

Chapter 8

Giselle followed Pyotrik up a three-rung ladder screwed into the bricks, then around a turret. Her breath caught in her throat as she emerged from the shadows onto a flattened corner amidst the pitched roof tops.

Prague spread out before her. She braced her hands on her thighs, drinking in the scene. She'd never been out of the United States, never been further than Mississippi, to be honest. Now one of the oldest, best-preserved cities in Europe lay at her feet.

She stepped closer to the edge. Night still held mastery over the city, but like any city, not all its inhabitants slept. At eye level, random window lights cast highlighted streaks across the slanted roofs and baroque saint statues. Far below, the narrow, twisting streets stayed in mysterious shadow, except for the occasional glow of a cigarette or neon sign.

Pyotrik wrapped his arm around her waist. "Are you ready to go? To train your magic, all senses must be engaged, overloaded. We start in the city."

Leave here, leave safety? She studied him a moment, looking at the camouflage he wore. They had redressed in the ninja strips, his fashioned like hers. On him, the sexy Ninja look was highly masculine, a bare cover for leashed power. A small leather backpack rested at his feet, her book of poetry tucked into an outer pocket. He looked determined, capable, taut and formidable with the power that surged inside him.

"Is it dangerous?"

He gave a shrug. "What is safe?"

Oh, what the hell are you dithering about, Giselle? This is Prague! With a smile, she agreed.

“Let’s go.”

Pyotrik laid a hand on her cheek. “This will be dangerous, make no mistake about that. I will teach you, but with two provisos. As my lover and seeress, you have autonomy. As my apprentice, you do not. This is my city, and right now, I am the expert in your magic. You will do exactly as I command.”

“Do I get to at least ask why?” she asked with more than a hint of tart irritation.

“As long as you do it.”

“What’s the second?”

“If, after the instruction, I deem that you are more liability than help, you will accept that decision. Without question. Do you agree to these?”

She bit her lip, thinking. Promises were sacred. The first was doable, for a short time, but the second . . . A bit of joy shriveled to a dusty knot that hurt to breathe around. Could she accept being left behind?

He pressed her lips with his thumb. “I must have these promises, Giselle. For the safety of us both. You must trust me.”

“Or?”

“Or we stay here and make love under the stars.”

“Not much of a threat, Pyotrik.”

A ghost of a smile played across his face. “Either way, we win. Your last choice, Giselle, at least for another couple of hours.”

“I choose to make love under the stars.”

The disappointment in his eyes was swift and quickly doused. He reached for her, but she stepped away.

“When we get back.” she finished. Had her choice ever been in doubt? When Prague and

magic beckoned?

He stared at her, and then laughed.

“I can’t promise no questions, or no suggestions,” she said as she put her hand in his. “But, I trust you, Pyotrik. Until we return, I’ll follow you.”

He kissed her knuckles before releasing her hand. “Then, come explore Prague with me.” To her surprise, he didn’t turn to the steps, but picked up the backpack, and then climbed over the surrounding railing.

“How do we get down?” She peered over the side, and saw a rickety ladder that must have been erected when Wenceslas was king. “Wouldn’t the steps be safer?”

Pyotrik hooked his wrist around the ladder and gave an exasperated huff. “What happened to trusting me?”

“I just need to understand.”

“That is why you cannot control your magic, mi amour. You think too much. Tonight is not about the mind, we’re not cerebral sorcerers. Our power comes from sex, from the body. From sensation and feeling. Give into that.” He started down the ladder, his voice fading. “Besides, Vasili likely has charms watching the door. This exit he knows nothing about.”

Pyotrik had disappeared off the side of the building.

She took a breath, and then followed him over the rail, clinging to the rail with white-knuckled fists, as she balanced four stories above the street. She twisted, looking down, but saw nothing of him, except a shimmer of movement, like heat above an oasis.

Damn good camouflage these clothes.

No different than the rock climbing wall. Better than the climb she’d made when she first arrived. Another steadying breath, and then she reached down with her foot. Her soft-soled shoe found nothing but air. She dug around, blind, then the moment’s panic receded when she connected with the top rung of the ladder.

Feel. She climbed down, refusing to pay attention to how far off the ground she was and how the ladder rattled and swayed in the night breeze. Feel only each rung, solid and metal, beneath her foot. Feel the air between each step, as real as the metal.

Her foot hit concrete instead of metal. The sidewalk, at last. Where was Pyotrik?

She caught a glow of amber in the shadows, like a single cougar's eye. As Pyotrik stepped from the shadows, the gleam of his dragon earring blended back with his skin. When he reached her, his fingers brushed against her bare neck, warm against her nape as he delved beneath her hair. When he removed his hands, she peered downward, feeling a weight nestled against her throat, but she couldn't see whatever he had placed there.

"The pendant is amber, the kin to mine." Pyotrik stroked a knuckle across her clavicle, the tips of his fingers brushing against the necklace. "Already it warms from the blood of your skin. When all else fails, use its connection to me to fuel your magic's power."

She touched it, following the trace of his hand. His extra heat soaked into the hollow of her throat. "Do you have something to connect to me?"

He shook his head, the silvery strands of his hair a mere blur of starlight. "Not yet, but soon this amber will resonate to you and form the link."

"Where do we go first?"

He just smiled and wrapped an arm across her shoulder as he led her through the streets, following the twisted alleys and sliding through archways that bore them to new streets. Within minutes, she was totally lost. If her life depended upon it, she couldn't have said what direction Pyotrik's home was. Not even the look of it or the number or the street. Hell, she could be standing right in front of it, and she wouldn't know.

If she got separated from Pyotrik, she wouldn't know how to find him again.

She opened her mouth to ask where he lived, what his house looked like, some details that would get her back to him, then she closed it again. Pyotrik had said not to think so much. Well,

maybe this was the first step. She chased the questions away and ceased the futile effort of memorizing each turn.

Instead she soaked in the centuries of life steeped into the stones and air, pointing out what caught her eye and chatting with him about their history. An elaborate window in a church done in the old style of lead and wavy colored glass. How many had found comfort in the scene of the ascension as they worshipped? Above two gargoyles peered protectively over a cornice. She and Pytorik passed a narrow stairwell, the stone steps worn to an arch by the passage of countless feet. Maybe Charles the Fourth had actually stepped there. Each fresh view fed her passion for history.

How had she let that passion get so dry? Searching through scanned pages for facts to answer questions posed by the clients of the history center. No longer raising her own questions or wondering about the people that created that history.

Not only the past revived for her, though. The present took on bold colors and fresh textures and stimulating touches. She savored the cool shadows of the night, the taste of paprika on the air, the play of Pyotrik's muscles against her side.

The heat of the amber increased, and she snuggled closer to Pyotrik, hooking her thumb over the edge of one of the cloths he wore.

Pyotrik gave a growl of approval as he turned her onto the St. Charles Bridge over the Vltava. At the center of the bridge, she tugged his arm to pause and take in the ripples over the dark river and beyond, where the lights of Prague Castle loomed. "Do you suppose the wives are resting tonight?"

"The four wives of Charles the second? Buried in the crypt and haunting the castle?"

She nodded.

"Not tonight. The night is too peaceful. The lines of power are too easy. Can you feel them?"

She tilted her head, giving him a quizzical look. "What power?"

"Prague sits at a crossing node of the earth's magnetic energies. That energy infuses everything here— the air, the stones, the water, wood and glass. There was a reason many alchemists chose the city

to practice their craft.”

She gave a snort of derision. “Alchemists were a bunch of fools and charlatans.”

“Really? You’ve known many?”

“I know the laws of chemistry. You can’t change lead to gold.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps, like magic today, there were many who pretended, who fooled themselves and others. But amidst the fakery, was there true power? Come.” He took her hand, his palm warm and faintly rough against hers, and led her to the end of the bridge, where they crouched. He placed her hand against one block.

“This is the foundation stone of the bridge, placed here on September 7, 1357 at 5:31 AM. Or, in the manner European dating, 1357, 9, 7, 5:31. That is a very deliberate, very magical choice. The energies and the numerology make this a stone of power, perhaps even the source of the Philosopher’s Stone legend, the Holy Grail of the alchemists.” His hand pressed hers flat against the rough granite. “Do you feel it? The power running through here? The tingle?”

She tried, she really tried, but all she could feel was the tingle she got from him: the heat and strength of Pyotrik’s hand above hers, the crowding of his strong body, the faint electric scent of his magic. She shook her head in regretful silent denial.

“Good,” he whispered in her ear. “Because this is not the cornerstone. That lies safe, deep in the foundation.”

“Bastard.” She gave him a playful cuff. “You tricked me.”

“Making sure you were listening to what’s within you. The power of suggestion and self deception is also strong.” He rose to his feet. “Come.”

They crossed over the bridge to the cobblestone streets, darker here from the shadows cast by the dominating hill where Prague Castle was situated. His pace increased, as though he were anxious for what lay ahead. Or anxious to be less exposed. They paused only twice, once when Pyotrik donated coin to a corner beggar and once to listen to a man singing an operatic aria on the curb, also the

recipient of Pyotrik's funds. Down another narrow side street, a few more twists away from the more traveled thoroughfares, and then he ushered her into a recessed doorway.

The smoky anteroom inside was redolent with sizzling lamb, oregano, and wine. Giselle inhaled, her stomach grumble reminding her that she was hungry.

The host greeted Pyotrik with an effusive hand clasp and air kisses to each cheek. She couldn't understand the exchange of words – what was the language of the Czech Republic? -- so drifted toward the restaurant entrance, drawn by the drone of patron's voices and the music of a trio.

Charming. The tables in the tiny restaurant were covered in white linen, with a single, vanilla-scented candle at the table's center the only lighting. Pyotrik finished his conversation with the host, and then joined her. He took her hand, his thumb rubbing across the top of her hand. "Do you like the musicians?" he asked.

"Yes, very much. I'm surprised at the contemporary sound a violin, a cello, and a piano can pound out." Her body bobbed with the rhythm. Alternative European rock, propelled by a driving beat with a base in the rich history of classical music. And could that violinist do complex bowing. "What are they called?"

"Zahrada."

"Zahrada," she repeating, mentally filing the name. Next time she was at a computer, she'd browse for their music to download. She nodded toward an empty table. "Do we seat ourselves?"

"No. Our host will prepare other arrangements."

"I hope those arrangements include food. I'm hungry."

"You shall be fed." He glanced over his shoulder at the host, who hurried back toward them.

"Ah, we're ready."

Without further explanation, Pyotrik led her toward the back of the restaurant, then down a winding staircase. The narrow stone steps slanted a bit, making footing tricky. Still holding her hand, he glanced back twice, making sure her steps stayed true. Once, her foot started to slip off the narrow

step, and quick as a blink, he braced her with a strong hand at her hip, almost before she realized that she was in danger of a fall.

At the foot, they wound their way through a narrow passage carved out of solid rock, nearly as uneven and treacherous as the stairwell. A shroud of dirt scraped against her soft-soled shoes. The air in the passage grew stale and damp.

Whoa, they must be going deep beneath Prague Castle. Giselle's mouth dried, and her heart began to pound against her ribs. Great time to discover an insipient case of claustrophobia. Her fingers tightened around Pyotrik's to draw a shred of courage from him.

"We're almost there," he said, as if he sensed her trepidation. The words were meant to reassure, but their comfort was lost when his voice sounded hollow in the endless passage and the stone walls swallowed up the sound, as thoroughly as the earth swallowed up them.

At endless last, a thick-hewn wooden door broke the gray barrier of rock. Pyotrik pressed his hand into a small hollow. The door slid noiselessly back revealing black nothingness. Not an iota of light escaped from the depths.

Giselle bit back the questions kicking in at a high octane rate.

Pyotrik went in first, drawing her in with him. The ground swallowed her. All sensation erased except a whiff of breeze and a faint thump.

The door had shut.

What the hell had she gotten herself into?