

CHAPTER 6

A faint tattooing sound interrupted Giselle before she completed her step. Someone knocking, weakly, at the door she realized after a puzzled listen. With Pyotrik gone, should she let anyone into the house? Except . . . maybe it was Pyotrik. If Vasili had found him . . . She hurried toward the sound and the front foyer, and then glanced out a narrow mullioned window.

A woman, maybe low thirties, leaned against the door, her body slumping as though only the brace of the wood kept her upright. She wore a brocade robe, the luxury fabric at odds with the rip in the sleeve and the hasty way it seemed thrown over her. Her mane of dark hair was tangled, and when she lifted her hand to the door, Giselle gasped, catching a glimpse of her bruised face and neck and the raw welt around her wrist. My, God, someone had bound her, beaten her!

“Pyotrik.” The woman’s hand flailed against the door, before she sunk to her knees.

Giselle threw open the door. Fog began to fill the ends of their narrow segment of the street, obliterating the moon and the other buildings. Feeling exposed, she knelt beside the woman. “Here, let me help you in.”

The woman shied away from her touch. “Pyotrik?”

“He’ll be back soon.” She wrapped an arm around the woman, helping her to her feet.

“You’re his seeress?”

The note of desperate hope in the abused woman’s question embarrassed Giselle. Here she’d only been thinking of magic in terms of a better lay. She couldn’t do any magic this woman would need. “I’m Giselle. What’s your name?”

“Lillian.” The final syllable faded, as though Lillian had used the remainder of her strength simply to declare her name.

As Giselle steadied the trembling woman, their hips brushed. Agony. Utter isolation. Cold forces slammed into her, repelling her sideways. An icicle of pain slashed her abs and jerked her supporting arm off Lillian, separating them. Lillian stumbled down the steps, while Giselle wheezed from the lung-freezing force.

Spasms twisted Lillian’s face. “I’m sorry. Too dangerous for you.”

Giselle grabbed air, her fists clenched to keep from touching Lillian. Much as she wanted to comfort the tortured woman, she feared unleashing another spear of torment. Bad as the touch had been for her, it had been excruciating for Lillian. “What the hell was that?”

“This.” Lillian brushed aside the lapels of her robe.

Nausea burned Giselle’s throat. Earlier she’d laughed about the idea of a chastity belt, but there was nothing humorous in the reality.

A web of ice-white metallic threads, so fine they could have been woven by a silkworm, encased Lillian from waist to thigh. The thin strands dug into her flesh, leaving the surrounding skin ashen. As Giselle looked, the mesh seemed to dig deeper, and Lillian flinched, a brief moan of pain coming from her lips.

“It’s getting tighter?”

“If I leave the possessor of the key, it will keep on tightening – until I’m dead or I return to the key owner.”

“We have to get that off you!”

“Can’t without the key Vasili holds. And I’d rather be dead than raped one more time by that toad,” Lillian spat, showing the will that had gotten her this far. “I can’t live like that. Bound. Freed only for the time it took for him to rape me. Unable to resist because he liked that and it make him stronger.”

“Maybe Pyotrik will know a way.”

“I had hoped Pyotrik could . . . ease my passing. Keep me, when the pain grows intolerable, from giving in and going back to Vasili.” A shudder ran across her, and she cast a fearful glance over her shoulder, as though expecting Vasili to leap into view.

They were badly exposed out here, Giselle realized, adding her own uneasy glance to the fog now billowing its way from either end of the street. She went down to help Lillian inside, but again the battered woman jerked away.

“Don’t you understand? If you touch the web again, it will ensnare you. You felt the pain of that first thread. You pulled away before it could establish the first link, but it knows your flesh now. The next touch will form a link you can’t escape.” Her voice ended on a whimper as she stared at the fog filling in the street. “I have led him to you.” Tears streaming down her cheeks, she gripped the railing, trying to step onto the sidewalk. “Go inside. Be safe.”

Careful not to touch the web, Giselle grasped Lillian’s shoulder and stopped her flight. “You are not leaving. Get in the house,” she commanded.

Lillian obeyed as instinctively as Giselle’s brothers had when she’d perfected that tone of voice on them and took a painstaking step up to the door.

The fog protested, swirling in an angry lash around their ankles. They stumbled up another step, barely able to see where to place their feet. Giselle glanced over her shoulder, and fear dug talons in her gut. Vasili – the demonic angel -- had materialized out of the pale curtain of fog and was striding toward them.

“One more step up.” Giselle shifted behind the halting Lillian, offering her body as a meager shield. “Look at the door. There’s the handle. You can reach that, Lillian.”

The first fireball hit Giselle square between the shoulder blades, tripping her upward from the force and the pain. Only some residual power -- Pyotrik’s earlier healing? Charms surrounding the house? The untrained magic of their sex? -- kept her from collapsing with the agony.

“You’ve got the handle.” Giselle urged Lillian forward.

“Vasili,” Lillian whimpered.

“I’ve got him,” she lied. “You open the door. You get inside.”

The second fireball sent her reeling, and she caught herself just before her hips grazed against Lillian. One more, and she’d be out.

“Open the door, Lillian!”

Lillian opened the door and fell through. Heart hammering, Giselle stumbled forward.

Straight toward a sizzling web of neuronic energy, blocking the door

At the last nanosecond, she pulled up, kept from being caught in Vasili’s trap. Vasili reached the foot of the steps, his face twisted in fury. “Fucking, seeress bitch,” he hissed. “Your belt’s waiting. I’ll take great pleasure in raping you. Hard and rough, the way I like it. As often as I want.”

“Screw yourself, Vasili.” Fist clenched, she spun to face him, balancing on the balls of her feet, ready to drive a knee or elbow where it could do the most damage.

Two bolts of blue lightning streaked out of the fog. Their power slammed against the web in a deafening boom. Electricity arced, standing the hairs on her arm up and bringing a jolt to her groin. From the points of contact, sparks raced along the web gobbling up the energy like Pac Man on speed.

Pyotrik streamed from the fog, his hands outstretched, and Giselle’s heart lurched at the waves of his fury. Her skin tightened from energy radiating across the bricks. He was pure masculine power, lean and focused, his face hard as a carved diamond. Two more bolts of blue lightning shot from his palms straight towards Vasili’s chest.

Vasili countered only at the last second, his breath harsh in the dark night. “I’ll have her, Pyotrik,” he sneered.

Pyotrik didn’t answer. Instead, he attacked again, at full strength and anger, all the more dangerous for his silence. Giselle picked up pot of geraniums from the porch and smashed it toward Vasili’s head.

Vasili deflected it, but not before it grazed his forehead, raising a welt of blood. He glared from one to the other, and then raised his hands. Not in surrender, instead, he pulled a thick swirling tornado of fog around himself.

Pyotrik swiped a hand through the air, cutting the fog like a hot knife. It collapsed into droplets on the damp sidewalk, but Vasili had vanished into the curtain of the night.

His breath heavy, Pyotrik stared at the empty space. “Not in any lifetime will you touch my seeress,” he spat. Then, he turned that simmering fury onto her. “What the fuck were you doing out here? I told you to stay in the house!”

“No you didn’t,” she countered, her hands fisting at her hips. He was disheveled, sweaty, and had never looked better to her. Didn’t mean she had to take crap from him.

“Well I meant to,” he shouted. “And you should have had the sense to figure it out. You knew Vasili was dangerous.”

Giselle bit back a sharp retort. She had enough experience with the male species to recognize his fear for her was translating into anger.

He crossed the distance between them in two strides and gave her a hard kiss, his hand resting against her breast, while the fingers of his other hand braced her neck. When he lifted he demanded, “How could you be so reckless?”

“Lillian was on the steps.”

“Lillian?” Pyotrik gripped her shoulders. “Where is she. Is she --?”

“She’s inside. Not doing well.” Giselle swallowed against the tightness in her throat. “She came here to die.”

“No! She can’t.” A frantic look crossed his face. He pulled Giselle inside with him, stopping a moment on the threshold to mutter something. Resetting protective charms, she guessed. The charms that had likely saved her life.

Lillian was sprawled in the foyer, only the small rise and fall of her chest evidence that she still

lived. Pyotrik knelt beside her and gently smoothed back the tangled strands of her hair. “Wake, Lily, sweet.”

Her eyes drifted open, barely. “Benedict?”

“Pyotrik.”

Her hand cupped his cheek. “I’d hoped to see you once more.”

Okay, she’d have to work on that jealousy thing, Giselle decided, seeing the affection between them and feeling an absolute heel for the brief pang of uncharitable thoughts toward a dying woman.

Pyotrik’s jaw set. “Do not give in! Giselle has brought us a great gift. The lost grimoire.”

A spot of color dotted Lillian’s cheek. “There’s a spell to counter the belt?”

“Yes.” Pyotrik’s hesitation was so brief that Giselle knew only she caught it. Caught that he was speaking from hope, not knowledge. He drew Lillian into his arms, then stood. “Rest in the game room while I retrieve it and call your seer.”

“Benedict’s back?” Hope tinted her question.

“Yes.”

Giselle trailed them into a room she hadn’t seen before. Feeling uncomfortably useless, she spared a curious glance around, as Pyotrik assisted Lillian to lie down on a lounge chair pulled near the fireplace. Not a foosball or pool table to be seen. Instead the games here – from ancient to modern – seemed chosen for both artistry and complexity of play. Nothing depended upon dumb luck to win. From the chess board made of carved marble to the polished gems of a Mangala game to the richly detailed city on a computer role-playing game, each was a work of art and lesson in strategy.

Other circumstances, and she could happily spend hours here. She loved games, from beating her brothers at Monopoly to the computer games she’d tackled because she wanted to know what kept her brothers so wrapped up on their computers. In fact, she realized with a start, Spirits, her favorite game, bore a startling resemblance to the milieu and rules of this world, except the magic in Spirits was fueled by the elements, not sex.

Uneasy with the thought, and not sure why, she focused on the problem at hand: Lillian and the chastity belt. Despite the bruises and the desperation, she could see Lillian was a beautiful woman. There was a power in her face, which even pain and near death could not hide. She lay back on the lounge, her breathing labored and her eyes closed. The robe had fallen open again, revealing the belt had bitten further into her skin.

Pyotrik tenderly covered her back up, allowing her a modicum of modesty, then rejoined Giselle. He took her hand and said in a low voice. “Keep her talking, give her something to think about besides the pain.”

“Distraction techniques.” She nodded. “Do you have anything for pain? Alcohol? Vicodin?”

“There’s wine by the computer.” He hesitated a moment, his fingers tightening around hers. “I died a thousand deaths seeing Vasili so close to taking you. I cannot lose you again, Giselle.”

She swallowed on the aching lump of her betrayal. She would have to leave; she had no choice. This fantasy would dissolve, lose its reality. She’d wanted to feel alive again? Well, she felt that in spades – desire, pain, and all. “I don’t want to lose you either.”

“Then we’ll get past any obstacles.” He gave a quick kiss to her knuckles, although the smoldering desire in his face and the countering tight wetness in her pussy confirmed they both wanted more. “Take care of Lillian.”

Giselle drew in a breath of air, knowing she didn’t have time to be afraid of what had just happened. Afraid of Vasili and the belt. Afraid of the commitment she had just exchanged with Pyotrik. Not yet. Later. Later she could be scared shitless. Later, she would wonder when this fantasy had suddenly ceased to be just about her, about sex and orgasms, and had become something both scarier and richer.

Now, she had to get Lillian comfortable. Get that abomination off her.

Giselle found the wine cabinet, uncorked a Burgundy, and poured a glass. She braced Lillian’s shoulders, as she held the glass to her mouth. “Here, drink.”

Lillian sipped the wine. Keep her talking, keep her distracted. Biting at the feeling of powerlessness, Giselle asked, “How did you get away?”

A ghost of a smile played on the other woman’s lips. “Vasili underestimated my will to leave. He allowed me my meditation and exercise times, for only by keeping my body strong could I continue to replenish him sexually. With each session alone, I tested the enchantments and boundaries of the house, until I found a way out. I picked a time when he was out, giving me the head start I needed to get here.”

Blood droplets soaked into her robe. Lillian grimaced, the words fading away, her eyes closing again, and Giselle knew the belt’s squeeze had reached intolerable levels. Lillian’s fingers grew slack. Her breathing slowed, yet . . . she still breathed.

Vasili was right. Her will to live was strong.

And, dammit, she wasn’t going to simply give up and fade away. Not if Giselle had any power at all to prevent it.

“No!” she shouted, startling Lillian into opening her eyes. Giselle put her face into Lillian’s. “You are not going to give up. There is some way to get you out of that, and you are going to keep on living until we figure out how. Find the spell. Or we steal the key. What does it look like? Did you see it?”

“Many times.” Good, a bit of sarcasm.

“What does it look like?”

“It’s hard to describe.” For the first time, a spark of something other than death lit into Lillian’s eyes. “I could draw it..”

They scrounged up a pencil and paper, and Lillian immediately set to work, her teeth pulling at her lip. Her hand shook, forcing her to draw with tiny strokes, and her skin remained white as bone, but she persevered, until she held up the drawing.

The orb bristled with phallic-looking knobs, each a slightly different shape and size. Giselle

frowned. “This is the key?”

“Yes. It’s not life-size. The round part is bigger.” Lillian held her hands about six inches apart. “I may not have gotten the protrusions of the correct shape and placement.”

“But I get the concept. The key is a ball of dicks.”

Lillian stared a moment at the paper, then a small giggle escaped her. “Obviously a male design.”

“A woman would have at least have done something practical with it. Like make them vibrate. Or open stubborn jars.”

Lillian giggled again. “I just pictured Vasili, standing in the kitchen, opening jars with his schlong.”

Giselle made an obscene, imitative gesture with her hips.

Lillian’s laugh grew richer, before a gasp of pain broke it off. She reached for Giselle’s hand. “Thank you. I had forgotten the gift of laughter.”

Pyotrik reentered the room, book in hand, giving them a curious look. “What’s the joke?”

“Ladies only.” Giselle joined him and peered over his arm as he paged through the book. “Which poem?”

“Ah, that’s the question.” At last he tapped a page. “This one. I’ll chant it as a counter to Vasili’s claim.”

The erotic imagery was powerful and exciting, Giselle admitted, feeling the heat of the words ignite inside her. Especially since Pyotrik’s fingers were grazing up and down her arm and the inside of her wrist. The heat of sexuality teased her nostrils with musky perfume. Definitely a poem of male dominance, one challenging for the alpha role.

Yes, it might work. She frowned, uneasy. Maybe one for her and Pyotrik to explore later, but, would it work for Lillian now?

Pyotrik tilted his head to look at her. “You do not agree?”

She flipped back three pages. “How about this one?”

It was Pyotrik’s turn to frown. “A feminine dominance chant?”

“A man did this to her. This reasserts her control.”

“The counter for a man’s abuse would be a man’s constructive, pleasurable use of that power.”

“You know more about how this magic works, but --” Giselle pursed her lips

“But your instincts argue against it. Even though, you would have lead the chant?”

“I would? I don’t know . . .” They glanced again at Lillian, knowing they would only get one chance.

Pyotrik read through the two chants again, then flattened the book at her choice. “We go with the feminine.”

“Why?”

“Because I trust you.” He touched her breast, directly above her heart. “Here, you know the magic.”

“No I don’t.” He couldn’t decide something like this based on an illusion. She turned in his arm to face him. “I’ve never learned magic. All this is . . .” she waved a hand. “Unreal to me.”

His face hardened. “It is real, mi amour. Accept that.” His free hand flattened atop her breast, circling, rubbing the nipple into a taut bud. He leaned down and bit her lip, then licked the spot with his tongue. A vortex of sparks opened inside her as his hand reached to the wetness between her legs. “This is very real between us.”

Whew, he could bring her near orgasm with just a sexy touch. “My choice was feminine instinct, nothing more.”

“Instinct is the first blush of magic.” He rose from the seductive touch. “I will read these lines with you. We’re strongest together. As this is feminine power, you’ll be outermost, at my back. Hold one of her hands and put your other on the belt – ”

“I can’t touch the belt.”

Pyotrik needed no explanation of why. His face hardened. “We will destroy him and this abomination, mi amour.”

He lifted Lillian from the lounge to the thick carpeting, then knelt behind her, bracing her upright. As he placed the back of his hands against the mesh, Giselle knelt behind him, her knees on either side of his hips, and set the book on the floor where they both could read it. She reached around him, to place her hands in his, careful not to touch the mesh. He was enough bigger than her that it was a stretch; her shoulders felt the strain and her breasts mashed against his back.

He let out a pent up breath as his strong fingers wrapped around hers. “I will hold steady, Giselle. You shall not contact the web.”

“I know.” She leaned against him, drawing in his spicy, masculine scent. She saw the faint press of his penis against the fabric of his pants, not hard yet, although she suspected the swirling power of the sexual imagery might change that. It, he, was simply there, asserting his masculinity, his differences from her.

For a moment, the words on the page blurred beneath the powerful current flowing between them. She blinked them into focus and began to chant, “The flow of mine eyes doth turn to the sun. He awaits my call. Blood of my heart I bid come. My breasts, my ovation, all mine to offer.”

“Commend your power to mine.” Pyotrik joined her in the masculine chorus. Their voices wove together, his deep as an ocean abyss flowing to dark depths, hers with the melody of the wind across the waves. Opposing strengths, they drew from their unique differences. The chant’s frank sexuality grew as the power of wind and water swelled together.

“Nay, only at my direct brush me, touch me with marble, accept the juice of mine.” The verse teased, beckoned, took control, aroused. Life and death going on here, and she was fucking horny.

“Embrace me, I beg. Take my life deep inside your throat.” Pyotrik turned his head slightly so his words brushed against her ear, a caress of words and air. The tip of his tongue touched her. “Take me, unleash us.”

“Entwine to unbind? Two bodies, four arms, legs, cunning and rude. Be this union the way of our life?” Every place she pressed against Pyotrik’s muscle tingled with life. His penis hardened, dampening the fabric with the first drops of semen. That rod, she wanted it between her legs. So close, but she wouldn’t move to touch and invite him in. Not yet. Not without Lillian’s freedom.

Instead, Giselle cradled him, growing wet and wanting. His fingers tightened on hers, anchoring the two of them together. Her words soared them higher. His kept them together.

The last words faded and Giselle held her breath, listening, watching. Nothing visible, no change. Her chest tightened. Had she chosen wrong? Shouldn’t the belt have magically dissolved or something? At least the chant had not seemed to worsen Lillian’s condition.

She heard the click of the door, and a stranger, dressed in a wrinkled grey turtleneck, jeans, and boots, ran into the room. The man was blond, fit, and handsome despite the haggard, drawn look of his face. “Oh, my, God. Lillian!”

Pyotrik didn’t shift from their position, obviously not fearing him, but warned. “We’re working, Benedict.”

Benedict, Lillian’s seer.

“Repeat the chant, Giselle, and keep repeating it,” Pyotrik ordered.

“It didn’t work.” Maybe they could still try Pyotrik’s suggestion.

“Do it!”

She began the words again, creating a cyclone of arousal as Pyotrik joined her. Benedict fell to his knees beside them. Silently, he nodded and swayed, absorbing the cadence. At last, he took Lillian’s hands in his and joined them for the final lines, an odd, intimate threesome, melded into one.

“Again! Dammit, dominate, Giselle. Bring the magic out.”

She found arousal and sex, but not the power of magic they evoked. Frustrated, Giselle began again. The third time, harsh, male sexual moans punctuated the chant with sheer, erotic power. Her body and fingers shook as that power ripped through her, ricocheted, and left.

She couldn't use it, couldn't direct it. Untrained, she tried to find the wells of strength she'd cultivated over the past eight years and failed. Keep serene and steady, follow the rules, organize – here her strengths were all useless.

Draw from your withered wells of daring and life, curiosity and determination. Her raspy voice strengthened.

Not enough. She couldn't compete with two strong masculine seers.

Lillian gasped, and her eyes popped open. They were glazed, unseeing. Or perhaps seeing something in the world beyond? Her hands jerked out of Benedict's clasp. She reached out, grasping his shoulders, fingers skeletal against the gray knit. Death throes.

No, no, no!

But, Lillian didn't gasp her last. Instead . . . “It's looser.”

Lillian's voice joined Giselle, two women united in the eternal feminine mystery. Lillian's power showed her a way, one she fumblingly joined in the final stanzas.

In the end silence, Benedict grunted and tugged the belt. The mesh parted, as though opening at a hinge. Lillian was free!

The wires writhed, snakes seeking a new hole to bury deep. Benedict shot to his feet, carrying Lillian with him, cradling her in his arms away from the danger. The silvery worms turned toward Giselle, the ends dancing as though sniffing out the taste of her flesh. One elongated, reaching for her. Too exhausted to move, she whimpered as cold needles lanced through her belly.

“No!” Pyotrik shouted. He let go of her and seized the wires before they touched flesh.

“Meld!”

The wires hissed as they imploded into a tight ball. Pyotrik dropped the ball to the carpet. A ghost of steam wafted from the metal and was gone. The silvery hue died, leaving a lump of molten lead. Benedict's boot stomped the mass, and it disintegrated.

Giselle collapsed against Pyotrik's back, her hair plastered to her face and neck as completion

rippled through her. Pyotrik turned, catching the nape of her neck with his hand, and kissed her. Hard. With tongue and teeth and his free hand kneading her breast. She returned the kiss, stroking him through the wet fabric of his pants, trying to chase away the lump of knowledge that as a seeress she was close to a failure.

“Not here,” he growled. “Not yet.” He pushed her hand away, then rose and held out a hand to help her up.

On her feet, she turned to Benedict and Lillian.

Lillian was cupping his cheek. “You’re back.”

“I was looking for you; I never stopped looking for you,” he answered, his voice thick.

“I’m sorry.”

He made a soothing, shushing sound. “No, no. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“But, Vasili –”

“His evil, not your shame. Never.” The energy between them shimmered in the air.

“You know where the guest bedroom is, Benedict,” Pyotrik said. “You’re welcome to stay there and refresh.”

Benedict nodded his thanks, but before he could leave with Lillian, Giselle stopped him. She knew what “refresh” would mean in this world. After what Lillian had been through, would she want to be alone with, touched by, a man, any man, even Benedict?

Giselle leaned forward and carefully brushed back a strand of Lillian’s hair from her bruised face. Given time they didn’t have, Lillian might have become a heart-sister, like Kate and Marissa. “You don’t have to go with him. What happens next, how you heal, this is your choice, a woman’s choice. Not his. Not theirs. I’ll back you.” Not that her pitiful effort would be much help.

“Thank you, but Benedict is the one I need now.” Lillian’s smile sobered. “Your magic . . . I’m not sure you’d understand that yet, but trust that I’m making the choice I want.”

“I’ll be tender with her,” Benedict vowed.

“Then go in peace.” Giselle stepped back and watched them leave, wondering if she would see either one ever again. She turned to see Pyotrik watching her as closely, his eyes silvered with need, but his mouth and face hard. A knot tightened in her belly. “What’s wrong?”

How could he explain, Pyotrik wondered, when he didn’t understand himself? The imminent danger of Vasili and their looming confrontation, the necessity to shield a weakened Giselle from the evil seer – these facts he understood and accepted.

But, how could he explain to Giselle the gnawing foreboding, the deep ache of loss washing over him? How could he say that he feared their time together was so very limited? Something was tugging him away, and she was not ready to follow him there. Not when she shied from her powers.

She might never be ready.

Or, once opened to possibilities, she might choose another path.

He’d have to trust her and accept her choices. Trust. That option never, if ever, came easily to him.

Choices? Shit, everything about Giselle scrambled logic. Tell the caveman truth. What he wanted was to mark her as his and claim her so deep that the thought of leaving again would never cross her mind. He wanted to treasure her, care for her, wallow in the scent and taste of her skin and the silk of her hairs, and burst with their conjoined magic. Not to put too fine a point on it, he frigging wanted to stick his dick in her wetness and swallow her kisses.

He swelled with a rush of blood. Damn, but after that poem he needed release, in the worst way and the best way.

He needed to recharge before he went after Vasili.

He grabbed her hand and tugged her out of the room, finally answering her what’s wrong?.

“Nothing’s wrong that fucking you won’t relieve.”

His chest tightened when she grinned. “Good. Where are we going?”

To heaven and to hell. “Just trust me.”