

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KERI ARTHUR



THE SPOOK SQUAD 3

PENUMBRA

PRAISE FOR KERI ARTHUR

Nominated for *Romantic Times* 2007 Reviewers' Choice Awards for Career Achievement in Urban Fantasy

Winner of the *Romantic Times* 2008 Reviewers' Choice Awards for Career Achievement in Urban Fantasy

“Keri Arthur’s imagination and energy infuse everything she writes with zest.”

—CHARLAINE HARRIS

Praise for *Full Moon Rising*

“Keri Arthur skillfully mixes her suspenseful plot with heady romance in her thoroughly enjoyable alternate reality Melbourne. Sexy vampires, randy werewolves, and unabashed, unapologetic, joyful sex—you’ve gotta love it. Smart, sexy, and well-conceived.”

—KIM HARRISON

“*Full Moon Rising* is unabashedly and joyfully sexual in its portrayal of werewolves in heat...Arthur never fails to deliver, keeping the fires stoked, the cliffs high, and the emotions dancing on a razor’s edge in this edgy, hormone-filled mystery...A shocking and sensual read, so keep the ice handy.”

—*TheCelebrityCafe.com*

“Keri Arthur is one of the best supernatural romance writers in the world.”

—HARRIET KLAUSNER

“Strong, smart and capable, Riley will remind many of Anita Blake, Laurell K. Hamilton’s kick-ass vampire hunter...Fans of Anita Blake and Charlaine Harris’ Sookie Stackhouse vampire series will be rewarded.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Unbridled lust and kick-ass action are the hallmarks of this first novel in a brand-new paranormal series...‘Sizzling’ is the only word to describe this heated, action-filled, suspenseful romantic drama.”

—*Curled Up with a Good Book*

“Desert island keeper...Grade: A...I wanted to read this book in one sitting, and was terribly offended that the real world intruded on my reading time!...Inevitable comparisons can be made to Anita Blake, Kim Harrison, and Kelley Armstrong’s books, but I think Ms. Arthur has a clear voice of her own and her characters speak for themselves....I am hooked!”

—*All About Romance*

Praise for *Kissing Sin*

“The second book in this paranormal guardian series is just as phenomenal as the first...I am addicted!!”

—*Fresh Fiction*

“Arthur’s world building skills are absolutely superb and I recommend this story to any reader who enjoys tales of the paranormal.”

—*Coffee Time Romance and More*

“Fast paced and filled with deliciously sexy characters...readers will find *Kissing Sin* a fantastic urban fantasy with a hot serving of romance that continues to sizzle long after the last page is read.”

—*Darque Reviews*

“Keri Arthur’s unique characters and the imaginative world she’s created will make this series one that readers won’t want to miss.”

—*A Romance Review*

Praise for *Tempting Evil*

“Riley Jenson is kick-ass...genuinely tough and strong, but still vulnerable enough to make her interesting....Arthur is not derivative of early [Laurell K.] Hamilton—far from it—but the intensity of her writing and the complexity of her heroine and her stories is reminiscent.”

—*All About Romance*

“This paranormal romance series gets better and better with each new book....An exciting adventure that delivers all you need for a fabulous read—sexy shapeshifters, hot vampires, wild uncontrollable sex and the slightest hint of a love that’s meant to be forever.”

—*Fresh Fiction*

“Pure sexy action adventure...I found the world vividly realized and fascinating....So, if you like your erotic scenes hot, fast, and frequent, your heroine sassy, sexy, and tough, and your stories packed with hard-hitting action in a vividly realized fantasy world, then *Tempting Evil* and its companion novels could be just what you’re looking for.”

—*SFRevu*

“Keri Arthur’s Riley Jenson series just keeps getting better and better and is sure to call to fans of other authors with kick-ass heroines such as Christine Feehan and Laurell K. Hamilton. I have become a steadfast fan of this marvelous series and I am greatly looking forward to finding out what is next in store for this fascinating and strong character.”

—*A Romance Review*

Praise for *Dangerous Games*

“One of the best books I have ever read....The storyline is so exciting I did not realize I was literally sitting on the edge of my chair....Arthur has a real winner on her hands.
Five cups.”

—*Coffee Time Romance and More*

“The depths of emotion, the tense plot, and the conflict of powerful driving forces inside the heroine made for [an] absorbing read.”

—*SFRevu*

“This series is phenomenal! *Dangerous Games* is an incredibly original and devastatingly sexy story. It keeps you spellbound and mesmerized on every page.
Absolutely perfect!!”

—*Fresh Fiction*

Praise for *Embraced by Darkness*

“Arthur is positively one of the best urban fantasy authors in print today. The characters have been well-drawn from the start and the mysteries just keep getting better. A creative, sexy and adventure filled world that readers will just love escaping to.”

—*Darque Reviews*

“Arthur’s storytelling is getting better and better with each book. *Embraced by Darkness* has suspense, interesting concepts, terrific main and secondary characters, well developed story arcs, and the world-building is highly entertaining....I think this series is worth the time and emotional investment to read.”

—Reuters.com

“Once again, Keri Arthur has created a perfect, exciting and thrilling read with intensity that kept me vigilantly turning each page, hoping it would never end.”

—*Fresh Fiction*

“Reminiscent of Laurell K. Hamilton back when her books had mysteries to solve, Arthur’s characters inhabit a dark sexy world of the paranormal.”

—*The Parkersburg News and Sentinel*

“I love this series.”

—*All About Romance*

Praise for *The Darkest Kiss*

“The paranormal Australia that Arthur concocts works perfectly, and the plot speeds along at a breakneck pace. Riley fans won’t be disappointed.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Praise for *Bound to Shadows*

“The Riley Jenson Guardian series ROCKS! Riley is one bad-ass heroine with a heart of gold. Keri Arthur never disappoints and always leaves me eagerly anticipating the next book. A classic, fabulous read!”

—*Fresh Fiction*

Praise for *Moon Sworn*

“Huge kudos to Arthur for giving readers an impressive series they won’t soon forget!
4½ stars, top pick!”

—*RT Book Reviews*

“The superb final Guardian urban fantasy saga ends with quite a bang that will please the fans of the series. Riley is terrific as she goes through a myriad of emotions with no time to mourn her losses....Readers will enjoy Riley’s rousing last stand.”

—*Midwest Book Review*

Praise for *Darkness Unbound*

“A thrilling ride.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Praise for *Darkness Rising*

“Arthur ratchets up the intrigue...in this powerful sequel.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

PENUMBRA

KERI ARTHUR



DELL
NEW YORK

Penumbra is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Epilogue

By Keri Arthur

About the Author

ONE

SAMANTHA RYAN PLACED HER HANDS on the front of her boss's desk and said, "I want a transfer, not more of your damn excuses."

She knew that speaking to Stephan in such a manner wasn't the best idea, especially when he was the man in charge of both the Special Investigations Unit and the more secretive Federation—a man who'd ruthlessly do whatever it took to get the answers he needed or the job done. She knew *that* from firsthand experience; she'd suffered through his interrogation without the medical help she'd required after she'd been shot while trying to stop the shapeshifter imitating her partner—a man who also happened to be his brother.

Not that she thought he intended her any sort of harm right now. He had as much interest in finding out who and what she was as she did. But he certainly *could* make her life hell—though how much worse it would be than her current hell was debatable.

She leaned across the desk and added, "Sir," a touch sarcastically.

Stephan Stern raised one blond eyebrow, as if mildly surprised by her outburst. An outburst he'd *known* was coming for months. "You know I don't want to do that."

"I don't honestly care what you want. This is about what *I* want." She pushed away from the desk, unable to stand still any longer. Damn it, she'd spent more than half her life with her head in the sand, cruising through life rather than participating, and she'd had more than enough. The time had come to get greedy—to think about *her* wants, *her* desires, for a change. And what she wanted right now was not only a more active personal life, but a working life that involved something better than a broom closet. "Transfer me back to State, let me resign or find me another partner. As I said, I don't care. Just get me out of my current situation."

Her angry strides carried her the length of the beige-colored office in no time and she turned to face Stephan. His expression was as remote as ever, but she'd learned very early on that Stephan was a master at hiding his emotions—and that his dead face was just as likely to mean fury as calm.

"I prefer to leave you with Gabriel, as I still believe you two will make a formidable team."

Sam snorted softly. "That has never been an option, and I think we both realize that now."

It wasn't as if she hadn't tried, for God's sake. But her partner was still going out of his way to exclude her from everything from investigations to chitchat. Access to the SIU's vast computer system just wasn't worth this frustration and unhappiness.

Especially since she was getting jack shit in the way of information about the past

she couldn't remember. Hell, her dreams were providing more information than the SIU's system. The only trouble was, how much could she actually trust the dreams?

And how much could she trust the man who constantly walked through them?

She didn't know, nor did she have anyone she could talk to about it—and that was perhaps the most frustrating thing about this entire situation. She *needed* to get a life. Friends. People she could trust and talk to. Hell, even a pet would be better than going home alone to a soulless hotel room every night.

"I prefer to give the situation more time." Stephan crossed his arms and leaned forward. "However, I do have another option that might suit us both."

Sam met his gaze. His blue eyes were sharp, full of cunning and intelligence. Stephan was a shark by nature—and this was the reason he, rather than his twin, Gabriel, ruled the SIU and the Federation.

Of course, that also meant she was beating her head against a brick wall where Gabriel was concerned, because Stephan was always going to look after his twin's interests first. Even if said twin didn't appreciate his efforts any more than Sam did.

She came to a stop in front of his desk and couldn't help feeling like a fish about to be hooked. "What might that be?"

"You remember Dan Wetherton?"

She nodded. "Last I heard, no one was sure if the body Gabriel found was the real Wetherton or a clone."

"Well, as it happens, it was the original."

Sam snagged the nearest chair and sat down, interested despite her wariness. "Gabriel and I theorized about the possibility of whole brain transplants making clones a viable replacement option, but officially—as far as I'm aware—it's still considered impossible to create a clone that exactly duplicates the mannerisms and thoughts of the original person. They may be genetically identical, but they are nevertheless different." She hesitated, frowning. "Besides, I read the in-house reports and tests done on the living Wetherton. He was declared human in all scientific results."

"And a clone isn't?"

She grimaced. Clones were human, no doubt about that. But whether that actually granted them *humanity* was a point of contention between the scientists and the theologians. "Having only met one clone, who was trying to kill me at the time, I don't feel qualified to answer that particular question."

Amusement touched the corners of Stephan's thin lips. "As it happens, the test results were altered by a party or parties unknown long before we got them." He picked up a folder from his desk and offered it to her. "These are the originals. Have a look."

From past experience she knew that it was pointless to ask how he'd gotten hold of the original papers. Stephan worked on a need-to-know basis—and generally, that meant the less everyone knew, the better. She doubted even Gabriel was privy to all his secrets.

Not that Gabriel himself was particularly open. Not with *her*, anyway.

She leafed through the information inside the folder. It included the genetic tests on

both Wetherton and the clone, the coroner's report and Wetherton's medical history.

"Wetherton had cancer," she said, looking up. "Incurable."

"Which the current version no longer has."

She threw the folder back on the desk. "If you know he's not the original, why not simply kill him?"

"Because we wanted to know why he was cloned. And where."

"But not who had cloned him?" Did that mean they suspected the mysterious Sethanon was behind it all?

"As I said, we don't know the where and the why. But there is only one suspect for the who."

"But the military is experimenting with genetics. There's no reason why Wetherton can't be their boy."

"No, there's not."

His tone seemed to dismiss her speculation, and yet she had a vague notion that she'd hit upon the very issue that was troubling Stephan. Only, for some weird reason, he didn't want to acknowledge it. "And what about the replacement parts industry? Have you checked to see if they have started developing fully formed beings, or is that just too obvious?"

His expression became briefly annoyed. "We never overlook the obvious."

Of course not. She smiled slightly. Irritating Stephan might be akin to prodding a lion with a very short stick, but when she got even the slightest reaction, it was oddly satisfying.

"The black-market trade in cloned parts is booming," she said. Of course, it was fueled mainly by humanity's desperation to cheat death. An incredible number of people seemed willing to pay exorbitant prices to grow new body parts, so why not take it a step further, and attempt a cloning miracle? Not just a replacement heart or liver or whatever other part had failed, but a whole new body?

But humanity was more than just a brain; it was also a heart and soul. Medical science might be able to transfer flesh and brain matter, but how could anyone transfer a soul? Even if they could pin down what a soul actually was?

Not that rules ever stopped anyone—especially when there was huge money to be made.

And somewhere along the line, someone had succeeded in achieving at least part of the impossible—fully fleshed, viable clones who looked and acted like the original. Wetherton, and her ex-partner, Jack Kazdan, were proof of that. Although something *had* gone wrong with Jack's clone; it might have looked like him, but it had had serious problems speaking. But then, it had been given a shitload of growth accelerant, so it wasn't truly a surprise that it couldn't speak well. It had never really had the time to learn.

"His source is not black market. We're sure of that."

She studied him for a moment, then changed tactics. "Wetherton's just been made Minister for Science and Technology, hasn't he?"

Stephan nodded. "Two years ago he was trying to shut down many of the science

programs, stating that the money could be better spent on the health care system. Now he's in charge of the lot."

"Why hasn't anyone questioned this sudden change of heart? Surely the press has noted it?"

"Noted a political backflip?" Amusement touched his lips again. "You're kidding, right?"

Point made. Flip-flopping politicians were such a fact of life that even the press had gotten tired of them. And the public at large simply ignored them, except when the flops directly affected their bottom line.

"What advantage would having a clone in such a position be for someone like Sethanon?"

"Sadly, we don't know the answer to that one yet."

Not until they caught Sethanon, anyway. And *he* had proven as elusive as a ghost.

"So you've had Wetherton watched?"

"We've had an agent in his office for the last two months, but she can't get close enough. Wetherton plays his cards very close to his chest."

If the man was a clone, he'd have to. One mistake and the truth would be out.

"What does all this have to do with my wanting a transfer?"

He smiled—all teeth and no sincerity. "The minister has recently received several death threats. He was given police protection, but the would-be killer has slipped past them on a number of occasions and left notes. The minister has now requested the SIU's help."

She regarded him steadily. "So who did you use to drop the notes? A vampire or a shapeshifter?"

Amusement flickered briefly through his eyes. "The original threats were real enough."

Yeah, right. There was just a little too much sincerity in his voice for her to believe that. "Am I the only agent being sent in?"

"No. You'll handle the night shift—it suits your growing abilities better. Jenna Morwood will do the days."

Morwood wasn't someone she'd met. "What's her specialty?"

"Morwood's an empath and telekinetic."

So she'd be able to see an attack coming by simply reading the emotions swirling around her—a good choice for this sort of work. "Are we the only two going in?"

"Yes." He hesitated. "Wetherton has requested that the night watch stay at his apartment when he's there at night. Since the first two threats were hand-delivered, I've agreed to his request. I want you to observe everyone he meets. Become his shadow and learn his secrets."

A huge task. "And the reason you're sending two female agents?"

Once again, that insincere smile flashed. "Wetherton appears less guarded around females."

"Meaning what? That he's likely to hit on us?"

“It’s a distinct possibility. And before it’s mentioned, no, I do not expect or want you to sleep with the man.”

“Good, because I wouldn’t.” She hesitated, frowning. “Wetherton’s made much of his caring, family-man image over the last few years. That doesn’t quite jell with him hitting on anything with breasts.”

“He and his wife separated not long after the original’s death. Since then, he’s bought a nice apartment on Collins Street and now spends most of his nights there. He’s also been seen with an endless stream of beauties on his arms.”

She frowned. Wetherton wasn’t exactly a looker—though that in itself didn’t mean anything. Some of the ugliest spuds in the world had immense success with the ladies simply because of the wealth they controlled, or their sheer magnetic power. But from what she remembered of Wetherton, neither of these was a factor.

“I’m surprised the press haven’t had more of a field day.”

“They did initially, but a politician behaving badly isn’t exactly news these days.”

That was certainly true. “I doubt whether I’ll learn all that much doing night shift. Surely most of his business will be conducted during the day, no?”

Stephan smiled grimly. “Wetherton has a surprising number of business meetings at night—and usually at nightclubs, where it’s harder to get a bug in.”

“He’ll be suspicious of me. He’s not likely to trust me with anything vital.”

“Not for a while. It may take months.”

Months out of her life and her need to find her past. But also months away from Gabriel. Would absence make his heart grow fonder? A smile touched her lips. Unlikely. “What about time off? You can’t expect either of us to work seven days a week.”

He nodded. “You’ll each get two days—though which two will depend on Wetherton’s schedule. Generally, it will be the days he spends at home with his children. We have other arrangements in place there.”

“Will the press buy our sudden appearance in his life? This sort of protection is usually handled by the feds, not the SIU.”

“They won’t question our appearance after tonight, believe me.”

The dry coldness in his voice sent chills down her spine. “Why? What are you planning for tonight?”

“A spectacular but ineffectual murder attempt. Wetherton may be injured, and will, of course, demand our help.”

“So who’s the patsy?”

Stephan shrugged. “A young vampire we captured several weeks ago. He’d been something of a political dissident in life, and his afterlife has only sharpened his beliefs.”

And Stephan had no doubt been feeding his madness, aiming it toward Wetherton. Meaning this plan had been in motion for some time, and that this assignment was part of a bigger picture than he was currently admitting to.

Goose bumps ran up Sam’s arms and she rubbed them lightly. Perhaps the vampire

wasn't the only patsy in this situation.

"I gather the vamp will die?"

"He murdered seven people before we captured him. His death is merely a delayed sentence."

"What if he escapes?"

"He won't."

Sam shifted in her chair. "If Wetherton is up to anything nefarious, it's doubtful I'll be privy to it."

"No. There will be certain times you'll be sent from the room; this is unavoidable. To counter it, you'll bug the room."

"Most federal buildings have monitors. The minute a bug is activated, an alarm will sound."

"They won't detect the ones we'll give you. Our labs have specifically developed bugs that will function in just this sort of situation."

And no doubt developed a means of detecting them, too. "How long do you think I'll be guarding Wetherton?"

Stephan shrugged. "I can't honestly say. It could be a month; it could be a year. Parliament doesn't convene again until the middle of next month. By then, you will be such a fixture in his life that no one will comment."

By then, she hoped Wetherton would have revealed all his secrets and she could get on with her life. Spending months in Canberra, yawning her way through endless cabinet sessions, was not something to look forward to.

She crossed her arms and stared at Stephan. He returned her gaze calmly. The uneasy feeling that he wasn't telling her everything grew.

"You're doing this to get back at Gabriel, aren't you? You want him to care."

"I'm doing this because no other agents have your particular range of talents. Your ability to detect evil could be vital in this case."

No lies, but not the exact truth, either. She sat back, feeling more frustrated than when she'd first entered Stephan's office. Guarding Wetherton was not the job she really wanted, but what other choice did she have? It was either this or put up with endless hours of mind-numbing paperwork in her shoe-box office in the Vault.

"How do I keep in contact?"

"You'll be wearing a transmitter that will be monitored twenty-four hours a day." Stephan reached into his desk and pulled out what looked like a gold ear stud. "This is the current model. It records sound and pictures. You turn it on and off by simply touching the surface."

"I don't have to get my ears pierced, do I?" She'd rather face a dozen vampires than one doctor armed with a body-piercing implement.

Stephan's smile held the first real hint of warmth she'd seen since she walked into his office. "No. The studs are designed to cling to human flesh. You actually won't be able to get them off without the help of the labs."

Just as well she could turn them off, then. She needed some privacy in her life, even

if it was only to go to the bathroom. “When do I start?”

“Tomorrow night.” Stephan picked up another folder and passed it across the desk. “In here you’ll find detailed backgrounds on Wetherton’s friends, family and business acquaintances.”

She dropped the folder onto her lap. There was plenty of time to look at it later. “You were pretty certain I’d take this job, weren’t you?”

“Yes. What other choice have you actually got?”

Indeed. “And Gabriel?”

“Will be told you’ve been reassigned.”

Which would no doubt please him. He’d finally gotten what he wanted—her out of his life. “And will I be? After this assignment is over, that is?”

Stephan considered her for several seconds. “That depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether or not he has come to his senses by then.”

A statement she didn’t like one little bit. “You owe me, Stephan,” she said softly. For ordering his agents to shoot when she’d been trying to stop the shifter who’d taken Gabriel’s form. For the hour of questioning she’d faced afterward when she should have been in the med center. For saving his twin’s life. “All I want is permanent reassignment.”

His gaze met hers, assessing, calculating. “All right,” he said slowly. “As I said, this assignment could take more than a year to complete. If you still wish a new partner at the end, I will comply.”

She stared at him. He had agreed to her demands far too easily. She didn’t trust him—and didn’t trust that he meant what he said. But for the moment, there was little she could do about it.

“What happens if I need access to files or information?”

“You’ll have a portable com-unit with you, coded to respond only to your voice and retinal scan. You’ll also have priority access to all files, though a copy of all requests and search results will be sent to me.”

She raised an eyebrow. Priority access? Whatever it was Stephan thought Wetherton was involved in had to be huge.

The intercom buzzed into the silence and Stephan leaned across and pressed the button. “Yes?”

“Assistant Director Stern to see you, as requested, sir.”

“Send him in.” He gave her a toothy smile that held absolutely no sincerity. “I thought you might like to say goodbye.”

Gabriel was the last person she wanted to see. She could barely control her temper around him these days, and hitting a superior officer would only get her into more trouble than Gabriel was worth. And Stephan damn well knew it. She thrust upright. “You’re a bastard, you know that?”

“No, I’m a man faced with two people who won’t acknowledge that they are meant to be partners.”

The door opened, giving her no time to reply. She clenched the folder tightly but found her gaze drawn to the tall man entering the room. His hazel eyes narrowed when he saw her.

But just for an instant, something passed between them—an emotion she couldn't define and he would never verbally acknowledge. And that made her even angrier.

“Sam,” Gabriel said, his voice as polite as the nod he gave her.

“Gabriel,” she bit back, and glanced at Stephan. “Will that be all, sir?”

A smile quirked the corner of Stephan's mouth. He hadn't missed her reaction. “Yes. For now.”

Gabriel stepped to one side as she approached. It was probably meant to be nothing more than a polite gesture—he was simply making way for her to get past—but it fanned the fires of her fury even higher. One way or another, this man was always avoiding her.

She met his gaze and saw only wariness in the green-flecked hazel depths of his eyes. Ever since the factory shootout with Rose and Orrin nearly two weeks ago, he'd treated her this way. She wasn't entirely sure why. And in all honesty, it was time she stopped worrying about it. She had more important concerns these days.

Like finding out who she really was. *What* she really was. Like getting a life beyond the force.

She stopped in front of him and his scent stirred around her, spicy and masculine, making her want things she could never have. Not with this man.

“You win, Gabriel. You have your wish. I'm out of your life.” She held out her hand. “I wish I could say it's been pleasant, but you sure as hell made certain it wasn't.”

His fingers closed round hers, his touch sending warmth through her soul. A promise that could never be.

“You've been reassigned, then?” Relief edged his deep voice.

“Yeah.”

He released her hand and her fingers tingled with the memory of his touch. Part of her was tempted to clench her hand in an effort to retain that warmth just a bit longer. But what was the point of holding on to something that was little more than an illusion? A desire that probably came from loneliness more than any real connection?

“Who's the new partner?”

There was something a little more than polite interest in the question. Were he anyone else, she might have thought he cared. With Gabriel, who knew?

Sam shrugged. “It's really none of your business now, is it?” She glanced back at Stephan. “I'll talk to you later.”

He nodded and she met Gabriel's eyes one final time, her gaze searching his—though what she was looking for, she couldn't honestly say. After a few seconds, she turned and walked out, her fury a clenched knot inside her chest.

—

Gabriel watched her go and the anger so visible in every step seared his mind, reaching into places he'd thought well shielded and far out of reach. Whatever this connection was between them, it was breaking down barriers not even his twin had been able to traverse, and raising emotions he'd long thought dead.

Which was just another reason to get her out of his working life. Whether or not she should then appear in his social life was a point of contention between the two parts of his soul. The hawk half—the half that had already lost its soul mate—wanted no strings, no ties, nothing beyond those that already existed, but the human half wanted to pursue what might lie between them. Wanted to discover if, given the chance, it could develop into something more than friendship.

Not that there ever *would* be a chance, if her anger was anything to go by. Which was precisely what he'd wanted, what he'd been aiming for over the nine months they'd been partners. So why did his victory feel so hollow?

He shut the door and walked across the room to the chair. "So," he said as he sat down. "Where has she been reassigned?"

Stephan leaned back in his chair, his blue eyes assessing. "She's right. It really is none of your business now."

"Don't give me that crap. Just tell me."

Stephan smiled, though no warmth touched his expression. It was that, more than anything, which raised Gabriel's hackles. Stephan was up to something, something *he* wouldn't like.

"She's on special assignment as of tomorrow."

Gabriel regarded him steadily. His brother was enjoying this. He could almost feel his twin's satisfaction. "Give, brother. What the hell have you done?"

Stephan steepled his fingers and studied them with sudden interest. "I've assigned her to the Wetherton case."

The Wetherton case? The *one* case she should have been kept well away from, if only because of its possible links to both Sethanon *and* Hopeworth? "Get her off it, Stephan. Get her off it *now*."

His twin's gaze finally met his, filled with nothing more than a steely determination. "She is the best person for the job, whatever the risks."

"You haven't even warned her, have you?" Gabriel scrubbed a hand across his jaw. *Christ*, she could be walking straight into a goddamn trap, and there was nothing he could do to save her.

"She knows we believe Sethanon is involved," Stephan commented.

"Which is the *least* of our worries. Wetherton's and Kazdan's clones can have only one source, and we both know it. Neither the government labs nor the black marketeers have succeeded with personality and memory transfers. Hopeworth has."

"Or so our spy tells us. It's not something we've been able to confirm."

The Federation had attempted to place spies in Hopeworth on several occasions, but it was only in the last few months that one of their operatives had leaked this information—though so far it was only his word backing it up.

"I think Hopeworth basically confirmed their involvement when they maneuvered

to get Wetherton's clone in charge of their budget."

"If they wanted their clone in charge of their budget, they should have got him assigned to Defense."

Gabriel crossed his arms. Hopeworth had fingers in both pies, and Stephan knew it. "Did you even mention Hopeworth to Sam?"

"It was mentioned. But we don't know for sure if Hopeworth is involved."

"Then did you at least tell her Sethanon is more than likely involved with Hopeworth?"

"No, because we have nothing more than a suspicion to back this up. We have no photographs of him. We don't even know if he truly exists. He is currently nothing more than a name."

"A name that has over thirty SIU and Federation deaths attributed to it. And I don't particularly want Sam's name added to that list." His voice was tight with the anger coursing through him. True, he'd wanted to lose her as a partner, but he certainly hadn't wanted to throw her to the lions, and that's basically what his brother had done. She would have been safer remaining his partner than taking this mission.

Stephan grimaced. "Nor do I, brother. Believe me. But we need to uncover the source of these clones. We need to draw Sethanon out, and we need to uncover whether or not he is involved as deeply with Hopeworth as we suspect. And the truth is, she's the best bait we have to achieve those aims."

"What about our source in Hopeworth? Has he heard any whispers about Sethanon?"

Stephan shook his head. "It's not a code name the military uses."

"Kazdan knew who he was, so others must. It's just a matter of uncovering the various layers of his organization."

"Which is why Samantha has been assigned to Wetherton. We know he's a clone. We know his name was on that list she got from Kazdan. We need to know what that list was, and what Wetherton had promised to do in return for life eternal. And why the original was deemed expendable enough to kill and clone and not directly exploit."

"But that still puts her too close to Hopeworth. That could be extremely dangerous."

Stephan leaned back in his chair and regarded his brother steadily. "Only if, as you presume, she is a product of Hopeworth itself."

"You've seen the initial reports from O'Hearn. You've seen the coding. Whatever Sam is, she's definitely not a product of natural selection."

"Yet it was Sethanon who assigned Kazdan to monitor her every move. Sethanon who appears to know just who and what Samantha is. You noted that yourself. Couldn't that mean he's responsible for her creation?"

Possible, but not likely. Gabriel didn't doubt that Sethanon wanted to use her, but if the man had been responsible for her creation, why would he take the risk of releasing her?

"Sam had a military microchip in her side," Gabriel pointed out. "The same sort of chip that we found in both the Generation 18 rejects and in Allars." She was also afraid of Hopeworth. Though she had never said anything, he could feel her fear as

clearly as if it were his own.

“And yet our source in Hopeworth can find no record of her, though he can find records on every other reject.”

“Maybe because her project was destroyed by a fire years ago.”

“A fire would never destroy every scrap of information. Nor could it erase every memory.”

“And yet everyone says that Penumbra was destroyed that completely.”

“People still remember the project, Gabriel. They just don’t remember her.”

Mary Elliot, the nurse who’d worked on the project, apparently did, but she was just one of many, and a woman with a faulty memory at that. Partially thanks to Alzheimer’s, and partially thanks to the military’s habit of “readjusting” memories. Gabriel shifted restlessly in the seat. “What if she isn’t a reject? What if she’s something else entirely?”

Stephan raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

He didn’t really know. It was just a feeling. The extent of Sam’s memory loss, the depth to which the truth appeared to be buried and the fact that someone was willing to bomb the SIU in order to destroy her test results—it all spoke of intent. It suggested that someone, somewhere, was protecting her from her past, whatever that might be.

He actually doubted that it was Hopeworth trying to conceal who she was, even if they were her creators. The military wasn’t that subtle. Besides, if Sam was one of their creations, they would never have let her go—especially not with the potential she was now showing.

“Look,” Gabriel said, somewhat impatiently. “All I’m saying is that if Sethanon feared her enough to place a watch on her, we should not risk using her as bait in an attempt to catch the man.”

“We don’t even know if, in fact, it is a man we are after.”

Gabriel leaned forward and glared at his twin’s altered features. It was in moments like this—moments when he almost wanted to punch the cold smile from his brother’s face—that Stephan’s ability to shapeshift into the form of any male he touched became a problem. It was harder to restrain the urge to hit him when he wasn’t wearing his own face. “Damn it, Stephan, don’t play word games with me!”

Something flickered through his twin’s blue eyes. Anger perhaps. Or regret. “Do you, or do you not, agree that we must learn more about Sethanon?”

“Yeah, but—”

“And do you, or do you not,” Stephan continued, his voice soft but relentless, “agree that Sethanon’s interest in Sam might be the lever we need to draw him out of the shadows?”

Gabriel rubbed his forehead. This was one battle he wasn’t going to win—not that he ever won many against Stephan. “At the first hint of danger, I’m going in.”

“Samantha can take care of herself. She’s proven that time and time again.”

But this was different. This was leaving her roped, tied and blindfolded in front of an express train. “I won’t see her harmed.”

Stephan smiled. “And here I thought you didn’t care for her.”

“I’ve never said that. All I’ve ever said is that I don’t want her as a partner. That I don’t want to see her dead.”

“Have you ever considered the fact that this fear of losing partners is irrational, and that maybe you should seek psychiatric help for it?”

“Considered it? Yes. Acknowledge it? Yes. Am I going to seek psychiatric help? No.” He met his brother’s stony gaze with one of his own. “If I wanted to talk to anyone, I’d talk to our father.”

“Because, of course, you couldn’t talk to your brother.” Stephan’s voice was almost bitter.

Almost.

“My brother has a tendency to put the needs of the Federation and the SIU above the needs of everyone else—including his brother.”

Stephan didn’t immediately comment, just leaned forward and picked up a folder from the desk. “Here’s the file on your new partner.”

Gabriel ignored the offered folder and stared at his twin through narrowed eyes. “What do you mean, new partner?”

“I’ve told you before. All field agents, whether SIU or Federation, now work in pairs. There have been too many murder attempts of late to risk solo missions.”

“How many times do I have to say it? *I don’t want a partner!*” What was his brother trying to prove?

“Then you’ll remain at your desk and leave the field work to the agents in your charge.”

He was tempted, very tempted, to do just that. But both he and Stephan knew that being confined for any length of time would make him stir-crazy.

Besides, he was more valuable to the SIU and the Federation in the field.

“Who have you assigned me?”

Stephan dropped the folder on the desk and leaned back in his chair. Though there was no emotion on his face, Gabriel could feel his twin’s amusement.

“James Illie.”

Who was the State Police officer they’d recruited after he’d made a series of spectacular arrests—arrests that involved one of the biggest vampire crime gangs in the city. He was good, no doubt about it.

The only trouble was, the man was a womanizer who was always on the lookout for his next conquest.

“It won’t work.” And Stephan knew it.

“Then make it work. And don’t try dumping Illie in the dungeons. He’ll bring in the unions the minute you try.”

Wonderful. “Is this all you called me in here for?”

Stephan smiled. “No. There’s been a break-in at the Pegasus Foundation that we’ve been asked to investigate.”

“The Pegasus Foundation?” Gabriel frowned, trying to recall what he knew of the