t even name them. Their eyes blazed like burning coals in the dark. In her mind’s eye, Kai saw them reaching out with skeletal hands to pluck souls from the crowd below.

She was never going someplace run by the *xita* again.

“They’re my step-aunts,” Tommy told her. “Sort of. They rule the family. And they wanted to meet you.”

The importance of Tommy’s words crashed down on Kai like a tremendous clash of brass symbols, silencing the noisy bar around her. She stared hard at Tommy.

“Will you marry me?” he asked.

* * *

Kai marched angrily down Royal Street, Tommy a few paces behind.

“That isn’t something you joke about,” Kai threw over her shoulder finally. The night hadn’t gotten much cooler, though it was nearing 3 a.m. The smell of the Mississippi drifted along the wind, dark and dank. Only a couple windows in the apartments looming above the street had lights on. The thumping music of Bourbon Street was far behind; all Kai heard was the occasional wash of traffic from the boulevard.

“I wasn’t joking,” Tommy said again.

“But you weren’t serious,” Kai said as she stopped, still fuming.

“What I said was that I hadn’t planned on asking you yet. It just kinda popped out.” Tommy hurried up to face Kai, as she’d finally started talking with him again. “But when I said it, well, I knew it was the right thing to say.”

Kai shook her head. It was so like Tommy—no planning, just wishing to make something so.

“Let me start over,” Tommy said, reaching out to smooth his fingertips along Kai’s arm.

Kai stepped back and out of reach, then started walking again. She wasn’t about to let Tommy distract her.

“I’ll get a ring, go down on one knee. Is that what you want?”

Kai stopped and stood very still. What did she want?

Was it something to do with her family? Papa liked Tommy only okay. He’d never accept

Tommy fully, though: Tommy was too white. Since Papa was fully human, he had no idea that Tommy was *xita*.

That wasn't it.

She circled back to her thoughts from earlier. Was this love she felt for Tommy? Lust? Something of both?

Why couldn't she just know?

"I want to be sure," Kai said slowly. "Not of you...no, but me. Of us."

"That's all?" Tommy asked, relieved.

"Yes, that's all," Kai said heatedly. "I can't believe you're not taking me seriously."

"No, no, it's not like that, babe. I promise," Tommy said earnestly. "I know y'all are serious. It's just that it's easy to find out. We can go ask the lady in the wall."

"Who?" Kai asked.

"The lady in the wall," Tommy said. He grabbed Kai's arm and tried to lead her up the street. "This way."

"I'm gonna break those," Kai said, glaring at Tommy's fingers and resisting. She hated being pulled along by anything other than her own senses.

"Sorry," Tommy said, not sounding sorry at all. "We need to find some good beads. The voodoo shop hasn't closed yet. I bet they have some. And some cheap whiskey."

"Why?" Kai asked, still unmoving.

"So the lady in the wall will tell our fortune."

* * *

It was after 4 a.m. before they finally reached their destination: an old creole cottage with terra-cotta walls covered in a fine net of cracks.

"Here?" Kai asked. "You gotta be kidding me." A breeze had sprung up, and it was finally cooling off a bit. The night was thick with quiet; even the bar at the corner had closed and the drunken tourists had made their way off the streets.

"Yes!" Timmy said. He'd downed his own beer in three gulps while they'd waited at the 24-hour convenience store to buy the whisky.

Kai still didn't understand why he'd been drinking so much that night. Though now that she thought about it, he'd been drinking more the past month, a couple extra beers here or there, or maybe a shot or two.

"See, there's the lady," Tommy said, pointing toward the cracks. He swayed closer to the wall, raising one arm. "There's her head, with her hair piled up."

Kai nodded. She could see a half-round shape as a face.

"Then she's got an old fashioned dress, with a butt bump," Tommy said, giggling.

"Bustle," Kai told him. She could see the full image now in the cracks. The lady sat at a round table, her head high and proper.

Tommy carefully counted out three strands of glass beads and laid them at the foot of the wall. "Always hold back some beads, just in case you have to bargain more," he said solemnly.

“The lady—she tells the truth, but sometimes in a tricky way.”

Kai nodded, appreciating the warning.

Tommy splashed the liquor against the wall, carefully aiming for the table, then dribbling down the wall and over the beads. Then he took a swig, followed by a second.

Kai caught the bottle before he had a third. “What’s wrong with you tonight?”

“Sipping a wish, that’s easy,” Tommy said, his brilliant blue eyes wide and serious. “But carrying one, it’s heavier than all the mountains.”

Kai knew he exaggerated. She’d seen him carrying a wish before, like the first night they’d met, when she’d made him dance with her and buy her drinks before she finally gave in and did what they both wanted: taken him home and then taken him to her bed.

He’d seemed as surprised as she was when he was still there in the morning, more interested in talking and making her laugh than having another round.

“Ah, poor baby,” Kai said, brushing his brown hair from his forehead and pressing a kiss there.

“Maybe someday you’ll know,” Tommy said, crushing her close for a long, intense kiss.

“Really?” came a chilling woman’s voice.

Kai stepped back quickly from Tommy, then gaped.

The wall had transformed into a large window, viewing a tiny room. The lady sat at a white table, her blue-and-black-striped hat matching her elaborate skirt. Though most of her hair was up, artful curls hung down the sides of her face. Her black eyes gleamed with danger and knowledge.

Behind the lady lay a narrow bed with a white iron bedframe. An open window against the near wall showed another night scene, just as deserted as the street they stood in. A small black cross hung next to the bed.

“Sorry, ma’am,” Tommy said. He bowed his head and took Kai’s hand.

“It’s all right,” the lady drawled as she poured herself some tea from a fancy china pot. “I expect that kind of behavior from her kind.”

“My kind?” Kai asked, bristling. “You mean humans?”

The lady cackled. “Darling, you ain’t been human since before your mama left you behind in the hospital.”

“Did you know my mama?” Kai asked. She’d given up looking for her mama long ago, particularly since Papa didn’t like it.

And also since Kai suspected that Mama hadn’t been fully human.

“I know your past, just like I know your future,” the lady said casually. “His, too.”

“Is it together?” Tommy asked, hopeful.

The lady gave him a sly smile. “I’ll tell you your fortune, darling boy. But not hers. I don’t deal with her kind.” She threw a glare at Kai. “Human or otherwise.”

What the hell did that mean? Her kind? Kai was human. Mostly. She was just special.

“Great!” Tommy said. He gave Kai a smile. “I’m sure it will be with you.”

The lady started talking—but no sound came out of her mouth.

Kai glanced at Tommy, who was nodding. He could hear her. Kai listened harder. She couldn't hear anything, not the traffic, or the rustling leaves.

Worry struck Kai when Tommy's grip on her hand turned vise-like. His blue eyes grew dark and he opened his mouth, like it was suddenly hard to breath.

Whatever the lady was saying to him scared him to his bones.

But he never let go of her hand.

Finally, sound abruptly returned to the night.

"Now, as I said, I don't deal with your kind. But I will give you a warning, the one that every being should heed. When that bitch Katrina comes, you grab your family and run."

With a *whoosh* the picture faded, turning into just a cracked, terra-cotta colored wall again.

Tommy gave a weak laugh. "There's that, then." He turned to Kai, picking up both her hands. "She said it don't matter, what I do with you. I won't live long enough to regret it."

"Nonsense," Kai said. "Don't let her scare you that way."

Tommy shook his head. "My kind—we get lost, sometimes. Catch hold of a wish that's too strong, 'til it overwhelms us." Tommy looked down. "I've been drinking to get away, sometimes."

"She could be wrong, you know," Kai said, squeezing Tommy's hands so he'd look up at her. "You said she wasn't always straight with things. She could be trying to trick you."

Tommy blinked, and a little color returned to his face. "That's right. She speaks in riddles sometimes. She said I was getting too close to the edge."

"But you can turn back, right?" Kai said, her worry shrinking. "You gotta think your way through what she said. Find your way around it."

Tommy nodded slowly. "True enough. Let's wait a week, okay? That way I can have a ring and everything."

"Waiting sounds fine," Kai said, stepping forward and kissing Tommy's cheek. "Now, who's this Katrina?" she asked as she slipped her arm around Tommy's waist, guiding him back up the street. "Should I be jealous?"

"There's only you, darling," Tommy said sadly. "There will only ever be you."

Kai vowed to work that melancholy out of Tommy's voice that night, and for a while, she did.

Five days later, when tropical storm Katrina was upgraded to a hurricane, Kai got her family out of New Orleans and up to Baton Rouge.

Tommy—didn't.

Kai always wondered if he'd sipped at the wrong wish just before the storm, gotten lost in someone else's dream to die.

Chapter One

Clouds pressed down from the sky, turning the Monday morning air sticky, making it close in tight. Kai cursed as water dripped onto her head from the plants being watered on the balcony above the sidewalk. She stepped into the street, tripping on the blue and red plastic cups left behind by the goddamned tourists who were always partying in New Orleans. Then she nearly ruined her shirt by brushing against a newly painted fence outside the orange and green creole cottage she was passing.

Stupid day. Stupid money. Stupid bills. Kai had spent her entire weekend running the numbers in her head.

There was no use in her running them again.

Either the money would come in or it wouldn't. Either she would be without a place to stay, and maybe food, by the end of the month, or she wouldn't.

Still, Kai slowed as she passed CC's, the enticing scent of fresh coffee tugging at her. She carefully looked in all the windows as she passed. Amita stood alone behind the counter, in that ugly red and orange uniform, fiddling with her short cornrow braids. No sign of Marcus. No one stood in line either.

Maybe something could go right today.

Amita nodded at Kai as she came in. "You come to pay your tab, hon?"

"Just one more," Kai said, ignoring her guilt. "I'll pay end of the week. Promise."

If any money came in...

"That's what you said last week," Amita grumbled, though she was already moving to fill Kai's order: a large drip with two shots of espresso. "You're gonna get me fired."

"Money comes in, you'll be the first I pay. Promise," Kai said, already reaching for her cup, already anticipating that first bitter hit.

"Not so fast." Marcus was suddenly standing there, pushing the cup away from Kai.

Damn it. Kai should have smelled him, ferretted out his scent over the intoxicating scent of fresh roasted beans and fresh brewed coffee.

"Amita, we talked about this," Marcus said patronizingly. "About letting people run tabs."

"If I'm paying for it, I don't see what the fuss is," Amita sparked at him.

Kai hid her smile. Amita might only be five-foot-nothing, but Kai would bet on her against Marcus' six-foot, pimply white ass any day.

"I'll make sure it's properly deducted this time," Marcus said, sliding the cup back toward Kai.

Kai winced. Amita needed every penny she earned—her son was barely three and already diagnosed as special needs.

"You'll get the money," Kai said guiltily as she took the cup, the weight welcome in her small hands.

Amita glared at Kai before nodding and saying, "So go and find something then."

“I will,” Kai said, though that wasn’t the problem. She could find things all damn day long. In post-Katrina New Orleans, everyone had lost something. Even ten years on, people were still searching.

Problem was, no one was paying for her to find them.

Though Kai blew on her coffee and waited after she’d walked at least half a block, she still scalded her mouth with the first sip. Disappointment flooded her. First Amita, now this: Even her coffee turned against her.

Her empty stomach rumbled, but Kai ignored it out of long habit. Skipping a few meals here and there wouldn’t kill her. Once some money came in, she could start having eggs again. And cereal. And toast. And...

Kai forced herself to stop thinking about food. Maybe instead, she should make the rounds of the major hotels again, hand out more business cards. However, more cards meant spending more money printing them, and Kai was already at the end of a very short rope.

Was it time for her to ask Papa for money? Or could she make it until the end of the month? She could stay with either Orlan or Caleb, but she’d rather go begging to her relatives than give up her independence that way.

Plus, Kai couldn’t take a regular job, something Papa had never understood. Being in the same place at the same time every day, unable to walk around the city, would kill her. It was worse than a cage.

But she needed to do something to get the cash flowing in.

Could she give up her crappy room in her crappy rental house and move into her office? Problem was, it had no running water and iffy electricity. At least she paid for the office with barter and not cash; she supplied her landlord Buddy with matching wood or materials from abandoned houses. Once he’d finished renovating the building, Kai knew she’d have to find someplace else. If he ever finished—three years and the brick was still being tuck-pointed, the plaster was still falling off the walls, and the first floor was unlivable.

As Kai climbed the rickety wooden stairs, she caught scent of the ocean, wild and storming. The feeling it brought with it was water, running strong, unstoppable. She’d never smelled anything like it, not even the week before Katrina hit.

Cursing silently, Kai dragged her cell out. It blinked with unread messages. Orlan had set up her security system so she just got text messages when someone walked into her office. As Papa, Caleb, and others often stopped by when Kai wasn’t in, it had seemed better than some kind of alarm.

Not like the police would have come to investigate if it had been a real alarm, even though their headquarters was only a couple of blocks away.

Kai sniffed the air. Violence and ill-intent didn’t have a scent, as much as she might wish they did sometimes. She didn’t smell any blood, though; just expensive silk, European perfume, and under all that ocean, a hint of tears.

And money.

* * *

“Morning,” Kai said as she sauntered into her office. A quick glance told her nothing had been touched. The scattered books, papers, and knickknacks on the shelves only looked random; Kai knew the exact placement of every item. Plus, the scent of the strange woman stayed centered where she sat. The woman held herself primly on the very edge of the chair in front of Kai’s desk. Was she scared or something? Those chairs were surprisingly comfortable.

“Good morning,” the woman replied. The German inflection matched her Sonja de Lennart black capris. Her silver silk blouse looked custom made, and perfectly matched her Manolos.

Nothing she wore was a knockoff. Could Kai double her fee? Quadruple it, maybe?

Platinum blond hair flowed over the woman’s shoulders, looking as if it had just been blown out. Her eyes were a clear gray, like water of Lake Pontchartrain after a good rain. She had a small, sharp nose and a sharp chin, and the corners of her mouth were turned down, probably permanently.

As Kai walked to her chair on the other side of the oak desk (also scrounged), she asked, “How y’all doing this morning?”

The woman glared at Kai.

Kai kept a pleasant, innocent look on her face. Courtesy before business, even if the woman already looked like she regretted coming here. Kai had been raised right. Besides, it was fun riling Yankees. “I’d offer you some sweet tea or something, but I just got in and haven’t had time to make any yet.”

“I don’t require tea,” the woman said in clipped tones.

“You sure?” Kai asked, pushing. “We could go get coffee or something,” she added, lifting her cup and making as if to get out of her chair.

“This isn’t a social visit,” the woman snapped. “I’d like to hire your services. My name is Rilke and—”

“Really?” Kai interrupted, leaning back in her chair and taking a sip of coffee. The woman didn’t look like a threat, but Kai had learned early on to be careful. “And what services might those be?”

“I need you to find my sister, Gisa.” Rilke’s mask of anger cracked and grief showed through. Then she swallowed it down. “Someone kidnapped her.”

“Kidnapped, huh? That’s serious business,” Kai said. “Why me? Why not the police?” Kai had never been asked to help in a kidnapping. Missing kids, sure, but usually, they’d all wanted to be lost.

“You’re not...” Rilke waved her hand toward Kai. “Human,” she finally ended with.

Kai put her cup down on her desk very deliberately, planted her feet on the ground, and stood slowly, intending on showing this woman the door. Kai *was* human. Just—extra. She wasn’t *xita*, and she only dealt with them when she had to.

Before Kai could start yelling, Rilke indicated herself. “Neither am I. I am a *nixe*. Water spirit. Siren.”

The ocean scent that Kai had never smelled before suddenly made sense. The sense of rushing water came over her again, willing her to be bowled over and sit.

Though still irked at being called non-human, Kai found herself curious. “Why would someone kidnap your sister?”

“I think it was because she was foolish, and alone. It wasn’t her they wanted, but a siren. Sirens call men, yes?” Rilke’s accent grew heavier. “We need them, to live.”

Kai nodded. She vaguely recalled something like that from a high school English class, way back before she’d dropped out.

“We also need water. When our need is great enough, we can call water, too.” Rilke stared hard at Kai. “Enough water to reach wherever we are, even if we are held in the middle of a city on dry ground.”

The humid air suddenly felt like a weight pressing against Kai, ready to pounce and drown her. She sat slowly.

The sense of rushing water increased—that unstoppable force, overflowing and drowning everything in its path.

Last night, the news had talked about a new tropical storm brewing off the coast.

“No,” Kai breathed out.

Not her city. It couldn’t be drowned. Not again.

* * *

They didn’t negotiate a fee. Kai gave Rilke an amount and a timeline—half now, half on completion.

Though it was six times what Kai usually charged, the siren didn’t blink. Without pausing, Rilke reached into her bag and started counting out hundreds, laying them on Kai’s beaten-up desk in the one clear patch of warm wood.

Kai’s mouth went dry as she watched the bills pile up on her desk. The sound of the construction work across the street faded away. The sun hadn’t found its way through the old wooden-paned windows, but Kai still thought she caught a golden beam shining on the stack. It looked obscene and fake, caught between the piles of newspapers and stacks of folders.

Even without picking it up and smelling it closely, Kai knew it was real. All of it. Not fairy or *silke* gold. Actual American dollars.

She could pay her rent. And get groceries. Even coffee. And...

“How will you find her?” Rilke interrupted Kai’s fevered planning.

“I need something of hers, that carries her scent,” Kai explained, reluctantly folding the money and shoving it in the front pocket of her skirt. She wasn’t about to lose touch with that wad before it was safely stashed.

“That’s what they said,” Rilke said, pulling out two items: a wooden comb and a peach-and-white silk scarf.

“They?” Kai asked. Who’s been talking about her?

“Other beings I asked,” Rilke said, smirking.

“Hmph,” Kai replied, picking up the comb. She was gonna have to check later.

The comb was beautiful, hand-carved from warm, dark wood, with a delicate pattern of swirls and flowers along the edge.

“This won’t work,” Kai said, putting it down. While it carried a scent, it wasn’t complete. Gisa had only used it for grooming. She hadn’t worn it.

“How about this?” Rilke said, passing the scarf to Kai using two hands, like a priest passing a sacred vestment.

Kai brought it briefly to her nose. It smelled of the leather of Rilke’s handbag, her overly sweet hand-lotion, and the fresh green of the money she kept in there. Under that, was Rilke herself. She’d cried into the scarf, tears fresh at one end.

Closer to the center, a scent similar but different than Rilke picked up. The scarf held the smell of ocean storms and wild winds. Power seeped into Kai’s fingers, and a sense of the wide open sea, empty and desolate, yet alive with magic.

“She’s stronger than you,” Kai commented. While Rilke was wound tighter than an old white church-lady, Gisa was looser, with less control. “Are you sure she was kidnapped?” Kai asked reluctantly. She wanted, *needed* this find, but Gisa was obviously wild.

Rilke pressed her lips together. “I feel it. I feel her. Out of water. No one, not even Gisa, risks her sanity by staying out of water for so long.”

“If you can feel her, can’t you find her?” Kai asked, puzzled.

“I’ve tried!” Rilke slammed her palm against Kai’s desk.

Kai hid her smile at the obvious cracks in siren’s mask.

“I’ve covered this city from canal to canal,” Rilke fumed. “I know she’s here. But she’s *hidden*. And she must be found. Soon.”

That sobered Kai up again. Yes. Soon. “When did you discover she was missing?”

“Three weeks ago,” Rilke sighed, deflating. “My sister would go travel sometimes, a day, maybe two, just to tease me. Never longer. After a week I knew something was wrong. I followed the trail here.”

Kai nodded, stretching her senses. Rilke was holding back, not just her emotions, but something else. Was it important? Or not? She needed more information; she’d never met a siren before.

Inward, Kai gave a great sigh. She was going to have to get up early and go to the Clover Grill, see if she could catch the professor, buy him breakfast, and question him about the sirens, let him ramble about mythology. He scared Kai a little, but she could pay him for more than just breakfast this time.

“Well?” Rilke said.

Kai realized she’d been sitting and thinking, not saying anything.

“Aren’t you going to go look for my sister?”

“Yes ma’am,” Kai said, pushing herself forward. “I will find your sister.”

“Call me here when you do,” Rilke said, shoving a business card from one of the best hotels

in the Quarter across the desk, a room number written in an old-fashioned script at the bottom.

Kai nodded and stood up, gathering the scarf up, pushing it into her bag. She'd have to get a baggie for it later, to stop contaminating the scent. Though she had it in her nose, it would be better if the source stayed pure.

Rilke stood as well. "Where will you start looking?"

"Oh, I'm not gonna look, hon," Kai said with a grin. "I'm just gonna wander."

* * *

Though Kai had told Rilke that she was going to wander in part to piss her off—she couldn't help but push the buttons of uptight Yankees—it had also been the truth. The most effective pattern for searching was crisscrossing the city, following random streets, until Kai suddenly found herself in front of whatever she was searching for.

First, though, Kai walked back to the coffee shop. Clouds still hung heavy in the sky, not threatening rain, just heat and more stickiness. Tourists blocked the sidewalk, talking in harsh voices and taking pictures of half a dozen street musicians standing on the other side of the street, warming up. Kai hadn't seen the musicians before, and they all smelled sour-poor and desperate. New band, maybe?

The welcoming smell of coffee greeted Kai as she pushed through the door, the air conditioning a chilled blessing on her skin.

Marcus glared at Kai from behind the counter. Two tourists in searing bright T-shirts with big cameras around their necks chatted with Amita as they ordered their drinks, pausing to rest their bare arms on the cool marble of the counter. Kai didn't blame them one damn bit.

"Not here to chat," Kai assured Amita when it was her turn, sliding one of the crisp hundreds to her. "Just paying my tab," she added, glaring at Marcus. "Keep the change," she added sweetly to Amita.

"Make sure it's not counterfeit," Marcus said, glaring back.

"You sure, hon?" Amita asked when she saw the number of zeros on the bill.

"I'm sure," Kai assured her friend.

"You get a job, or rob a bank?" Amita asked as she cast the wand over the bill, barely looking at it.

Kai relaxed some when the hundred registered as legit. "Job. I'll tell you all about it later." Then she sobered, remembering what might happen if she failed. "You got a place to go if you have to, right? If that storm comes?"

"That storm isn't coming inland," Marcus said.

"Wasn't talking to you," Kai said pointedly. Not that she wished Marcus drowned—she didn't wish that on anybody. Caged, with water rising, was Kai's worst fear. Worse than being stuck, or broke, or even hurt.

Amita nodded. "Got an aunt in Baton Rouge."

"You call her tonight," Kai said pointedly.

No matter what Kai might have told Rilke about wandering, she knew she had to find Gisa in

time. She didn't have to imagine the consequences—all she had to do was visit the Ninth Ward, parts of Bywater, any of the neighborhoods ravaged by Katrina.

She couldn't let that happen to her city. Not again.

* * *

Coming out from the bank, Kai paused and lifted her face toward the sliver of gray sky sandwiched between the gray buildings on either side of her. She sniffed.

Nothing.

There were plenty of scents: musty furniture that was just for show from the antique shop next door; frying grease and three-day-old seafood from the nasty tourist restaurant across the street; plastic, cosmetics, and caged pain from the drug store kitty-corner. No scent of Gisa.

Not that Kai had expected any. Only part of what she did was based on scent. Mostly it was just *feel*.

Kai stepped onto the sidewalk and felt herself going right.

Even on a steaming day like today, Kai found this part of Royal Street to be chilly: When the sun broke through the clouds, it couldn't make it past the tall, concrete-and-stone buildings that held in the cold and made hearts hard.

As Kai turned up Iberville Street toward Bourbon, she heard the steady beat of an electronic drum and the deep wail of guitars. Ten o'clock in the morning, and the party she never was invited to was already going strong.

Or maybe it had never stopped. The smell of stale beer washed over her, but at least the streets had been cleaned, the tourist cups swept away.

On St. Charles, Kai waited for the streetcar with a group of college kids. They had a schedule with them and worried that they'd missed the most recent car. Kai just laughed at them, but didn't bother telling them that streetcars ran on "city time"—schedules didn't matter. The car would get there when it chose, and probably more than one, since the streetcars tended to travel in herds.

Two streetcars trundled toward them a few minutes later. The old green car smelled of lemon polish and old sweat, the constant battle between keeping things up and things running down. Kai sat down on one of the uncomfortable, wooden-slatted seats and opened a window, hoping for a breeze.

Maybe once Rilke paid the rest of her fee, Kai could get a car, then get one of her friends to drive her while she stuck her head out the window like a dog, giving directions instead of being stuck on prescribed lines, her direction defined by others.

Kai pulled herself away from such daydreams. She needed to do a different sort of dreaming now.

The streetcar clattered into motion, its wheels squealing as it rounded the corner. Kai swayed with it, drifting. The buildings changed, from tall and concrete to lower, old and brick, with people in the streets, not just businessmen.

After only a few stops, just before the freeway, Kai got off the streetcar. She went up a block,

past the abandoned warehouse and the park with litter lining the fence, then wandered back along the gray buildings into the color and traffic of Canal Street, passing the fancy hotels she sometimes did business with, the cool air blasting from the doors when they opened. Then she went north again, a couple more blocks, before wandering west.

Something was north of Kai. Her nose was always turning north. She wandered the Central Business District, just west of the Quarter, past streets full of big important buildings, until she was close to the start of Tulane Avenue. Squeezed in between the modern offices were smaller stores with old-fashioned signs and windows full of unwanted goods.

A Chinese import-export store made Kai pause. Green jade good-luck dogs sat in the window, their tongues hanging out as if they felt the heat seeping in through the glass. Arched dragons made of brass floated above their black wooden pedestals. White porcelain fish hung from the top of the window, and mirrors with black-and-white yin-yang patterns reflected their backs.

Of course, because this was New Orleans, jade fleur-de-lis figures and harlequin masks also made up the display.

An echo of Gisa's scent slipped out from the store in front of Kai. Then it disappeared. Other scents floated around her as well: sweet incense, inhuman sweat, cheap plastic, and musty silk.

Kai walked up the block, past the sandwich shop, the closed brewery, and the chic office garden in front of the upscale law firm, then circled back around, following her nose.

Gisa's scent didn't linger around the door of the shop, as it would have had she passed through. Kai had the feeling of a receding tide, which kept drawing away as she approached. Something was there. But what?

After the third time around the block, Kai knew she'd have to go in. There wasn't anything more she could discover from the sidewalk.

After another deep breath, Kai pushed open the door, the air conditioning instantly chilling her overly warm skin.

And she stopped.

Kai had been so intent on Gisa's scent she hadn't paid attention to all the scents floating out from the shop. She'd known they were there, but they hadn't mattered. Not until she'd stepped in and realized that *others* were here.

The inhuman kind.

The store had a wide open feel to it, though it was full of ordered shelves. None of them were higher than three feet, so Kai could look over the tops of all the knickknacks and see the entire store. Just human things were sold here, like ornamental fish and lotus blossom vases.

But the *xita* came here. All the time.

The store was empty except for an Asian man wearing a black business suit with a white shirt, reading a foreign newspaper spread out over the glass on the front display counter. When he finally deigned to look up, his eyes went wide. Was he scared of Kai?

He quickly came from behind the counter and started speaking rapidly to Kai in some language she didn't know. He looked Asian—same black hair as Kai, same smooth eyelids she

saw in the mirror every day, same tiny nose—but up this close, she could tell he wasn't human.

It wasn't just his scent, but a feeling of ancient shaded patios and the pond he used to keep his scaly skin cool.

When the man reached forward to take Kai's elbow, Kai stepped back abruptly. He wasn't touching her.

"Sorry, sugar," Kai finally said. "I don't understand you."

The man stopped and stood up straighter, stiffer. "I see," he said coldly. "You go now," he added in heavily accented English. "Please. Leave."

"Excuse me?" Kai said, exaggerating her own drawl. "That's no way to treat a potential customer."

The man sneered at Kai. "We don't serve your kind. *Xiao hu*."

"What was that about my kind?" Kai fumed. "What did you call me?"

"Nothing you know," the man said, turning his back on her and walking toward the back of the store. "Nothing your mama taught you, she left you too young."

"My what?" Kai asked, startled. How did he know about Mama? How she'd walked out? Did he know her?

The man paid no attention to Kai, settling himself over his paper, looking at it as if it held the next day's Powerball numbers.

Kai shook herself. There wasn't anything for her here. Gisa wasn't here. Maybe it was just the *xita* who came to this store that threw her, threw her senses.

Determined, Kai turned and pushed open the door, welcoming the heat. The clouds had finally burned away, and a bright sky greeted her.

How could she have been so careless? She didn't normally go places where the *xita* were. She avoided most things that were inhuman. Kai held her head up, nose in the air. There had to be some other clue, some other scent or trace of Gisa. She was somewhere in the city.

And Kai had to find her. Or else.

* * *

Kai wandered north, walking hot sidewalks in the blazing sun. She stopped at little local stores with its crowded corridors of white bread and local hot sauce, riding the scent of sugared donuts and deep-fried chicken, buying ice cold water then following that thread back into the heat.

The scent this time took her closer to the water. Kai left the office buildings and businesses and started wandering neighborhoods full of old houses. Even ten years after Katrina, houses were still empty, rotting in the merciless heat. The line where the water had reached was still visible, higher than her head most places. Door still held spray-painted Xs, marking the searches, the number found alive and dead.

Still, Kai couldn't stop. Couldn't rest. The compulsion to keep moving north, always north, took over. Tremé. Seventh Ward. Dillard. Her feet hurt. Her shirt was plastered to her back with sweat. She needed water and shade.

Just a little more, the voice in Kai's head kept saying, leading her by the nose.

Kai avoided the worst places, her nose leading her away from the smell of gunmetal and blood. But violence lived here, and she didn't belong, no matter how dark her skin was.

She still couldn't stop.

The smell of the lake was close, maybe a neighborhood away. Kai passed by an abandoned old mall, going further north, when the pull changed.

She'd gone too far. Sighing, Kai turned back. Damn it, she was too hot and tired for this.

Kai circled around the block, spooking when a cat raced out from under a pile of trash. She didn't know how she was still able to scent Gisa through the filth, but finally, the siren's scent was clear.

The trail led back to the abandoned mall Kai had passed. Glass covered the parking lot—broken drug vials, bottles, and just windows. The smell of moldy paper, rotten wood, and mildew filled the air.

As Kai approached the crumbling building, she realized it was *that* place, an abandoned mall she'd seen in the news. A developer had said he'd rebuild it, then had embezzled the money and left it reeking of flood waters. Fifty-odd counts of fraud later, and he'd never served a day in jail.

A chain-link fence blocked off the unstable structure, with new signs hanging on it, saying they were finally going to bulldoze the place.

Probably pay the same developer to do it.

This close to the building, Gisa's scent grew stronger, along with the foul, burnt smell of meth mingled with gunpowder. When Kai looked closely, she saw two street kids hanging out in the shade of one the spindly bush oaks.

Hanging out and making drug deals.

Kai looked back at the graffiti on the new signs. Gang markings.

Why would a gang steal a siren? What would they gain by drowning the city?

Maybe Rilke's story wasn't true. Kai needed to do some research.

A loud ringing of church bells startled Kai. It took her a moment to silence her phone.

The kids were looking at her. Kai turned and walked away, shading the screen with her hand.

The text message read, "911," followed by an address.

Caleb was in trouble, and needed her help. Now.

Chapter Two

“What’s the emergency?” Kai asked as she rushed down the dark alley to meet Caleb. Graffiti-covered dumpsters hulked along the edges. Rotten beer, stale wine, and urine mingled with the scent of cheap fried food. Music thumped steadily from the clubs up the street.

The evening’s twilight had just faded into true night, though the heat hadn’t loosened its hold. Kai’s shirt still clung to her back and her skin itched. She longed for a cold shower and the cool sheets of her bed.

Caleb detached himself from the brick wall where he’d been leaning. The darkness hid his face, giving Kai just an impression of dark eyes and white teeth. He wore his usual tailored short-sleeved shirt, board shorts, and designer high top sneakers.

He looked nothing like what he was.

Kai suspected Caleb dressed that way on purpose. There was nothing about his dark brown skin that proclaimed him as *xita*. His eyes were plain brown, neither sparkling or golden. His canine teeth looked absolutely human. His voice still carried a hint of Alabama twang, but that was the only thing that set him apart.

“So?” Kai asked again when Caleb hadn’t said anything.

A little further down the alley, a door banged open, making Kai jump. A cook in an apron and rubber gloves, temporarily illuminated by the light behind him, threw a couple of big garbage bags into a dumpster before disappearing again, extinguishing the light as he closed the door.

“I told you, darling, I need your help.”

Kai glared at Caleb. “You used the emergency number. You’re only supposed to use that when you’re in real trouble.”

“But I am—”

“You’re not in the police station or the hospital,” Kai snapped. “And I don’t smell a body. But there’s gonna be one, soon, if you’re lying about this being an emergency.” He couldn’t just call her like that. He knew that.

Finally, Caleb’s cool melted a little. “I need a favor and I don’t like asking,” Caleb admitted, stepping closer to Kai.

“And the emergency part?” Kai asked, holding onto her anger.

“Gotta do the job tonight,” Caleb said with a shrug.

“No one else could help you?” Kai asked, suspicious. Caleb had two brothers, also in the family business, and his dad still occasionally took jobs. Plus more cousins, aunts, and uncles than Kai wanted to count.

“You know Blind Randall?”

“Drug dealer in Bywater?” Kai asked.

At Caleb’s surprised nod, Kai added, “Did a job for him. Once.”

Like Caleb, Blind Randall looked harmless: an old black man with eyes whitened by cataracts. His “office” was a ratty wicker chair outside of a grocery store, white cane by his hand

and a chess board on the rickety table next to him. He played by memory—his opponent told him the moves out loud.

That Randall could track Kai without sight hadn't bothered her. What had set her back up was how much he smelled like blood, as if he'd bathed in it. She'd found his missing delivery boy in less than an hour, shackled up in Mid-City with a girlfriend who'd just gotten out of prison.

Kai had suspected it had been a test, and not a very hard one. But she'd never gone back for another job.

"What are you up to?" Kai demanded when Caleb didn't continue.

"Randall found out that someone's planning to rob his warehouse tonight. Hired me for protection and persuasion."

"And me?"

"Distraction."

* * *

Caleb stepped away from Kai into the darkest part of the alley. He took off his gold medallion, St. Martin de Porres; held it with his hands pressed against his forehead for a quick prayer before handing it to Kai. "Don't you lose that," Caleb warned.

Kai rolled her eyes. "I know. Idiot." She put the warm medallion over her own neck. She understood why Caleb liked St. Martin—he was half-black, and he'd run an animal hospital. She didn't share his faith, though, and wearing the medallion always made her uncomfortable.

"Looks good on you," Caleb flirted. "Though not as good as it looks on me."

"Come on," Kai muttered, restraining herself from smacking Caleb on the arm. The cook down the street had just been out again, and it wouldn't be that long before he came back a third time.

"I ain't ashamed. I'm a good-looking man," Caleb drawled as he took off his shirt and handed it to Kai. "Got nothing to be ashamed of, darling," he added as he quickly shucked his shorts and boxers.

Kai shook her head and stuffed everything into her bag. She didn't need light to see Caleb's supple body—memory supplied that. He was simply muscled, not a gym rat or a couch potato, merely active and healthy. "Shoes?"

"I hate this part," Caleb muttered, unlacing them and gingerly placing one bare foot down, then the other. "The ground here's slimy," he complained.

"Then change quickly."

Caleb held out his shoes, but didn't let them go when Kai took them. "Kiss for good luck?"

Kai snorted. "Don't think that's going to happen, hon. Not when you're about to change. Dog breath. Ugh."

"You're probably right," Caleb said. He let go of his shoes, then grabbed them again before Kai could move out of the way. When he tugged abruptly, Kai stumbled toward him.

She got a full hit of Caleb's deep musk before his lips descended on hers for a bruising kiss.

Kai responded automatically, opening for Caleb's questing tongue, the taste, feel, and smell of

him exploding across her senses. Warmth churned in her stomach, echoes of want and need thrilling through her blood before she remembered her anger and pushed him away, hard, knocking his shoes against his shoulder and his jaw by accident.

“Ow,” Caleb said, rubbing his chin.

“Asshole,” Kai said, glaring at him. She held her hands back from reaching for him again. Something about just being near him always got under her skin, and she’d broken her long-held rule about never getting involved with the *xita* again (not since Tommy) when she’d first taken him to bed.

Caleb grinned, unrepentant. “Just getting in the mood.”

“Wrong mood,” Kai told him, though she wasn’t still angry. How could she be? He warmed her, body and heart and soul.

With a last, all-too-human shrug, Caleb began to change.

“Oh, you are not getting away with that,” Kai told him as she watched. They were going to have to talk about boundaries again.

It took effort for Kai to even pretend to be angry watching Caleb change. It was too fascinating. He *condensed* his body, shrinking as the process made him bend forward. Kai could always tell how he fought that part, tried to stay upright. Only when his hands touched the ground did he seem to relax.

Hair sprouted across Caleb’s smooth back. His tight curls lengthened and rolled down to meet it. His hands and feet fused into paws, his thumb sliding up his leg. Kai teased him sometimes about being Pinocchio, the way his nose grew out.

The white patches of fur bothered Kai, though she never told Caleb that. He made such a beautiful black man. But the husky he changed into had a white bib, some white on all four paws, as well as around his eyes. It was normal husky coloring, making Caleb look like an ordinary dog, just as he looked like an ordinary human.

Except Caleb in dog form didn’t quite look normal. His eyes, now a startling blue, looked too intelligent, too keen. While he could fake dog behavior, and sit relaxed with his tongue lolling, it didn’t come naturally to him; he had to remember to do it. He stood with his tail straight out, on guard, watching everything. He didn’t move like a regular dog either, his stride too long and loping.

Mostly importantly, Caleb didn’t smell like a normal dog.

In human form, a person had to have something extra, like Kai did, to know Caleb was something more.

In dog form, no other creature—unless it, too, was something extra—dared approach him. Even people avoided him, afraid even when Caleb appeared unthreatening and was only normal dog size.

Kai finished tying Caleb’s shoes to her bag while Caleb shook himself and stretched after the change. Though he could run or fight immediately after transforming, he preferred to have a few moments to get reacquainted with four legs.

“Ready?” Kai asked as she hefted her bag onto her back.

After one last full-body shake, Caleb trotted to her side, his cold nose nuzzling her fingers.

“Stop that. I’m still mad at you,” she said.

Caleb gave Kai a toothy dog grin.

“Lord, you’re a menace,” Kai said, shaking her head and following Caleb down the alley.

* * *

Kai glared at the gray metal, padlocked door. “Supposed to be open, huh? Or am I more than just distraction?” The low, long warehouse was near the Mississippi, in the Central Business District. More warehouses made out of cinder blocks stretched on either side, edged by concrete and asphalt on all sides—nothing green grew here, except mold. Trucks rumbled by two streets up, on Tchoupitoulas.

This was a part of New Orleans most tourists never bothered to see.

Caleb whined and pushed at the door with his shoulder. It didn’t budge. He glanced left and right, then started sniffing along the side of the building, nosing among the brown, stubborn weeds struggling out of the cracks.

Kai tugged on the padlock, to see if it wasn’t fully latched. The feel of the cool metal stayed in her fingers after she dropped it. She rubbed them with her thumb, but she didn’t see anything in the orange glow of the streetlight, and she couldn’t smell anything strange, either, just concrete, diesel fuel, and the warm river water.

But there was something there, tugging at her senses.

After closing her eyes, Kai raised her hand and walked her fingers along the edges of the door: up, across, and then down, circling back again until the rough-cut edge of a key pricked her. With her eyes open, Kai could barely make out the unseen pocket where the key was tucked away.

Maybe someone other than Kai could have found the hidden key. Maybe Caleb would have been able to sniff it out, except that it was close to the top of the door, and he probably wouldn’t have been able to reach it, even standing on hind legs.

It made her more suspicious that this was some kind of setup. Was Blind Randall up to something? Was he pissed at her for some unknown slight?

“Caleb,” Kai whispered. She didn’t need to speak loudly when he was in dog form. He loped back to her side instantly. “Did Randall ask about me?”

Caleb tilted his head to the side and his tongue lolled: the perfect picture of an innocent dog.

Except Caleb wasn’t really a dog, and even as a boy Kai doubted he’d ever been innocent.

“We’re gonna talk about this later,” Kai promised.

Caleb pawed at the door.

Kai shook her head and unlocked it. Caleb pushed ahead of her, tail out, posture guarded.

After shutting the door quietly behind her, Kai took a moment while her eyes adjusted to the dark, letting her nose and other senses map everything else: dust, wood, concrete, industrial cleaning fluids, broken ceramics, plastic, rice, and sautéed veggies, all overlaid with incense.

Long lines of tall shelves rose almost to the ceiling, twenty feet above Kai's head, with three levels on each. Dishes and ceramic goods, dusty and dirty, sat stacked on them.

Kai paused as a familiar odor tickled her nose. It was almost identical to her own scent. But that wasn't possible. She'd never been here before. She wasn't about to mention it to Caleb, though. First, he couldn't actually answer her in his current form. Plus, he'd probably just suggest she use better deodorant if she was smelling herself.

The wide, garage-like doors at the front of the warehouse, big enough for a semi, rattled when a heavy truck blew by. An empty office stood to the side, filled with a massive desk covered in papers. Another door, people-sized, opened up to the street just past the office.

Above the office, a second office had been built, probably not to code given the rickety stairs leading up to it and the slant of the railing surrounding it. That was where the real business of the warehouse was conducted; the sharp tang of chemicals and cold drugs floated down.

Kai and Caleb positioned themselves halfway between the front and the back, waiting among the shelves. Caleb stretched out on the cool concrete floor, and Kai sat next to him. Her feet hurt from all the walking she'd done that day, as did her lower back. But the cool floor felt good against her bare legs. She laid a hand on Caleb's warm, scratchy fur. She knew better than to pet him—he wasn't a dog, no matter what he looked like.

Barely five minutes had passed before Kai smelled the intruders entering the warehouse, coming through the front door.

Shit. They were *xita*, like Caleb, similar, but not the same.

Kai couldn't tease out what breed they smelled like, though she had this image of the stupid dogs from the Asian knickknack shop she'd stopped at this afternoon, suddenly coming to life.

Caleb rose slowly. Kai joined him. Silently, they made their way toward the front of the warehouse to see who'd come.

Three creatures that looked like dogs paced beside a short Asian man. He wore a simple black Chinese jacket, loose black trousers, and black slippers, like what some kind of grand kung fu master might wear. A shiny, dark red amulet, shaped like a teardrop, hung from his neck.

The dogs looked like a blend between a Chinese pug and a Rottweiler: big as ponies, sturdy, with smushed-in faces, eyes merely slits under folds of skin and fur, and brown and black coloring.

Kai sighed. She couldn't fight them, not any of them. That had never been her style. Even if she'd trained hard, she'd always be short with delicate hands. Plus, these creatures all had great noses on them, she was certain. She couldn't bluff her way out of here as a drunken tourist, which had been their original plan: She'd act as distraction, while Caleb came from behind and took the guys out.

Though their original plan had stunk, Kai didn't see any choice. Three creatures and some kind of super-fighter were beyond Caleb's wild side, no matter how ferociously he attacked.

After a last, pointed finger at Caleb—*we are so gonna talk about this later*—Kai pulled her hair looser out of her ponytail and opened another button on the top of her shirt.

Here went nothing.

* * *

“Say, boys,” Kai drawled as she stepped into the light at the front of the warehouse.

The dogs locked onto her immediately: They’d already smelled her and been unsettled, just unable to pinpoint her location. They stood with hackles raised like serrated blades down their spines, all black and prickly, and gold-green eyes that shone hard as stone. They growled in unison, a soft dog tone.

No wolf in any of them for all their *xita* blood. Kai nearly sneered.

Though the dogs had known Kai was there, the human hadn’t. Maybe he wasn’t some kind of freaky Zen master—just a wannabe. Which could be more dangerous, frankly.

He stared at Kai as she approached, but instead of questioning her or telling the dogs to attack, he bowed, then yelled commands in a foreign language that made the dogs look sheepish and tuck their tails in.

In a mixture of English and whatever other language the man spoke, he started apologizing. All Kai could catch was, “Late,” and “Sorry.”

Given his deferential manner, Kai put on her best snob. “Wrong warehouse,” she said haughtily.

“On, no, my lady, no, I beg your pardon, no, but it’s this one,” he said, pointing toward the sloping stairs going up to the second office. He also looked like he wanted to piss his pants.

Kai rolled her eyes heavenward, the universal sign of *Lord, give me strength*. “No, idiot. Next door. He moved everything next door.” Kai turned and walked toward the door, assuming the man and the dogs would follow.

“You’re not—you’re not her!” he proclaimed, standing stock still.

Luckily, Caleb knew an opening when he saw it.

* * *

Caleb had torn out the throat of the first dog with a vicious bite before the other two were even aware they’d been attacked. Blood spurted in a wide arc, blocking out all the other scents, even the cool night at Kai’s back. It slid like colored rain against the gray concrete floor.

The other two dogs approached Caleb slowly, heads low, snarling and growling. Kai could feel her own hackles raising.

Then Caleb growled back, a warning of death and mayhem.

Even the man paused.

Though Caleb looked like a normal husky, he wasn’t merely a dog nor a transformed human. He was truly inhuman, a pure-bred *xita*: the kind of thing that made people afraid of the dark and check under their beds at night.

The dogs still attacked, desperate now, wild and angry. One raced forward and ran into Caleb, chest to chest, while the other nipped at his hind legs, seeking weaknesses.

Kai couldn’t help with the massive, snarling mess. Caleb would just have to get himself out of that. She turned to the human and groaned when she saw him pulling a plain green bowl and a

bag of red sparkling powder out from his jacket pockets.

A fucking spellcaster. Worse than some kind of martial artist.

Magic didn't *work*. Humans—and this guy was one-hundred-percent human—couldn't do magic. Either a person was born with special abilities, like Kai and Caleb, or they dabbled in things that regularly blew up in their face. Of course, Kai had always heard rumors that just the right spell, or the right ingredients, or the right moon phase, and the spell would do its thing.

Kai had never seen it. Every time, it had been a complete disaster.

Maybe that's what this guy was counting on. Something to blow up right in Kai's face.

"Oh no you don't," Kai said.

A yelp distracted her.

Caleb was down. Both dogs were on top of him.

Kai moved forward quickly. She had to stop the stupid magic freak first. Then she could look for a bat or something to beat the other dogs with.

"Oh yes, my lady, I do," the guy said, grinning at her. His black eyes had taken on a weird blue glow. He dumped the powder into the bowl and snapped his fingers. Fire sprang up in the bowl.

Kai had never seen someone do even that much magic before without spectacularly bad results, but that didn't mean the next thing the guy tried wouldn't go completely wrong. She grabbed for the bowl.

The guy pulled back and some of the burning powder spilled over the edge, sparking like fireworks all the way to the floor.

He yelled something in a foreign language. A name, maybe?

More yelps. Caleb was still pinned, snarling and fighting one dog. The other one had pulled away and was now looking at Kai.

Kai had a choice: out the door and *maybe* lose the dog in the streets, or running into the warehouse and hiding. She knew she could get away in the warren of shelves. She just had to find a good bolt hole.

But first, Kai had a magician problem. She ran forward, directly into him, mowing him down as she raced for the stacks. She'd smacked the bowl from his hands and it had tumbled onto the lowest nearby shelf, still blazing, as she took off, a giant dog on her heels.

Kai ran for the closest metal ladder, leaping up the stairs, heading for the top shelf.

A scrambling noise made her look behind her.

Of course, the fucking dog followed her. He wasn't really a dog, was he?

Kai raced across the top shelf, the cheap plywood banging under her heels, dipping under rafters and racing around piles of pottery.

A menacing growl followed her, close, too close.

At the ladder at the end, Kai threw herself over the edge, tripping and sliding down the rungs before she caught herself and pushed onto the second shelf. She shoved at the ladder with her foot. Miraculously, it rolled away, out into the middle of the aisle.

Kai stood for a moment, panting. She heard the clicking of claws above her head, and a whine.

When Kai looked up she was a snout and two paws coming over the edge. The dog lowered its body slowly, moving in a way that dogs didn't.

Kai searched wildly for a board or even a stick, something to hit it with.

A stack of plates sat open amongst the boxes. Tape held them together, with bits of Styrofoam between each. Kai tried using her nails but the damned tape wouldn't break.

The low growl from the dog sent shivers down Kai's spine. She smelled saliva, musky hound, and blood.

Kai had to get out of there.

Tearing into her bag, Kai dug out her keys and finally ripped through the tape.

Kai whirled and threw the first plate, missing the dog by a good foot.

The shattering sound of the porcelain when the plate hit the concrete below made Kai jump. Shit. Now she'd given her position away, if the other dog started hunting her.

Kai threw another plate anyway, hitting the dog solidly mid-body.

He growled again and swung himself in toward the shelf.

For a long moment the dog fell, twisting, and Kai thought he'd make it.

However, he couldn't bring his rear legs around quick enough. Just the front paws held the shelf.

Kai moved quickly before the dog could scramble up. She brought another plate down on its head, hard. Then, with all her strength, she kicked his smooshed-in face. "*Not here. Bad dog.*" Kai muttered as she kicked once, twice.

With a loud whine, the dog fell back, off the shelf.

Kai scrambled to the edge and looked down.

Stupid thing hadn't even landed where the first plate had fallen, so it hadn't cut itself or anything. It just gave a great body shake, glared at her, then raced off toward the other ladder.

Great. He was going to climb back up.

Kai looked over the edge, calculating the distance. She couldn't drop to the ground, not without hurting herself.

Instead, she turned back to the shelf, trying to find a weapon.

Nothing. Plates. Boxes. No handy long pole or some kind of knife.

The sound of claws against the cement made Kai stick her head back out.

Caleb looked up at her. Blood dripped from his body onto the concrete—from him or the others, Kai couldn't tell—the black fur hid his injuries too well. But he stood solidly on all four paws and didn't look like he needed stitches.

"What took you so long?" Kai grumbled before she made her way back down the shelf to the ladder at the other end, promising herself that after she checked Caleb for injuries she was going to inflict a few herself.

* * *

When Kai tried to lead them up the narrow space behind the warehouses so Caleb could change back, he shook his head at her, leaned back on his haunches.

“We can’t go back to the Quarter with you like that,” Kai hissed. Caleb *had* to change. The last thing they needed was for a cop to stop them due to some damn leash law. All she could smell was blood and fire. Hopefully, the stupid magician was burning, along with the warehouse.

Caleb took Kai’s hand gently in his mouth and tugged, wanting to go the other direction.

“Fine, fine,” Kai grumbled. “But I don’t have any money to get you out of the pound.”

Then Kai remembered she *did*, but she wasn’t about to tell Caleb that.

It was easy to avoid people while they still walked along warehouses, harder as they drew near the Quarter. Drunk tourists spilled out into the street, the constant party well on its way. Caleb drew them north, along the quieter, residential streets. Kai’s legs ached as the adrenaline drained out of her. How long had she walked that day? She wished they could take a cab, but they couldn’t, not with the blood-caked monster who walked beside her.

The aftermath of the rush left Kai shaky, as if coming off a caffeine high. She glared at Caleb when he bumped into her, cold blood staining her legs, until she realized she’d walked into him.

“Sorry,” Kai whispered, running her fingers along the top of Caleb’s head.

Caleb’s family owned an old shotgun house that had been divided into apartments. They rented the front to people who wouldn’t ask questions, while Caleb got the back, as well as the yard. They went into the yard first, sweet night jasmine perfuming the air. High, cinderblock walls enclosed the back, topped with rolling razor wire. Caleb led Kai to the hose. The cool water felt good against her legs, and Caleb endured her spraying him down, too.

Of course, afterward, he shook himself and sprayed her with more water.

The door on the first level was blocked off: Caleb had shown Kai the trick for breaking through it, if they were ever trapped inside. Instead, they climbed up to the second floor. Caleb insisted on going up the stairs first. Kai smelled nothing unusual but she trusted Caleb’s nose more than her own at this point.

To the side of the door, a dozen round, black sensor pads were arranged on the ground. The dog door locked automatically, and only opened when Caleb pressed the right sequence on the pads. Kai had asked why he’d needed the precaution, but he’d just growled and never answered her.

After doing his complicated dance, Caleb slipped through the dog door. A moment later, a naked and mostly human Caleb opened the door. He still bled from more than one bite. “Damn it,” Kai said, reaching for him, intending to take him to the bathroom and patch him up.

Caleb pulled Kai in, slammed the door, then slammed her against it. He kissed her, hard, desperate, and wild.

Kai held more than just Caleb’s clothes at times like this. He needed to remember his humanity, to be a man again. She kept both the outer human covering as well as the inner human.

Despite her exhaustion, Kai responded. She tried to gentle the kiss, slide the frenzy into something more calm. But her own hands were greedy, pulling Caleb closer, her questing fingers

needing reassurance that he was alive and well. He'd been bleeding so badly.

Kai whined as Caleb dragged his teeth against her neck, all the nerve endings tingling, every point sparking. Hooking one leg around his hips, she pulled him tighter, grinding against him, letting her own wildness meet his.

Caleb pushed Kai's skirt up roughly. Tugging her panties to one side, he opened her, sliding two fingers into her easily. Kai supported herself, pushing back against the wall, rolling her head from side to side as the fire exploded, melting what little resistance she had.

Kai howled when Caleb finally lined up and plunged inside her, that hard length scratching an unbearable itch, right there. She rode him hard, nails digging into his back, kisses interspersed with bites, holding his head back by his short hair and licking at wound on his neck.

It was frantic, animalistic, and just what they both needed.

Kai's climax came crashing down on her before she was ready, making her buck madly, shoving herself down on Caleb's cock, trying to fill herself further.

Caleb wasn't far behind, picking her up under her arms and slamming her back down hard enough to jar her teeth before he bit down on her shoulder, stiffening as he pumped everything into her.

They stayed like that for a moment, panting against each other, before Caleb growled again. He swung Kai around without letting her go, carrying her easily to the bed.

Then they started all over again, though this time, with more gentle kisses and human passion.

To read the rest of this novel, go to [Book View Café](#).

About the Author

Leah Cutter's first three novels (*Paper Mage*, *Caves of Buda*, and *The Jaguar and the Wolf*) are all historic fantasies, set in diverse periods of time, such as Tang dynasty China, WWII Budapest, and the Viking era, respectively.

Her recent novels, (*Clockwork Kingdom*, *Zydeco Queen and the Creole Fairy Courts*, and *The Raven and the Dancing Tiger*) are all contemporary fantasies, and set on the Oregon coast, in rural Louisiana, and around the city of Seattle, respectively.

Her short fiction includes fantasy, mystery, science fiction, and horror, and has been published in magazines, anthologies, and on the web. A collection of her recent short fiction is available in *Baker's Dozen*. A collection of her mysteries all set in the same future world with a ghost detective are available in *The Shredded Veil Mysteries*.

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