

CHAPTER 10

Giselle spun around. The door had vanished! She ran to the wall and pounded against the burgundy fabric. “Pyotrik!”

“Your fantasy is over.”

Madame Claudine’s gentle voice brought Giselle around again. She found Madame, dressed in the same silk blouse and tailored skirt, watching her with a face full of understanding.

“Over?”

“Did you receive all you asked?”

What had she asked for? Orgasms? Magic? A dangerous man? “Oh, yes.” She gulped in air. “I want to go back.”

Madame shook her head. “One fantasy. And the time for ending is now.”

“But . . . Pyotrik?”

“Fantasy.” Madame nodded toward a clock sitting atop a small escritoire.

The clock, the one chiming midnight when she’d walked in the chamber, now read one minute after twelve.

“Is it still Friday?” Trembling, she squinted at the clock face.

“Technically it is now Saturday.”

“How –?”

“If your fantasy fulfilled your desires, you may pay there.” Madame firmly interrupted her questions, and Giselle knew she’d have none of them answered. “Your card, if desired is there as well.”

How could she complain? Every one of her dreams had been fulfilled. It was her problem if she wanted that fantasy to be real. If she ached to hold him again, to feel the magic of him inside her.

She glanced down. The ninja clothes were gone; she had on the same outfit she'd worn to dinner with Abby, Suzette and Raven earlier in the evening. The cold hollow at her throat told her that her amber was gone.

All fantasy.

Numb, she wrote a hefty check, and then picked up the card. Right now, she couldn't imagine wishing this pain, this heartache, on anyone else. Still, she slipped the card into her purse. It was then she realized that she still had the book of erotic poetry tucked into the pocket.

Madame plucked the check from her hand. "Do you need me to call a taxi?"

Giselle shook her head, not trusting her voice, as fatigue and reality slammed into her. Just let me get out of here with some dignity. Without breaking down to a blubbering fool. She pushed down the feelings, pulled on the manners and the reserve that had gotten her through another nightmare of loss. "My car is near. Thank you for your . . . generosity."

Back stiff, she made it through the shop and back out into the sultry French Quarter. Madame locked the door behind her.

The fantasy was over. Gone. She pulled in a shuddering breath, not sure where to go. Home. Yes, home. Don't break down, not yet, now while people can see.

Her feet took her blindly down their habitual route. Clinging to her pride by the merest threat, she could barely breathe in the thick hot air. Her heart almost hurt too much to pump the blood against the humidity. Too many people still about. Too many when all she wanted was a curl into solitary misery.

She ducked into a small alley, into the dark, away from curious eyes, Leaning her head against the rough brick, she allowed the tears to fall down her face, steam her neck. Shuddering, silent sobs made her ribs ache.

It had to end; she knew that. Get a grip, get over it, get back in reality. The pain inside contracted to a hard lump as she repeated the mantra. You knew it couldn't last. You knew it was all just a pleasant dream. You knew—

You knew? Fuck! She was doing it again. Denying those ugly, irrational emotions.

Her breath came in a harsh rasp, and to hell if anyone heard. She clenched her fists, allowing anger and loss free reign. “Damn it, Pyotrik,” she shouted. “Damn, damn, damn! How could I fall in love with you in the space of a minute? It’s not fucking fair.”

Yeah, and life is a bitch. She could almost hear Marissa’s sardonic retort.

“Yeah, and that bitch smacks like hell.”

A couple passed by the alley, giving her a curious glance, and their steps hurrying away as she ranted to herself.

“Would you have rather never met Pyotrik? No. Not have your heart pound in ecstasy and danger. No. No. Would you trade this hurt for the magic you found? No.”

She wanted to talk about her pain, share it, not hold it in like last time. The girls. It was late, they’d think she was nuts, but they’d be there for her. As she rummaged in her purse for her cell phone, her gaze caught on a shimmer of sapphire.

Her Pegasus tattoo. Even in the darkness of the alley, she could see the deep blue glow.

She crouched down for a better look and stared until her eyes burned. This had been pale, until she’d had sex with Pyotrik.

So, not everything was fantasy. What was real? The magic inside her? Searching beyond the hurt, she laid a hand at her belly, much like a pregnant woman who feels the first stirring of life.

Oh, honey, it was there. That core of power, that magic. She thought of Pyotrik, thrusting inside her, tonguing her nipples and that nidus grew brighter. She reached inside her waistband, touching her swollen clit with a finger tip. Her mouth parted, and she grew wet as she imagined herself taking him into her mouth. That brilliance spread, a pillar of power from groin to forehead and back to

the soles of her feet.

The magic was real. And strong.

Hope unfurled with desire.

Was Pyotrik real, too? Could their minds and bodies have somehow joined in a place out of time, out of reality? The possibility pounded between her eyes. Too confusing to understand. Too precious to deny.

How could she find him? He could be anywhere in this world.

What had he said? Use the amber? She didn't have any –

Arcana! The gallery. She sped from the alley, then raced through the night until she reached the shop. Thank the sainted Mother, it kept French Quarter hours. The same haughty clerk stood behind the counter.

“I'll buy that amber,” Giselle said breathlessly, before her logical mind could convince her that it was not a smart idea to empty her savings on a whim. Instead, she pulled out her checkbook and filled in the amount.

“I'll have to verify the funds.”

“Fine. I'll wait.”

The clerk give a sniff, then dialed in to their check verification system.

Giselle's foot tapped against the floor. Geez, how long could it take? Every second delay piled on a new weight, a fresh sense that time was running out.

When the clerk had verified the funds, her attitude improved. “Would you like me to gift wrap that?”

“No, I want to wear it.” Giselle clasped the fine gold chain around her neck. The amber nestled at the hollow of her throat, right where it was supposed to.

She waited. It warmed to her skin, but when she turned . . . no hot or cold or pulse, or anything to indicate where she should go next. She stepped outside and tried walking both ways. Nothing.

Nada. Zip. Well, hell.

So much the cosmic dowsing theory of meeting.

Her nails dug crescents into her palms, as she tried to decide what next. Where was the sign?

The clue?

Her sense of urgency grew, fluttering at the edges of panic. He's found me. Pyotrik's last words. If Pyotrik was real, then was Vasili. If Vasili had found him in this reality. . . . "Where are you Pyotrik Demke?" she muttered.

Demke! That was it. She rushed back into the shop.

"Was there something else?" the surprised clerk asked.

Giselle shook her head as she raced over to the picture she'd seen earlier. The Times-Picayune newspaper photo of the owner. Christophe Demke. Not Pyotrik, but a near relative, there was a resemblance in the eyes. She skimmed the caption: Demke presents priceless chess set to Prague Museum of Fine Arts. Welcomes Czech ambassador to his home. His home. Where? She peered closer to the picture. There. Those columns on the building next to them, she recognized them from visits to a high school friend. She knew exactly which St. Charles digs were the Demke's.

She just prayed that was where she'd find Pyotrik.

She grabbed the street car, rather than take the time to backtrack and get her car from the parking structure, and used the time of the trip to review the book of poems. Which spell, which technique? Her repertoire was limited. She had a feeling she'd only get one chance, one moment of surprise. She'd memorized the chosen words by the time her stop came up.

Once off the streetcar, she slipped into the shadow of a live oak, an ancient one that hadn't been killed by the ravages of Katrina, assembling the bones of a plan. The target house was three stories, dark as ebony. Not a single flick of light. The air-conditioning was silent, too.

She slid around to the back, away from the exposure on St. Charles, and tiptoed up the back porch. As her hand hovered above the door latch, it occurred to her that she could have completely

fabricated this connection. That her subconscious had remembered the amber and the photograph from Arcana and had simply incorporated them into her fantasy, like dreaming of waterfalls when you had to pee.

That she was about to break and enter into the home of complete stranger armed with a book of erotic poetry.

That she was about to throw away twenty-seven years of hard-earned respectability.

Her mind almost convinced her feet to turn.

Take a risk, Giselle. She stepped onto the back stairs.

A spasm of pain stabbed her groin, and the amber scorched her skin. The man she loved was in there, and he needed her. Wishing she had the ninja clothes, she slipped off her heels and prepared to commit a felony.

Her fingertips, hovering above the latch, tingled. The echo of electric magic stopped her. Of course. Vasili worked metal; he'd have a warning spell.

Pyotrik had told her she held power over the physical world and over the body. "Bind to my will," she murmured to the metal. "Let him feel my dominion."

The tingling disappeared. Carefully, she opened the door. No alarms that she heard. Or felt. She slipped through the house, letting her body flow between the molecules of air, creating no disturbance, no whisper or wrinkle of magic that could be detected. Going on mere instinct, she tiptoed up the stairs to the highest floor. In the hall, she stretched her hands to the sides, letting the air tell her what she needed to know.

Here. She stopped outside one door, no different than any other. The spear of heat, the ripple of excitement in the muscles of her pussy told her – Pyotrik was inside. The amber heated again. Did that mean, he knew she was out here?

She was taking such a risk, taking so much on faith.

A stab of pain knifed between her ribs. Shit, they were hurting him. Bad. The heat began to

cool.

Damn, damn, damn, she was losing him. Again. Desperate, but retaining enough sanity to know she couldn't go in blind or unprepared, she knelt in the carpeted hall and put her eye to the keyhole.

Her field of vision was so limited at first she thought the darkened room was empty. Then a movement of the shadows caught the corner of her eye, and she recognized the thick body. One of Vasili's bodyguards.

Her heart tattooed against her ribs. The acrid taste of fear puckered her tongue. Where were Vasili and Pyotrik?

There. Another body moved, revealing a single burning candle, the flame a pale, nearly transparent yellow. The light caught the body's face as he bent down.

Vasili.

She pressed her lips together to avoid a telltale gasp. He was creepier, harder, than her fantasy had played him. Just beyond him, she could see a naked shoulder bound to a chair, an ear, the edge of a spiked-platinum-hair scalp.

Pyotrik!

Vasili stretched out his hand, and the feeble light now gave a quick glimpse of the metal caps on his fingertips. Cruel looking with sharp points and a thin, blue charge crackling between them. He laid them on the naked shoulder. The sizzling stink turned her stomach.

"Who did you summon?" Vasili sneered.

A groan. "No one."

Pyotrik's voice sounded odd, off. She swallowed back the burn of vomit, refusing to be distracted.

"You should be dead. I'll find who gave you the strength."

She'd seen enough. Giselle backed away from the door and fixed in her mind where each man

was located and the plan. Block Vasili, free Pyotrik, and, if she was very, very, very lucky, get a punch in at the muscle. Then, pray that Pyotrik was free enough, and strong enough, to finish the job.

Because otherwise they were in a shitload of trouble.

“Be not afraid. Flesh and bone and blood do join,” she murmured, moving close, invoking the strongest charm of all. “My love for you conquers will and wrong.” Power burned inside her like a shimmering pillar of steam. Her hair stood on end, the ends quivering as the electricity of magic surrounded her in a halo of strength. “Almighty, my love.”

Her foot shot forward on the last word, power slamming open the door – thank you Tai Chi lessons. She saw only a snapshot of the room, no time to think. Powerful magic spun from her groin. Bolts of blue lightning shot from her hands. Vasili reeled backward. Cursing. Screaming in pain.

The chains holding her lover. She snapped them like pretzels.

He sprang from the chair.

Vasili snapped out a thread of metal, straight at her. Can't let it touch me.

Pyotrik turned away to send a surge of power to Vasili. The metal sliced in two. Powerless. He punched forward. Finishing Vasili. The two dark hulks grabbed her. Her feet smashed left. Thigh, missed the kneecap, but she was hard enough that he let her go. Right with the swing of power. The other one grunted from the pain.

“Back,” shouted Vasili.

Bolts of lightning singed the empty air as a bleeding, hunched-over Vasili and his henchmen vanished. Pyotrik snatched a cell phone from his jeans pocket. “They’re coming back,” he spat, then closed it with a snap. He stood, back still to her, his hands braced on his thighs as he drew in gulps of air.

Even with the scant light, she could see the burn marks on his bared back. Her throat contracted, and she started trembling, unable to stop, as her nerves and muscles finally paid the toll of the extended night.

“Uncle Christophe is waiting at Vasili’s lair,” Pyotrik said in that low, odd voice. “We didn’t expect him to come here, but now he’s damaged. The Magi will finally get him. Thanks to you.”

He straightened and turned, and Giselle gasped.

“Dom?”