

Water Viper
A Jesse Alexander Novel

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During Starfall, magic flooded the Earth and destroyed most technology, while humans developed magical abilities. Jesse mistakenly chooses to be a woman in a male-dominated clan, ruining her hopes of becoming a hero.

Weary of life as an assassin, she retires to enjoy raising horses and delivering messages. When her plans fall apart, she has one chance to set everything right. Should she fail to redeem herself, she'll lose everything, including her friends, her family, and her life.

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Chapter 1

A black, pitted stone bounced across the bar. I leaned back, picked up my beer, and made way for the rock, tracing its trajectory towards the front door.

The first beer bottle it broke belonged to a mercenary like me, and his wail drew everyone's attention. The rock smacked into the bar, left a black smear, a gouge, and a few golden sparks before continuing its haphazard flight. Several more glasses and bottles fell to it, and frothy brew decorated the old, dull wood before spilling over the lip to the water pooled on the floor.

Curses chased after the stone, and out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed several men giving chase. They were cloaked, an annoyance for someone like me, who wanted to keep track of everyone nearby in case of trouble.

In the sunken ruins of Miami, where only the brave, the foolish, or the desperate stayed, trouble was plentiful. Today's variant worried me more than most.

Where a Starfall stone went, catastrophe followed. Three men hunting for its sort of trouble meant someone was about to get hurt.

After the day I had, if I lost my hard-earned beer, *I'd* be the catastrophe. I could fight with many weapons, from staves to swords. In a pinch, I could even use a gun, although I worked damned hard to make sure people never realized combustibles functioned in my hands.

The man beside me spat curses, twisted his body, and cradled his pint to his chest. Taking another swig of my beer, I kept an eye on the stone and its trio of pursuers. I couldn't blame the damned thing for wanting to make a getaway. There were dives, then there was Oyster Bay. If one of the usuals came after me, I'd run, too. As though losing hope of escape and finding me the best option in a room full of bad choices, the stone rolled to a halt in front of me.

The barkeeper stared at me, stared at the rock, and swept his bare hand over the bar to send a shower of broken glass splashing into the water washing over the floor of his establishment. "That yours?"

All three men splashed to a halt beyond the range of my sword. I twisted, pondering how much calamity I wanted to rain down on Petey and his wretched little bar if I lost even a single drop of my beer.

I matched him stare for stare. Stupid questions didn't deserve an answer, and maybe if I got real lucky, Petey would forget he'd asked. After a month of me haunting his bar and renting a space in the communal flop in the back room above the water line, he'd stopped asking for my name.

The name most knew me by would only draw the wrong type of attention. No one liked knowing they shared a bar with an assassin. I didn't like having to explain why I, a woman, had a man's name. Jesse could go either way, something I was eternally grateful for, but the instant Alexander left my mouth, the questions started. Why did a woman have a man's name? Was Alexander really my last name? Why would anyone name a pretty girl something as masculine as Jesse Alexander?

"Well?"

Everyone in the place watched me, and I took another swallow of my beer. If I wanted, I could break the bottle and get to work, turn the sea pink with their blood, and be done with the fetid sinkhole that had once been Miami, Florida. The bottle would complicate things for me, but after the dry spell I'd had on paying gigs, I needed a challenge to restore my reflexes and edge.

Why had I thought moving south would do me any good? The warmth was a selling point, but when the seas rose and every building still standing flooded out, I remembered everything came with a price.

What the ocean claimed, it didn't like giving back, and in another year or two, there wouldn't be a Miami at all. Dying cities were a horrible place for a mercenary wanting to make an honest living killing dishonest people.

“No games. That yours?”

I leaned back, and the metal stool shrieked a protest. “If it were mine, Petey, I wouldn’t be using it to waste beer.”

The stone sparked and flared, and blue-white light zapped through the brew spread over the bar. Several of the men yelped, jumped off their stools, and splashed into the seawater on route to the door. Lifting my feet, I hooked my boot heels onto the stool’s foot rest.

When a Starfall stone glowed, wise men ran.

I was neither wise nor a man, so I stayed put and watched the show. Running wouldn’t do me any good, not if the stone decided to burst. It’d shine its light for over a mile or more and likely do so before I reached the front door.

“Fuck!” Petey dived behind the bar.

Two of the cloaked men recoiled, but one darted forward, gloved hand stretched out to claim the stone. I gulped down the rest of my beer, flipped the bottle, and smashed it into his forearm. The glass shattered, reflecting the stone’s light throughout the molding, decaying room.

“You’re in my space.”

The Starfall stone kept sparking, and its glow intensified.

Backing out of my reach, the man shook his hand. Shards of brown glass tumbled into the sea, and beneath the water, they continued to shine with the rock’s blue-white radiance and its golden sparks. “Move, then.”

Most men hated when I defied them. My opponent waited, intriguing me when he hesitated to force me out of his way so he could take what he wanted. Men liked to think they ruled, and in their opinion, the strongest men got the best women, and that was that.

Wise men realized some women conquered their own mountains and tossed off every man who challenged them.

One day, I’d figure out where I stood in the grand scheme of things. I’d been raised to be a man, a warrior above other men, the strength and pride of my clan. I should have become a man when I had turned ten, but thanks to my stupidity, I had ended up a woman instead.

Remembering pissed me off enough I either needed another beer, a fight, or both.

“Move.”

The bar cleared out, and Petey numbered among those bailing. I arched a brow, shrugged, and reached across the bar to snag myself another beer, careful not to touch the Starfall stone. “When I’m done drinking my beer, I’ll move.”

Within a minute, Oyster Bay emptied, leaving me with the three cloaked figures and a man at the other end of the bar too stupid to run or too brave for his own good. When he spotted me looking in his direction, he lifted his bottle in a salute.

Men were a dime a dozen, but sometimes, a pretty one came around, and my flavor of the month was tall, dark, and handsome enough to remind me there were a few perks to being a woman. He smirked at me, likely anticipating the fireworks from the stone or the brewing fight between me and the three men who wanted it.

I liked his mouth, and my gaze locked on his lips before I managed to force my attention back to my trio of unwanted guests.

Outside, thunder rumbled, rain pattered on the bar’s metal roof, and the storm stirred the ocean’s ire, splashing salt water against my feet.

“Move.” The man took one step forward, and his voice remained emotionless and calm.

“Cheers,” I said, lifting my bottle towards my lone spectator. If he wanted a show, I’d give him one, and when I was finished with the three men determined to invade my personal space, I’d leave him a little memento to remember me by. I scooted my stool back, stepped into the water, and met my adversary’s gaze.

I set my beer down beside the Starfall stone. “You’re not going to let me finish my beer in peace,

are you?”

He took another step and leaned forward, his breath hot on my face. “No.”

Walking away would’ve been smart. Leaving the Starfall stone to burst and cause mayhem without me in the general vicinity would have been wise. Instead, I unsheathed my sword and rammed the pommel into his gut.

I smiled and went to work. All I’d leave for him were bruises and his life. He didn’t deserve anything else from me, not even a scar.

* * *

I left the three cloaked men slumped over the bar, lined up in a neat row as an offering to the glowing Starfall stone. Their bodies twitched in the sparking water.

Maybe the rock would wait to burst until I was clear of its blast radius. I had enough problems as a third generation shifter of the Blade Clan. I didn’t need anything added to them.

I sighed and regarded my victims with a wrinkled nose. Why couldn’t they have put up a real fight? If I had wanted to kill them, I would have saved myself a great deal of time and effort. Letting them live meant I’d have enemies at my back.

There was a thin line between killing for profit and sport, and I meant to stay on the right side of it, even if it meant leaving a few extra unwanted adversaries nipping at my heels. Sighing, I dried my sword on their cloaks before sheathing it, then I went to work patting them down.

It didn’t take long to locate the cash hidden inside their clothes. Someone had paid them well, probably to retrieve the Starfall stone. The rock pulsed while I counted bills. Between the three of them, they had over two thousand dollars.

The sum was only a fraction of the stone’s worth. Starfall stones could do a lot more than charge water and glow in the dark. Some exploded. Others imbued those who held them with magic.

A rare few healed.

Why would anyone hire those three to collect the stone? They hadn’t given me much sport. Why would anyone pay incompetents so much money? Shaking my head, I took all but five hundred as compensation for their lives.

Tall, dark, handsome, and smirking rose from his stool and strode towards me, coming to a halt just beyond arm’s length. “Aren’t you supposed to take all their cash?”

If he came a single step forward, he’d be in perfect range to take out. I stuffed the money in my jeans, and while I still had my hand in my pocket, I slid a sedation needle out of its sheath around my wrist, which was hidden beneath my blouse’s sleeve. “I took my retainer fee.”

Raising his dark eyebrows, he looked me over head to toe, and I noted his gaze lingered on my hips. Working as a mercenary kept me lean and muscular, but I still managed to have curves—curves men liked.

I blamed my shifter heritage. With my luck, when I discovered my inner beast and learned to transform, I’d end up a cow. I’d already screwed up my gender, so it was only a matter of time before I fucked the rest up, too.

“You’re for hire, then?”

“Depends on what you need.”

Bursts of green and gold lit the man’s dark eyes. “I wouldn’t mind you guarding my body at night. You know how to fight. You toyed with them. If you’re bored, I could keep you amused.”

At a glance, I couldn’t tell what he was or what magic he possessed, but his interest in me and my fighting likely made him a shifter. Shifter males, especially of predatory species, liked women who challenged them and refused to submit without a fight, preferably a violent, bloody one.

Unfortunately, too many shifter males played for keeps, and when they took interest in a female, it was because they wanted to breed. Some species of shifters mated for life. Others stayed around

long enough to ensure they had viable offspring before drifting away until the next mating season when they would find a new female and spread the love around.

Shifters were a pain in my ass. Until I discovered the nature of my inner beast, I'd remain infertile, which worked well when I sought out non-shifter males for a mutual itch scratching.

Like me, they only wanted a wild night and nothing more.

"What makes you think you'll give me any sport?"

"You've the pride of a queen. How do you know if you'll give *me* any sport?"

I leaned against the bar and relaxed. I'd heard every line in the book, and as far as come-ons went, his were among the more intriguing ones. I had no doubt he'd been aroused during my fight with my sleeping trio of victims.

He'd join them as soon as he stepped in range, and I'd have fun with him before I left the sinking ruins of Miami for new territory.

"My retainer fee is how much I require as a deposit when I'm hired to kill." I offered the courting male my best smile. "I thought it was a fair price for their lives."

"Intriguing. I'm Nate. Beer?"

"They did spoil my first two," I admitted, hooking my stool with my boot and dragging it closer. "You can call me Water Viper."

If he recognized my assassin name, Nate showed no sign of it. He reached across the bar to snag a pair of beers, and when he offered me mine, I palmed the needle and scraped a nail against his skin to mask dosing him with the sedatives. I dropped the sliver of metal into the sea, secured my hold on my beer, and popped the top.

"Cheers to a good fight," he said, opening his bottle before lifting it.

Tapping mine to his, I chuckled and slid onto my stool. Within five minutes, the effects of the drug would kick in. It didn't matter what type of shifter he was; it would knock out an elephant for an hour. Until he dropped, I'd enjoy my beer and his company while I watched the Starfall stone pulse. "Think it'll burst?"

"Wouldn't surprise me. Most people would call us insane for sticking around for the show. Hoping for stronger powers?"

"Too early in the morning for a run."

"But not too early for a cold one?"

I regarded the brown beer bottle and arched a brow. "If you think this is cold, you need to get out more."

"For Miami, it's cold."

One of these days, I would learn not to play with fire—or with handsome shifter males I had no business toying with. Instead of arguing with him, I shrugged and drank my beer. Wherever I went, it'd be a city with reliable electricity *or* magic. Either would work, as long as I could have something cold to drink.

When I didn't speak, Nate rested his elbow on the bar with his bottle hanging loosely in his hand. "Staying long?"

His relaxed posture put me at ease. In another few minutes, he'd succumb to the drug. Sedation was my first method of dealing with unwanted attention from men. After scratching them with my needle and waiting a few minutes, I left. Would he, a shifter male, rise to the challenge I would present when I marked him before I made my getaway? "Only a fool would stay long in a sinking city."

Nate chuckled and set his beer on the bar. "Are you going to lay me out with your friends here if I take the stone?"

Starfall stones scared away those with common sense and lured fools and the brave in equal measure. Which was Nate?

I blamed my species and gender for my curiosity.

“Be my guest.”

I’d have the rock back soon enough.

Reaching around me, he picked up the stone and held it in his palm. If the sparks it emitted bothered him, he showed no sign of it. “It’s amazing such a small stone can cause so many problems. It’s hard to believe this is a source of magic. If it bursts, what do you think it’ll do?”

That was the real problem with Starfall stones; no one knew what the stones could do. The weakest fragments often did nothing at all. The stronger ones—the ones worthy of being named—could change the world. Cities rose and fell from their power. Some even believed they had the power to create gods.

No one knew the name of the stone responsible for sinking Miami, but it had been a stronger stone.

Nate watched me, waiting for an answer.

Whatever Nate was, he wasn’t a cute little bunny; a rabbit would’ve dropped over snoring within a minute. Since my sedatives weren’t working fast enough, I replied with my default answer of, “Scare the piss out of everyone in a mile radius.”

“Right you are. Maybe it’ll have a two-mile radius. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

What sort of madman sounded excited at the prospect of a Starfall stone influencing such a large area? I eliminated prey species, and a thrill ran through me.

Predator shifters lived for the hunt, and I was about to give Nate several excuses to nip at my heels. “That’d be something, but I’m not sure fun is the word I’d use.”

“What generation are you?”

“Third.”

The fourth generation was just being born, and no one knew if their magic would swell or die away to nothing, leaving them closer to human. The first generation included those who had survived Starfall and the children born within the first few years following the meteor bursting over Canada and drowning the world in magic.

The second generation, in some ways, had been stronger than the first. Mine had drawn the short straw, relying on bursts from the Starfall stones to develop useful abilities.

In a way, I was the weakest of the weak, and I would remain so until I discovered my animal and earned the ability to shift. Choosing my gender at age ten had started the process. I hadn’t remained with the Blade Clan long enough to learn when—or how—to become a true shifter and find my animal.

I’d have to figure it out on my own, one way or another.

With my luck, I really would become a cow.

“Never dreamed of rising in the ranks? One lucky burst and you could be a first gen.” Nate slipped the Starfall stone into his pocket.

I’d been hired to take out a few first gen during my career. A single hit had paid for my life in Detroit for an entire year, where I had lived in a real house with a big yard. I’d learned the hard way I hated mowing, my thumb was blacker than sin and coal, and I’d grown bored of suburban life in a month.

“What’s someone like you doing in a dive like this?”

Nate frowned. “Someone like me?”

I allowed myself a smirk of my own. “Nice clothes, pretty face, decent manners? Shouldn’t you be above sea level? Maybe in a flying castle in the clouds or at least a mansion somewhere?”

Propping his chin in his hand, Nate watched me through half-lidded eyes, the first hints of a drug-induced glaze setting in. “Turns out the ivory tower only has pretty pampered princesses, so if I want intelligent conversation, I have to go get my feet wet.”

I leaned back and made a show of looking him over, focusing on his boots. “Hope you left your good shoes at home.”

With a murmur and a sigh, Nate slumped against the bar. In sleep, his expression relaxed, and a small smile curved his lips. Rubbing my hands together, I took my time looking him over before I dug into his pants for the Starfall stone.

The rock warmed my hand, but the jolts of electricity I expected didn't come. I slipped it into my front pocket. As one of the few drifters using Oyster Bay as a flop, I was charged a pittance for a lock box, and with a merry whistle, I dug out my keys to fetch my bag.

Setting the leather satchel on the bar, I rummaged through it until I found my tattoo box. When I killed someone, I took time and care with the job, leaving little evidence behind, except for my mark. When I was hired through official channels, I left my mark on the center of my victim's forehead as a warning to their associates.

When I wasn't, or I really had a grudge against them, my mark went over their heart.

Unless Nate gave me a reason to, I wouldn't kill him. However, I wanted to find out just how good of a sport he could be. It wasn't often I got to play with a shifter male, especially not a good looking one.

Too many embraced their animals and smothered their human side, and I wanted a man as a partner, not just some beast.

I tattooed a coiled water viper below his navel. Since I liked him, I used my golden ink, which blended well with his rich tan. When I finished leaving my mark on him, I dipped my finger into my jar of healing cream and smeared it over the fresh tattoo, ensuring its permanency. I dosed him with the sedative's antidote and erased the scratch marks of my needles with my ointment.

I ran my fingers along the line of his jaw, taking note of his features so I'd hopefully remember his face in case he rose to my challenge and hunted for me. "Sleep well. Sorry, but I gotta run. Thanks for the beer."

Dropping a twenty on the bar for Petey, I headed out of Oyster Bay and into the spring storm sweeping in from the sea.

Chapter 2

What had possessed me to steal a Starfall stone out of Nate's pants?

The stone weighed a lot for its size, and with every step I took, my awareness of its presence in my pocket grew. Mercenaries always cracked at least once during their careers. I could blame boredom or stress, but I'd gone into creepy stalker territory by leaving my assassin's mark on a man.

In gold ink.

I hadn't just cracked; I'd dived straight into the deep end head first. If I wanted to turn him into my top enemy and inspire him to hunt me down, leaving the tattoo had been a good start. If anyone found out it was there, every assassin would want to know why I was interested in him and why the man wasn't already dead.

A neon sign declaring him my property would have been less obvious.

In the grand scheme of my life, taking the glowing hunk of magical rock likely to blow up in my face was merely a misdemeanor. Maybe I could use the stone to distract Nate if he did hunt me down. If he had the choice between acquiring the Starfall stone or chasing after an assassin who had already humiliated him, the rock was worth more, wasn't it?

Then again, I had drugged a shifter male. For some reason, they got offended when I did that. The last time I'd done it, my victim had been an overly amorous bear. I viewed it as helping him reach the blissful state of hibernation a month early.

When a bear roared, it could be heard from miles away, and it had taken me until the start of winter to ditch my unwanted suitor. I had escaped him, and I made a point to avoid the mountains of West Virginia.

At least rabbits and other prey species took their unexpected naps with a lot more grace. I wrinkled my nose, scaled the ladder to Oyster Bay's roof, and headed for one of the sagging rope bridges swaying over the white-capped sea. I paused long enough to watch the weather, noting the lack of howling winds and the tattered clouds in the distance marking the storm's end.

My impulse prey would wake long before the bar flooded if a storm surge did wash over the dying city. Satisfied I hadn't condemned Nate to death, I navigated the maze of bridges lashed between crumbling skyscrapers. It had taken me two weeks to get used to the slick boards under foot and learn to identify the signs of rot to avoid falling through the disintegrating wood.

I wouldn't miss the place, not one bit. With fifteen hundred dollars and a Starfall stone burning a hole in my pocket, I'd be able to pick any city in the east, take over a flop, and have enough to live on until I found work.

If the stone didn't burst while I had it, I'd be a rich woman in short order. Active stones brought in a lot of cash on the black market. Before I'd sell it, however, I'd do the research necessary to learn if it had a name.

Even if it did burst, as long as it didn't shatter, I'd make some money off someone willing to gamble on it reactivating.

If by some miracle I had gotten my hands on a named stone, I'd have to think long and hard about what it could do and who I'd sell it to—or if I'd take it to the ocean and toss it in, hoping no one ever found it again.

Maybe a deep well would be a better choice. Any fool could brave the ocean for a stone, but descending into a well took serious work.

If the stone had a name, if it wasn't so wretched no one should have it, selling it would open so many doors for me. I would first buy a new weapon. My short sword had served me well over the years, although it lacked magic and carried the weight of unwanted memories.

The Blade Clan forged the best steel, and no other mundane sword could match those crafted by the clan. If I had become a man instead of a woman, my sword would have become my first blade,

my symbol of masculinity, and my right to fight alongside my fellow men.

If I had fought well, fought bravely, and earned honor, the clan would have used its Starfall stone, Steel Heart, to bless my blade. I'd never seen the stone, but there was no mistaking a blade touched by its power.

Some glowed. Some burned with white flame. Others crackled with frost or lightning. A rare few could cut through anything without breaking. No matter what power the Starfall stone granted, the blades it touched were forever changed and marked with magic.

Before I had become a woman, I had dreamed of earning my true sword along with my spirit animal and the gift of shifting. I had always believed I would become a man, and I still didn't understand what had gone wrong.

I understood why; I had worshipped the ground the clan heroes walked on so much I would have done anything to fight at their side. My obsession had consumed me, and somehow, it had turned me into a woman.

Clenching my teeth, I crossed the swaying bridges of Miami towards higher ground, where the sea lost the battle with the land.

Instead of fighting for the clan's honor, I merely survived. I killed those who needed killing, taking money for their spilled blood. I left my mark on the dead. I carved my way through the world, leaving bodies in my wake. Some I let live, like the three men who had tried to claim the stone for themselves, and like Nate.

Lightning flashed across the sky, and I grimaced at the cracking roar of thunder. No one else dared to traverse the bridges in a storm. The lightning rods rising from the rooftops helped keep strikes off the bridges, but they weren't foolproof.

The first thing I had learned about the city was how people died by the dozens every year braving Miami's weather. If the storms didn't kill them, sharks and other predators did.

I'd been in the city a month, and I hadn't killed anyone before moving on.

Miracles could happen after all.

* * *

It took me four hours to reach Miami's city limits, and I cursed myself, the driving rain, the cracking thunder, and the blinding bursts of lightning every single step of the way. When the wind gusted, the bridges bucked beneath me with the indomitable pride of an unbroken stallion.

The water crested beneath the wooden planks, spraying me with stinging mist, and when I finally reached real land and the surf-soaked sand shifted beneath my boots, the gale screamed its fury at my escape.

I flipped the sky my middle finger.

The sky rumbled impotent curses back at me.

When Miami had fallen, much of Florida had gone with it, turning the state into a scattering of islets connected by sandbars and bridges. Aquatic shifter clans ruled the habitable spaces, including much of the Everglades, which thrived when everything else had fallen into the sea.

Where humans and their descendants didn't dare to tread, wild horses did. I'd learned more about the equines from Petey than I had anything else. The lucky saw one, the blessed touched one, and only the insane risked their lives for a ride.

Every few years, the Blade Clan headed west to hunt mustangs, and the bravest returned with a horse to tame. They bred them, too, but a man was measured by his skill with the sword, the horse he rode, and the woman he claimed for his bride.

I added 'a good horse' to the list of things I would buy if the Starfall stone proved valuable.

I marched with my sword unsheathed, watching the waving grasses for movement counter to the storm's winds. When humans weren't hunting, animals were, and I had no intention of falling prey

to either.

Nothing bothered me while I splashed from islet to islet, following the jagged coast north towards the ruins of Fort Lauderdale.

When I reached the city's edge two days later, hungry, cranky, and itching for a fight, a crimson, crystalline statue greeted me. In life, she had been an older woman, smiling when the Starfall burst had washed over the city. Her feet marked the start of the ruby scourge, and it stretched out as far as I could see.

I slipped my hand into my pocket and pulled out the Starfall stone. It still glowed and pulsed, warming my storm-chilled skin. Clenching my teeth, I returned it to my pocket and prayed I hadn't made a huge mistake taking it.

When I had first passed through Fort Lauderdale, I had counted the dead while I traversed the streets, cringing when the waves washed around my feet and the sea turned red. People hadn't been the only things to turn to crystal; an undisturbed image of the past stretched out before me. Cars littered the street, their occupants frozen within. Birds clung to branches, and those unlucky enough to have been caught in flight still hung in the air.

Somewhere deep within the city, the crystal entombed President Wilson, the second US President to fall prey to a Starfall stone. His replacement, elected six months after Fort Lauderdale's fall in 1992, still governed. Before Starfall, terms had been limited to eight years, but the American people had voted to change the rules, mandating every literate adult eighteen or older was required to vote, and the President of the United States could serve until they were voted out or impeached.

Ninety percent of the voters had made their voices heard, and mine had been among them: for as long as President Stephanie Miller remained willing to govern, the people would follow her lead.

If the rest of life could be so clear-cut, I suspected a lot of things would have been different. I lifted my chin and delved into the crystal city's depths. My footsteps chimed, and the columns of red stones, which had once been buildings, gleamed in the fading sunlight.

Next time, if there was a next time, I would plan better. There was no way I'd be able to cross the city without resting. I hated sleeping in a city occupied by the dead. When night fell, the spirits whispered, and when the dead spoke, the wise listened.

Unfortunately, the dead never had anything nice to say.

"Well, fuck." My voice echoed, and I took shelter under an awning to wait for dawn.

* * *

Even the dead feared a Starfall stone ready to burst. Not a single ghost haunting Fort Lauderdale disturbed my sleep or whispered threats in my ear.

The next morning, I counted my blessings, grimaced at the stiffness deep in my bones, and forced myself to start walking. Within an hour, Fort Lauderdale became a memory, one I hoped I'd never revisit.

By the end of the day, I reached Pompano Beach. It was the southernmost city where I could hire a coach to Jacksonville, one of the few parts of Florida still attached to the mainland United States.

From there, I could take a train just about anywhere, although I didn't have too far to travel. I'd lose two hundred dollars reaching Charlotte, North Carolina, but it was the best place for me to go. Between the mercenary guilds, the mystic guilds, and the freelancers, there'd be work. I refused to pay homage to any one guild, setting me apart from most assassins.

The harder it was to find me, the harder it was for someone to track me down and kill me.

Then again, maybe I was just bored of living. Not only had I put my mark on Nate, I had told him the name I never should have given anyone. He knew my face.

If he was a shifter male like I thought, he likely knew my scent, too. The chance existed he, like

me, hadn't discovered his beast, but I thought it unlikely.

Only those of the Blade Clan and the rival weapon clans sharing the Adirondacks to the northern reaches of the Blue Ridge grew into adulthood without learning their second nature. While I wanted to live long enough to discover what I was and who I'd become, I tired of my shamed exile.

I should have been a man, but I was a woman instead. No amount of training would give me the height or strength of a man. I made up for my weakness in skill and precision, but every time I crossed swords with a man, I knew.

When it came to brute force, I'd never compare. I'd always remain lean compared to men, especially shifter males. Until I discovered my beast, I'd be lean and weak compared to shifter females, too.

It set those born of the Blade Clan and other weapon clans apart from the other shifters.

We were, unlike everyone else, truly human until we became adults. We lacked power; we found it later in life, long after we reached maturity. Our bodies were weapons, and our swords were an extension of our very selves.

Except for me.

My guilt and shame chased me all the way to Charlotte. A cold mist hung in the air, worked its way through my clothes, and clung to my skin. Few departed the train with me despite Charlotte's rank as a metropolis. The train station, located in the heart of the city, rested on a junction point, a rare place where magic and electricity blended without interfering with one another.

The hum of the electric plant above the train station gave me a headache. Mystics in need of work fed their power to the lines, generating the electricity the city needed to function.

My first stop would be at a clothing store. In Charlotte, appearances mattered. Worn jeans and a road-stained blouse closed doors. No one knew me as the Water Viper, although the city had seen my mark before. They knew me as Jesse Alexander, a quiet sell sword and bodyguard who hid a lot of weapons under her skirt.

One day, someone would notice the Water Viper only appeared when I was in the city. It was the game all assassins played.

Someone wanted someone dead.

Someone like me picked up the job.

Then I killed them, taking a life with a set value, quantified into dollars and cents. Death didn't always come quickly, but it came. I preferred to inflict a painless death, sneaking up on my victim in the night. While my toxins stole away their lives, I watched and waited.

Few realized they were dying before death crept up on them in their sleep. It was then, at rest in their beds, I tattooed my mark into their cooling skin.

Some called me ethical and far more merciful than my victims deserved. Others believed worse things of me.

I had designed my mark to reflect my desire to stamp out treachery, swift and vicious like a water moccasin, but fatal, unlike the freshwater snake that menaced those who ventured too close to the river's shore. The people believed I took my name from a sea snake with a gentle but lethal bite.

One day, I might correct them, but for the moment, their misinterpretation served me. No other assassin I knew of boasted a merciful reputation.

No one understood I gave my victims the death I wanted, in my sleep, in a bed belonging to me. It wouldn't happen, not for someone like me, but I longed for it anyway. When my victims took someone to their bed, I took them unawares, sedating them so they would not witness their lover's death, although they woke beside a corpse.

Sometimes, I even felt guilt and remorse for what I did. Not often, but sometimes.

I headed into the city to, for the third time in my life, make it my home.

* * *

I chose a dress instead of a skirt because its slitted sides allowed me to move while the top clung to my chest without restricting my ability to breathe, and I liked the color. I doubted the bright, yellow fabric did me any favors, but the crimson Chinese dragon coiling over my breasts up to my shoulder and down my back gifted me with a sense of invulnerability.

It also helped bring out the faint hint of gold in my otherwise dull, brown hair.

Sometimes sacrifices had to be made. My attire didn't leave me a lot of places to hide the new stash of weapons I purchased along with the dress, so I wore them openly. Knives decorated my thighs, bound to my leg with black leather straps and matching sheaths. I wore my blade with pride, and I covered my sword belt with a golden sash to do my dress a little justice.

Underneath the sash, I had a lot of little pouches tied to my belt, and in one of them, the Starfall stone pulsed like a beating heart, waiting for its moment to burst and drown everyone around it in magic.

I really needed to get rid of the damned thing.

I abandoned my heeled boots for golden slippers with leather soles. When I needed to fight, I would be able to.

If I did my job right, I wouldn't have to.

Because I liked the dress, I doubted it would last long. They rarely did. I shouldn't have spent a hundred dollars on it, but I had. At least when I showed up to my first mercenary guild of choice, the Lancers' Alliance, I'd draw the attention of just about everyone.

Smart assassins never drew attention to themselves, which was why I did it. People liked believing in the evidence of their eyes. Their eyes told them I was a woman, and when I wore a dress worth more than five dollars, I sometimes even passed as a pretty one. My sword informed them I was a mercenary.

Thus, I delegated myself to the role of a bodyguard for events where appearances mattered, which paid well enough. My choice of public jobs also played into my status as a sell sword with a preference for protecting people.

I strengthened the facade by presenting the open, honest, and good-natured part of me, the farce I lived to convince everyone I wouldn't poison people and mutilate their bodies with a tattoo, which I used to inform the authorities I had been paid to kill someone.

The police really hated when I left them with no evidence, which was why I offered my services to them right after I cycled my way through the mercenary and freelance guilds, who were looking for a few extra swords to fill their ranks on a temporary basis.

No one liked believing an assassin would boldly walk among them. If I presented enough evidence I couldn't be anything other than a regular mercenary, those hunting the Water Viper searched elsewhere.

I took a lot of risks with the way I operated, but it had worked so far. Lifting my chin and resting my hand on the hilt of my sword, I focused on my destination.

The Lancers' Alliance never failed to amuse me. Someone—its guild leader, Todd Jacobson—had had the bright idea to convert the building into a rustic, bright red barn easily spotted from a quarter mile away, its roof towering several stories over its neighbors.

Not a single one of the mercenaries I'd met through the guild used a lance or rode a horse. Some of them became horses, but no one was dumb enough to suggest they should be ridden into battle.

The only type of riding they liked doing involved a bed and a woman, and I wasn't dumb enough to screw around with an equine shifter male. Maybe belonging to a harem herd of pretty ladies appealed to some, but I had no interest in competing for the herd's single breeding male.

If I ever decided to settle down, I had no intentions of sharing my man with anyone.

At least my preferences in men made it easy to eliminate a lot of species from my beast's hidden identity, although it didn't narrow the playing field enough for my liking. A lot of animals mated for

life, and I wondered which one I'd become if I lived long enough. My thoughts amused me for the rest of the walk to the mercenary guild.