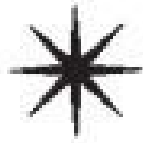


# DEMON KEEPERS



A NOVEL OF THE FINAL PROPHECY

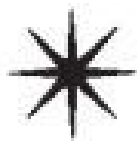
JESSICA ANDERSEN



A SIGNET ECLIPSE BOOK



# DEMON KEEPERS



A NOVEL OF THE FINAL PROPHECY

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# Praise for the Novels of the Final Prophecy

## *Skykeepers*

“An exciting, romantic, and imaginative tale, *Skykeepers* is guaranteed to keep readers entertained and turning the pages.”

—Romance Reviews Today

“*Skykeepers* will knock you off your feet, keep you on the edge of your seat and totally captivate you from beginning to end.”

—Romance Junkies

“Jessica Andersen’s *Skykeepers* is a gripping story that pull[s] this reader right into her Final Prophecy series. I have not read *Nightkeepers* or *Dawnkeepers* yet, but after reading *Skykeepers*, they are both on my must-read list!”

—Romance Reader at Heart (top pick)

“The Final Prophecy is a well-written series that is as intricate as it is entertaining!”

—The Romance Readers Connection (4½ stars)

“The world of the *Nightkeepers* is wonderful, and I love visiting it. It is intricate, magical, and absolutely fascinating. . . . Step inside the *Nightkeeper* world and prepare to be swept away!”

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“If you’re looking for a book to read, one that has an intricate, inventive, and well-researched world with characters that are fully realized, might I suggest *Skykeepers* ?”

—Romance Novel TV

## *Dawnkeepers*

“Prophecy, passion, and powerful emotions—*Dawnkeepers* will keep you on the edge of your seat begging for more!”

—Wild on Books

“This strong new series will appeal to fantasy and paranormal fans with its refreshing blend of Mayan and Egyptian mythologies, plus a suitably complex story line and plenty of antagonists.”

—Monsters and Critics

“This exhilarating urban romantic fantasy saga is constructed around modernizing Mayan mythology. . . . The story line is fast-paced and filled with action as the overarching Andersen mythology is wonderfully embellished with this engaging entry.”

“Using the Mayan doomsday prophecy, Andersen continues to add complexity to her characters and her increasingly dense mythos. This intense brand of storytelling is a most welcome addition to the genre.”

—*Romantic Times*

“Action packed with skillfully written and astounding fight scenes . . . will keep you on the edge of your seat begging for more.”

—Romance Junkies

### *Nightkeepers*

“Raw passion, dark romance, and seat-of-your-pants suspense—I swear ancient Mayan gods and demons walk the modern earth!”

—*New York Times* bestselling author J. R. Ward “Andersen’s got game when it comes to style and voice. [This is] a series that’s sure to be an instant reader favorite, and will put Andersen’s books on keeper shelves around the world.”

—Suzanne Brockmann on [WritersareReaders.com](http://WritersareReaders.com)

“I deeply enjoyed the story. It really hooked me!”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Angela Knight

“Part romance, mystery, and fairy tale . . . a captivating book with wide appeal.”

—*Booklist*

“[A] nonstop, action- intensive plot . . . Ms. Andersen delivers a story that is both solid romance and adventure novel. If you enjoy movies like *Lara Croft* . . . or just want something truly new, you will definitely want this.”

—Huntress Book Reviews

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—*Romantic Times*

“If *Nightkeepers* is any indication of her talent, then [Jessica Andersen] will become one of my favorites. . . . [The book] brought tears to my eyes and an ache in my heart. I read each word with bated breath.”

—Romance Junkies

“[A] terrific romantic fantasy . . . an excellent thriller. Jessica Andersen provides a strong story that fans will cherish.”

—*Midwest Book Review*



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# *The Novels of the Final Prophecy*

*Nightkeepers*

*Dawnkeepers*

*Skykeepers*

*Demonkeepers*

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# DEMON KEEPERS



A NOVEL OF THE FINAL PROPHECY

JESSICA ANDERSEN



A SIGNET ECLIPSE BOOK

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SIGNET ECLIPSE

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*In loving memory of my grandmother Marian Woodard,  
who was never without a book close at hand.*

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The Nightkeepers' world is well hidden within our own; bringing it to light isn't always an easy process. My heartfelt thanks go to Deidre Knight, Kara Cesare, Claire Zion, Kara Welsh, and Kerri Donovan for helping me take these books from a dream to a reality; to J. R. Ward for her unwavering support; to Suz Brockmann for being a mentor and an inspiration; to Nancy N. and Julie C. for being rock-star beta readers; to Liz F. for taking over the Keepers' message board; to my many other friends for always being there for a laugh or cyberhug; to Sally Hinkle Russell for keeping me sane and to Brian Hogan for too many things to name in this small space.

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## What has come before . . .

*Two years ago, a reluctant king stepped up to rule the scant dozen surviving Nightkeepers and the winikin protectors. Bound by blood and magic, this small band of saviors must protect mankind from the rise of terrible demons on December 21, 2012, as prophesied by the calendar of the ancient May. In order to reach their full powers, the magi must find and bond with their gods-destined mates . . . who aren't always who or what they seem.*

*With their numbers decimated by demon slaughter and their information stores destroyed by religious cleansing, the Nightkeepers fight a rearguard action against not only the dark lords of demonkind, the Banol Kax, but also against their earthly enemies, the magic-wielding members of the Order of Xibalba, who seek to preempt the end-time for their own purposes. Badly in need of new spells and prophecies in the final three years before the end-time, the Nightkeepers must gain access to their ancestors' library, which is hidden in the barrier of psi energy that gives them their magical powers. Their only hope for this lies in the scarred hands of a formerly demon-possessed human who now harbors the powers of a Prophet but can't figure out how to use the magic to save his own life . . . or that of the woman he once loved.*

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# **PART I**

## **SUNRISE**

*The beginning of a new day*

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# CHAPTER ONE

*June 12, New Moon*

*Two years, six months, and nine days to the zero date*

*University of Texas, Austin*

“I just got the booty call,” Jade announced as she let herself into Anna’s office, which could’ve doubled as the set for a movie of the archaeologist-slash-adventurer-saves-the-day variety, with artifact-crammed shelves and framed photographs of rain forests and ruins. After closing the door to make sure nobody out in the cool, faintly damp halls of the art history building could overhear unless they made a real effort, Jade dropped into the empty chair opposite her friend’s desk and let out a frustrated sigh. “Thing is, it wasn’t the booty-er calling. It was your brother.”

Anna winced. “Ew.”

“No kidding, huh?” Not that Jade thought Anna’s brother was an “ew”—far from it. Strike was massive, raven haired, and seriously drool-worthy, but he was also thoroughly mated, and the fact that he was the Nightkeepers’ king had added to the squick factor, taking the uncomfortable phone call from “*gee, it’d be nice if you and Lucius hooked back up*” into royal-decree territory. Granted, Jade had volunteered for booty duty, and the sexual mores of a mage were way more liberal than human norm, but still.

Propping her feet on a cracked, knee-high clay pot that showed a sacrificial scene of a victim’s beating heart being ripped out, and which currently served as Anna’s trash can, Jade slumped down and let her long, straight hair fall forward around her face. It obscured her view of the trim jeans and upscale, low-heeled sandals that would’ve looked casually elegant on Anna, but on her just blended. As she slouched, she swore she heard Shandi’s voice in her head, chiding, *Sit up straight, Jade. The members of the harvester bloodline are always dutiful, diligent, and decorous.* The three “D”s. Even before she’d known she was a Nightkeeper, or that her last name of Farmer was a modern take on her bloodline, she’d been hearing about duty, diligence, and decorum, along with the familiar admonitions: Walk, don’t run; listen, don’t talk; speak, don’t shout; follow, don’t lead; blend, don’t stand out.

*Gack.*

Tucking her hair behind her ears and straightening her spine—because she wanted to, not because her *winikin*’s remembered chidings, dang it—Jade glanced at the black, tattoo-like bloodline glyph she wore on her inner forearm, along with the scribe’s talent mark that tagged her as little more than a glorified librarian. Bared by the soft white button-down sleeves she’d rolled up past her elbows, the marks stood out in sharp relief against her pale skin, which refused to tan despite her otherwise dark coloring of sable hair and light green, almost sea-foam eyes. *Ten bucks says Shandi never expects*



that the “duty” part of the three “D”s would come down to something like this, she thought snidely. Really, though, she had zero problem with what she was being asked to do. Her problem was that Strike had been the one doing the asking. *Damn it, Lucius.*

“You could bail.” Anna leaned back in her desk chair, toying with the thin metal chain that disappeared at her neckline. The king’s sister was a striking woman in her late thirties, wearing a moss-colored lightweight sweater that counterpointed her dark, russet-highlighted hair and the piercing cobalt eyes she and Strike had both inherited from their father, King Scarred-Jaguar. Despite her heritage, though, Anna had recently stepped up to head the human university’s ancient civilizations department. Of the scant dozen Nightkeepers still living, she was the only one who had refused to take up residence at Skywatch and commit to the Nightkeepers’ war against the *Banol Kax* and the fast-approaching zero date. Although Jade knew that Anna’s decision had caused—was still causing—problems back at Skywatch, she considered herself lucky that the other woman had stuck to her guns, not just because the university connection gave the Nightkeepers access to high-level information on the ancient Maya and the world at large, but because the campus itself had turned into a landing spot for magi looking to get away from Skywatch without being totally out of the loop. . . . Like Rabbit, who’d needed to escape the compound’s isolation and memories of his borderline sociopathic father, and Jade, who’d needed . . . Hell, she didn’t know what she’d needed. Space, maybe. Perspective. A cooling-off period, and some new skills that didn’t rely on magic.

Now, though, she was being called back to Skywatch. Back to duty. And back to a man who . . . *Shit.* Jade took a deep breath. “Sure, I could back out.” As she turned her palms up, her forearm markings flashed a stark reminder of duty. “But then what? We need access to the library; Lucius isn’t getting done on his own, and the others haven’t managed to trigger his powers using rituals and blood. Besides, we’ve got plenty of proof that sex magic trumps blood sacrifice. Strike and Leah used it to drive the *Banol Kax* back to the underworld; Nate and Alexis used it to repair a breach in the barrier, and Michael and Sasha used it to defeat Iago and his Xibalbans.” Although that last point was somewhat debatable.

Sure, the Nightkeepers’ earthly enemies, the members of the Order of Xibalba, had been quiet since the winter solstice, but the last time the Nightkeepers had laid eyes on the Xibalbans’ leader, Iago, he had been in the process of summoning the soul of the long-dead—and seriously bloodthirsty—Aztec god-king, Moctezuma. Iago had been trying to create an *ajaw-makol*: a powerful human-demon hybrid that retained its human characteristics in direct proportion to the degree of evil in the host’s soul. But the transition spell had been interrupted when the Nightkeepers had breached Iago’s mountain lair, making the outcome far less clear. The few hints Jade had found in the Nightkeepers’ archives suggested that an interrupted *makol* transition could go one of two ways. Most often, the human host-to-be slid into a comalike stasis for weeks or months while the demon spirit fought to integrate itself—or not—with the host’s brain. Which was what the Nightkeepers suspected was happening with Iago. Less often, both the demon and human consciousnesses could coexist while the host remained conscious, with the two souls fighting for dominance . . . which was what had happened to Lucius. The Nightkeepers had eventually managed to rescue him and banish the *makol*, but that hadn’t actually been their goal. What they’d really done was offer his soul to the in-between in an effort to turn him into the Prophet: an incarnate conduit capable of channeling badly needed intel from the metaphysical plane. Lucius’s exorcism and survival had been a side benefit, which galled Jade at the same time that it forced her gratitude.

Now she tried not to notice how Anna was just sitting there looking at her, the way she did with her Intro to Mayan Studies students. *Keep going, the look said. You’ll see where you went wrong in*

*minute*. “Three times now,” Jade continued doggedly, “sex magic has turned out to be the key to unlocking the larger powers necessary for successful high-level magic: Godkeeper magic in Leah and Alexis’s cases, the Volatile’s shape-shifting ability for Nate, and the balanced matter and antimatter of Michael’s and Sasha’s talents. So it seems logical that sex magic could be the key that triggers the Prophet’s power in Lucius.”

Granted, he wasn’t a Nightkeeper. But despite the ongoing debate among the Nightkeepers, particularly the members of the royal council, Jade didn’t think the problem was his humanity, his former demonic connection, or the fact that he’d retained his soul when the library spell had called for its sacrifice. Her instincts said he just needed a jump start, with an emphasis on the “jump” part—in, he needed to get himself jumped. And if that was bound to make things complicated between them, so be it. She’d made herself scarce for the past five-plus months since his return to Skywatch; she could leave again afterward if she had to. It wasn’t like anyone was begging her to come back. And it didn’t that just suck?

“There’s one big difference between your situation and the other cases you’re talking about.” Anna raised an eyebrow. “Unless there isn’t?”

And there was the crux of another major debate. Was it the sex magic itself that unlocked the bigger powers, or was the emotional pair-bonding of a mated couple the key, with sex magic as a collateral bonus? *Hello, chicken and egg*. Of the three couples Jade had named, in the aftermath of the battles they’d been instrumental in winning, two had gained the *jun tan* marks signifying them as mated, soul-bound pairs. And although Michael’s connection to death magic prevented him from forming the *jun tan*, he and Sasha had gotten engaged human-style, diamond ring and all. Which suggested it wasn’t just the sex magic that was important; it was the emotions too.

Jade had heard the argument before—ad nauseam—but it pinched harder coming from Anna, who had become a good friend in the months since Jade had fled from Skywatch to the university for a crash course in Mayan epigraphy and some breathing room . . . And Anna’s relationship with Lucius went a good six years farther back than that—she’d been his boss, his mentor, and briefly his bonded master under Nightkeeper law.

“I don’t think it’s a question of love,” Jade said, glancing past Anna’s shoulder to the shelf beyond where a crudely faked statuette of Flower Quetzal, the Aztec goddess of love and female sexuality, seemed to be smirking at her. Doggedly, she continued: “I think in each of the prior cases, the couples were struggling with identity issues, trying not to lose their senses of self to the magic or the feelings for each other. That won’t be a problem for Lucius and me. I don’t have much in the way of magic, and we’re not . . . Well, we had sex once; that was it.” And oh, holy shit, had that been a disaster. Not the sex, but the way she’d flubbed the aftermath. “We’re just friends now,” she finished. *Sort of*.

“The *jun tan* the others earned through sex magic doesn’t symbolize friendship . . . and neither does what Strike wants you to do.”

“It’s just sex.” Jade glanced at her friend as a new reason for the cross-examination occurred. “Unless you think he’s still too fragile?” Even with his grisly wounds on the mend, thanks to Sasha’s healing magic, Lucius had been badly depleted in the weeks following his return to the Nightkeepers. He’d been disconnected and clumsy, as though, even with the *makol* gone from his head, he wasn’t home inside his own body. More, he’d been deeply ashamed of the weakness, thanks to a childhood spent as the weakling nerd in a family of hard-core jocks. Had his condition deteriorated?

“Fragile is *not* the word that comes to mind.” There was an odd note in Anna’s voice.

“Then what’s with the ‘don’t do it’ vibes?”

“I think . . .” Anna trailed off, then shook her head. “You know? Forget I said anything. It’s not for me to say on one hand that I want Strike to deal me out of the hierarchy, then on the other running around trying to subvert the royal council’s plan.”

Jade winced at learning the should-Jade-jump-Lucius discussion hadn’t just been a three-way between her, Strike, and Anna, as she’d thought, but had also included the other members of the royal council: Leah, Jox, Nate, and Alexis. Michael had probably been involved too, as he was practically a council member; and if he knew what was going on, then so did Sasha. Shandi had also likely been in on the conversation, though the *winikin* probably hadn’t added much beyond, “Whatever you think is best for the sire.” Jade was determined not to let any of that matter, though. For once, she was the one taking action while the others hung back and played supporting roles. The harvester bloodline might have traditionally produced shield bearers rather than fighters, and she might be the only living Nightkeeper aside from Anna who didn’t wear the warrior’s talent mark, but this time she was on the front lines, ready to take one for the team.

So to speak.

Anna touched her chain again. Though Jade couldn’t see the heavy pendant it held, she could easily picture the yellow crystal skull. Handed down through the maternal lineage, the quartz effigy was the focus of an *itza’at* seer’s visionary gift. Normally Anna blocked her talent, which was glitchy at best, but Jade thought she caught a faint hum of power in the air as Anna said, “I’m not sure. . . .” She trailed off, eyes dark and distant.

Jade straightened. “Are you seeing something?”

“Gods, no.” Anna self-consciously dropped her hand from her throat, pressing her palm to the solid wood of the desk. “It’s just a feeling, probably coming from the fact that I care deeply about both of you, and hate that I can’t be there for Lucius without breaking promises that I’ve made to people here.”

Jade didn’t bother pointing out that vows made to humans were pretty far down in the writs when it came to the list of a mage’s priorities. Anna was forging her own path, which wasn’t necessarily the same one set down by the First Father and the generations of magi since. “Will it help if I promise to be gentle?”

Anna made a face. “Again. Ew.”

Jade laughed, but the humor was strictly on the surface. Underneath it all, she wanted to press further—about whether Anna was having visions, about how Lucius had looked when she’d last seen him . . . and whether he’d asked about her. But, just as Jade had cut off Strike and Anna whenever they had tried to tell her about Lucius’s progress before, she didn’t ask now. In the end, what mattered most were the results. Besides, she’d given her word to her king, and according to the writs, a vow made to him was second only to a promise made to the gods. Since the gods were currently incommunicado thanks to Iago’s destruction of the skyroad . . .

She had a booty call to answer.

---

## CHAPTER TWO

*Skywatch*

*Near Chaco Canyon, New Mexico*

The strange orange sun was slipping toward the horizon as Strike and Jade materialized, not in the great room, where the teleporter king usually landed his homeward bounds, but out behind the big mansion that formed the heart of Skywatch. Jade appreciated his discretion; she wasn't exactly jonesing to endure a round of "Hi, how are you?" pleasantries while everyone tried not to say anything about what she was there to do. Except Sven, who was perpetually seventeen, and would probably do a wink-wink-nudge-nudge routine.

Yeah, she'd skip that, thanks.

She and Strike had zapped in beneath the big ceiba tree that stretched over the picnic area out behind the mansion and pool. There, cacao saplings grew beneath the rain forest giant, the out-of-place tropical plants flourishing in the arid New Mexican landscape thanks to Sasha's lifegiving *ch'* magic and her affinity for plants. Nearby, the steel building that served as the Nightkeepers' training hall was a dark silhouette of deepening shadows.

The scenery was all very familiar to Jade. The atmosphere, though, wasn't.

Stepping away from the big, black-haired king, who was wearing his usual nonregalia of jeans, t-shirt, and sandals, with his right sleeve just brushing across the *hunab ku* mark that denoted his god-validated kingship, Jade filled her lungs with moisture-laden air that seemed more appropriate to the lowlands of the Yucatan than a box canyon in New Mex. The air smelled faintly wrong, though she couldn't immediately place the odor, which clung to her nasal passages and made her want to sneeze. She glanced at Strike, who was a dark shadow in the rapidly dimming light. "Did you guys install a giant Glade air nonfreshener while I was gone?"

"I wish. At least then we'd know what we're dealing with . . . and it'd presumably come with a 'off' button." His deep voice was edged with frustration. "We seem to be going from desert to tropic and it's not just the ceiba tree growing out of place now, or even the cacao. There are patches of slimy green crap—like dry-land algae or something—growing all over the area, though it's worse down here. Sasha says it's only partly her talent that's promoting the growth; mostly it's the funky sun."

Jade glanced at the horizon just as the last sliver of orange light disappeared. The gas giant had been off-color worldwide since the previous fall, when humanity had awakened one day to a sun that had turned from white light to blood-tinged orange overnight.

The amount of solar energy reaching the earth had dropped precipitously even though the earth's atmosphere was its same ragged, ozone-depleted self. Scientists worldwide had various theories—but the big surprise there—but the consensus seemed to be: *Beats the living hell out of us.* The astrophysicists

were testing whether a cosmic dust cloud or something was blocking things between the earth and sun. ~~the ecologists were freaking about issues of climate change, crop losses, and killer red tides; and the threat of mob stampede was growing as food prices skyrocketed and microclimates shifted over the course of weeks or even days. And all the while, people were asking, *Why is this happening? How?*~~

Unbeknownst to most of humanity, the answers that came the closest to reality were those of the supposed crackpots who blamed it on aliens . . . or, rather, demons and the approach of a doomsday predicted by the calendar of the ancient Maya. In depicting the end-date, the Dresden Codex, one of the only four Mayan codices to survive the conquistadors' book burnings of the fifteen hundreds, showed a terrible horned god standing in the sky, tipping a jug that poured fire onto the earth. Although most human scholars assumed that meant the Maya believed that the world would be demolished by a fiery apocalypse, Jade had dug up information from the archive suggesting that the solar fire would be part of the gods' efforts to *help* the Nightkeepers during the final battle, which was good news. . . . Or it had been until the sun got sick.

Unfortunately, in the absence of a reliable oracle—aka the Prophet—there was no way for the Nightkeepers to ask what the hell was going on or how to fix it.

Shivering, Jade scrubbed at sudden gooseflesh. “Maybe there’ll be something in the library,” she said, voicing the sentiment that had grown to a refrain over the past six months. “Which is my cue to get down to business.”

But when she turned toward the mansion, which was a darkly solid, reassuring silhouette in the gathering dusk, Strike caught her arm and one-eightied her in the direction of a nearly invisible path leading away from the main house. “Lucius moved into one of the cottages a few months back. Said the mansion made him feel claustrophobic after being trapped inside his own head for so long.”

“Oh.” She tried not to let the change unsettle her, though when she’d pictured the pending book duty, she and Lucius had always been in his suite, which was a few doors down from her own and nearly identical in floor plan and bland decor. *Not a big deal*, she told herself. *It’s just a shift of scenery*. Experience had taught her that people didn’t fundamentally change; only peripherals did. Human, Nightkeeper, it didn’t matter. Some people were good, some bad, most a mixture of the two. She trusted Lucius despite knowing that he harbored a deep darkness that had attracted the *makol* and allowed it to gain a foothold within his soul. But he also had a strong core of innate goodness; that was what had kept the demon from possessing him fully, setting up the internal tug-of-war he’d suffered through for more than a year.

“Is that a problem?” Strike asked. The deepening dusk made his voice seem to come from the humid air around her rather than from the man himself.

“Which cottage?” she said, ducking the question because she knew it would take far more than a change of scenery to scare off a warrior, and she was determined not to let herself be anything less.

“The one farthest from the mansion; you’ll see the lights. He sleeps with them on. Or else he doesn’t sleep at all; we’re not sure.” The king paused. “Nate and Alexis are spending the night in the main house rather than their cottage. With Rabbit and Myrinne at school, you’ll have privacy. Closing the distance between them, he pressed something into her hand. “Take this.”

Feeling the outlines of one of the earpiece-throat mike combos the warriors used to stay in contact during ops, she didn’t ask why. “Who’s going to be on the other end?” Even knowing that the mike would transmit only if she keyed it on, she couldn’t help picturing a voyeuristic tableau in the green room.

“Either me or Jox. Unless you’d prefer Leah.”

He was doing his best, she realized, to maintain the illusion of privacy while keeping her safe.

letting her know the warriors stood ready to come to her defense if the sex magic went awry and Lucius once again drew the attention of the underworld lords of the *Banol Kax*. Which had been one of the numerous daunting possibilities that had been thrown around over the past few weeks.

“Whatever you think is best,” Jade said, just barely managing not to tack on “sire” at the end, as her *winikin*’s voice echoed in her head, reminding her of the three “D”s. *I’m not following orders this time. This was my idea. My choice.* Raising her chin, she said, “Lucius won’t hurt me.” No, she manage that part on her own. Always had.

“He’s not the guy you used to know. Becoming the Prophet has changed him.”

“He’s not the Prophet yet. If he were, you wouldn’t need me.”

Strike didn’t have anything to say to that, which pinched somewhere in the region of Jade’s heart. Given her inability to tap her scribe’s talent for the spell crafter’s gift it was supposed to convey, she didn’t bring much in the way of a unique skill set to the Nightkeepers . . . except in the matter at hand. She was the only female mage who remained yet unmated, and she and Lucius had—briefly, at least—shared a sexual connection. More, in the wake of her and Michael’s failed affair, back when they’d first come to Skywatch and gotten their bloodline marks, she’d proven that she could be sexually involved with a man and not lose her heart. While that was more innate practicality than skill, she knew the royal council saw it as a plus. Lucius wasn’t one of them, with or without the Prophet powers.

Realizing that Strike was waiting for her to make her move, she took a deep breath. “Okay. Wis me luck.”

She halfway expected him to come back with something about getting lucky. Instead, he said, “I want you to remember one thing: You can call it off at any point. This was your idea. I wouldn’t have summoned you today if you hadn’t volunteered. So promise me that you’ll stop if it doesn’t feel right.”

She frowned at the sudden one-eighty. “But the writs say—”

“Fuck the writs,” he interrupted succinctly. “Which probably isn’t what you expected—or wanted—your king to say, but there you have it. Over the past two years we’ve proved that the writs aren’t perfect or immutable. So now I’m telling you—hell, I’m *ordering* you, if that makes it better—make your own decision on this one. Take me out of it. Take the others out of it. This is between you and Lucius. Sleep with him or don’t, your call.”

Jade drew breath to whatever-you-say-sire him, but then stopped herself. After a moment’s pause she said, “I get where you’re coming from, but with all due respect, it’s bullshit. I’m here because we’re out of other options. If we don’t get our hands on the library soon, the earth might not even make it to the zero date. Between whatever’s going on with the sun, and the threat that Moctezuma could come through into Iago any day now, we might be looking at going into full-on war with the Xibalbans long before the barrier falls in 2012. Sorry, but you don’t get to tell me to take all that off of the equation just so you can feel better about making the call. If it doesn’t bother me to offer myself to Lucius this way, under these circumstances, then it shouldn’t bother you. And if it does, that’s not my problem.”

There was a moment of startled silence. Then Strike said, “Huh.”

Jade didn’t know if that meant he was offended, taken aback, or what, but told herself she didn’t care, three “D”s or no three “D”s. “What? You didn’t know I have a spine?”

“I knew you had one. I just wasn’t sure you’d figured it out.” He made a move like he was going to touch her, but instead let his hand fall to the warrior’s knife he wore at his belt. “Good luck, then. And remember that we’ll be monitoring the radio in case . . . well, just in case.”

Without another word, he spun up the red-gold magic of a Nightkeeper warrior- mage and disappeared in a pop of collapsing air, leaving her standing there thinking that the 'port talent was hell of a way to get the last word in an argument. Not that they had been arguing, really, because they were both right: She couldn't separate the act from the situation, but at the same time, the act itself was her choice. Strike had called only to tell her that the other magi and the *winikin* were out of ideas and they were up against the new moon, which was the last day of any real astrological significance—and hence increased barrier activity—before the summer solstice that would mark the two-and-a-half-year threshold. Her response to the information was her responsibility, just as the suggestion had been hers in the first place.

“So why are you still standing here?” she asked herself aloud.

“Maybe because you're not sure this is such a good idea after all,” a stranger's voice rasped from the darkness.

Adrenaline shot through Jade, making her skin prickle with sudden awareness. “Who's there?” But even as she asked the question, she realized that the voice hadn't been entirely that of a stranger. The whispery tone wasn't familiar, but she knew the cadence and faint Midwest accent. Knew them well in fact. Swallowing to wet her suddenly dry mouth, she said, “Eavesdropping, Lucius? That's not like you. And why are you whispering? Trying to creep me out? Well, congrats. You succeeded.”

The shadows near the training hall moved and she heard the faint hiss of denim, the pad of sandals on the steps leading down to the packed dust of the canyon floor. That same voice responded, “I'm not trying to do anything. But considering that you've been discussing my sex life, or lack thereof, with the royal council, do you really want to complain about my listening in on your conversation?”

He wasn't whispering, she realized belatedly. Six months earlier, Iago had nearly hacked his head off—which, along with ritual disembowelment and performance of the banishment spell on a cardinal day, was what it took to kill an *ajaw-makol*, as Lucius had been back then. Although his possessive demon had kept him alive and Sasha's magic had later knit his flesh, the grievous injury to his throat had made it difficult for him to speak in the immediate aftermath. Jade had assumed that would improve with time. Apparently not. *Your poor voice*, she wanted to say, but didn't. Regret pierced her for the loss of his lovely storyteller's tenor, even as the change sent a fine shiver racing along the back of her neck and down her spine.

*It's just Lucius*, she told herself, as she'd been doing ever since she'd first broached the sex-magic idea to the king. Now, though, she wondered whether she'd sold herself on a lie. Granted, she learned early and often that human beings didn't fundamentally change, not at their core. But what if the human being in question might not be entirely human anymore? He had been an *ajaw-makol*. He survived the Prophet's spell. Was she trapping herself in her own logic by applying human rules to him on the one hand while on the other arguing that he could be susceptible to sex magic?

She took a deep breath that didn't do much to settle the sudden churn of nerves. “I guess you eavesdropping makes us even, then. And it saves me from explaining why I'm here . . . though I doubt you're surprised. You had to figure something like this was coming.”

His gritty tone darkened. “Given the choice of sex versus ritual sacrifice, I vote for sex.”

She didn't even try to pretend that execution wasn't another of the options that had been discussed. The Prophet's spell called for the sacrifice of a magic user's soul, assuming that the sacrificial victim would have just one soul in residence, and would therefore yield an empty golem through which the Prophet's power would speak, answering the Nightkeepers' questions from the information contained within the library of their ancient ancestors, which had long ago been hidden within the barrier to keep it safe from their enemies. In Lucius's case, though, the *makol's* soul had been sacrificed, leaving h

human consciousness behind. It wasn't clear whether his failure to access the library had come from the retention of his soul, the fact that he wasn't a true magic user, the thick mental defenses he'd built up over more than a year of sharing head space with the *makol*, or what. But it wasn't much of a stretch to think that the only way to get a fully functional Prophet might be by emptying Lucius's body of its remaining soul through another sacrifice. To be fair, Strike was holding that out as the absolute last option—the Nightkeepers practiced largely self-sacrifice, helping separate them from the Xibalbans and their dark, bloodthirsty magic. But at the same time, the Nightkeepers' king would do whatever was necessary to protect the magi and their ability to combat the Xibalbans and *Banol Ka*. That was his responsibility, his duty. But what was hers in this case? She wasn't sure, and nobody seemed to have an answer for her.

She had lobbied the royal council on Lucius's behalf just as vehemently as she'd begged the warriors to search for him after he'd gone *makol*. Now, as then, the answer was a maddening, *We'll do our best, but he's not our priority*. She knew what it felt like not to be a priority, which had only made her fight harder on his behalf . . . earning the victory that had her standing there in the darkness, suddenly wondering if she was making a Big Freaking Mistake.

*It's Lucius, she reminded herself again. You're not afraid of him.*

"So . . . does this make *you* the sacrificial victim?"

A spurt of irritation had her snapping, "I'm not the loser's forfeit in one of your brothers' drinking games, Lucius. I'm not offering you a pity fuck, and I don't need to sleep my way to a better grade Intro to Mayan Studies. I'm—" She broke off, swearing to herself. *Great seduction technique, genius. Remind him of all the embarrassing stuff he's ever told you. While you're at it, why not call him "Run Hunt" like his old man used to?* She had to remember that the past wasn't important just then. What mattered was what happened—or didn't—next. At the thought of that *next*, heat skimmed through her brought by the memory of a sexual encounter that had registered Richter high. Leveling her tone so she wouldn't betray the sudden *thudda-thump* of her heart, she said, "I'm just trying to help. If you want to turn me down because of what happened before, then do it. But don't try to make me into the bad guy because I'm offering."

There was a long beat of silence before he exhaled. When he spoke again, his rasping voice sounded more like that of the man she'd known, or else she was getting used to the change. "I don't want to turn you down. And I don't think badly of you. I couldn't. You're the only person here that I—" No, it was his turn to break off.

*The only person that I . . . what?* Jade skimmed through possibilities to settle on "trust." Despite what had happened, she trusted him. That might work both ways. Given that he knew she'd been discussing his potential for sex magic with Strike and the others, he probably also knew she was the closest thing he had to an ally within Skywatch. "Then why the hell wouldn't you *talk* to me?" The question was out before she could stop it, despite her plan to stop bringing up the past. But it had hurt when he'd refused to let her help him deal with the shock of the exorcism and the memories of what he'd done—or rather, what his body had done—while under the *makol*'s control. She'd been overjoyed by his rescue, had wanted to do everything and anything in her power to bring him back to the man he'd once been, the friend she'd once treasured.

"Because I was a godsdamned mess," he said. "I didn't want you to see me that way."

Jade wished she could see his eyes, wished the darkness didn't leave her trying to interpret his feelings from a few clipped words in a stranger's voice. Before, his lovely tenor had painted the oral legends of the Nightkeepers into word pictures for her as they'd worked side by side. Though he was only human, he'd taught her about her own ancestors in a way Shandi had never managed, making



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