

# COUNCILOR



RENÉE JAGGÉR  
MICHAEL ANDERLE

12

PARA - MILITARY RECRUITER

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PARA-MILITARY RECRUITER™ BOOK 12

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MICHAEL ANDERLE



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## CHAPTER ONE

The black-and-pewter 1971 Mach 1 Mustang rolled to a halt at the feet of the gigantic statue of King Arthur that loomed against the massive walls. The king's eyes were turned to the sea, and his hands were wrapped around the hilt of his stone sword.

Rosa Hernandez was out of the car before it had entirely stopped. "Oh, *Julia!* Imagine the wedding pictures!" she squealed. "You can fly. You could fly Taylor up there and sit on this guy's shoulders for photos!"

"Mom! No!" Julie Meadows switched off the car and got out. "Come on. That's King Arthur's statue. I'm not using it for wedding pictures."

"This is your venue, honey." Rosa planted her hands on her hips. "You need to take advantage of all the wonders it offers you."

"Still a hard no from me." Julie grabbed Rosa by the elbow. "Let's look at the Great Hall instead, okay?"

Someone snickered in Julie's head. Merlin, commonly known as Hat, was perched on her head in the shape of a cute summer number he had insisted matched the floral dress she was wearing. Julie had not agreed, and her disagreement had deepened when Rosa complimented her on her "cheerful look."

*Don't be ungrateful.* Hat grouched as she towed Rosa toward the castle's doors. *I knew you wanted to butter up your mother.*

*Maybe playing into her tastes wasn't the best move, Julie retorted. We're trying not to let this wedding look like a unicorn coughed it up, okay?*

Hat snickered.

*What do unicorns cough up?* a husky, youthful voice inquired.

Julie was getting used to having two voices in her head. Her constant new connection with Eglantine, the unhatched heir to the dragon throne, was an anchor in the chaos her life had become.

*I don't know. Colorful mucus, I guess,* Julie shot back.

“Julia, it’s amazing!” Rosa exclaimed.

They had stepped through the castle doors and into a long hallway lined with tapestries depicting King Arthur and his knights. Hat groaned at several that featured Merlin looking ferocious in a blue-and-silver robe with a magnificent beard.

*I never looked that old,* he grumbled.

“People take their myths seriously in this place.” Rosa stopped to study a tapestry showing a youthful Arthur drawing a sword from a stone.

“These aren’t myths, Mom. It’s all real.” Julie brushed the rough threads. “That’s Hat, by the way.”

“He was the stone?” Rosa raised her eyebrows.

“Yeah. Pretty cool, right?” Julie grinned.

“Certainly interesting.” Rosa tilted her head to one side. “King Arthur has wings in these.”

“That’s right. He’s a Lunar Fae, too.” Julie gazed at the king’s face, twisted with effort as he clutched Excalibur’s hilt.

“Just like you, baby!” Rosa gushed. “Maybe you’re related to him!”

Julie’s toes curled.

*You still haven't told her?* Eglantine squawked.

*I don't know yet, Eggy!* Julie protested. *All I learned yesterday was that I have Pendragon blood. I don't know which Pendragon.*

She glanced over her shoulder at the tapestry that hung on the opposite wall. As black and purple as a bruise, it depicted a slender person, face hooded, dragonfly wings splayed above either shoulder like Julie's. Darkness and lightning gathered in Mordred's hands.

"Wait, wait." Rosa clutched Julie's arm. "I used to read these books to you as a kid. Isn't Morgan Le Fay the bad guy?"

"Don't believe everything you hear in fairytales, Mom." Julie forced a laugh. "You'll like Morgan. She's pretty cool."

Rosa raised her eyebrows. "Okay."

Julie steered her away from the Mordred tapestry, trying to ignore the cold knot of nerves in her stomach. "Parts of those stories were true, like that Arthur isn't dead."

Rosa asked, "He's not?"

"No. He's in an enchanted sleep, which Morgan cast on him to save his life. They say he'll wake again someday." Julie wondered if he would have any answers if he awoke during her lifetime. "Morgan's probably with him now."

"Wait, he's *here*?" Rosa squawked.

"He is. First, though, check out the Great Hall." Julie pushed open a heavy door at the end of the hall. "You're going to dig this."

Rosa's hands flew to her mouth. The hall had stained-glass windows that allowed beams of multicolored light to pour onto the floor, playing over the fresh rushes strewn on the stones. Statues of the knights in full armor stood between the pillars that supported the ceiling, swords drawn to extend over the long, narrow room. Vast chandeliers dangled from the vaulted ceiling.

"Oh, this is *perfect* for the ceremony, honey," Rosa breathed. "It's so magnificent. With the right florist, it's going

to look amazing.”

Julie stepped into the middle of the floor and gazed under the stone blades on the stained-glass window at the end of the hall. It depicted Excalibur, flames licking around the blade. In a few weeks, Taylor would be waiting for her under that window. The thought made her wings hum with joy.

“You’re right, Mom.” Julie couldn’t suppress a grin. “It is.”

“What about the reception?” Rosa asked. “Morgan mentioned *ballrooms!*”

Julie chuckled. “Let’s go find her.”

They followed another hallway into a silent orchard bathed in eternal noon in the center of Tintagel’s first tower. The grassy floor was littered with fragrant pastel-pink cherry blossoms from the slender trees scattered through the round space. At its center, a dangerously beautiful Lunar Fae perched on a tree stump, her elbows resting on a glass casket on a raised stone pedestal. Morgan Le Fay’s pitch-black hair poured over her shoulders, stark against her pearlescent-pale skin.

She raised her head, and a glossy wing of hair fell away from her face. “Oh, hey, Julie!”

“Morgan, this is my mom.” Julie beamed. “Rosa.”

“We’ve met via scrying screen.” Morgan stood up. “It’s lovely to meet you, Rosa.”

Julie glanced at her mother, waiting for her to blanch at the aura of power and ferocity that hung around Morgan. Instead, Rosa hustled forward, grabbed the unwitting fae by the shoulders, and wrestled her into a hug.

“You’re such a *darling!*” she cooed. “Julia talks about you all the time. You’ve been an angel to my baby girl.”

“She does?” Morgan wheezed.

Julie offered an apologetic grimace.

Rosa released her. “All the time! Thank you for the opportunity to see Tintagel. It’s definitely on the shortlist.”

*I didn't know there was a list,* Julie grumbled.

*I don't think there is. It's a negotiation tactic,* Hat suggested.

*Negotiating for what?* Julie squawked.

Rosa leaned over the glass casket. "Who's this?"

Morgan stared at nothing, shell-shocked.

Julie gently nudged her mother back a few inches. "That's King Arthur Pendragon, Mom. He's asleep."

"Asleep" was a poor description. King Arthur had lain in this orchard for thousands of years. His hands were folded over Excalibur's hilt. The gleaming sword ran down the length of his legs. His features were sharply handsome, a wing of dark hair falling over his brow, lips rose-red. The face was pale, and a circlet of beaten gold in the shape of olive leaves twined over his black locks.

Rosa was busy inspecting him, so Julie reached for Morgan and pulled her into a tentative hug. "Thank you, Morgan. Mom's right. Your friendship has meant so much to me." Julie tightened the embrace. "It's a high honor to be allowed to marry at Tintagel, and I can't wait." Her throat thickened.

Morgan returned the hug, then held Julie at arm's length. The fae's hazel eyes scrutinized her briefly. A smile played over her perfect lips, and she squeezed Julie's shoulder with one hand. Pride shimmered in her expression.

"You know," Rosa commented, "for a mythical figure suspended in a magically-induced coma, Arthur's *really* hot!"

Julie groaned. "Mom!"

"I'm serious, baby! Look at those fabulous cheekbones." Rosa poked the glass.

Julie winced, but Morgan's lips twitched as she stifled a giggle.

"If he wasn't in a coffin," Rosa went on, "and I didn't love Taylor so much, I'd be encouraging you to take your shot!"

Julie felt like her eyeballs were melting and running down the back of her skull with embarrassment. She clapped her hands over her eyes and dragged them down her face, wishing the earth would swallow her. “*MOM!*”

Morgan chuckled.

“What?” Rosa planted her hands on her hips. “It’s the truth!”

“That’s gross,” Julie moaned, staggering away and slamming her head against the nearest tree.

Morgan’s chuckle became a belly laugh.

“Why?” Rosa demanded. “You have eyes, don’t you? See? Morgan doesn’t mind.”

“You’re talking about *King Arthur!*” Julie wailed. “Even if he *wasn’t* the most powerful Lunar Fae since Luna, he could be, like, my great, great, great grandpa, or uncle, or something.”

“Wait.” Rosa’s face stilled. “Are *all* Lunar Fae related?”

Morgan touched Rosa’s arm. “Not directly.”

Rosa raised her hands to her mouth. “Julie, are you telling me that you...you’re related to *him?*” She pointed at the sleeping king.

Julie shifted her weight. “I don’t know for sure, Mom. I might be.”

“Oh, baby!” Rosa’s eyes filled with tears.

“Dr. Olena took DNA samples from the High Magic Division and from me. It turned out that Torrent and I are related, and she traces back to the Pendragon family.” Julie clasped her hands in front of her. “So...”

Morgan’s smile had vanished, and she studied Julie intently.

“Honey, that is amazing!” Rosa gushed. “You’ve been waiting so long for real answers about your family.” She grabbed Julie’s hands, untangled them from each other, and

squeezed them. Her eyes welled with tears. “I always knew you were special, but *royalty*?”

*Mordred was king, too.* Julie pushed the thought away and gently extracted her hands. “Yeah, it’s nice to know, I guess.” She smiled. “So, Morgan, I was telling Mom about all the ballrooms you have here.”

Morgan lit up. “Yes! Follow me. I’d love to show you around.”

“Ballrooms!” Rosa squealed. Her tears vanished, and she skipped along beside Morgan as the fae led them out of the orchard.

“Have you seen the great hall?” Morgan asked.

“Julie showed me. It’s incredible!” Rosa exclaimed. “All those statues and the stained-glass windows! It would work so well for the ceremony.”

“I think so, too. You’ll love the bridge.” Morgan led the way to a barred door at the end of a long, carpeted hallway. “I think you two will take the most breathtaking photos out here, Julie.”

Morgan pushed the door open, and they stepped onto the majestic sandstone bridge that connected two of Tintagel Castle’s towers. The bridge spanned a valley between the rolling hills and overlooked an expanse of ocean that stretched to the horizon. Julie’s breath always hitched, no matter how many times she saw the view. Overhead, the wings of circling dragons cut sharp shapes against the blue sky.

A huge dragon, his scales patterned in blue, gold, and purple, swooped low over the battlements. The wind of his passing ruffled Julie’s hair and Rosa’s blouse. She squawked and grabbed Julie’s arm. “Help!”

“It’s okay, Mom!” Julie laughed. “That’s Alugon. He’s, uh, the boss of Avalonian dragons.” She decided to omit the information that the dragons of the Deep, an underground world beneath their feet, were their enemies.

“*Dragons?*” Rosa yelled.

“They’re here to protect the castle,” Morgan assured her. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Rosa gaped after Alugon as the dragon turned in a wide arc, smoke trailing from his nostrils. Julie couldn’t blame her. Alugon’s head was the size of a city bus.

Two other dragons came toward them. One was huge and blockish, his crusty skin the same color as the sandstone bridge, wings beating frantically to keep him aloft. Close behind him, a second dragon lithely rippled through the air on three pairs of pale wings.

The lithe dragon reached the battlements first. In mid-air, his outline shrank, wings vanishing, and he shifted into a scrawny human in a baggy robe. His companion crashed to the ground with a force that made the bridge tremble.

Julie exhaled. “Livius! Axl! Hi!”

“Hi, Julie!” the larger dragon rumbled. He transformed into a young man with glorious pectorals, sculpted shoulders, and sturdy calves, each muscle sharply etched. His shimmering white toga left little to the imagination.

Rosa’s eyes lit up.

*Oh, crap,* Julie moaned.

Eglantine giggled.

“Mom, these are friends of mine.” Julie laid one hand on Livius’ scrawny shoulder and the other on Axl’s bulky one. “This is my mom, Rosa.”

“Mrs. Meadows.” Livius dropped to his knees.

Axl followed suit with a bridge-shaking thump. “Mother of the Heirkeeper, we salute you.”

Rosa preened. “Why, thank you, boys! Aren’t you lovely?”

“Not as lovely as you, Madame,” Livius told her gallantly.

Axl rose to his feet and took Rosa’s arm, which made her blush. “Do you like it here so far?”

“It’s clear where Julie got her wonderful smile,” Livius added.

Rosa giggled throatily. “It’s been very nice, thank you.”

“We hear Julie might get married here.” Axl beamed. “That would be amazing.”

“I think so too!” Rosa gushed. “I’m excited!”

“Being the mother of the bride is very special.” Livius sighed. “I remember when our sister got married. Our mother was so happy.”

“Tell me more about dragon weddings,” Rosa urged. “There are so many beautiful traditions from all cultures. The more we incorporate, the better!”

Morgan rested a hand on Julie’s arm. “I think your mom’s going to be occupied for a while.”

Julie laughed, and they moved a few yards away. “Thanks for reaching out to her, Morgan. This means a lot to both of us.”

The fae waved a hand. “It’s time there was more light and life in this place. What better than a royal wedding?”

Julie flinched at the word “royal.”

They reached the battlements, and Morgan leaned her elbows on them, but her eyes were on Julie. “I want to ask you about something, Julie.”

Julie folded her arms. “What?”

“Something happened to you in the drow lands.” Morgan tilted her head to one side.

“That’s thanks to the High Magic Division.” Julie grinned. “I’ve learned to access my magic without drawing on selenite, moonlight, or my dragon bond to fuel it.”

Morgan smiled. “An experience you’ll never forget.”

“Never. It’s different now.” Julie opened her hand, and a silver flame danced on her palm. “It’s as easy as breathing. I don’t think; it just happens.”

“That’s wonderful, but it’s not what I’m asking you about.” Morgan arched her eyebrows.

Julie bit the inside of her cheek. “I...accessed my creative magic?”

Morgan chuckled. “That’s not what I’m getting at, either.” She touched Julie’s arm. “There’s a geas shining in your life force, Julie. I haven’t seen a vow of honor like that in thousands of years.”

Julie stared at the ocean and the dragons swooping above it. “It’s different from what Nimue did.”

“Very different. It is pure and wonderful.” Morgan’s tone was gentle. “I saw vows like these in the days of Arthur’s knights.”

Julie touched the center of her breastbone. “It felt right. It still feels right. I bound myself to what I believe in.”

Morgan inclined her head. “The knights of old did the same. What did—”

“Morgan, we’ve come up with the most incredible idea!” Rosa burst out, hurrying to them. “Tell her, Linus.”

“Livius,” the dragon corrected.

“Tell her, Livius!” Rosa beamed.

“It’s a dragon tradition. Seems to have leaked into human culture a few hundred years ago.” Livius rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s called blending fire. After the ceremony, when the reception begins, the bride and groom light the ceremonial fire in the hearth together with one breath.”

“See?” Rosa cried.

“Uh, Mom? It’s cute, but we don’t breathe fire,” Julie pointed out.

“You shoot fire from your fingers, baby. I’m sure Taylor can figure something out.” Rosa waved a hand.

Julie looked at Morgan helplessly.

The older fae sallied to her rescue. “Humans have a cute tradition that I think is lovely. The last dance. We could have a send-off for Julie and Taylor, and while we’re getting ready for that, they could dance together in the ballroom, only the two of them.”

“Oh, so romantic!” Rosa cooed. “I love it!”

They strolled across the bridge, Livius and Axl bringing up the rear.

“What time of day were you thinking for the wedding?” Morgan asked.

“Evening, definitely.” Rosa nodded. “We’ll need the golden hour for the pictures.”

Julie refrained from informing Rosa that Morgan could control the weather and time of day on Tintagel’s grounds.

“Plus, who wants to get up early to get married? Spending the morning bouncing around with your girlfriends and getting ready is so much fun.” Rosa smiled. “I should know. I’ve done it twice.”

“You’ve been privileged.” Morgan’s smile was sad, and she glanced at the tower in which Arthur rested.

“Of course I have, dear.” Rosa patted her arm. “I have Julie for a daughter.”

Julie smiled.

“I was thinking that Julie could arrive at the reception in a carriage with pretty horses. Or unicorns!” Rosa exclaimed.

“Unicorns don’t pull carriages,” Julie pointed out.

“That sounds very romantic,” Morgan agreed. “I wonder, though, if Julie wouldn’t prefer to arrive in Genevieve? That car was a treasured gift from someone very important to her.”

Rosa’s eyes got misty. “Of course. Then we’d have Lillie with us. She would have loved to see your wedding day, baby girl.”

Julie blinked rapidly. “She would have.”

“Do you want to get ready elsewhere and portal to Tintagel for the ceremony?” Morgan asked.

Julie shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter.”

“What if you got ready in New York, sweetie?” Rosa suggested. “We could do it at home. I’m sure there’s magic to keep people from seeing your friends’ horns and wings and things.”

Julie grinned. “Actually, that sounds great, Mom. I have a portal-maker that can take me to Tintagel from anywhere. I know it was designed for more serious uses, but...”

Morgan chuckled. “Your wedding day counts as serious.”

They strode through the double doors into the second tower. Morgan took a hallway to their right and pushed open another set of heavy wooden doors.

“It’s perfect!” Rosa squealed.

Her words echoed back at them from the other side of the tremendous ballroom. It could have swallowed Julie’s childhood home and left room for more, and its marble floor shimmered in the sunlight from the vaulted floor-to-ceiling windows that surrounded the room. Each window bore rich purple drapes, and the pillars between windows were decorated with delicate carvings inlaid with selenite, depicting the deeds of the Knights of the Round Table.

“There’s even a fireplace.” Morgan pointed. “For your fire-breathing thing.”

“I love it,” Julie murmured.

“It adjoins the great hall, so we could feast there, then move here for speeches and dancing. I’ll place tables along the walls for drinks and snacks, and we usually add couches over there.” Morgan indicated a curtained-off area on one side of the ballroom. “For sleepy guests, especially kids.”

“That’s amazing,” Rosa agreed. “I love it.”

*Thank goodness she does, or we’d be in the shit,* Julie observed silently.

“What about food?” Rosa asked, turning to Morgan. “We haven’t settled on a menu yet. I still need to find a caterer.”

“There’s no need for a caterer.” Morgan beamed. “The great hall magically provides a feast of our choice. We only need to decide on the dishes you want.”

“Fantastic!” Rosa squealed. “You’re wonderful, Morgan. All I need to do is arrange a cake!”

“We could place the cake on a table here.” Morgan gestured at a small dais on one side of the room. “Then everyone could admire it until it was cake-cutting time.”

“What a perfect idea!” Rosa gushed.

*This is going to work. Julie’s shoulders relaxed. I can’t believe Mom and Morgan agree on everything.*

*Don’t you want to voice your opinions, too?* Hat asked.

*Julie chuckled inwardly. About the details of my wedding day? I’ve got other shit to deal with, Hat. I’m happy for Mom to call the shots as long as I get to marry my petrichor prince. There are a few things I’m set on, but the rest is up to her.*

“What flowers were you thinking of?” Rosa asked.

“Lilies.” Julie didn’t have to think about it. “I don’t mind what else as long as there are lilies.”

Rosa took her hand. “Perfect.”

“I know an excellent florist in Tintagel Village,” Morgan told her eagerly. “We could set up an appointment to see him next week.”

As Rosa agreed with enthusiasm, Hat hummed on Julie’s head the way he did when he was processing something.

*Julie?* he butted in. *I hate to interrupt.*

*Liar.* Julie scoffed.

*Fine. I love to interrupt. It’s a message from the Eternal Palace, an urgent summons. It’s from Malcolm, Hat told her. He requests, and I quote, that “Councilor Meadows expediently return her ass to the palace.”*

*Expediently? Better hurry, I guess. Julie sighed. So much for being on leave after a long-ass trip to the Gleann that included several battles.*

*We barely even got to visit, Eglantine complained.*

*No rest for the Lunar Fae councilor, Hat quipped.*

## CHAPTER TWO

“Mom? Morgan?” Julie turned to them. “I’m really sorry, but I need to go. The palace wants me back pronto, and it’s a long flight in Genevieve.”

“I can take a taxi,” Rosa suggested.

“No!” Julie and Morgan chorused.

Rosa raised her eyebrows.

“No taxis, Mom.” Julie shuddered. “I’d rather drop you off.”

“I can open a portal for you,” Morgan suggested. “Large enough to drive Genevieve though. Then you could drop Rosa at home before you go to the palace, and you’ll still get there in time for the start of the meeting.”

Julie smiled. “That would be amazing. Thanks.”

“Any time.” Morgan beamed. “I can’t wait for your wedding, Julie. I haven’t had anything like this to look forward to for a long time.”

“The entire para world could do with a pick-me-up,” Julie admitted.

Rosa gripped her hand. “Never you mind the para world, honey. This wedding is about you and Taylor and nothing else. Okay?”

“Rosa’s right.” Morgan laughed. “For once, don’t worry about the rest of the world. That day belongs to you and your true love.”

*Your true love.* Corny as shit, but Julie liked the sound of it.

---

Julie flung herself into Genevieve, clutching a paper bag and a cardboard cup. Hat, now the badass black fascinator that went with her best suit, glared at her despite the minor inconvenience of not possessing eyes.

*What?* Julie demanded. *You want me to do this council meeting on an empty stomach?*

*That would be terrible for worldwide paranormal relations,* Hat conceded.

Julie started Genevieve and glanced at the time. *Mom's dropped off, I've got coffee and a bagel, and we still have plenty of time to get to the palace. So calm your tits.*

Hat scoffed. *I don't have any.*

Eglantine giggled.

*Eggy, moondrop, erase everything I just said,* Julie told her.

*Tits!* Eglantine squealed.

Julie groaned. *We're going to have a conversation about that. I know it.*

Genevieve purred through the streets of Avalon Town, surrounded by a glorious chaos of buildings from every style and time period. A shining skyscraper stood beside a circle of grass hovels inhabited by tiny gnomes. The next building was a Victorian townhouse. An elven footman in full livery stood by the neatly trimmed hedge that surrounded its flat green lawn, chatting with the tired-looking werewolf in the suburban yard next door as she supervised six cubs playing in a splash pool.

*We'll take the shortcut via Second Street,* Julie decided, taking the next left. *Happy?*

*Somewhat*, Hat grumbled.

*He's mad because he doesn't like going past his old tower*, Eglantine announced.

*Gentle words, Eggy*, Julie reminded her.

*I don't care about the old tower*, Hat lied. *I sold it as a museum during the refugee crisis, remember?*

*We can go another way if you like*, Julie offered.

Hat sighed. *No. It's fine. It's good to see the old place being restored and open to the public, actually. It's about time the younger generation gained an appreciation for history.*

*Should we get off your lawn, too?* Julie teased.

Merlin's former tower stuck out above the rooftops as they rolled down Second Street, looming black stone with small, vaulted windows. The black roof was conical against the sun. A green glow oozed from the windows and outlined the edges of the roof tiles.

*Didn't your kids own this place?* Julie asked. *Wait, do you even have kids?*

*Not after how things went with Nimue, I guess*, Eglantine pointed out.

The pause was pregnant.

*Sorry?* Eglantine offered.

*No. That was...a convenient misdirection for the public*, Hat admitted. *I owned it until I signed it over to the OPMA during the crisis. I'm glad they converted it into a museum after the refugees all had somewhere else to go.*

Julie braked at a red light down the block from the tower. The grounds that surrounded it were tidy now, with smooth lawns and benches and flowerbeds planted along the black wrought iron fence that separated it from the road. A wooden sign over the front gate announced *Museum of Magical History. Entrance Free. Open 09:00–15:00 Mon-Sat.*

The front gate and front door both stood open, and a vampire guarded the gate. Two werewolves approached on the

sidewalk with a litter of wolf puppies tumbling around their feet, biting and playing. The mom yelled something, and the puppies obediently turned into a row of children and filed through the gate one by one. The ward surrounding the tower flashed blue as the werewolves passed through it.

*They brought a lot of stuff here from the Warehouse, didn't they?* Julie asked.

*As they rightfully should.* Hat sniffed. *No magical artifact should be left to rot like I was.*

Before Julie could come up with a snappy retort, the light turned green. She pulled away, then slammed on the brakes hard enough to send Hat skidding across the dash. A black SUV careened in front of her and skidded to a halt in front of the tower, parked half across the road.

“What the f—” Julie began.

The SUV's doors crashed open, and three warlocks spilled out, identifiable by their pointed black hats and the way the hairs on Julie's arms rose at the aura of their magic.

“What is this, Halloween?” Julie squawked.

Instead of robes and cloaks, the warlocks were in harlequin garb, wearing tights and tunics in bold diamond patterns: one red, one green, one purple. The purple and the red ran toward the museum, balls of magic growing in their hands. The guy in green whirled to face Julie. Pale blue eyes glared balefully from the grotesque swirls of his dark mask, his lips drawn flat behind the mask's caricature cackle.

“Get down!” Hat roared.

Julie slid down as a ball of crackling green magic soared toward them. It slammed into Genevieve's hood and spread in tiny, snapping bolts that shot over her bodywork like electricity.

“Did he scratch my *car*?” Julie squealed.

“They're doing worse than that. Look!”

Julie raised her head. The red warlock reached the museum's gate and flung a bolt of red magic into the

vampire's chest that threw him backward. The guard skidded across the lawn and lay motionless. The werewolf kids scattered, yelping, across the grounds. The werewolf dad pounced, transforming midair into a snarling bundle of fur and rage. His front paws slammed into the red warlock, and they tumbled over in a mass of claws, fangs, and magic.

The werewolf mom drew a sidearm and aimed at the purple warlock, but he fired a bolt of magic at her. She dodged and got off a single shot before the green warlock's magic slammed into her and flung her to the sidewalk, blood welling on her temple.

"Go, go, go!" the purple warlock yelled. He seized the ward like an invisible curtain and hauled it back, and a purple rip appeared in the air.

"Julie, do something!" Hat bellowed. With a faint *poof*, he transformed into a metal helmet.

"Oh, *now* you want to be the Knight?" Julie demanded.

"Not the time!" Hat shot back.

Julie rammed him onto her head and slapped Genevieve's wheel. "Time for action, girl."

Blue light burst from Genevieve's engine, and the Mustang rose into the air. Every part and panel detached from its fellows and levitated separately. Julie kept her hands out of the way as the leather of her bucket seat shrank to the trim, replaced by high-tech upholstery. When the steering wheel returned to her hands, it was carbon fiber.

Genevieve thudded to the ground on multilink suspension, and her 5.2-liter V8 roared with the voices of seven hundred sixty horses. Black paint shimmered on the hood, complemented by bright scarlet GT stripes.

As that was going on, the amulet on Julie's chest lit up. From the duffel bag on the backseat, a full suit of steel armor inlaid with copper and selenite burst free and soared to Julie. Piece by piece, the armor clanked into place, straps pulling tight around her chest and limbs.

The racing harness locked around her chest, and the gas pedal jumped under Julie's foot as Genevieve's battle cry pealed from the exhaust.

Julie slid her into gear. "Let's do this, bitches."

Smoke rose from Genevieve's tires as she surged forward. The green warlock plunged through the rift in the ward and raced into Merlin's tower. Julie reached through the window, silver fire engulfing her hand, and shot a crackling fireball at the warlock in purple.

He deflected with a burst of magic. "Come on!"

The red warlock lay on his back with the werewolf dad on top, chomping on the warlock's armored forearms as he tried to shield his face. The werewolf dad's golden eyes blazed in his black-furred face as he shook the warlock's arm. The warlock screamed and slammed a hand against the werewolf's cheek, and a bolt of magic hit his face. The werewolf was flung off and landed on his side, smoke rising from his fur and paws pedaling as he fought to rise.

The red warlock flipped to his feet in a swirl of harlequin patterns. Red magic gathered in his hands, a dark, brooding color that was very different from the vibrant glow of Bianca's. His face twisted in triumph, and then Genevieve's hood slammed into him.

The warlock smacked against the windshield with a glass-cracking crunch. Metal squealed as he skidded over the roof, and in the rearview mirror, he slammed into the asphalt, rolled over, and lay still.

"Sorry, Gennie." Julie sprang out of the car, silver fire licking up her forearms.

The werewolf dad staggered to his paws, chest heaving, blood trickling from his muzzle. His ears pricked at the sight of Julie.

"The Knight!" he barked.

"Get to your wife!" Julie pointed. "I've got the kids."

The werewolf limped to his fallen spouse, and Julie swung around. The purple warlock ran for the tower, took the steps to the open door two at a time, and vanished inside.

Julie's flames rose to her elbows. The pups, in wolf form, cowered in a corner of the grounds, whimpering.

*Hat, the wards,* she growled.

*Just go!* Hat snapped.

Julie broke into a run, armor clattering, and braced herself for impact as she reached the front gate. Instead, the ward flashed blue, and she passed through it as though it were empty air.

*I'm holding it!* Hat exclaimed. *Get the pups out.*

"This way, kids!" Julie ordered, pointing.

The puppies bolted and popped to safety in a burst of blue.

*Seal the ward,* Julie growled, striding to the tower.

*You'll be trapped in here with them,* Hat cried.

Julie grinned as she stepped through the door. *I'm counting on that.*

Hat groaned. *Please be careful. Several artifacts here are irreplaceable.*

Julie cracked her flaming knuckles as she took in the lobby: polished counters, artwork on the walls, and a stone spiral staircase leading upward.

She made for the staircase at a run, and when she reached the bottom, she opened her wings and flew up, following the curves with ease.

*Third floor!* Hat yelled.

The door was open. Julie swooped through it and landed with a clatter of boots on the hardwood floor. Display cases surrounded her, and shards of glass arced across the floor in the middle of the room. The two remaining warlocks froze. Purple held a bag made from leather so delicate it was nearly transparent, like the skin of a bird. Green had thrust his hands

through the broken glass, and his fingers were clasped around a jeweled necklace resting on a velvet pillow within.

*That's Nimue's necklace, Hat growled. I gave that to her! It's cursed. Be careful.*

*Was it cursed when you—* Eglantine began.

*Not now, Eggy!* Julie held up her blazing hands. “Put it down!” she ordered.

Green and Purple stared at her, then at each other.

Julie threw a fireball that soared over their heads and slammed into the hardwood floor near the opposite wall, blowing a hole in the floor. Flames licked across the wood.

*What are you doing?* Hat shrieked. *This place is filled with priceless artifacts!*

“I said, put it down!” Julie snarled. She summoned a tiny raincloud and shooed it over to the fire. It rained on the floor with a sheepish patter.

Purple nodded. Green threw the necklace into the bag and wheeled to face Julie, magic oozing from his fingers. Julie raised her burning fists.

*Julie, no!* Hat begged. *Please!*

Purple bolted for the window. Julie extinguished her fists and ducked a ball of magic from Green.

*Guess we'll have to do this the old-fashioned way.* She whirled to the display cabinet on her left and smashed the glass with a gauntleted fist. Her other hand closed around the shining white hilt of the leaf-shaped sword resting within. White fire engulfed the blade.

*Dyrnwyn,* Hat told her.

Julie raised the magic blade, and a tremor ran through her spine. The blade burned only for those who were either worthy or of noble birth. The first time she'd lifted it, she'd taken for granted the fact that it was because she was worthy.

She stared into the pale flames. *Mordred was noble-born, too.*

*Look out!* Hat and Eglantine shrieked together.

The bolt of magic slammed into Julie's shoulder and threw her off her feet. She landed on her side and skidded across the floor, clinging to the blazing sword. Green fired another bolt of magic at her. Mid-skid, Julie slashed at it, and Dyrnwyn's flames clove the bolt in half. The magic missed her, and she scrambled to her feet.

The warlock in green summoned more magic to his fists and fired two more bolts. Julie dodged both as she charged him, swinging her blade. He blocked with one forearm, and Julie let the momentum of her strike carry the tip of the blade back past her body. She reversed the hilt in her hand and put her weight behind it to slam the heavy pommel into the warlock's cheek. His head snapped back, and he went down like a falling tree.

*Where's Purple?* Julie demanded.

*Outside, trying to get through the ward. Move your attractive arse!* Hat bellowed.

Green was still breathing. Julie grabbed him by the back of his harlequin outfit and hauled him with her as she clumped across the floor and flung herself out of the window. Her wings opened, and she hovered for long enough to spot Purple near the front gate, hands pressed against the ward. Pulses of purple light surged through the air in front of him as the ward struggled to hold.

"Hey, shithead!" Julie yelled.

Purple flinched.

"Yeah, I'm talking to you!" Julie tossed the sword through the window and summoned fire. "Stand down or eat a fireball!"

Dangling from his tunic, Green moaned, then squealed in terror.

Purple bared his teeth behind the grotesque mask. He ripped his hands away from the wall and whirled, firing two bolts of purple lightning at Julie. She barely dodged them while swooping low enough to drop Green into a decorative

holly bush, which became significantly less decorative, then pulled up and raised her blazing fists.

“Okay, then,” she snarled. “If that’s how you wanna play it, let’s go.”

Purple’s next bolt exploded a stone in the wall behind her into tiny shards that spattered her face, finding the chinks in her visor to produce stinging pain. Julie turned the pain into a yell and shot two fireballs at him. He rolled aside, dodging one, and neutralized the other with a bolt of magic. A bitter, scorched smell like burning plastic filled the air.

Julie growled, *Crap, he’s pretty good.*

*Watch out!* Eglantine yelled.

Julie flung a fireball to meet the bolt that crackled toward her. It exploded in a burst of silver and purple light, searing Julie’s vision. She stumbled back, blinking frantically at the after-image burned across her corneas, and made out the blurry figure of Purple bolting through a gap between a bunch of fancy topiary and the wall, which was draped in a creeper dotted with blue flowers.

*Wait!* Julie cried. *Aren’t those snapdaisies?*

Before Hat could answer, she crouched and pressed both hands to the earth, feeling the roots of the plants surrounding her. She reached for the snapdaisy that crept up the wall and the magic that pulsed in her chest, as white-hot as the vow that rested there.

With a wordless yell, Julie sent life surging into the snapdaisy. Purple was nearly out of reach when one of the flowers reared its head, and its tiny fangs blossomed into tusks like walrus teeth. The slender curve of its stem swelled to the thickness of Purple’s thigh as it coiled back and struck.

Purple didn’t see it coming. The tusk slammed into the back of his skull with a dull thump, and he fell to the grass face-first. The weird, gross birdskin bag flew from his limp fingers and landed a few feet away with a dull clatter.

Hat groaned.

Julie dusted herself off. “Scratched my armor. Assholes.”

At the sound of her voice, Green abruptly stopped struggling in the holly bush and played dead. Julie raised two fingers and gave him the I’m-watching-you gesture, pointing at her eyes and then at him.

*I think he’s too scared to move,* Eglantine observed with satisfaction.

Sirens yipped in the distance.

*The OPMA’s on their way,* Hat informed her.

*What were they trying to steal?* Julie trudged over the lawn. She paused to kick Purple in the shins and was rewarded with a groan. He didn’t seem to be in any shape to jump up and fight her, so she ignored him and crouched next to the creepy-ass bag.

*This is disgusting.* Julie gingerly opened the bag’s mouth with her fingertip.

*It’s made from the skin of a woman who was turned into a crane,* Hat told her.

*I did not need to know that.* Julie squinted inside. The jewels of Nimue’s necklace gleamed dully, but there was more. She lit a small flame on one fingertip and held it up to the bag to peer inside.

The interior of the bag was the size of Rosa’s suitcase, which was saying something.

*Ah, yes. Must be high tide,* Hat observed.

*Whoa, what’s that?* Julie held up the flame. *Looks like a helmet.*

Hat’s breath caught. *That...that’s Goswhit. Arthur’s helm.*

*There’s a little dagger, too. With a white hilt,* Julie observed.

*Carnwennan. Arthur’s dagger!* Hat cried.

*Did he name all of his shit?* Julie demanded. *What was his pillow called, Cuddlewyn?*

Genevieve honked insistently outside the main gate.

*We'd better go before anyone from the OPMA sees you,* Hat hissed. *Leave all that here. The OPMA will put it back.*

Julie abandoned the bag and flew to the front gate, then passed through the ward in a blue flash. Genevieve rolled up to the curb and flung the driver's door open as the first UMMV rounded the corner. Julie scrambled into the seat as the magic-powered military vehicle hummed toward them, levitating over the road.

"Punch it, Gennie!" she yelled. "I'm *really* late for that meeting."

Genevieve roared forward as the UMMV slammed to a halt behind them and the doors banged open. As the Mustang accelerated, Julie glanced at the rearview mirror. A tall succubus stepped out of the UMMV in a navy uniform, an automatic rifle in her hands.

Their eyes met in the mirror, and Bianca Hartshorn winked. Julie waved, then Genevieve squealed around the corner, and the tower was lost to view.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Shit, shit, shit!* Julie ran across the anteroom toward the double doors. *So late, so late, so late!*

She waited for Hat to chew her out, but the slightly crooked fascinator was silent.

*Hat? Hello? You okay?* Julie asked. She paused in front of the doors, panting, and smoothed the front of her jacket. *I could use a little help to come up with an excuse for being late.*

*Mm? Fine.* Hat sighed. *Why did they steal all those artifacts that used to belong to Nimue and Arthur?*

*We'll figure it out,* Julie promised him, then squared her shoulders. *First, I've got to sort out this... What was that?*

*Sounded like someone being thrown across a table,* Hat mumbled.

Julie scoffed. *Don't be ridiculous. This is a council meeting. No one's being thrown across a—*

Muffled by the doors, there was a crash inside the hall.

*That sounded like someone being thrown through a table,* Hat observed.

*Crap!* Julie thumped the doors open and strode into the shitshow.

The tiered seating surrounding the edges of the council hall was in chaos. Curved tables were scattered everywhere, legs jutting up, microphone cables spilling from underneath them

like eviscerated guts. Paras of every shape, size, and species brawled between them. A dryad seized a gremlin by the ears, swung him around, and threw him across the room. Squealing, he crashed into a yeti who was trading punches with an irate gorgon whose snakes were all standing on end. A giant and a cyclops slapped at each other furiously, arms fully extended, faces turned aside, both whimpering.

“What the actual?” Julie squawked.

*What the actual what?* Eglantine inquired.

*Where are the griffins?* Julie snapped. The niches at the top of the pillars surrounding the hall were empty.

A flash of gold fur caught her eye. Stormstar, the commander of the Eternal Guard, stood near the bottom of the room, wings wide open, snarling and hissing. A wyvern bobbed and snapped at him, tail lashing from side to side. The other griffins were scattered across the room, trying and failing to keep the squabbling paras apart.

The only piece of furniture still standing was the Round Table in the center of the room, feet still firmly planted on the marble floor. Julie’s heart skipped at the sight of the empty throne.

*It’s okay,* Hat reassured her. *Queen Esmerelda isn’t here.*

*That explains a lot,* Julie snapped.

A skinny vampire sat alone at the table, chin propped on one hand, elbow on the table, sipping from a bottle of water and looking disinterested. Malcolm Nox had dark rings under his eyes.

The other members of the high council all stood, yelling at one another across the table, their voices lost in the yammer. The orc, Mazi Hagyar, jabbed an angry finger at Danijah, the dragon. Felix Kushnir, the Sylthana Elf, bled blue fire from his fists as he screamed nose-to-nose at Taylor’s uncle Arion, who’d drawn both of his slender Aether daggers.

*They’re acting like kids.* Julie gritted her teeth, and heat flashed over her fists. She strode to the edge of the tiered

seating and looked down at the Round Table. “*Hey!*” she bellowed at the top of her voice. “*Order!*”

Somebody’s microphone sailed past her head and shattered against the wall.

Julie closed her eyes. *Help me out here, Eggles.*

*Any time.* The unhatched dragon’s heartbeat quickened, and a power crackled through Julie’s veins. She breathed deeply, allowing it to build in her chest until it felt as though her lungs were being crushed. When she opened her eyes, every selenite crystal in the room exploded with white light.

Malcolm was one of the few paras who noticed, and he raised his head. A griffin grabbed an unlucky werefox by the scruff of his neck and shook him.

*Okay, that’s it.* Julie channeled Eglantine’s power and summoned wind. It swirled around her, building in intensity and ruffling her hair. She gathered it, then punched both hands forward, palms flat.

The wind howled across the council hall with hurricane strength. Paras, tables, paper, microphones, and water bottles flew into the air. Griffin feathers scattered, and yelling turned into squawks of alarm. The windows rattled, the hall’s many banners streamed, and Malcolm clutched the edge of the Round Table to avoid being blown over. Felix skidded face-first across the table and landed heavily in Mazi’s lap.

When the wind dissipated, the silence in the hall was absolute. No one was still standing. The giant and the cyclops clung to each other, whimpering, their faces buried in one another’s necks.

*“I said, order!”* Julie yelled.

Everyone stared at her.

She strode forward, boots clomping on the marble. “That means quit acting like you’re in a schoolyard and show the dignity your office deserves.”

Arion sheathed his daggers and stared at the floor, a gray flush of embarrassment creeping over his cheeks.

Felix scooped himself up off the floor. His long white hair had straggled loose from its braid and stood up like a long version of Einstein's.

"He has no respect for the rights of the ancient royal line!" he shrieked, pointing at Arion.

"Really, Felix? You're still going with the whole Sylthanas-are-the-only-true-rulers thing?" Julie snapped. "Sit your ass down and think of something more credible."

Felix scowled.

"I might be new, but I know this is not how the council should conduct itself," Aitken Mackintosh grumbled. The freckled Copper Dwarf had two long, thick scarlet braids.

"Isn't that a Copper Dwarf battleax with its blade buried in the floor?" Julie snapped.

Aitken blushed and removed it with no apparent effort. "I had no choice, Councilor. I had to uphold the dignity of my people."

"You're all here to uphold the dignity of the council," Julie snarled. "I suggest you remember that. I've only been gone for a few weeks. Is that really enough time for the high council to devolve into a tavern brawl?"

A generalized shuffling of feet echoed throughout the room.

Stormstar stood, shook out his wings, and paused to lick a gigantic front paw. He used it to smooth a few locks of his mane back into place.

"Griffins, assist the council in restoring order," he snarled.

The cyclops and the giant scrambled to their feet and exchanged horrified glances, then trotted off to help the griffins retrieve the tables from the far side of the room.

Julie picked up her chair with as much dignity as she could muster, which was a challenge considering it was a heavy-ass chair. She scooted it into place with a long squeak and sat down. Except for Felix and Danijah, the other seven councilors followed suit with good grace. Felix's chair smoked

when he sat, and Danijah's was missing a leg. He stood, hands clenched in front of him, knuckles pale.

Julie waited until the tables had been replaced and everyone had returned to their seats. "Okay." She steepled her fingers and took a deep breath. "Tell me what started this whole thing."

She instantly regretted her words since the whole council shouted as one. The cyclops and giant slapped each other again, faces turned away this time. Stormstar roared at the council. Danijah roared at Stormstar. Felix yelled at Arion, gesticulating violently, and Arion yelled back.

"Aitken, can you help me out?" Julie asked.

The Copper Dwarf leaned closer and shouted above the noise, "There's more tension than ever in para communities that have split, with many supporting the Eternity Throne and others supporting the Mordred cult. Like you saw in the Gleann, Councilor. Many other communities are at risk of civil war. We're trying to come to a protocol for how to handle this amicably."

Julie raised her eyebrows. "Amicably, huh?"

Aitken grimaced. "With variable success."

"Thanks for the explanation." Julie sighed. "*Order!*"

This time, one shout was enough. The council hall fell into a broody silence.

"One at a time. Like grown-ups." Julie glared. "Who was talking before the fight started?"

The council glanced at one another.

Malcolm muttered, "Liaine."

"Okay. Excellent." Julie sat back. "The floor is yours, Councilor Liaine. Welcome to your first meeting of the High Council. Please, continue."

The young female drow rose to her feet, holding up her microphone. She trembled, and her charcoal-gray skin had a greenish tinge, but her voice was steady. "As I was explaining

to the council, I believe that it is necessary for para groups to handle these divisions on their own.” Her skinny shoulders relaxed. “They need to restore clear leaders and alliances, as my people did so recently.”

“What of the groups where allies of the Mordred cult rise to leadership?” Felix shouted.

Liaine raised her chin. “They are enemies of the Eternity Throne and will be dealt with accordingly.”

“We are already at war!” Arion flew to his feet. “Would you make even more enemies for us?”

Danijah growled, a dragon’s rumble from a man’s face.

“Let the drow speak,” Mazi snapped. “This way, our enemies will come to the forefront, where we can fight them.”

“All at once, orc?” Aitken chuckled. “Boldly spoken for one who doesn’t have a mountain to retreat to.”

“She brings nothing but violence!” Felix jabbed a finger in Liaine’s direction. “What else could we expect from a drow?”

A gasp rippled through the council at the outright speciesism.

Julie gave a doleful sigh. *At least no one’s punching anyone else.*

*She’s holding her own, whether or not I agree with her point,* Hat acknowledged.

Everyone at the Round Table was yelling except Malcolm Nox. He still had his chin in one hand and was staring into the depths of his water bottle like it was Connla’s Well.

Julie frowned. *Hat, can you give me a telepathic link to Malcolm?*

*Sure.* Hat hummed softly.

Malcolm stirred. *Julie? Is that you?*

*Yeah.* Julie leaned closer to him. *What’s up, Mal? You look more tired than usual.*

The vampire's eyes were red, and not only his scarlet irises. They met hers, and he offered an exhausted, humorless smile.

*I'm not surprised by how things are going today. Malcolm shrugged bony shoulders. It's been coming to this since you left for the drow lands.*

Julie gritted her teeth. *Then we need a solution fast.*

---

Julie strode across the courtyard, the walls of the Eternal Palace rising around her. Her boots had high heels and sophisticated detailing on the leather toes, but they clumped as heavily as her combat boots as she marched to the door at the base of Queen Esmerelda's tower.

When she reached the door, she hammered on it. *My head still hurts from all the yelling back there.*

*I can't believe the council screamed at each other for an hour and got nowhere. Hat groaned. Malcolm's right. This is bad.*

*I'm glad you called a recess since my head hurts, and I'm not even in the same dimension, Eglantine sympathized.*

Julie huffed. *Now, if I could get hold of the queen and glean the info I'm missing, that would be great.* She hammered on the door again, trying to still the worry boiling in her gut.

The door swung open, revealing no one.

"I'm down here," the queen's steward snapped.

Julie lowered her gaze. Dylan, the brownie who managed Queen Esmerelda's personal affairs, was impeccably dressed in a pinstriped suit that made him look maybe thirteen instead of twelve inches tall. His hair was parted to the side with ruler straightness, and he studied Julie over his half-moon glasses with growing distaste.

"Oh, hey, Dyl." She grinned.

“My name is Dylan.” He tapped a foot. “What do you want?”

“I need to talk to Queen Esmerelda. Shit’s going down in the high council, and we need her help,” Julie explained.

Dylan’s thin shoulders sagged. “Her Majesty is currently indisposed.”

Suspicion coiled in Julie’s gut. “Currently?” She folded her arms. “How long has she been ‘indisposed?’”

Dylan glared at her, then sighed, head hanging. “A long time.” His voice broke. “She’s too frail to see you, Councilor. Her last good day was...well, when your mother visited.”

Julie’s heart thumped. “That was before I left for the Gleann. *Weeks* before.”

Dylan just stared at his brightly polished shoes.

Julie gentled her tone. “Hey, maybe my mom can come and keep the queen company again. That seemed to cheer her up last time. Maybe you could take up a message for me?”

Dylan brightened. “Yes! Yes, I can do that.” He turned, then hesitated. “Oh. What did you want to ask her?”

*So, you do have a heart, Dylan.* Julie stifled a grin. “Tell her the council is having issues, and I need her blessing to find a solution before this problem grows beyond our control.”

“Very well. I believe Her Majesty is aware, though I try to protect her.” Dylan nodded. “Wait here.”

A diminutive portal opened in front of Dylan, and he vanished through it. Julie fished out her phone and unlocked it, spotting a new text from Taylor.

**How was Tintagel, babe? Hope Mom likes it. Call me when you get back? Love you.**

It was followed by two goat emojis.

Julie sent him a gif of a baby goat jumping on a trampoline.

**Can't talk. Summoned to council. Sorry.**

**No worries. Trouble?**

Julie sent several puking emojis and two thumbs down.

Taylor responded with a gif of a goat jumping into a haystack and completely disappearing in the hay.

Julie grinned.

**Tell you later. Love you, babe.**

Taylor sent a sticker of a goat with heart eyes.

Julie rolled her eyes and opened Rosa's chat instead.

**Hey, Mom. You available to keep QE company for a few days?**

**Anything for your great-great-granny, honey! Do we really have to talk in code?**

**You're crappy—**

Julie frowned, then backspaced.

**You're bad about leaving your phone unlocked around humans. Call you later with details.**

Dylan reappeared as she slipped her phone into her pocket. The brownie's face was serious. "Her Majesty requests your mother to come to the Palace as soon as convenient."

"I have her on standby." Julie patted her pocket.

"Thank you." Dylan nodded. "I will portal to your fiancé's home and bring her here."

Julie didn't bother asking how he knew where Rosa was. "What about the other thing?"

Dylan paused, then opened a fist-sized portal, reached through it, and held out a heavy selenite amulet on a golden chain. The crest of the Eternity Throne was inlaid in gold on the crystal.

Julie's breath hitched. "Is that..."

"Queen Esmerelda's amulet." Dylan sighed. "It contains the royal seal. This will give you the power to act as the head of the high council during Her Majesty's absence."

It was exactly what Julie had asked for, but it seemed like a much heavier request now that she held the amulet in her hands. She pulled the chain over her head and smoothed it on her chest. "Thank you, Dylan."

The brownie sniffed. "This was not my doing."

"One more thing." Julie offered a winning smile.

He raised his manicured eyebrows. "What?"

"May I use Her Majesty's receiving room for a few minutes?" Julie asked. "I need to make a few calls in private."

Dylan hesitated, then inclined his head. "If you have her seal, Councilor, use of the receiving room goes without saying." He sneered. "Kindly avoid leaving any dirt on the carpet."

Dylan portaled out, and Julie chuckled as she mounted the staircase to the receiving room. *You know, I think he would be cool if someone would remove the giant stick from his ass.*

Eglantine giggled. *Stick in his ass!*

Julie groaned. *I regret letting you into my head, moondrop.*

*You don't mean that.* Eglantine scoffed.

*No, I don't.* Julie entered the receiving room and glanced appreciatively at its elegant furnishings, deep carpet, and the glass ceiling that formed the bottom of a clear tank containing a small sea serpent. The serpent's blue-green glow lit the room. It was curled up on the glass, sleeping.

Julie sat on the couch and pulled out her phone, wondering if her favorite weretiger captain had figured out his brand-new

scrying screen yet.

---

Captain Jack Kaplan had already broken a keyboard today, and his new one was in danger of sharing the same fate.

“Send. The. Email!” he roared, slamming the enter key with a gigantic fist.

A little window popped up with an incomprehensible error message. Kaplan bared his teeth, canines growing until they pricked his bottom lip, and snarled at it.

He inhaled, ready to yell for his assistant to find Qtana, then remembered that the head of IT at the OPMA was in the Gleann to establish stronger communications with the Eternity Throne’s newest allies. If he wanted to get hold of her, he’d have to use his infernal scrying screen. It perched on the end of his desk, black and blank, and he glared at it.

“What happened to carrier werepigeons?” he roared at no one in particular.

Muttering to himself, he extended his index finger and soothed the inner tiger that threatened to explode to the surface. His shining white claw morphed into a human fingernail, and Kaplan delicately pressed the enter key.

**Sending!** his screen announced cheerfully.

“About time,” Kaplan growled.

He clicked on the next email with only moderate difficulty and glowered at the words on the screen. Another report from Intelligence on the situation in the Deep. He scrolled quickly, his frown deepening. Agent Elspeth Feathertouch was one of his best, but she still hadn’t found out anything substantive. The dragons had withdrawn into the depths of their underground world and vanished.

“You were supposed to come back to us after Nimue died,” Kaplan muttered.

He typed an email in response to Ellie.

**Agent,**

**Thank you.**

**Kaplan.**

Wasn't she getting married to that werewolf with the missing arm soon? Kaplan made a mental note to ask Hartshorn about it, then dismissed the thought. Avalon was at war, so he had other things to worry about...like whether he'd get an invitation to Meadows' wedding. He could only imagine what a magnificent disaster that was going to be, considering how disaster followed the woman like a shadow.

A series of shrill beeps sounded from the end of Kaplan's desk. He jumped hard and slammed ten claws into the desk as black-and-orange fur spread across the backs of his hands.

"Merlin's perky ass cheeks!" he roared. "What is *that*?"

The office door opened, and his timorous assistant peered inside. "Did you call me, sir?"

"What is that infernal noise?" Kaplan bellowed.

The assistant blinked at him. "Uh, it's your scrying screen, sir. Somebody's calling you."

Kaplan glared at the screen, which showed static, then prodded it with a clawed finger. Nothing happened.

"Merlin's yellow fingernails," he grumbled.

"Sir? It's not a touch screen. You need to gesture at it, remember?" The assistant flailed in a demonstration.

"Of course I remember. Dismissed," Kaplan snapped.

The assistant wisely retreated, and Kaplan waved his paws at the screen until the static cleared. A youthful face with sharply pretty features and pixie-cut dark hair grinned roguishly at him from the screen.

"Sup, Jack? How's the OPMA without its biggest troublemaker?" Julie asked.

Kaplan barely managed to stop himself from beaming at her. "Surprisingly peaceful," he growled. "What do you

want?”

“I can’t call my old cappy-cap to say hi?” Julie raised an eyebrow.

“I’m a little busy with *not* having the shit constantly hit the fan, thanks to your absence.” Kaplan folded his powerful arms. *We could use your shit hitting the fan, Meadows*, he added silently. “Besides, I know this isn’t a social call.”

“Always on the ball, Jack.” Julie grinned. “I’m hoping I can get some time to discuss the latest issue plaguing Avalon.”

Kaplan leaned forward. “I’m listening.” Julius had told him that the high council was devolving into a shitshow.

“Are you free for dinner?” Julie asked. “There’s a new barbecue place on 3rd and Main I’ve been dying to try, but Taylor isn’t a fan of dragon cuisine. He’s off getting measured for his wedding tux tonight with Iris.”

“Mmm, I don’t know.” Kaplan gave her a smile that showed off all his pointed teeth. “It depends on who’s paying.”

Julie bridled. “Who’s *paying*? Obviously, you are. You’re the captain.”

“I recall you swindling the OPMA out of several thousand dollars in recruitment bonuses.” Kaplan raised his brows.

“Swindling? *Swindling*?” Julie spluttered. “Excuse *me*! I was doing excellent work, and you know it.”

“Several thousand dollars, Meadows,” Kaplan told her severely. “The least you can do is to buy me dinner.”

“It didn’t come from *your* pocket,” Julie grumbled, but her eyes sparkled.

“Dragon cuisine isn’t cheap.” Kaplan raised his hands. “We could go to the KFC in Brooklyn.”

“Okay, fine.” Julie laughed. “It’ll be my treat *this* time. I have an appointment with Dr. Olena this afternoon, so I can pick you up from the NYHQ.”

*An appointment with Dr. Olena?* Kaplan quelled the flicker of worry in his belly. She looked fine to him. “Pick me up? I

know your driving, Meadows.”

“I’ve never killed anyone,” Julie joked.

“See you at seven?” Kaplan suggested.

Julie nodded. “Seven is fine. Thanks, Jack.”

“Thank *you* for nothing, Meadows,” Kaplan grumbled. “I knew this was going to be trouble the moment my screen went off.”

Julie laughed. “You love my trouble, and you know it.”

“Bullshit,” Kaplan snapped.

“Love you too!” Julie hung up.

Kaplan allowed his smile to spread across his face. He turned back to his emails, humming *The Noble Acts*. Seven o’clock couldn’t come soon enough.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Julie listened as she approached the council hall. Raised voices echoed from within, but there was no crashing, shouting, or griffin roars.

*Progress?* she wondered.

Hat groaned. *I don't share your optimism.*

*I do!* Eglantine chipped in.

*Thank you, Egges. Your support means the world,* Julie told her pointedly.

Hat sighed.

Julie pushed open the doors and glared at the Round Table. The council had been in session for five minutes, and nobody had flipped any tables. However, Felix and Arion were in each other's faces again, the dryad was engaged in a shouting match with a Matahari Elf, and Malcolm had buried his head in his hands. The cyclops and the giant were holding hands under the table.

Julie strode to her seat. The clomping of her boots was enough to get most of the councilors to tone it down. Arion flopped into his seat, his dark hair disheveled, and Felix lowered his voice a few decibels.

"Order," Julie snapped as she sat.

Stormstar, perched in a niche above the Round Table, bared his teeth and let out a growl so low that it was barely audible that rattled every table in the room. Silence followed.

Julie reached into her jacket and fished out Queen Esmerelda's amulet. She held it aloft and waited for the gasps of surprise to subside.

"I stand as the head of the council today." Julie's words echoed around the hall.

Danijah and Felix exchanged glances. From across the hall, Liaine grinned and gave Julie two thumbs-up. Julie stifled a smile.

"It is clear that we are now facing division, not only between species but within them." She raised her chin. "When our people are divided, how can we hope to unite with others? It is time we all listened to our own species. Ordinary paras often ally themselves with evil when they see no other choice, so I challenge you all to do this: go home."

Gasps rippled through the hall.

Julie ignored them and plowed on. "Go home and talk to your people. If they are running into Mordred's arms, it is because they are being driven there. Find out why they are turning against you and against the Eternity Throne. Help your people where you can. Identify ringleaders who are allies of the Mordred cult."

Arion nodded along with her words. Felix watched her blankly, which was as close to agreement as Felix ever got.

"Report back at the next council meeting two weeks from today," Julie ordered. "The full might of the Eternity Throne will be here, as always, to aid and protect all paranormals. Let us get to the root of the divisions in our communities so that we can remove them." She let the amulet go, and it thudded against her chest. "This meeting is adjourned."

Chairs scraped and feet shuffled as paras got up, talking animatedly. A bubble of empty space existed around Liaine as she gathered her papers and water bottle.

*Poor Liaine. She's not popular,* Julie observed.

*She's going to change that. Don't worry. She's a great ambassador for her people,* Hat reassured her.

*Do you think she knows she's pregnant yet?* Julie wondered.

*None of your nosy Lunar Fae creative magic business,* Hat grumbled.

Malcolm was the last to rise from the Round Table. Julie hung around, pretending to mess with her papers, until the other councilors had headed for the door. When Malcolm pushed his chair back, she touched his arm.

“How are you holding up, Mal?” she asked. “How’s Mina?”

Malcolm shrugged. “About the same. The doctors all say it’s going to be a long road, and the vampire we loved is still in there.” He sighed. “No one wants to talk about the fact that she might never get better. I wonder at what point the Mina who tried to kill us and nearly did kill you and Bianca becomes the only Mina there is.”

Julie didn’t know what to say. She put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it.

“Anyway.” Malcolm offered a watery smile. “Do you really think sending the councilors to the four corners of Avalon will help?”

“We *do* need more information, and spending time with their people could be exactly what they need to remember the stakes.” Julie lowered her hand.

The old gleam returned to Malcolm’s eye. “There’s another reason, isn’t there? You’ve got something up your sleeve. I know that look.”

Julie grinned. “Sending them away buys me the time I need to put my plan into action.”

Malcolm chuckled. “I *knew* having you on the council would be great.”

Julie tilted her head to one side. “Hey, Taylor’s getting measured for his tux this evening. I’m sure he could use brotherly support from someone who’s done this recently. Why don’t you call him and see if he’d like you to join him?”

Malcolm brightened. “Yeah, that sounds good. I’ll do that.”

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The stall next to Genevieve’s spot in the covered parking area at NYHQ was empty. Julie pouted, clutching two sugar cubes in her hand.

“Where is he?” she demanded.

Taylor slammed the passenger door. “Sleipnir? Maybe he’s busy.”

“He’s a *horse*,” Julie pointed out.

“An eight-legged magic horse with shit to do.” Taylor grinned.

*Your fiancé is wrong, as usual, Hat teased. After he accompanied you to the drow lands, Sleipnir was sent to the Sylthana beach for a few weeks of turnout and gentle swimming. His legs took a hammering on the paving. He is several thousand years old, you know.*

“Poor old Slippy.” Julie returned the sugar cubes to her pocket.

“He’ll be back soon.” Taylor wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Come on, babe. We’re going to be late for Dr. Olena.”

They strolled across the grounds, presided over by the squat brick headquarters in which Julie’s paranormal journey had begun. A gaggle of recruits in navy OPMA sweatsuits sat in a circle on the grass, looking exhausted. Three centaurs trotted down the path to the front door. Julie and Taylor cut across the tidy lawn to the para-ER at the back of the building.

“I don’t mind if you need to leave before my appointment, honey.” Julie leaned into Taylor, and his fresh scent filled her nostrils. “I don’t want you to be late for Iris.”

“I know this is important to you.” Taylor squeezed her shoulders. “Iris can wait. I told Malcolm to wait outside when

he comes to pick me up. He gets it.”

“Thank you.” Julie smiled at him, taking in his tawny skin, the smooth sweep of his pointed ears and chiseled jawline, and the soft curves of his side-parted dark hair. “You’re the best.”

“I should hope so.” Taylor smirked. “You *are* marrying me.”

Julie poked him in the ribs.

The glass doors of the ER slid aside as they approached. Doctors and nurses in purple scrubs bustled across the tiled floor. The charge nurse at the counter looked tired. Three medics, two dwarves and a cheerful elf, wrestled with a wild-eyed young man in one corner. He kept turning into a lion, then back into a human and yelling, “The beavers are coming. *The beavers are coming!*”

“Catnip.” The charge nurse sighed as Julie reached the counter. “There’s a bad batch on the street right now. You never know what they’re going to cut it with. Wolfsbane, garlic...” She shook her head. “You’re Julie Meadows, right?”

Julie gripped Taylor’s hand. “I am. Dr. Olena said to come at six.”

“That’s right. A trauma came in a few minutes ago, but she’ll be done shortly. You can wait for her in Treatment Two.” The nurse smiled and pointed at a bay on the other side of the room, closed off with purple curtains.

Julie thanked her, and Taylor led her behind the curtains. Julie perched on the edge of the bed and swung her legs, staring at the floor.

“You’re shaking, love.” Taylor sat beside her. “What’s wrong?”

Julie exhaled. “Olena said she might not find out much more after the more extensive DNA analysis she planned to do, but what if she *did*?” She met his eyes. “What if she didn’t? I don’t know what to hope for.”

Taylor tilted his head. “You’ve wanted to find your birth family since you found out you were a changeling. What’s

different now?”

Julie hung her head. “If I’m related to Torrent, I probably have Pendragon blood.” She blinked as hot tears swarmed her eyes. “The question is, is it *Arthur* Pendragon blood, or...” She couldn’t finish.

Taylor wrapped an arm around her. “You’re worried that you might be descended from Mordred.”

Julie leaned into him, pressing her face to his shoulder.

“What does it matter if you are, baby?” Taylor asked gently.

“What does it *matter*?” Julie pulled back and stared at him. “I’ll be a descendant of the most evil fae who ever lived!”

“So?” Taylor shrugged. “You’re Julie. You’re made from pure goodness, no matter whose blood runs in your veins.” He kissed her forehead.

The tears spilled over, and Julie wiped them with the back of her hand. Her chest felt lighter. “Even when I’m stealing all your blankets at night.”

Taylor chuckled. “Especially then. It gives me more reason to wrap myself around you if I’m freezing my ass off.”

Julie laugh-sob-hiccapped and flung her arms around him.

Taylor hugged her back. “Your ancestors don’t make you who you are, Julie. You carry King Arthur’s legacy, whether or not you have Mordred’s blood in your veins.”

That nudged her mind. *You are, you know. Your geas is as much a part of you as your DNA now.*

Julie raised her head. “On that note, babe, there’s something I want to tell you.”

“Mmm?” Taylor kissed her cheek.

She pulled back. “You know when King Oisín said something magical happens during a vigil of arms?”

Taylor chuckled. “You mean the vigil of arms where you turned a barren riverside into a waterfall with a vibrant jungle

surrounding it?”

“Yeah, that.” Julie smothered a smile.

“Something happened that night, didn’t it?” Taylor took her hand. “You’ve been different since then in a good way. More *you*.”

“Something did happen.” Julie paused. “Have you heard about geasa that aren’t born of dark magic?”

“Vows of honor?” Taylor nodded. “They were common among the Knights of the Round Table during the Golden Age.”

Julie inhaled. “I took one.”

Taylor’s eyebrows shot up, and he smoothed them down. “A geas?”

“Yes. I bound myself to uphold everything the Eternity Throne has stood for since Arthur established it.” Julie bit her lip. “I vowed to restore unity among all paras.”

Tears shimmered in Taylor’s eyes, and he looked away.

“I know I should have told you about it earlier, babe.” Julie’s voice cracked. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? Oh, Julie!” Taylor pulled her in close. “Why should you be sorry about something so magnificent?”

Julie melted into his arms. “It felt like the right thing to do.”

“It’s in line with everything I know to be true about the incredible woman I’m marrying.” Taylor kissed the top of her head. “I’ve always seen the light in you. Now it’s like that light has been concentrated.”

“I know what I believe in, T. Maybe it was reckless, but I wanted to hold myself to those beliefs. A sacred vow seemed so right.” Julie pressed her cheek against his chest and threaded her arms around his slender waist.

“I get it.” Taylor’s arms tightened. “I trust you, always.”

Julie blinked back tears. “Thank you.”

“I’m so proud of who you are, love,” Taylor whispered. “I don’t expect anything from you but your full devotion to what you know is right.”

Julie squeezed him. “Thanks, babe.”

The curtains rustled. “Am I interrupting?”

Julie gently extricated herself from Taylor’s arms.

“Not at all, Dr. Olena. It’s nice to see you. How are you?” Taylor turned, shielding Julie from view.

The motion bought Julie a few seconds to wipe her eyes.

“I’m well,” the Sylthana Elf replied. “Sorry for the wait.”

“No worries, Olena.” Julie fixed a smile in place. “I appreciate the time you’ve taken to dig around in my DNA. I know you’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

Olena’s blue eyes creased in a smile. “You were one of the few paras who stood by me when the Dark Moon League caused speciesism and hate toward Sylthana Elves. It’s the least I can do.” She held out a manila folder.

Julie took it and flipped it open. The report was gibberish to her, but the two diagrams vaguely looked the same.

“Um?” she managed.

“In-depth DNA analysis confirmed that you have Pendragon blood.” Olena rested a hand on Julie’s shoulder. “I only know that because I have a few samples of Queen Esmerelda’s blood to compare. Unfortunately, apart from your friend Torrent and Her Majesty, I don’t know of any surviving Pendragons I can use to improve my study.”

*King Arthur being alive isn’t common knowledge, Hat reminded her. Many consider it a legend.*

*I’m not going to interfere with Morgan’s magic by asking for a blood sample anyway, Julie conceded.*

“What does that mean for Julie?” Taylor asked.

Olena sighed. “It means there’s nothing more I can tell you. I’m truly sorry. I was hoping I could pinpoint the family

line, but I don't have enough DNA data to narrow it down." She took the folder back. "Once, we had DNA on file for every member of the royal family, but that information was purposefully destroyed."

"Why would anyone do that?" Julie croaked.

"Perhaps as part of the persecution of Lunar Fae we've been seeing." Olena paused. "Or to protect their children."

Julie stared at her boots, trying to ignore the hollow disappointment in her belly.

"Are there no records for Lunar Fae families?" Taylor asked.

"Not many. There are genealogies, but for safety's sake, they're classified. I've exhausted what I can research with my clearance level." Olena hooked a stray strand of silver hair back into her ponytail. "I'll keep working the DNA angle, but in the meantime, your best bet is to get your hands on those genealogies."

"Thanks, Doc." Julie smiled. "I appreciate your effort."

"Any time." Olena rested a cool hand on Julie's shoulder. "I wish I had more information for you."

A chime rang through the ER.

"We've got incoming!" the charge nurse yelled.

"I've got to go. I'll keep you updated!" Olena ducked through the curtain and vanished.

Taylor took Julie's hand. "I'm sorry we didn't learn more, babe."

"It's cool." Julie stood and inhaled deeply. "I've got other shit to worry about anyway."

"What about the genealogies Olena mentioned?" Taylor pulled the curtain aside.

Julie stepped through it. "I will ask Queen Esmerelda if there's anything in the palace archives that might help. I get the feeling she's looked through them or had Dylan do it, but maybe I can dig up more."

“That sounds like a great idea.” Taylor intertwined his fingers with hers as they strolled to the door.

Julie inhaled the cool evening air after they got outside. “You are right. I still want to find out about my birth family, but I’m not going to let that stop me.”

“It’s only natural to worry,” Taylor assured her. “Dwelling on it isn’t going to help, though.”

“I’ve got more important things to think about.” Julie grinned. “Like a wedding.”

“You say Mom played nice with Morgan at Tintagel this morning?” Taylor raised his eyebrows.

Julie smiled. “She loved Morgan, and they had a fantastic time. We’re still cool with leaving most of the details to them, right?”

“Absolutely. Firstly, Mom’s got this. Secondly, Morgan won’t let her do anything too...” Taylor fished for a word.

“Explosive?” Julie suggested.

Taylor chuckled. “Something like that.”

“We also have so much to do, T. I’m happy to let them handle the nitty-gritty, and Mom’s been cool about incorporating anything I *do* ask for.” Julie shrugged. “I’m sure she’ll do the same for you if you want anything special.”

Taylor kissed the side of her head. “I want to marry the sexiest fae in Avalon.”

“Sexiest *female* in Avalon,” Julie corrected. “Of any species.”

Taylor inclined his head. “That too.”

Julie smiled. “I bet Iris is bursting out of her skin to make your tux.”

Taylor’s grin widened. “We’re only taking measurements and looking at ideas today, but you’d think she’s dressing the Eternity Queen herself, the way she’s carrying on about it.”

“I can only imagine her excitement.” Julie threaded her arm through Taylor’s.

“Trust me, it’s nothing compared to her excitement about *your* appointment this weekend.” Taylor grinned. “She mentioned that she’s been preparing for this moment her entire life.”

“Aw, Iri.” Julie giggled as they stepped through the broad doors of the parking garage.

“How do *you* feel about the appointment?” Taylor asked. Their footsteps echoed in the large space. “Nervous?”

Julie burst out laughing. “Nervous? Absolutely not! I’m almost as excited as Iris is!”

Taylor beamed. “Fantastic.”

“I can’t wait for the dress, babe.” Julie took his hands and turned to face him. “But more than anything, I can’t wait to be married to you.”

Taylor leaned close and pressed his forehead against hers. They both closed their eyes, and Julie breathed deep, drinking in his scent, his presence, and the gentleness of his touch on her fingers.

“I love you,” Taylor whispered.

“I love you too.” Julie squeezed his hands.

An engine revved obnoxiously nearby. “Can’t you two save it for the wedding?”

Julie looked up. Malcolm grinned through the open window of his black Pagani Huayra and touched the pedal again, making the engine shriek.

“Nice ride!” Julie yelled.

Malcolm smoothed his hands over the wheel. “You have no idea. Come on, Tay. We’re going to be late.”

“See you, babe.” Taylor pecked her on the cheek and bounded to the hypercar, which swooped away with a powerful scream from its V12.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Kaplan leaned against Genevieve, massive arms folded. Julie hadn't often seen him out of uniform, and it was still jarring. His enormous bulk was crammed into a well-cut gray sports coat that made his boulder-like shoulders look even bigger, and his salt-and-pepper hair was styled in lines as fiercely sharp as the glare he leveled at Julie.

"You said seven, Meadows," he growled.

"Sorry, Jack." Julie smirked. "I didn't realize you had a hot date waiting for you."

Kaplan scoffed. "Get in the car."

Julie spun Genevieve's keys on her finger, then unlocked the car and slipped inside. Kaplan squeezed himself into the passenger seat with many grunts and grumbles and muffled expletives and much shoving and yanking on the seatbelt. When he finally slammed the passenger door shut, his head was jammed against Genevieve's roof and his knees on the dash even though Julie had scooted the passenger seat back.

"You okay there, Jack?" Julie inquired.

"Fine," Kaplan muttered. "Just fine."

Hat snickered. *No wonder he drives that Dodge Ram.*

*He drives a sheep?!* Eglantine squeaked.

Julie started Genevieve and touched the gas pedal. The engine roared in response, and Kaplan's eyes went wide.

"Meadows—" he began.

Julie threw Genevieve into reverse and squealed out of the parking space. The air burst out of Kaplan's lungs as his chest slammed into the seatbelt. Claws sprouted from his fingertips, and he stuck out his hand to catch himself on the dash.

"Nuh-uh!" Julie shot sparks at the hand, making him yowl. "No claws on my dash!"

"There wouldn't have to be if you would...*SHIT!*" Kaplan squawked.

Genevieve surged forward, pinning the weretiger into his seat. He clung to the oh-shit handle above the door as Julie accelerated out of the parking lot.

The Mustang plunged toward the campus' gates at eighty miles an hour, and the Copper Dwarf guarding them had the presence of mind to fling them open when he heard the V8 Cobrajets' furious shriek.

Kaplan let out a long yowl as Julie sped through and grabbed the emergency brake. Genevieve's back wheels skidded in an elegant arc, rubber shrieking, and the wheel twitched in Julie's hands as the car bumped onto the street. She dropped the handbrake, spun the wheel, and stomped. Genevieve went from zero to sixty in five seconds.

Black-and-orange hair sprouted on Kaplan's hands and bristled from the neck of his jacket. "*Meadows, slow down!*"

Julie chortled. "You and I both know that's not happening, Jack."

Up ahead, the light turned yellow.

"*Stop!*" Kaplan squealed.

Julie accelerated. The needle on Genevieve's speedo jumped, and she zipped across the light as it turned red. A siren yipped behind them.

"You are *breaking the law*, Meadows," Kaplan growled.

Julie checked her rearview mirror and spotted spinning blue lights. "So? They have to catch us first."

“I command you to—” Kaplan’s sentence ended in a roar of terror as Genevieve squeezed through the gap between a sedan and a semi to plunge onto the on-ramp. The busy freeway loomed, a wall of glass and metal.

*This is cruel*, Hat observed.

*Bullshit*, Julie retorted. *Look at his face. He’s loving every minute.*

*Whoooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!* Eglantine whooped.

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu—” Kaplan moaned.

Julie spied a gap and jerked the wheel. Genevieve zoomed through an impossible gap to a cacophony of blaring horns and screeching sirens—Julie heard a clank as the car folded herself through the narrow space—and swerved through traffic until she reached the fast lane.

In minutes, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge stretched before them, a straight expanse of steel and asphalt begging for speed.

“Ready for this, Jack?” Julie asked.

“No,” Kaplan growled, but his lips twitched into a grin before he could stop them.

Julie rested a hand on the gearshift. “Hang onto something.”

She pushed the pedal to the floor, and Genevieve responded with a surge of power. The blue lights in the rearview mirror receded into the distance, and water shimmered on either side of them as the struts of the bridge flashed by in a blur. The needle crept higher. Ninety. A hundred. One-twenty. One-forty. The engine’s purr rose to a full-throated bellow.

Kaplan grinned, fangs shining.

“Are you purring?” Julie yelled over Genevieve’s roar.

Kaplan glared at her. “I am *not* purring.”

*He is*, Hat commented.

Yep. Julie chuckled. *I know my Gennie's noises, and that's not one of them.*

The deep rumble from the weretiger's chest shook Genevieve's interior and mingled with Julie's laughter as they sped toward Avalon.

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Genevieve squealed to a halt outside the barbecue place. Julie switched off the engine and patted the dash. "That's a good girl, Gennie."

Genevieve honked her horn and flashed her headlights.

"You're never driving again." Kaplan squeezed his bulk through the door.

"Codswallop," Julie protested in a drow accent.

Kaplan raised his bushy eyebrows. "What?"

"Means bullshit, Jack. You loved that." She slammed the door. "C'mon. I'm starving."

Kaplan smoothed his hair as they approached the large, plain building. It was newly built on the edge of Avalon Town, where the Deep and Fernwood diaspora had been growing the town's borders for several months. Earth magic had shaped its rough, rocky walls, making it little more than a dome of rock with chimneys and windows. A curtain of luminescent purple moss served as a door, above which fluorescent blue lichen grew in the shape of the words *The Original Flame-Grilled*.

"Smells amazing," Kaplan conceded.

Julie pushed the curtain aside. The building was one large room with stone tables of varying sizes scattered everywhere: one gigantic, dragon-sized table in the middle of the room, humanoid-friendly versions around the edge, and a row of tables no bigger than cigar boxes lining the windowsills.

One side of the room was occupied by a stone countertop staffed by medium-sized dragons, each the size of a city bus, their blue-green scales shimmering in the light from the

bioluminescent lichens that grew like wavy gold grass from the ceiling. A whole pig turned gently on a spit near the end. The dragon turning the handle directed a slow stream of flames from his pursed lips onto the slow-cooking meat. Another dragon held up a griddle packed with chicken pieces and barbecued them with one huff of her fiery breath.

“Ever had dragon barbecue?” Julie asked.

Kaplan’s face brightened at the sight of the long stone table that curved around the room, laden with dishes. Silver dragons no bigger than a clenched fist fluttered between dishes, warming each with little puffs of fire.

“It’s a buffet?” Kaplan asked eagerly.

“All you can eat,” Julie confirmed.

They grabbed plates at one end of the table and headed for the dishes. Julie grabbed a pile of pulled pork and reached for the enormous spoon in the potato salad, then hesitated. Kaplan had delicately chosen one piece of chicken and a little scoop of coleslaw.

*Mmm, maybe I shouldn’t eat more than the seven-foot weretiger, huh?* She took a modest helping of green salad instead.

They picked a table near the middle, and Kaplan diplomatically ignored Julie’s struggles to get onto the seat, which was designed for someone his size.

“Nice place,” Kaplan observed, cutting a genteel bite of chicken.

“It’s got Deep vibes, that’s for sure.” Julie took a mouthful of pulled pork. “Authentic cuisine, too.”

“I should hope so.” Kaplan grunted, glancing at the dragons behind the counters. The one turning the spit now did so with his tail. He lay on his back beneath the revolving carcass, his belly glowing with heat.

Kaplan turned his attention to Julie. “What was it that you wanted, Meadows?”

“Right to the chase, as usual, Jack.” Julie took a mouthful of green salad.

Kaplan peered at her, bushy brows raised.

“Okay, here’s the deal.” Julie lowered her fork. “I’ve sent the council home to investigate the divisions among their people.”

“Penelope told me. It was an...interesting choice.” Kaplan crunched his coleslaw.

“It was a strategic one,” Julie corrected. “I needed them out of the way while I worked on what I think is the real issue behind most of these divisions.”

“I’m listening.” Kaplan cut another bite of chicken.

Julie dabbed her lips with a napkin. “Paras are too isolated, Jack. I saw that when I visited the Gleann. The drow have many secrets to share with us, but they also have many needs that could have been met centuries ago if they’d been part of the Eternity Throne. They’re an extreme example, but almost all para groups stick to their ancestral homelands.”

“Homelands are important,” Kaplan murmured.

“I’m not denying that. They should be protected, but paras need to have the opportunity to see beyond them and live beyond them while still having the freedom to express their culture as they learn about others.”

Julie gulped the last of her pork. “When para groups are kept separate from each other, it breeds mistrust. More than that, they end up lacking resources that could easily be provided if they’d communicate with their neighbors. Look at the Shajara Elves. They have no tech, but their healing magic is incredible. Then there are the trolls. Their tech is amazing, yet in their homelands, they have almost no effective medicine. If we could bring those two together, both would benefit.”

Kaplan tilted his head. “How would that help with the division you’re seeing?”

“Paras don’t ally themselves with Mordred’s cult because they think they’re hotshots, Jack. They do it because he has something they need.” Julie finished her salad. “If we can work together to make sure that all paras have their needs provided for, we’ll have far fewer ordinary paras turning to dark magic. Isn’t unity and caring for all paras at the heart of the Eternity Throne’s mission?”

Kaplan’s lip twitched. “You’re not wrong.”

“The war has drained our resources, especially in certain places. I get that.” Julie frowned. “We’ll have far more to go around if we share. Look at Avalon Town. The refugee crisis hit us hard, but we rebounded. Why do you think the refugees came here? It’s because we have everything we need since we have every kind of para working together here.

“We need to create more cities like Avalon, places paras can come when they’re affected by unrest. We gave dragons fleeing the Deep somewhere to go. We need to do the same for all other paras so that they can feel safe with the Eternity Throne. We—”

“I’m still hungry.” Kaplan rose to his feet.

“Hurry up. I’m in mid-speech,” Julie complained.

He raised his eyebrows at her empty plate. “You trying to fit into your wedding dress?”

“What?” Julie spluttered. “I’ll have you know, Jack, that a woman’s *weight* is the last thing she should worry about in the run-up to a lifetime commitment of love!”

Kaplan chuckled. “Are you chicken, then?”

Julie’s eyes narrowed, and she seized her plate. “I am *not*.”

They returned to the table ten minutes later with heaping plates. Julie grabbed a sticky pork rib and waved it. “Can I go on with my speech now?”

Kaplan speared a sausage. “I got the gist of it. You want to establish more cities like Avalon Town for paras to go when they need to leave their homes because of scarcity or unrest.”

“Or if they *want* to live somewhere with more diversity.” Julie chomped on the rib.

“One question. Where do you propose to put these cities?” Kaplan asked.

“Many paras have returned to Fernwood and the Deadwoods, but there’s still a lot of work to do to restore those forests to their former glory. There are also a lot of uninhabited stretches where we could establish new cities without damaging the existing villages.”

Julie gnawed the bone clean. “If we build new cities there, they could boost the local economy, as well as expose the woodland folk to other para groups.”

Kaplan ate a sausage in one bite. “Why is that important at a time like this?”

“A time like this? It’s *always* important, Jack. Especially when shit gets real.” Julie reached for a lamb chop. “Ever been to West Brighton?”

Kaplan stabbed a beef patty with his fork. “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“We lived in one of its poorest areas after Dad died.” Julie comfort-ate the chop. “We were never well-off since Dad had a ton of student loans. His life insurance covered them, but we were left with nothing. Mom had only worked part-time, so she could be around every day when I got home from school. She had to figure out a way to feed us, and the first thing that had to go was the car. The second was the mortgage.”

Kaplan paused between bites of burger, listening.

“We moved to a teeny apartment in a run-down building that always smelled like cigarette smoke.” Julie sliced a piece of minute steak. “I was thirteen. The first night we stayed there, Mom and I had a huge fight. It was stupid. I went to bed without dinner, and I heard Mom microwaving something in the little kitchen when someone knocked on the door. This asshole at school had told me that people got mugged all the time in my new building, so I rushed out with my copy of

*Anna Karenina* to, like, bludgeon the attacker to death or something.”

Kaplan snorted. “Believable.”

Julie started on the pile of fries. “When Mom opened the door, it wasn’t a mugger. It was this super sweet Indian lady with a giant vat of butter chicken and her four kids, each carrying a dish of rice or something else. They hardly spoke a word of English, but they all marched into our house and set the table and sat us down for a meal.

“Mom cried, and the lady kept patting her shoulder and saying, ‘It okay, it okay.’ We taught the kids English that summer, and when Mom had to pay the rent on the apartment and we were down to ramen, they fed us Indian food for a whole month.”

Kaplan squirted barbecue sauce on his steak. “Sharing resources?”

Julie pushed her plate aside. “Something like that. We had English. They had lamb korma. We helped each other. Same with everyone else in my neighborhood. Everybody had something to contribute, and we learned from one another.”

Kaplan scoffed. “You’re not giving up, are you?”

“What?” Julie demanded.

He gestured to her plate. “You can’t let that go to waste.”

Julie eyed it. Her belly felt like she’d eaten a baby dragon, but Kaplan was still happily plowing through his portion without apparent effort. She narrowed her eyes, pulled her plate nearer, and grabbed a hot dog.

“You want to create a West Brighton for paranormals,” Kaplan summarized.

“Maybe without the cigarette smell and the poverty, but yeah,” Julie agreed around a mouthful of meat. “Before we moved there, I hung out with kids at school who looked and sounded like me. When I went to high school at the end of that summer, though, I didn’t care what anyone looked like. I saw potential friends in everyone.”

Kaplan bit a T-bone in half with a crunch. “That’s your goal with your new cities.”

“Absolutely.” Julie pointed her fork at him. “I mean, I didn’t actually *make* any friends. High school sucked, but my whole perspective changed because I lived with people who looked, acted, sounded, believed, and ate in many different ways. If we can get different kinds of paras to live and work together, they’ll learn to co-exist. Maybe to cooperate.”

Kaplan nodded slowly. “It could work.”

“It *would*.” Julie scoffed. “My ideas always do.”

Kaplan raised an eyebrow. “Do you remember when the yetis went into the sewers in Brooklyn and—”

“My ideas *almost* always work,” Julie corrected.

Kaplan’s chuckle rattled the floor. He scooped up a fistful of fries. “What do you need me for?”

“Advice,” Julie admitted. “I’m not a city planner, so I don’t know where to start.”

“Neither am I, but I know someone who is.” Kaplan sucked his fingers clean and fished his phone out of his pocket.

Julie took the opportunity to lay down her fork and sip her soda. Her belly was as distended as a barrel.

*You’ll be bloated for your appointment,* Hat fussed.

*Have you eaten in the great hall? I plan to be bloated shortly after the ceremony,* Julie shot back.

Kaplan held out his phone, showing a professional paranet site. “You need to meet with her.”

The portrait at the top of the page showed a suave fae with glowing silver skin and pale eyes. Her hair was pulled back into a severe bun, and she wore a serious black suit.

“Philomena Darkwing,” Kaplan told her. “She runs DETH.”

“Death?” Julie raised her eyebrows.

Kaplan rolled his eyes. “The Department of Executing Tasks for Humanitarianism.”

“Humanitarianism? Is this going to be another case like the OPMA’s Human Resources?” Julie demanded.

“Sourcing human corpses for vampire consumption *used* to be charitable work,” Kaplan snapped.

“That’s disgusting. What does DETH do?” Julie asked.

“It’s similar to a civic department. Operates in Avalon Town and addresses the needs of all kinds of paras. Philomena established it decades ago, and she was instrumental in helping us change the refugee camp into a decent suburb,” Kaplan explained. “If anyone can help you figure out what goes into building and maintaining a successful city, it’s her.”

Julie grinned. “Thanks, Jack. I’ll look her up and get in touch.”

Kaplan dropped his phone into his pocket. “You’re welcome. Do you want dessert?”

Julie stared at her plate. Miraculously, she had reduced it to bones and smears of grease. She glanced at Kaplan’s plate, which was empty. The bones had mysteriously disappeared.

“If I have dessert,” she admitted, “I’ll puke.”

Kaplan scoffed. “Wimp.”

Julie had to draw on every reserve to watch, hands resting on her bulging belly, as Kaplan packed away generous wedges of apple pie, blueberry cobbler, strawberry shortcake, and an extremely moist, squishy, heavy chocolate cake. He washed it all down with a mocha topped with whipped cream, which arrived in a mug big enough to be a bathtub for an entire faerie family.

“Done?” Julie inquired weakly as he chugged the last of the mocha.

Kaplan slapped his belly with an energy that made Julie’s gut lurch. “That’ll hold me for a few hours.”

Julie didn't want to *see* food for six more weeks. She reeled outside, clutching her abdomen. Kaplan bounded over to Genevieve while Julie leaned on the hood, sucking in long breaths of the crisp, clean air.

*Remind me never, ever to get into an eating competition with a seven-foot weretiger again,* she groaned.

Hat snickered.

*Okay, I'll remind you,* Eglantine responded dutifully.

"Ready to go, Meadows?" Kaplan held out a massive hand. "I could drive."

"No!" Julie groaned. "I feel like I'll get motion sick behind the wheel. I don't even want to *think* about being a passenger."

Genevieve waved her windshield wipers.

"No funny business," Julie cautioned her, slipping into the seat. "You'll get puke on your upholstery if you make a wrong move."

Kaplan wedged himself into place beside her. A contented rumble escaped his chest as he buckled up.

"You're purring." Julie grinned. "Don't bother denying it."

"Dragon barbecue does that to any carnivore." Kaplan paused. "Besides that, it's good to see how much you've grown, Meadows." He looked away, his voice husky. "Only a couple of years ago, a sassy little human stood at my desk and told me she'd have a new recruit within a week. Now, she's a Lunar Fae councilor who's planning on establishing whole cities."

"Aw, Jacky-Jack, don't get all emotional on me," Julie teased.

Kaplan glared at her. "You're still trouble on two legs." His features relaxed, bushy brows flattening. "But you're the best kind of trouble, Meadows."

## CHAPTER SIX

“What *is* this?” Julie squeezed Genevieve into the only open parking space in the narrow street. “A rave or something?”

Iris Fashion was a small boutique squeezed between other businesses on a street that had been designed for one elegant lady to ride past in a brougham every now and then, not the hectic collection of vehicles currently crammed into every legal and illegal space available. Genevieve’s nose almost touched the cherry-red Porsche in front of her, and she had to tuck her ass in to avoid scratching the faded sedan behind. A carriage drawn by six black pegasi waited on the boutique’s roof, each pegasus enjoying a nosebag of oats. A UMMV levitated in midair above Genevieve.

“Whose is *that*?” Rosa asked from the passenger seat, pointing at a creepy-ass lizard-rodent hybrid thing tied to a lamppost, saddled and bridled. It wore a faded sticker proclaiming *I <3 Edward* on its backside, right next to its bald black rat tail. Its mane consisted of writhing tentacles, each sporting a bright pink bow.

“That’s got to belong to Raven.” Julie frowned. “Hey, and that sedan is Olena’s. The Porsche can only be Cassidy’s, and the carriage...” She turned to Rosa, gaping. “Mom, did you invite *everyone*?”

“You seemed happy with the idea when I asked if you’d like a few friends to come to your dress fitting, honey.” Rosa beamed. “I figured, why not invite all of them? You don’t have many opportunities to socialize right now. I thought it would be good for you.”

“*All* of them?” Julie spluttered.

Rosa grinned. “You’ll see. Come on!”

As soon as Julie was out of Genevieve, Rosa grabbed her arm and towed her to the boutique. Its glass front offered a heart-lifting glimpse at the designs on the mannequins inside, lit by a soft, flattering glow that came from the walls. An elegant suit, night-black, had real starlight sewn into the seams. A green dress near the door was adorned with bright blue flowers, among which hummingbirds buzzed, their metallic purple feathers catching the light. The ballgown in the back corner had a waterfall spilling over its poofy skirt, though the floor beneath it was dry.

Excitement prickled over Julie’s skin as Rosa dragged her through the doors. The boutique smelled of eucalyptus and cinnamon, and delicate music trickled through the air, flutes and dancing piano.

Julie eagerly looked for Mikayla, the bitch who’d treated her like shit the first time Taylor brought her here because she was still human-presenting back then. The counter was empty, and the door swung shut behind Rosa.

“Is the boutique closed?” Julie asked.

Rosa burst out laughing. “Oh, *honey*, did you really think Iri would want the distraction of other customers on what she terms the biggest day of her entire life?”

Before Julie could protest, Rosa shoved open the door to one of the private fitting rooms at the back of the boutique.

The spicy smell and classy music were eclipsed by a tidal wave of thumping troll techno and the smell of alcohol, as well as the hint of the pervasive aroma of wereelk.

Julie laughed, delighted. “You did mean *all* of them, Mom!”

The fitting room’s elegant furniture was crammed with the ladies in Julie’s life. The coffee table groaned with snacks and a gigantic bowl of punch with suspiciously green pointy bits floating in it. Judging by the way Qtana was dancing, the punch was the source of the alcohol smell. The troll clutched a

glass in one hand and held the other out for balance as she sashayed around. She wore a sequined dress that barely reached her shapely hips, and her blonde ponytail had been replaced by a teased, tangled yellow cloud.

Bianca bounded over to Julie in high-heeled knee-height boots. The succubus' stylish golden curls tumbled richly over her shoulders, and her gazelle horns twisted up to perfectly matched points. Morgan drifted happily in her wake.

"Hey, girlfriend!" Bianca wrapped her in a hug, using her arms and her leathery wings.

"Bee, hi!" Julie hugged her back. "Morgan! I can't believe you're here. I thought you couldn't leave Tintagel."

"Not for very long, so I'm portaling out soon, but the dragons have boosted my magic." Morgan took Julie's hands. "It's wonderful to be here."

"Sorry about Qtana," Bianca added. "She's been under a lot of stress."

"Is that aloe vera punch?" Julie asked suspiciously.

"It is, honey!" Rosa gushed. "It's delicious *and* nutritious, and it'll keep you regular for weeks. Plus, it has plenty of vodka in it." She cackled. "*Plenty.*"

"Uh, nobody told you about trolls' alcohol tolerance, did they?" Julie asked.

"What about their alcohol tolerance?" Rosa raised her eyebrows.

Qtana attempted a cartwheel and landed in a heap of long green legs. Olena flew from her seat and rushed to her side, but the troll sat up, giggled, and waved her off.

"They don't have any," Bianca explained.

Rosa grimaced. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, Mom." Julie laughed and took Rosa's hand. "It's cool to see Qtana with her hair down. It's cool to see *everyone* in the same room." She met her eyes. "Thank you."

“Being engaged is a weird time, honey. You spend all of it rushing to your wedding day, wanting to get it over.” Rosa’s eyes softened. “Don’t go too fast to enjoy every second of it.”

“She’s *heeeeeere!*” Iris shrieked.

The leggy Aether Elf, Taylor’s best friend, strode from the chaos. She smelled of roses and jasmine, and her torrential hair poured down to her hips. The elf enfolded Julie in a gentle hug as the rest of the room cheered.

“Thank you so much for this, Iri.” Julie returned the embrace.

“Thank *you* for letting me dress you for your wedding day.” Iris clasped her hands under her chin. “Dressing Taylor’s bride is something I’ve been looking forward to since we became friends as little kids.” She blinked away her tears. “Come on! Snacks first. Then we can get to trying on dresses!”

Julie was borne to the nearest couch on a tide of excitement. Olena had guided Qtana to the armchair opposite, and the troll now sipped a cup of strong black coffee, giggling to herself. Cleo, the Sphynx, was curled up in her lap, purring. Much of the room was taken up by the lengthy bulk of Minatarva, a six-legged, blue-and-green-scaled dragon who blew celebratory smoke rings to welcome Julie to the party.

Ilsa, the queen of the Aether Elves and also Taylor’s sister, scooted over on the couch to make room. “Hey, Julie!”

“Ilsa! It’s been way too long.” Julie sat. “Thank you for coming. I know you’re busy.”

“Never too busy for my soon-to-be sister-in-law.” Ilsa beamed. “I brought wine from the royal cellars, but I’ll bust it out when everyone’s had something to eat and the excitement has died down. It’s three thousand years old and deserves to be savored.”

“Pff, wine.” Cassidy, Malcolm’s batshit-crazy wife, shook her head. “What are you doing, Ilsa? Trying to make this classy?”

“You’ll be a queen too someday, you know,” Ilsa chided.

“Shh, Ilsa. Don’t ruin the fun,” Bianca teased. “You’ll be hating on our bridal games next.”

“Bridal games?” Ilsa’s elegant eyebrows shot up.

“They’re...” Bianca hesitated.

“NSFW,” Cassidy supplied.

Ilsa clutched her ancient wine, horrified.

“I can’t believe you all made it.” Julie swallowed the giant lump in her throat. She took hold of Ilsa’s arm and reached for Cassidy’s hand, then thought better of it and gripped Minatarva’s nearest spine instead. “Thank you for being here.”

“No, no, no. No sappiness today,” Korin chided. “Only fun.”

“I didn’t make these scorecards for the games for you to be weepy over,” Raven added, producing a sheaf from her purse.

Jae, the shy Shajara Elf, didn’t speak. She sat on an armchair slightly apart from the crowd with her noise-reducing headphones in place, but her grin stretched from ear to ear.

“Snacks! Snacks, people!” Bianca ordered. “Don’t let her just sit there. Stuff her face!”

“I brought a salad,” Doris announced. The wereelk lifted a bowl from the coffee table and held it out to Julie. Three sad bits of lettuce and several strands of what looked suspiciously like grass clung to the bottom.

“That’s very nice of you, Doris,” Julie managed.

Emeline, Doris’ Woodland Fae colleague, rolled her eyes.

Rosa produced a magnificent bowl of cheese curls. “I know you love these, sweetie, but eat them *before* you put on dresses, okay?”

Julie stuffed several handfuls into her face as Iris returned from the storefront, dragging a wheeled rail of wedding dresses like a bank of clouds rolling over the horizon. Cream and ivory, silver, pearl, snow-white, and other colors—flame gold, midnight blue, and sunset vermilion—swam before Julie’s eyes.

“Did you have any specific ideas for the dress, Julie?” Iris asked.

“She *needs* an A-line. It’ll be perfect on her figure,” Raven cooed.

Rosa bristled. “*Anything* will be perfect on her figure!”

“Easy, easy.” Cassidy patted Rosa’s arm. “That’s a vampire. Don’t push it.”

Rosa clenched her fists.

“Wow, Rosa!” Bianca interjected. “This aloe vera punch is *amazing*. You say it’s good for you?”

Rosa whirled, beaming, and extolled the virtues of aloe vera at incredible length. Julie mouthed, “Thank you” to Bianca, who grinned.

“Julie?” Iris prompted.

“Sorry.” Julie wiped her hands on a napkin that magically arrived at her elbow, courtesy of Ilsa. “Actually, Iri, I didn’t even look at pictures. I’ve been busy, and I trust your expertise.” She grinned. “I was hoping we could get right to trying on the dresses!”

Iris squealed and clapped her hands. “So was I. Come on!”

She whisked Julie into the curtained dressing room, where they stepped carefully around Minatarva’s tail as Iris lifted the first dress from the rail.

“Don’t look at it on the hanger,” the Aether Elf instructed. “They never look good on the hanger.”

“Mom told me.” Julie slipped out of the simple summer dress she was wearing. “She also picked this dress for today since it’s easy to get in and out of. Pro tips, right?”

Iris chuckled. “Exactly.”

She helped slip the dress over Julie’s head, and the corset ribbons pulled snug without prompting.

“It’s so light and fluffy.” Julie’s bare toes curled on the carpeted floor.

Iris propelled her from behind the curtains. “Let’s see how it looks.”

A chorus of oohs and aahs rose from the audience as Julie stepped onto the little dais in front of the panel of tall mirrors. She ran her hands over the skirt, which was knee-length and explosively poofy, layered with petticoats. The short puffed sleeves hid the bolder curves of her military-trained arms and shoulders, and a sweetheart neckline exposed the smooth lines of her collarbones.

“My Julia!” Rosa cried and promptly burst into tears.

Doris patted her back.

“It’s perfect!” Raven exclaimed. “Absolutely perfect.”

“Give us a twirl,” Bianca ordered.

Giggling like a child, Julie spun, and the skirt floated around her.

“How did you make it so fluffy?” she asked.

Iris beamed. “It’s a blend of fabrics I’ve been working on for a while. Chiffon, cirrus, and a hint of laughter. Babies’ laughter is the best.”

“It’s amazing,” Julie murmured.

“Did you use dragons to capture the cirrus clouds?” Morgan asked.

Iris shook her head. “I buy cultivated cirrus from leprechaun farmers. People like the idea of wild-caught cirrus, you know, but at the end of the day, it’s kinder to the environment—and the economy—to buy from farmers.”

“Fashionable *and* socially conscious, as always.” Ilsa had opened her wine and looked twenty percent less horrified.

Cassidy up-ended a huge wicker basket over the coffee table, and a torrent of garters spilled out, several in garish colors. “Grab one each, and let the games begin!”

Ilsa’s horror returned.

“Can I try on another one?” Julie asked. “I love it, but I’m not ready to be done.”

Iris grinned. “I was hoping you’d say that. Come on!”

The next dress was an elegant column of shining, sturdy fabric that hugged Julie’s curves, ruffles pouring down the back. Julie stared into the mirror, breathless.

“Mostly mikado,” Iris informed her. “There’s elven starlight in the ruffles.”

“Girl.” Bianca sat down abruptly. “That is *hot*.”

“Your ass.” Ellie Feathertouch gave a chef’s kiss. “Amazing.”

“It’s sexy, but it’s not vulgar,” Ilsa chipped in. “It’s sophisticated. I love it.”

“Nothing wrong with a little vulgarity sometimes, dear.” Rosa patted Ilsa on the head. “You’ll learn.”

“Merlin’s FUPA!” Korin cursed. A row of glass bottles stood on one side of the room, surrounded by sad little heaps of garters.

“Go on, Jae.” Raven nudged the elf. “You’ve got this.”

Jae clutched a lacy white garter in both hands. Her dark eyes narrowed, and she tossed it carefully. It sailed six feet clear of the bottles and landed on the floor to groans from the rest of the party.

Julie grinned at Iris. “Next one!”

“I thought you might like something a little different to try, too.” Iris led her into the curtained area and pulled another dress from the rail.

“Ooh,” Julie breathed.

The gown was royal blue, its fabric smooth and shiny like mikado but as light as air once Julie slid into it. When she stepped into the light, it shimmered. The back was open almost to her hips, and the bell sleeves covered her wrists. A bold V-neck plunged over her chest. The reflected light from

the dress scattered over Julie's skin, bringing out her pearlescent Lunar Fae sheen.

A gasp rippled through the room when Julie stepped out from behind the curtains.

"I've never seen anything so sparkly in my whole life." Rosa clasped her hands to her mouth. "It's amazing."

"Isn't it?" Julie lifted the skirt, which felt weightless in her hands, and twirled. Light scattered all over the walls and ceiling.

"It's beautiful!" Jae exclaimed. "My favorite so far."

"Mine too," Morgan agreed.

"There's more." Iris stepped forward, holding a veil that splashed over her arms with the soft rush of running water because it *was* running water. When Iris affixed it to Julie's head with a pin, it was a real waterfall, spilling down to knee length and ending in foaming spray. Julie brushed it, and her fingers slipped right through. She felt the trickle of water between them, but when she withdrew her hand, it was dry.

"Technology is amazing," Rosa declared.

"That's magic, Mom," Julie corrected.

"It's all the same to me, dear." Rosa sighed. "You look incredible."

Olena threw a garter. It caught on the top of one bottle, spun, flew off, and landed on the floor.

"So, so close." Cassidy shook her head sorrowfully.

"I have one more for you to try." Iris smoothed a part of the veil that had fallen over Julie's shoulder. "Want a break for snacks and something to drink first?"

Before Julie could answer, the door crashed open, and a portly weremouse burst through it. She carried a shiny dish with a gleaming steel cover.

"Meggie!" Julie cried.

“Oh, poppet, look at you!” Meggie set the dish on the coffee table. “You’re a perfect picture. I hope you’re hungry, though. I’ve brought lunch.”

With Iris’ help, Julie wriggled out of the gown, scrambled into her dress, and hurried to the coffee table. Ellie took her turn at the garter-bottle-toss game. Ilsa’s wine bottle was half-empty, and she sprawled in an armchair, clutching her glass. Qtana stared into the middle distance.

“Is she okay?” Julie hissed to Bianca.

“Oh, yeah. She’s almost sober. You know how fast their metabolisms are.” Bianca grimaced. “I’m hoping the hangover will not hit until we’re done.”

“Lunch!” Meggie announced and removed the cover from the dish with a flourish.

The tray held an empty china plate.

Everyone stared at it in polite silence. Meggie beamed proudly.

“Uh, Megs?” Bianca cleared her throat. “I think you left it at the bistro.”

“Don’t be silly, dear. It’s a cornucopia.” Meggie set the cover aside.

“A horn of plenty?” Julie raised her eyebrows. “Shouldn’t it be...well, a horn?”

“This isn’t the Dark Ages, poppet. It’s complicated culinary magic, but I daresay I’ve mastered it.” Meggie gestured at the plate. “Go on. Take it.”

Julie grabbed the edge of the plate and lifted it. As it left the tray, there was a brief puff of purple smoke, and a perfectly fried Sylthana fish appeared on it, resting on a bed of sloppy British chips.

“Ooh!” Julie squealed.

A second plate had appeared out of nowhere on the tray.

“Your favorite dish from my bistro will appear as soon as you touch it.” Meggie beamed. “Enjoy!”

The girls crowded around, except for Rosa, who gripped Julie's elbow. "Honey, you shouldn't have such a heavy meal before trying on your dress."

"Don't worry, Rosa," Iris reassured her. "My dresses adjust themselves to the wearer. She could eat a barrel of fish and chips if she wanted. The dress would still be flattering."

Rosa relaxed. "Iris, you're a delight. Stuff your face, dear."

Meggie's food was delicious enough that conversation slowed until all the plates were clear. Rosa dispensed glasses of aloe vera punch, shoving one into Julie's hand before she could protest.

"It's okay," Bianca hissed. "You mostly taste vodka."

Julie sipped carefully. Alcohol blazed through her mouth and scorched her tonsils, snatching her breath away. She wheezed and spluttered while Bianca pounded unhelpfully on her back.

"If I'd known that all I had to do was add vodka to make you drink your juice, I'd have done it years ago," Rosa proclaimed.

Minatarva crunched the large bones of the nasty, bloody thing that had appeared on her plate, almost drowning out Rosa's words. Cleo delicately lapped a saucer of cream.

"Okay, that's it!" Ilsa got up. "I'm trying the garter game."

"Nobody's done it yet," Cassidy declared mournfully. "It's impossible."

Ilsa wobbled tipsily to the end of the coffee table and grabbed the last garter, which was shocking red with sequins sewn on in rude shapes. Still clutching the neck of her wine bottle, the queen of the Aether Elves narrowed her eyes, sizing up her target.

"Go, Ilsa!" Julie swigged more boozy aloe vera.

Swaying, Ilsa drew her hand back and flung the garter. It swooped almost to the floor, then rose, wobbling, and collapsed over the neck of the bottle.

Cassidy leaped to her feet. “She did it!”

“You never said we could use magic,” Raven wailed.

Ilsa raised both hands. “I am the garter queen!” She chugged wine from the bottle.

Laughter washed around the room. Julie looked around, and her heart swelled. Cleo strolled around, knocking over the bottles from the garter game. Qtana’s hair was back in its ponytail. Jae was curled up in her armchair, watching with a faint smile. Ellie and Raven were arguing about the garter game with Cassidy.

Rosa put a hand on Julie’s arm. Her eyes were wet. “I’ve hoped this for you all your life, baby.”

“What?” Julie asked. “That I’d drink your aloe vera stuff?”

“That too.” Rosa chuckled. “I meant that you would find a group of friends like this. They’ve helped you through a lot of storms and been with you to enjoy a lot of sunshine. I never thought I’d see the day. You were such a loner as a kid.” She squeezed Julie’s arm. “Now I know you needed to find the place where you belonged.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Julie paused. “This is amazing. I wish Mina could be here.”

“Me too.” Bianca smiled. “We’ll have to take lots of pictures to show her when she gets better.”

Iris nudged Julie. “Ready for the last dress?”

Julie set down her glass. “Absolutely!”

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Silence fell when Julie stepped from behind the curtains and halted on the dais. The world stopped, and she raised her hands to her mouth, conscious of the sudden wild thumping of her pulse.

The final dress was a symphony of silk and lace that poured over Julie’s slender frame, the silken skirt pooling

around her feet in a magnificent train of intricate lace and sparkles. The simple V-neck had lacy edges that crept past her collarbones. Lacy sleeves hugged her upper arms, celebrating the strong curves of her shoulders and biceps, then flared out from the elbow in a torrent of near-transparent chiffon that almost touched the ground. A selenite belt met the shining skirt around Julie's hips.

Tears filled the bride-to-be's eyes.

"Don't cry yet. I'm not done," Iris chided gently.

This veil was composed of a sheet of solidified silver light. "It's moonlight," the elf told her.

She smoothed the veil over Julie's head, with the blusher pulled back to hang over her shoulders. Iris gripped the bulk of the veil and tossed it out behind Julie with a practiced flick of her wrists. It spilled several feet behind her, edged with delicate lace. The moonlight parted neatly around Julie's wings.

"Okay." Iris stepped back, smiling. "*Now* you can cry."

Julie couldn't stop staring into the mirror. She'd never seen herself this way. It wasn't about beauty—she was drop-dead stunning, and she knew it—but about what this ivory gown signified.

For the first time, Julie saw a bride. She saw a wife, someone about to be bound soul-deep to another person with a vow as glorious and powerful as the white-hot pulse of the geas in her chest.

The beauty went far beyond the dress, and it made Julie stand taller. She would soon face the man she loved more ferociously than she had known she *could* love, wearing this dress, and vow to love him for the rest of her life. It was heavy, but the weight didn't hang on her. It was a firm pedestal that lifted her higher.

"Julia, baby." Rosa joined her beside the mirror, tears rolling down her cheeks, and wrapped an arm around her. Her arm passed through the moonlight veil. "This is it. This is the one."

Julie's friends roared in agreement.

"I thought it might be." Iris touched Julie's sleeve. "I made it years ago when you and Taylor came here for a dress for Malcolm's handfasting. Maybe that's creepy, but I knew." She smiled. "The moment you walked in here with him, I knew."

"It's perfect." Julie hugged her.

Bianca grabbed her arm and wrenched her away from Iris. "You can't just stand there and say it's perfect. You need to test it! Ladies, put on dance music. We're gonna put this dress through its paces!"

Ilsa flicked a finger at the speaker in the corner, and an upbeat woodland tune rollicked through the room. Bianca whisked Julie around the dais as though it were a dance floor, cackling with glee. Julie started laughing and couldn't stop.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Numbing pain coursed down Esmerelda's arms. She squinted through her thick, troll-made glasses, trying to focus on the words in the book propped on her belly, but they swam before her eyes.

*No*, Esmerelda chided herself. *I'm not giving up*. She gripped the book, but her fingers barely responded. Tremors raced up her forearms, and with a gasp of annoyance, she fell back against her pillows. The book fell to the floor with a dull thump, and she closed her eyes, defeat washing through her.

Her chamber door opened. "Your Majesty?" Dylan's voice was high.

"I'm all right, Dylan," Esmerelda told him, as she did a thousand times each day. She opened her eyes and forced a smile. "Would you retrieve my book for me?"

Dylan scooped it up with an effort and muscled it onto the nightstand.

Esmerelda turned her head on the pillow, ignoring the pangs that traveled down her neck as a result. "What is it, Dylan?"

The brownie hesitated.

"I know there's something you need to tell me," Esmerelda whispered.

"There's a visitor for Your Majesty." Dylan pressed his lips into a thin line. "I do not believe now is a good time."

"Who is it?" Esmerelda asked.

Dylan sniffed. “It is the human, Your Majesty. Rosa Hernandez.”

Esmerelda sat up, her smile coming easily for the first time in days. “Please, send her in.”

“Is Your Majesty certain?” Dylan asked.

“Dearest Dylan.” With an effort, Esmerelda stretched out a hand to him. “Have I ever told you that you are insufferably anal at times?”

The lines of Dylan’s face softened, and he rested his small hand on Esmerelda’s palm. “Many times, Your Majesty.”

“I know you do it in service to me, dear fellow, and I know my condition weighs on you, but I implore you to think about how I am after a visit from Rosa.” Esmerelda tried to squeeze his hand and succeeded only in brushing her fingertips over his.

Dylan nodded. “She has a positive effect on Your Majesty, I admit.”

“Then let her in, please,” Esmerelda requested.

Dylan bowed lower than necessary. “Of course, Your Majesty.”

The brownie scurried away, and Esmerelda heard Rosa bounding up the steps several moments before the door burst open and the human came in on a tide of enthusiasm. Her enormous handbag, quilted in an eye-searing combination of neon colors, bounced and clinked on her hip.

“*Esmeeeeeeeee!*” Rosa sang. “It’s so lovely to see you.”

Esmerelda managed a chuckle. “We visited yesterday morning, Rosa.”

“Still, it’s always good to see you.” Rosa pulled up a chair near the edge of the bed.

Esmerelda looked around for Dylan, and the brownie materialized before she could call for him. “Would you bring us afternoon tea?”

“Tea?” Dylan brightened. “Right away, Your Majesty.” He disappeared.

“How was the dress fitting?” Esmerelda asked.

“Oh, Esme, you should have seen her!” Rosa beamed. “Her dress is perfect, absolutely perfect. Most of all, her face in the mirror when she realized that this was really happening. That she was really getting married? It was priceless.”

Esmerelda grinned. “I assume your face was similarly beyond value.”

“Honey, I blubbered like a baby.” Rosa waved a hand. “What did you expect?”

Dylan reappeared, holding a tray inlaid with selenite. A teapot rested beside two cups from Esmerelda’s favorite set, a gift from the muses, and several small plates with macarons, cucumber sandwiches, delicate toast triangles smeared with salmon pate, and miniature cinnamon rolls.

“All of Your Majesty’s favorites.” Dylan arranged the tray over Esmerelda’s knees and vanished.

Rosa poured the tea and handed Esmerelda a cup without a saucer, only half-full. Esmerelda took it with shaking hands, grateful that she didn’t have to endure the embarrassment of spilling on her sheets.

“Thank you for being here, Rosa.” Esmerelda sipped. “It truly brightens my day.”

“Anytime, Esme, anytime.” Rosa patted her knee. “I love visiting you.”

“Yes, but you have other responsibilities that are undiminished by your enjoyment of our time together,” Esmerelda acknowledged. “Does your husband never wonder why you spend so much time away from home?”

“Poor old Ernie. He’s a good sport.” Rosa smiled indulgently. “Julia came up with a cover story. I don’t like lying to my Ernesto about being in Calgary while Julie is ‘working there,’ but I understand the reason for the rules.”

Esmerelda tilted her head to one side. “Why Calgary?”

Rosa laughed, a wonderful, rolling bubble of a sound. “Ernesto had a terrible trip there one time. The taxi smelled of cigarette smoke and got lost twice on the way to the hotel, there were bedbugs in the mattress, he got mugged standing in line for overpriced coffee, and after all that, his business meetings didn’t even go well.”

Esmerelda chuckled. “Oh, dear.”

“I keep telling him it’s a nice city and he had a bad experience, but he’s adamant that he’ll never set foot there again.” Rosa chortled. “It’s perfect.”

“It seems so.” Esmerelda glanced at a cucumber sandwich, thinking she might be able to stomach it.

Rosa handed it to her and gently took her empty cup. “Refill?”

“Yes, please.” Esmerelda nibbled the edge of the sandwich.

Rosa poured more tea. “I’ll make it up to him. He’s a good man. Ordinary, but good.”

“The power of ordinary people is underestimated.” Esmerelda took the teacup.

“Amen to that.” Rosa clinked her cup against Esmerelda’s. “You’re pale today.”

“I am tired,” Esmerelda admitted. “It is difficult not to be weighed down by the pain.”

“That reminds me.” Rosa seized her handbag and tipped it out onto the bed. “Whoops. Should have cleaned it out first.”

Esmerelda marveled at the array of objects on her covers. Energy bars, breath mints, several shades of lipstick, tissues, baby wipes, packets of electrolytes, sealed water bottles, a flashlight, a space blanket, a rain poncho folded up in a little bag, a bottle of human pain medication, two packets of instant cappuccino, toothpicks, sunscreen, lip balm, hand cream, an opened box of tampons, three kinds of phone chargers, a power bank, a fistful of hairpins, and a folding makeup

mirror/hairbrush hybrid were among the contents of Rosa's handbag.

"If the world ends, dear Rosa, I shall call on you," Esmerelda told her. "It appears you are prepared for anything."

"Once a mom, always a mom. You know that." Rosa flashed her a smile and pawed through the chaos. She extracted several small glass bottles with handwritten labels. "I brought you these. They're homeopathic remedies, all natural, with no side effects. They could help with your pain and build up your immune system. Help you fight whatever it is you're dealing with. We could see how you respond. Maybe we'll find something that can get you back on your feet."

"Ah." Esmerelda bit her lip.

"They're drops, see?" Rosa opened a bottle and dribbled something that smelled like alcohol into her tea. "Hardly taste like anything. You can drip them under your tongue a few times a day. Here, try these. They're boswellia, fabulous for pain." She held out a bottle.

Esmerelda rested a trembling hand on Rosa's. "Thank you, Rosa. You are very kind, and I appreciate your willingness to help me heal." She let her hand slide to her lap. "I'm certain your remedies are effective, but they will do nothing for me."

Rosa's face fell. "You could try them, Esme. They won't do any harm. I talked to Olena, and she said that none of the ingredients were poisonous to Lunar Fae as far as she knew."

"Of course not, Rosa." Esmerelda smiled. "The point is that they will not cure me because there is no cure."

"Oh." Rosa lowered the bottle, shock rippling through her features. "I see."

Esmerelda paused. "My condition is...delicate, and public knowledge thereof would have devastating effects. Only my physicians and Dylan know the extent of it, but you are my friend."

"You don't have to tell me." Rosa smiled tenderly. "But if you do, my lips are sealed."

“Even to Julie?” Esmerelda asked. “The high council cannot know.”

Rosa chortled. “Esme, I’m her mom. I replaced her goldfish six times before she realized something was different about him. When it’s in Julie’s best interests, I can stay quiet about anything I need to.”

“Very well.” Esmerelda smiled. “There is no cure for my infirmity because when I was young, at the very start of my reign, my enemies attempted to kill me by poisoning me with vampire blood.”

Rosa’s eyes widened.

“I was little older than Julie is now.” Esmerelda sighed. “I feared it would be the end of the first Lunar Fae reign since Arthur.”

“I’m so sorry, Esme. That sounds awful.” Rosa took her hand.

“It was frightening, but my healers saved me, bless them. Vampire blood makes our cells degenerate. I am falling apart atom by atom, and I have been for over three hundred years.”

Esmerelda sagged against her pillows. “They were able to slow the degeneration, but there is no way of stopping it with all the magic in the world. Also, most of the research on Lunar Fae was destroyed, perhaps exactly for this purpose.”

“I’m sorry.” Rosa sighed.

“I have lived a full life, my dear friend, even though it was short by Lunar Fae standards. I beg you, keep this to yourself,” Esmerelda added. “You can see how the knowledge would be disastrous in the current political climate.”

“Honey, I don’t need to see.” Rosa smiled. “Julie’s from the royal line. That makes her family of yours, right?”

“It is unclear how we are related.” Esmerelda handed her empty cup to Rosa. “We are both from the Pendragon line, however, so yes, we are family.”

“That makes you *my* family, Esme.” Rosa took the cup. “You’re my friend, too, and I don’t take that lightly. You don’t

need to worry. My lips are sealed.”

“Oh, Rosa.” Esmerelda reached out with a trembling hand.

Rosa folded it in both of hers. Her touch was soft and warm, and her smile lit her eyes as she gazed at Esmerelda.

*How strange, Esmerelda thought, that a creature with a life as fleeting as a human would be a solid rock in the life of one who should have been nearly immortal.* Those words wouldn’t come when she opened her mouth, so she croaked, “Thank you,” instead.

“Anything, dearest Esme. Anything.” Rosa squeezed her hand.

“Your trustworthiness means more than I can say,” Esmerelda whispered.

“You’re tired, honey.” Rosa moved the tray aside.

“There is no need for you to leave.” Esmerelda struggled to sit up.

Rosa chuckled and plumped her pillows. “I wasn’t planning on it.” She scooped the chaos back into her handbag and perched comfortably on the bed beside Esmerelda, where no one had dared sit since her late husband. Rosa retrieved a shiny disc—a hologram generator—from her pocket and placed it at the foot of the bed.

“Taylor put my favorite movie on here for me to show you.” Rosa pressed a button, and a hologram buzzed into existence above the disc. “Ever seen *Two Weeks’ Notice*?”

“I am not well-versed in human entertainment,” Esmerelda admitted.

“Prepare to become versed, then.” Rosa winked.

Esmerelda’s eyes settled on the hologram, and she lay back against her pillows, but the knot in her stomach remained.

If only she didn’t have to hold back the truth about what being a royal truly meant for Julie.

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Julie brought Genevieve to a gentle halt in one of the many parking spaces in front of the civic hall. To her right, a humpbacked bridge crossed the river, leading into Little Fernwood, the vibrant woodland suburb that had risen from the once-squalid refugee camp.

*None of this looks familiar,* she admitted.

*The last time you were here, everything was on fire,* Hat pointed out. *Including you.*

*Bianca told me they'd rebuilt the community center.* Julie grinned, gazing at the building she'd parked next to. *I didn't know they'd done this.*

The community center, from which she'd rescued a bunch of homeless paras during a chaotic phase of her stint as a major in the OPMA, used to be a squat, featureless building, the bare bones of a place to shelter. Now, the civic hall was a collision of ancient and modern. Turrets at all four corners of the building towered against the gray sky, and clouds reflected in the floor-to-ceiling glass façade. Instead of steps, a broad ramp led to the glass doors, which were open.

Julie got out of Genevieve and strode up the ramp. The interior was cool and clean, with a tiled floor and stone walls hung with medieval tapestries. Well-worn but comfortable chairs and couches were scattered around the large lobby, accompanied by peaceful potted green plants: ferns, aloes, and a little palm tree in the corner. Two fridges stood against the wall by the door. One was stocked with bottles of water, and the other contained cardboard food boxes. *Take one,* the printed sign stuck to each door proclaimed.

An orc in a plaid suit who sat behind the desk on the far side gave Julie a wide smile as she entered.

“Welcome to Avalon’s civic hall!” She sounded like she meant it. “How can I help you?”

“Hi, I’m Julie Meadows.” Julie paused by the desk. “I have an appointment with Ms. Darkwing?”

“Of course. Philomena told me.” The orc rose. “She’s in class right now, but it’s nearly over.”

Julie followed her across the room to where a gently sloping ramp led to the first floor. The hallway was broad, clean, and quiet, with children’s artworks framed on the walls, signed with name and age.

The orc stopped outside a steel door painted a calming sage green and peered through the tiny window. Julie took the opportunity to admire a scribbled crayon composition by *Lulu, 105*.

*Dryads live long lives*, Hat reminded her.

*She’s not very good*. Eglantine scoffed. *I’m sure I’ll be better the moment I hatch*.

Hat snickered. *I wouldn’t be so sure*.

“They’ve just finished,” the orc announced.

Chairs scraped, and the orc opened the door. To Julie’s surprise, a scruffy bunch of teenage drow shuffled into the hall, clutching textbooks and backpacks. Their leader, a girl with her white hair in long braids, stumbled to a halt when her eyes landed on Julie.

A dozen students stood in the hall. Many were drow, but others were woodland folk, as well as two dragons in human form. The drow, as one, gaped at Julie.

“Go on!” A Starlight Fae stepped into view behind the students. “Lunch is ready for you in the cafeteria if you need it.”

The students scampered off, whispering.

“Did you see? That was *her*,” one hissed.

“Really?” another returned. “Are you sure?”

“I saw her when we evacuated the Citadel. The Hero of the Battle of Fire and Light!” the other squealed.

*Seems you're popular,* Hat teased.

The orc introduced Julie, and the Starlight Fae stepped forward. She was shorter than Julie, with curvaceous hips flattered by a smart navy blue suit. Pearls graced her neck and ears, and her long silver hair was pinned up. Her hazel eyes glittered fiercely behind her rectangular glasses.

“Philomena Darkwing.” The fae extended a hand. “It’s good to meet you, Councilor.” Her grip was as cool and steady as her gaze.

“Thanks for making time for me, Ms. Darkwing.” Julie nodded.

“We can talk in this classroom.” Ms. Darkwing stepped back and gestured at the open door. “It’s free until our adults’ night classes begin.”

Julie had expected the classroom to be bare and spartan, but a broad window overlooked jousting lists and volleyball courts outside, and the walls were a welcoming pale yellow. The desks were in good repair. A hologram generator stood on the broad teacher’s desk at the front of the classroom, and rows of words were written on the whiteboard on the wall. Julie recognized Drowish and English.

“Were you teaching an English class?” she asked.

“Oh, no. This was Drowish.” Ms. Darkwing gestured at the chair opposite the desk. “Most drow are fairly fluent in English, Councilor, as I’m sure you know from your visit to the Gleann.”

Julie met her steely gaze and resisted the urge to cower. “Yes, Ms. Darkwing.”

Hat snickered.

*She reminds you of your second-grade teacher!* Eglantine had been rifling through Julie’s memories again. *Did she really call you—*

*I don’t want to talk about it,* Julie interrupted.

“It is vital that we not only teach paras the ways of Avalon Town but make an effort to learn them ourselves. This is what

gives Avalon Town its magnificent diversity. We are clasping hands with all kinds of paras.” Ms. Darkwing steepled her fingers.

Julie grinned. “I now see why Kaplan sent me to you.”

“Yes, the good captain told me he’d given you my number.” Ms. Darkwing sat back. “What are you here to discuss?”

“I want to find out more about your role in Avalon Town, Ms. Darkwing. You’re in charge of the civic department, right?” Julie produced a leather-bound notebook and a pen.

Ms. Darkwing nodded. “My department is affiliated with the Eternity Throne, which is why we have not yet crossed paths since I understand you have been posted all over the OPMA.” Her lip twitched. “We support basic paranormal rights in Avalon Town. The civic hall is a major part of that, but we also champion broader needs throughout the town, especially when it comes to providing all paras with the necessary infrastructure.”

“Were you involved with the new infrastructure built in Little Fernwood?” Julie asked.

“Indeed.” Ms. Darkwing’s lip twisted. “There should never have been such a dire situation, but I digress. We collaborated with the OPMA to bring in both hard and soft infrastructure.”

“Hard and soft infrastructure?” Julie raised her eyebrows.

“Hard infrastructure relates to physical networks: bridges, roads, portals, and so on. Soft infrastructure is about concepts rather than physical objects: healthcare, education, access to the paranet and other communications, access to species-specific fuel for magic where applicable, et cetera,” Ms. Darkwing explained.

*Did she actually say “et cetera?”* Hat wondered.

*Shh. Help me remember all this,* Julie chided.

“Sounds like cities need both to thrive,” Julie commented.

Ms. Darkwing’s brows drew down. “Cities need both to *survive*, Councilor. To *thrive*, paranormals need more than

that. They need the freedom to express themselves and access the expressions of others. They need arts, sports, entertainment, and more.”

Julie took mental notes. “What would you say most contributes to bringing diverse groups of paras together?”

Ms. Darkwing rubbed her chin. “Surviving together is one thing, Councilor. True bonding occurs when paras have the freedom to enjoy something greater than staying alive. I have seen different species come together to build homes and wells, but I have seen them share and build lasting friendships when they play sports or make art together or partake of one another’s cultural rituals.”

Julie scribbled that down word for word. “That’s fantastic information, Ms. Darkwing. Thank you.”

Ms. Darkwing folded her arms. “You can dispense with the questions now, Councilor.”

Julie raised her eyebrows. “Excuse me?”

“I would like to know why you are here.” Ms. Darkwing’s steely eyes glittered. “Is the council dissatisfied with my performance?”

Julie sat back. “Dissatisfied?”

“My work is not easy, Councilor. I want to know if my performance has been insufficient.” Ms. Darkwing’s jaw clenched.

“No!” Julie shook her head. “Not at all. Actually, I’m here because I admire your work.”

Ms. Darkwing’s shoulders slackened. “You *do*?”

“I’ve read your file, Ms. Darkwing. You’ve worked miracles against amazing odds. I’d never heard of you until this week, but you’ve had an overwhelmingly positive effect in Avalon Town. Not only during the war but even before that.” Julie smiled. “I’ve come to you because you’re the right person to help me with my plan. I want to learn from you to make my long-term goals for Avalon a success.”

Ms. Darkwing's hands fell into her lap. "That is good news."

Julie grimaced. "I didn't mean to give you the impression that anything was wrong."

"You did not, Councilor." Ms. Darkwing sighed. "My work is often thankless. I'm used to bracing myself for criticism, which I did somewhat prematurely today."

"Let me tell you the whole story, Ms. Darkwing," Julie suggested.

The supernanny façade cracked long enough for a small smile to escape. "Call me Philomena."

Julie grinned. "Okay, Philomena."

Julie explained her thoughts about the widespread divisions in Avalon and her ideas of establishing more cities like Avalon Town to bring all kinds of paranormals together.

"I want to replicate the management and policies of Avalon Town in these new cities," she continued. "We need more centers of art, commerce, and education to bring *all* para species together. We're very different, but that's a great strength if we can learn not only to live with one another but to *bond* with one another."

Philomena's eyes gleamed. "Forgive me if I'm sometimes suspicious of politicians, Councilor."

"Julie, please." Julie grinned.

"Julie, then." Philomena removed her glasses. Her eyes were tired, which was almost hidden by her makeup. "I'm proud of what we've achieved here, but sometimes it feels as though I've had to work against bureaucracy every step of the way."

Julie chuckled. "Believe me, I understand."

"Right now, I'm impressed. Your plan could work, and I'd be honored to be part of it," Philomena told her. "It's not something you can tackle alone, though."

“I understand.” Julie spread her hands. “I can tell you’re busy, but I was hoping you’d be interested in working on this project with me.”

Philomena’s eyes narrowed. “This is worthwhile. I’m here for you.”

“Great.” Julie grinned. “I’ll need you. First, I need to get the council to approve my plan.”

“You’ll need to prepare if you’re going to present the plan well.” Philomena nodded. “I’ll pull together a committee of experts who can guide you on that. How much time do you have?”

“Thirteen...no, twelve days,” Julie informed her.

Philomena sat back. “You’re nothing if not ambitious, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know any other way to be.”

Philomena laughed, an unexpectedly melodic sound. “I’d better get started, then.”

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Julie eased into the bucket seat. *I think we’re getting somewhere.*

*I think Philomena thinks you’re crazy, but she likes it,* Hat observed.

*I think you’re full of shit, as usual.* Julie started Genevieve. *I’d better get to the office and do my homework so I know what these experts are talking about when I meet with them.*

*I’ll guide you, even though you’re rude,* Hat teased.

Julie brushed his brim. *I love you, even though you’re an ass.*

Hat grumbled incoherently.

Julie grinned as she put Genevieve in gear. The Mustang purred onto the street, heading for the Eternal Palace. She

fiddled with the radio's knobs and picked up her favorite woodland station broadcasting from Little Fernwood. Rollicking music, all flutes and pipes, flooded the car's interior. Julie jammed behind the wheel, humming.

*I hate to interrupt your little party, but there's another robbery.* Hat got cold on her head. *Seems like the same warlocks who robbed my tower.*

Julie jabbed the brakes. *Where?*

*A reliquary on Avalon Plaza near Meggie's Bistro.* Hat told her. *They're after more artifacts. Julie, Rhongomyniad is there!*

*Rhongowhat?* Julie demanded, spinning the wheel as the light turned green. Genevieve bellowed in response.

*Arthur's spear, the one he used to defeat Sir Thomas. It's imbued with powerful magic,* Hat squealed. *Go, Julie, go!*

Genevieve barreled onto the freeway, her engine roaring throatily. Julie clung to the wheel as the car zipped and dodged through traffic of her own accord. She swerved hard to take an unexpected off-ramp and zoomed through a quiet suburban district.

“Okay, Gennie.” Julie lifted her hands from the wheel. “Do your thing.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Minutes later, the glittering black and red Shelby GT500 Mustang roared across Avalon Plaza. Encased in her dwarf-made armor, Julie squinted through the windshield at the tall reliquary squashed between a hairdresser's and an electronics store called Electrollics. The building was ancient, with a crumbling authenticity very different from Philomena's sleek new civic hall. Its stone façade had no windows, only heavy iron-bound oak double doors and arrow slits. Copper letters still clung to the wall, so green and corroded that they were illegible, with gaps between them like missing teeth.

*Arthur's spear is here? That's sad.* Julie sighed.

*It was safe there!* Hat wailed. *You can't let them take it, Julie!*

A shrieking vampire bolted across the plaza in front of Genevieve. Julie spun the wheel and dodged with a hair's breadth to spare, then squealed to a halt in an alley a few buildings down from the reliquary. Blue light shimmered from the two UMMVs parked several yards from the reliquary's door, and a half-circle of navy uniforms surrounded the front of the building.

*Looks like the OPMA has this handled,* Julie commented.

*They don't. That was why I alerted you.* Hat inhaled. *The warlocks have hostages this time.*

Julie slammed the door open and jumped out of Genevieve, wings humming. She rose until she was at eye level with the reliquary's roof and hovered behind a billboard

advertising werewolf toothpaste to take in the situation. The OPMA soldiers stayed back, shields raised.

At the reliquary's doors, a warlock in gray harlequin garb used a terrified Woodland Fae in a brown habit as a shield. The warlock's left hand gripped the rough robe, pinning the fae to his chest. His right hand crackled with steel-gray magic, and he held it inches from the fae's throat, where his pulse throbbed violently.

*Why does he look like a monk?* Julie wondered.

*I'll explain later. Do something!* Hat demanded.

"Stay back!" the warlock ordered, his voice low and commanding. "Or there will be consequences!"

The fae whimpered.

Julie spotted golden curls in the navy crowd below her. Bianca. The succubus stood beside a tall, composed orc who had been Julie's commanding officer in her military days.

*Bianca and Droppelheimer! Hat, can you patch me through to their telechips?* Julie asked.

*You haven't announced yourself to them as the Knight yet,* Hat pointed out.

*Kaplan knows. If Droppelheimer knows too, that's fine with me. Do it!* Julie urged.

Hat hummed on her head, and her visor rattled. *Okay, you're through.*

*Hey, Sarge!* Julie chirped. *How's it going? How's the wife and kids?*

Droppelheimer jumped and clapped a hand to his ear, looking around wildly. *Councilor Meadows?* he squawked.

*Hey, girl!* Bianca greeted her.

*What's the sitch, Sarge?* Julie asked.

*Where are you?* Droppelheimer cried. *Are you in the building?*

*Don't go all DEFCON 1 on me. I'm fine,* Julie told him.

*DEFCON what?* Droppelheimer demanded.

*Never mind. I'm here to help.* Julie peered around the billboard, trying to see into the building. *What's going on in there?*

*I'm not sure—* Droppelheimer began.

*Six hostiles. The one at the door is the ringleader, Bianca interrupted. Two more are moving through the building. From the look of the magical signature scan, they're gathering artifacts. Another two have the rest of the order cornered in the eating hall on the first floor. The last one is holding the knight commander—he goes by the title of "abbot" in this order—in his study on the top floor.*

*Order?* Julie wondered.

*They're Knights of the Order of the Sacred Blade. Bit loony but harmless, Bianca summarized. They don't deserve to be blown to bits by these assholes.*

*Okay, cool. I've got this.* Julie cracked her knuckles. *Sarge, I'm gonna need you to look the other way when the Knight shows up.*

*I beg your pardon, Meadows? The Knight?* Droppelheimer looked around for her.

Bianca sighed. *Use your imagination, Sarge.*

Droppelheimer froze. *Wait. Meadows is—*

*Yes, I am.* Julie straightened her robe. *Pretend I'm not here, okay?*

*Meadows, this is highly irregular!* Droppelheimer raged, his big fists clenched by his sides.

*It's also the safest bet for us to get through this without costing civilian lives,* Bianca pointed out.

Droppelheimer deflated but kept his fists clenched. *Very well. Proceed, Meadows.*

*I'll make it up to you, Sarge,* Julie promised. *Hat?*

*Back of the building, top floor, Hat supplied. There's a small stained-glass window. You'll squeeze through.*

*Thanks.* Julie rolled her shoulders. *Let's do this.*

She buzzed out from behind the billboard and swooped to the back of the building. The window was round, and its many-colored panes were edged with lead, but it was open a crack. Julie gripped it with both hands and eased the crack wider, then peered into a dark, gloomy study. The walls were lined with bookshelves and dusty display cabinets. Rusty swords hung above the shelves, and a full suit of armor in impeccable condition stood in the corner.

*There,* Hat whispered. *That's our hostage.*

A slender Woodland Fae cowered behind a heavy oak desk placed across a corner of the room. He was elderly, the years etched deep in the lines on his face. Shaggy gray hair mingled with striped white and gray feathers fell down his back, and his habit had been patched a few too many times. The sleeves were so long that his hands, which he held in front of his body, vanished into them.

The abbot's enormous amber eyes were locked on the warlock in the doorway. He wore blue harlequin clothing, and lightning crackled between his fingertips as he stared into the hallway.

Julie summoned wind, a tiny breeze that fit into the palm of her hand, and tossed it at the abbot. It ruffled the parchment on his desk, and he turned his head with an eerily smooth movement.

*Crap.* Julie's grip faltered on the windowsill. *I never get used to Owl Fae and the way their heads turn.*

The abbot's eyes widened.

"Friend!" Julie mouthed, raising her hands. She pressed a finger to her lips.

The abbot hesitated, then nodded.

Julie eased the window open and soundlessly slid into the room. She paced quietly toward the blue warlock, her eyes

locked on the heavy stone lintel above his head.

*No!* Hat squawked. *This building is a—*

*Let me guess. Priceless artifact?* Julie sighed. *Have to do this the old-fashioned way, then.*

A mace hung on the wall by the blue warlock's shoulder. Julie sent an eddy of wind down the hallway, a hiss of sound that made the warlock lean out to look. She snatched the mace from the wall and clonked him on the head with all her strength, and the warlock crumpled at her feet without a sound.

“Madam!” the abbot burst out, rising.

“Shhh!” Julie hissed.

The abbot stared at her.

“I mean, shhh, *sir*.” Julie carefully hung the mace back in its spot. “I’m here to help you. Are you okay?”

“I am unharmed,” the abbot informed her. “But young lady, the artifacts!” He shuddered. “If they fall into evil hands, the consequences will be devastating.”

“I won’t let that happen,” Julie promised. “What about the other knights of your order? How many are there?”

“Five and a squire.” The abbot closed his eyes, mouth turning down at the corners. “All have vowed to give their lives to protect what lies within this building.”

“Not today, they won’t. Stay here. I’ll be back when it’s safe,” Julie ordered. “Bar the door.”

She swung it shut behind her quietly and hustled down two flights of stone stairs to the first floor. *First hostage safe*, she reported to Drollpelheimer.

He sighed. *As effective as ever, Councilor.*

*Take the first door on your left, Hat instructed. That leads to the eating hall. There are four hostages in there, with two warlocks. The other two warlocks are on the second floor right now.*

*I'll deal with them after the hostages are safe.* Julie summoned fire, pushed the door open, and strode into the room.

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A fiery explosion burst from the arrow slits on the first floor, smoke and flames curling into the air.

Dropelheimer tensed. *Meadows, do you need backup?*

“She’s good, Sarge.” Bianca patted his arm. “Trust me. That was a fireball.”

A scream on the first floor cut off short. Two desperate hands thrust through an arrow slit, the arms clad in yellow harlequin. The hands abruptly disappeared as though their owner had been yanked back.

“Stop! Stop!” the blue warlock shrieked, yanking the habited knight around. “Stop, or I’ll kill him!”

“She’s not ours, dude.” Bianca raised her hands. “We’ve got no control over her.”

“I’ll kill him!” the blue warlock persisted. The fae squealed.

“And lose your only bargaining chip?” Bianca raised her eyebrows. “I don’t think so.”

The blue warlock sputtered into silence.

Dropelheimer’s face was blank, but his knuckles were white when he clasped his hands behind his back. He winced when glass shattered within the reliquary.

“Did you know about her, Bianca?” he demanded.

Bianca gave him her best doe-eyed gaze. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Cadmeus.”

A huge crash echoed from inside. “Come at me, bitch!” Julie yelled. A pulse of glittering orange magic followed, then a rumble of thunder and the howl of wind. Bianca smothered a grin.

Droppeheimer turned to Bianca, his elegant eyebrows raised. “You know *exactly* what I’m talking about.”

A battle cry turned into a high-pitched scream, then a thumping clatter that sounded like someone being thrown down a flight of hard-edged stone stairs.

Droppeheimer folded his arms. “Did you know Meadows was the Knight?”

Bianca shrugged. “I’d be lying if I said I was surprised.”

Droppeheimer’s eyes narrowed.

Footsteps thudded on the ground floor. The blue warlock spun, ignoring the troops at his back, far more concerned about the single Lunar Fae within the building. He jerked the Woodland Fae in front of him as a shield.

“I’ll kill him!” he squealed.

“You said that already,” Bianca yelled helpfully.

The blue warlock trembled and cringed behind the fae.

*Not so cool and commanding now, huh?* Bianca smirked.

Julie chuckled in her mind. *Thanks for not giving me away, Bee.*

*Oh, you heard that?* Bianca caught Droppeheimer staring at her and squashed her grin.

*It was very diplomatic. The Lunar Fae councilor approves,* Julie teased. *Also, are you guys well away from the front of the building?*

*The troops are approximately thirty meters from the door,* Droppeheimer reported.

*Thanks, Sarge. Stay there,* Julie ordered. *Knight over and out.*

Droppeheimer shifted his weight from one polished boot to the other.

The ground creaked in front of the reliquary, paving stones buckling and cracking. The blue warlock whirled again, dragging his hostage with him, and stared in horror as

cobblestones moved apart at his feet. He stumbled, losing his grip on the fae, who saw his chance and bolted.

Julie strode through the door, armor catching the sun despite several new dents and the nasty bloodstain on her chest.

Desperate, the warlock raised a glowing palm. “I’ll kill—”

She glanced at the floor, and a cobblestone flew off the ground and smashed into the warlock’s jaw. His head snapped back and he went down like a felled tree, landing supine with a heavy thud.

“Okay, everybody,” Julie called. “You can come out now. We’re good.”

Blinking at the ruined street and the unconscious warlock, a handful of Woodland Fae in brown habits shuffled into the sunlight. Most were middle-aged, three or four centuries old, although the abbot looked much older. One fresh-faced, freckled lad couldn’t have been more than fifty. None had a scratch.

“All yours,” Julie announced cheerfully. “They’re already cuffed, and the knights have everything they took.” She gestured at a young fae, who held the creepy birdskin bag.

“Move in!” Droppelheimer ordered.

The troops hurried to the building, crouching, weapons drawn. A crew of medics came forward to check the hostages.

Bianca nudged Droppelheimer’s ribs. “Useful to have a vigilante on our side, huh?”

Droppelheimer drew his dignity around him like a tattered cloak. “She was effective, but this is highly irregular.” He stalked away.

Bianca chuckled and leaned against the hood of her UMMV, watching as the abbot turned to Julie. *Just like old times.*

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“No, no. Go to them. I’m all right.” The abbot shook his head as the OPMA medic came over.

“Sir, we need to check you,” the elven medic persisted.

“I’ve been through worse, youngling. Leave me,” the abbot quavered.

The medic inclined her head and withdrew to her ambulance with the other hostages. Julie stepped back. *I’ll make myself scarce before people start asking questions.*

*Should have done that before that bit of grandstanding,* Hat grumbled.

*That was awesome!* Eglantine enthused.

Julie turned away, but the abbot’s amber eyes froze her as effectively as a grip.

“I do not know who you are,” he murmured, “but I thank you for what you did.” He nodded at the nasty feathered bag one of his knights held. “If these had fallen into the wrong hands, the consequences would have been dire. Even this bag is a warning.”

“What is it, sir, if I may ask?” Julie gestured at the bag.

“Ancient magic. Drowish, I believe, with a dark past. Whoever these enemies are, they must have ties with the drow who attacked the Eternal Palace.” The abbot’s bushy eyebrows drew down.

Julie nodded. “You’ll tell the OPMA that?”

“I will tell them all that is necessary, Dame Knight.” His shrewd eyes searched hers. “Secrecy has been our order’s sanctuary for centuries. I believe the same is true for you, so I will not ask your name. However, rest assured that you will always have friends in the Order of the Sacred Blade.”

Julie smiled at the scruffy old fae in his tattered habit, hands still tucked into the opposite sleeves. “Thank you, sir. Be safe.”

She spread her wings and fluttered toward the alley in which she’d left Genevieve. *Well, that was weird. I’ll have to*

*talk to Bianca about an increased OPMA presence at this old place. They can hardly leave all that shit with a few old fae to guard it.*

*The Order of the Sacred Blade is more formidable than you think. Hat sighed. We were lucky that you surprised the warlocks, or this might not have ended as well as it did.*

*Stop pissing on our parade, Hat, Eglantine grumbled.*

*Eggles!* Julie exclaimed.

She landed lightly in the alley and froze at the sight of the tall figure beside Genevieve, silhouetted against the sunlight pouring through the alley's mouth. The person turned, displaying gazelle horns and gleaming curls.

"Hey, Bee." Julie pulled off her helmet and grinned.

"Nice show you put on there." Bianca ran her fingertips over Genevieve's hood. "Also, I love classic Genevieve, but I've got to say, this is one *sexy* beast."

Genevieve flashed her blinkers.

"She's blushing," Julie translated. "She says thank you."

"Takes one to know one." Bianca chortled.

"Let's get out of disguise, Gennie," Julie suggested.

They stood back as Genevieve levitated, glowed blue, and clanked back into her true form.

"Aren't you supposed to be dragging warlocks to justice?" Julie asked.

"Nah. My shift ended an hour ago. Cadmeus stood me down." Bianca fished in her pocket. "Lipstick?"

"No thanks." Julie stretched, wincing as bruises made themselves known. "I've got to get back to the palace and work on my plans."

"May I ride with you?" Bianca asked. "I'm meeting Bacchus there. Besides, I need to catch up with my bestie."

"Sounds good to me." Julie unlocked Genevieve and stowed Hat on the backseat. She shrugged her dragonscale

robe off and tucked it into the duffel bag, then added the amulet, which caused her armor to levitate into the bag.

“Snazzy.” Bianca applauded Julie’s well-cut steel-gray suit.

“Thanks.” Julie flashed her a grin.

They cruised through the streets at a gentle pace, windows down, enjoying the throaty hum of Genevieve’s engine taking it easy.

Bianca leaned against the headrest, long red fingernails trailing in the breeze. “You say you’re busy with your plan to make more Avalon Towns? How’d your meeting with that civic department lady go?”

“Really well. She’s been helpful.” Julie ran a hand through her short, sweaty hair. “I’ve got homework to do, but I was thinking I’d stop by and see Her Majesty first. My mom texted me and let me know she is lucid today. I want to ask her permission to access the royal archives.”

Bianca arched her eyebrows. “You think you’ll find more about your birth family there.”

Julie nodded. “I do. Maybe I can finally get to the bottom of this.”

“I hope so.” Bianca nudged her arm. “Whatever you find out, you’re still my kick-ass BFF, though.”

“Thanks, Bee.” Julie grinned. “You and Bacchus hanging out tonight?”

“Yeah. He is annoyed because he had to come to the palace and wear normal clothes.” Bianca chuckled. “A symposium for the woodland folk.”

“It’s good to see him taking an active role in diplomacy.” Julie shifted gears and slowed at a crossing.

“I’ll take any excuse to see him in a tailored suit.” Bianca leered.

Julie giggled. “Tell him I said hi.”

“I’ll tell him you said, ‘All yours. They’re already cuffed.’” Bianca guffawed. “What kind of one-liner was that?”

Julie squawked, “I don’t practice them in front of the mirror, you know!”

Bianca threw her head back and laughed.

“On a more serious note.” Julie tightened her grip on the wheel. “What’s with all these warlocks trying to steal magical artifacts? Especially Pendragon artifacts?”

“Those aren’t the only ones.” Bianca’s smile vanished. “The *cohuleen druith* was nearly stolen from a family of kelpies on the outskirts of town, and three eggs were stolen from a weregoose family in the farmland.”

Julie frowned. “Weregoose eggs? That’s sad, but—”

“Their goslings had painted them gold in their excitement,” Bianca explained. “The thieves must have thought they were *actual* gold eggs. The weregander got them back, though. Word to the wise: never piss off a weregander.”

Julie decided not to ask. “Have the warlocks kept any stolen artifacts yet?”

“No. We’ve been lucky.” Bianca pressed her lips into a grim line. “You apprehended the most serious attempts, and the OPMA caught them with the *cohuleen druith* in time to give it to a kelpie in human form so she could return it to the loch.”

“Most of the artifacts have magical properties, then. They’re not only historically interesting.” Julie rubbed the back of her neck.

“Exactly. They’ve shown no interest in magically inert objects,” Bianca confirmed.

“Could they be planning a ritual?” Julie guessed.

Bianca shrugged. “Maybe. I’ve heard there are ways to drain and warp powerful magic from artifacts. Qtana was doing research on artifacts imbued with dark magic, trying to figure out how to change the magic to something purer. Could be our enemies want to do the opposite.”

Julie grimaced. “Or they want to cripple us somehow. We might not have used King Arthur’s shield or spear in combat for years, but theoretically, we *could*. They might know something we don’t.”

“Possible,” Bianca acknowledged. “Whatever they want to do, it can’t be anything good, though.”

“Maybe the Knight should prowl around more,” Julie suggested.

Genevieve’s engine bellowed, and she accelerated, horn honking.

“Calm your ass, Gennie.” Bianca patted the dash. “The OPMA is taking steps to keep artifacts safe. There’s increased security at Merlin’s Tower, the palace’s museum, and other places where artifacts are stored. My team was on their way to guard the Sacred Blade’s reliquary when the shit hit the fan.”

“That’s good news.” Julie thought about the Nest, Eglantine’s birthplace in the Deep. “A lot of families might have artifacts sitting around in their houses, too.”

“Kaplan’s thought of that. He’s sent out a broadcast offering to bring items to the Warehouse for any families who want to protect dangerous or valuable artifacts,” Bianca explained.

Julie chuckled. “Once, I’d have said the Warehouse was a great place to take things if you wanted to *lose* them.”

*I can vouch for that,* Hat grumbled from the backseat.

“With the brownies’ new system, though, it’s a good idea.” Julie winked. “The Knight will sleep in her own bed tonight with her hot fiancé.”

Bianca beamed. “Speaking of a certain attractive Aether Elf prince, did Iris give you a date when you can pick up your dress?”

“She said she’d let me know when it’s ready.” Julie smiled. “Something about wanting to do her best work. Anyway, we’ll do a final fitting, and I wanted to know if you’d like to—”

“Yes!” Bianca shrieked, her voice so high-pitched that Julie jammed the brakes. Bianca slammed against her seatbelt, and Genevieve flopped her windshield wipers in protest. “Yes, absolutely!” the succubus squealed. “I will *so* come with you. I was waiting for you to ask. I can’t *wait* to see you in the final version!”

“Okay, okay.” Julie petted Genevieve’s dash apologetically. “Thanks, Bee. I’m looking forward to it.”

“You know what else you should be looking forward to?” Bianca’s grin turned dangerous.

Julie raised an eyebrow. “Should I be worried?”

“Your bachelorette party.” Bianca cackled.

“Uh...”

“Don’t worry, girl. It’s not going to be so wild as to be no fun,” Bianca promised. “All I need is for you to let me know when you have an evening open to do basic planning. Although I absolutely have surprises waiting for you.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” Julie grinned. “I have a feeling your idea of ‘wild’ and my idea of ‘wild’ are not the same thing.”

Bianca spluttered with mock indignation. “Excuse *me!* I *am* your bestie. I know exactly what your idea of everything is.”

“Fair enough.” Julie bumped her shoulder lightly as they pulled up to the Eternal Palace. “I’ll let you know. Thank you, Bee. You’re the best.”

“Obviously I’m the best.” Bianca flicked a shimmering curl over her shoulder. “What did you expect, that I’d suck at this?”

“Eh, I thought you’d be so-so.” Julie tilted a hand from side to side.

Bianca rolled her eyes, and laughter filled the Mustang as they rolled into the palace grounds.

## CHAPTER NINE

Julie's low heels clunked on the cobblestones as she strode across the courtyard, straightening Hat in his badass gray fedora form. Queen Esmerelda's tower loomed ahead. She tugged her jacket to straighten it and quickened her step.

*Do you think Rosa's still there?* she wondered.

*Not sure, but you're about to be waylaid.* Hat groaned. *Councilors at your three o'clock.*

*Councilors?* Julie squawked, spinning. *They're not supposed to be back for more than a week!*

The sight of Malcolm and Arion tempted her to relax, but Julie's gut clenched when Felix emerged from behind the taller councilors. The Sylthana Elf's hair was disheveled, and his habitual glare was absent. Julie had never seen dark circles under his eyes before. Liaine brought up the rear, jogging to keep up.

"Councilor Meadows!" Felix roared, striding toward her.

Julie groaned inwardly.

Malcolm mouthed, "Sorry," behind Felix's back.

Julie squared her shoulders and employed her iciest politeness. "Councilor Kushnir, it's concerning to see you back so soon. How may I assist you?"

Felix stopped a few feet short of her, breathing hard, his fists clenched by his sides. Heat scorched her palms. She breathed deep, reining in her annoyance, and met his eyes calmly.

“Councilor...” Felix hung his head, his voice cracking. “I don’t know what to do.”

Everyone stared at him. Julie gaped at Arion, who shrugged.

“The Mordred cult has its claws far deeper into my people than I anticipated.” When Felix raised his head, tears glimmered in his eyes. “We have lost swathes of young people to them. Schools and universities are reporting record numbers of dropouts. When I investigated them, I found that hundreds of young Sylthana Elves had abandoned their dreams and the service of others in order to devote their lives to ‘the one true king.’” He enclosed the words in air quotes. “They are our future as a people, Councilor, and they’re leaving us in droves. I tried to meet with them, but most turned me down. They called me ‘the enemy.’ They believed I was trying to brainwash them into ‘persecuting’ their king.”

“You said ‘most.’” Julie bit her lip. “Did you meet with *any*?”

“Yes. One, and only because I had known him since he was an elfling.” Felix shuddered. “My nephew.”

Julie exhaled. “I’m sorry.”

“He was so different.” Felix’s lip trembled before he regained control. “He kept talking about this utopia he’s been promised by some shadowy cult leader he refuses to name. He called it a world of justice, where ‘higher beings’ would be given ‘the respect we deserve,’ and ‘the lower life forms would be put in their places.’”

“By whose standards, I wonder?” Julie muttered. “Councilor Kushnir, you know your nephew. Why would he abandon the Eternity Throne?”

Felix hesitated. “Artem’s always struggled in school, Councilor, and university has been hard on him. Perhaps—” He bit his lip. “Perhaps the stringent world of Sylthana Elf academia has pushed more young people away than necessary. The cult has taken advantage of that unrest among our students.”

“We’re seeing similar issues among our people, Julie.” Arion nodded at Malcolm. “Councilor Nox and I were discussing this when Councilor Kushnir returned via portal from the Sylthana lands. Among Aether Elves in our ancestral homeland, discord has been growing because our queen’s court is located in New York instead of in Avalon or on our lands. Impoverished elves have difficulty traveling to see her when matters need to be brought to her attention. The cult has been feeding them lies about how, when ‘the one true king’ returns, he will be accessible to all of his people.” Arion’s eyebrows drew together. “Cult leaders tell them all this while failing to reveal their names, but the people fall for it.”

“The vampires have a similar issue.” Malcolm sighed. “Europe is better after our tour there, thanks in part to King Antoine’s efforts, but Avalonian vampires are complaining that the royal family has been ‘humanized’ by living on Earth for so long.” He winced. “I’m sorry for the slur.”

Julie sighed. “*I’m* sorry for the stereotype, but this is about blood, isn’t it?”

“It is.” Malcolm grimaced.

“*Human* blood?” Julie added.

Malcolm glanced at his companions. “Elf blood is fine, too. Of course, we drink each other’s blood as well.”

Everyone took a barely perceptible step back.

“We have a dark history, okay?” Malcolm wailed. “Everyone knows that, and I’m terrified it’s going to be dredged up all over again after millennia of peace. Vampires as a species vowed no longer to kill for blood when we joined the alliance that defeated Mordred. We’ve been drinking harvested and purchased blood for centuries, but the war has led to a decreased supply of human and elven blood, which is essential for our culture as well as vampire medicine and magic.”

Julie put a hand on his arm. “We know. Your people’s needs are legitimate.”

Malcolm’s shoulders remained tight. “The Mordred cult is promising vampires not only unlimited blood but the

opportunity to kill for it again. Several of the vampires I've spoken to are worried that extremists are pushing for a return to the, uh, old ways."

"What about you, Liaine?" Julie asked. "I know you didn't need to return to the drow lands so soon after leaving, but you look worried."

"My foster father sent me a concerning message this morning. One of the trolls helped me with those screens you can talk through, and Oisín and I talked." Liaine bit her lip. "There's trouble among the chieftains. They might all be allied to Oisín now that Ainè was defeated, but they haven't had to work together for centuries. Spats are breaking out between local lords. If any cultists are still active in the Gleann, they've gone to ground, but if the discord continues, I don't know how long they'll stay there."

Julie ran a hand over her chin.

"Things are not only worse than we thought, Councilor." Arion's mouth drooped. "They're rapidly worsening."

"Thank you all. I appreciate your reports." Julie squared her shoulders. "We need to do two things. First, prevent paras from turning to the cult, and second, bring the lost back to us. I have long-term ideas that could help prevent more losses across Avalon, but it's clear that we need to ease the burden on your constituents in the short term, too."

Felix nodded eagerly. "Please, Councilor. I can't—" He stopped. "I'm not married. Artem is like a son to me." His voice cracked. "He can't be lost to Mordred."

"We're going to figure this out," Julie promised. "Let's meet and debrief in detail so we can come up with the necessary measures. I'll clear my calendar and email you the details."

"We need to do something *now!*" Felix protested. "We are losing more young Sylthana Elves by the minute!"

*Ah, there he is,* Julie grumbled inwardly. *The asshole we all know and love.*

Eglantine giggled.

“We must make haste slowly,” Arion chided. “I would appreciate a little time to work on ideas before the debrief, Councilor Meadows.”

“I’ll be in touch shortly,” Julie promised. “We’ll figure this out.”

Felix turned on his heel and swept away. The rest of the councilors shuffled off in his wake.

Julie chewed her bottom lip as she headed toward the queen’s tower again. *This isn’t good news. I’d known there were divisions among the Sylthana Elves and vampires, but I’m surprised about the Aether Elves.*

*There’s division everywhere, Julie.* Hat sighed. *As few as we are, the Lunar Fae, too, stand divided.*

*Tell me about it.* Julie groaned. *Hopefully, I’ll soon find out which side of the divide I’m on.*

*How can you wonder about that, Julie?* Eglantine snapped. *I’ve seen King Arthur through my ancestors’ eyes. I’ve seen him fight for everything that’s right and true and pure about this world or any other, and I saw Mordred kill my mother. Her tone wobbled. You’re no Mordred.*

*I know what I believe in, Eggles, but if he’s my great-great-great-great-grandpa or something...* Julie stared at her hands, the veins visible on them. *I’ll never feel clean again. I’ll feel tainted from the inside out.*

*You’re not tainted, though.* Hat spoke gently. *You are who you determine yourself to be. The geas that binds you, the one you took voluntarily, makes you far nearer to Arthur than Mordred, no matter which branch of the Pendragon family you come from.*

Julie rubbed her hands on her pants as she reached the bottom of the queen’s tower like she could wipe off the dirt that she felt inside her veins. *I have seen so much pain caused by Mordred’s cult. I know he can never come back, but even the thought of him has torn the world I love apart. I don’t know how to deal with the fact that I could be his descendant.*

*I share my ancestors' memories and wisdom, but that doesn't make me who I am.* Eglantine scoffed. *I'm still my own dragon. Take it from someone who knows her ancestors, Julie.*

Julie sighed. *It's difficult to explain.*

*Your feelings are valid, but Eglantine is right. It doesn't matter which Pendragon branch birthed you,* Hat told her. *You're not Mordred. You've dedicated every ounce of power you have to making this world a better place.*

Julie pushed the door open, nodded at the griffin guards, and stomped up the spiral staircase without responding. Maybe Hat was right, but she was still worried.

When she reached the landing on the floor with the receiving room, the door crashed open.

“*Juliaaaaaaaaa!*” Rosa boomed, exploding toward her.

Julie jumped. “Mom?”

“My baby girl!” Rosa cooed.

The numerous griffins surrounding the room remained motionless, except for one, a young male with a tatty, still-growing mane. His lip twitched. A senior griffin leveled a ferocious amber glare at him, and the young griffin's face blanked.

Rosa snatched Julie into her arms, squashing her daughter's face into her abundant bosom. Julie allowed the embrace for a tactful five seconds, then gently extricated herself.

“I've had the loveliest day, sweetie!” Rosa shrilled. “Esme and I had such a good heart-to-heart. She's having a rest now, and Dylan mentioned you'd be here soon, so I thought I'd relax in that lovely room with the sea dragon.”

Julie sighed. “It's a sea serpent, Mom.”

“Ah, I see. I was wondering why it wasn't as talkative as your friends from Tintagel.” Rosa patted her arm. “I thought maybe it was an introvert.”

“That's not how introversion works,” Julie muttered.

Rosa ignored her. “In any case, I told Ernesto I’d be here for the week. He has a dreadful work deadline, honey, so he’s not upset about having me out from under his feet.”

*Bet he doesn’t have a civil war to end,* Julie grumbled.

*Oh, stop fussing,* Hat scolded. *You and I both know you like having her around.*

*Yes, but having her in the apartment is not conducive to pre-wedding bonding,* Julie shot back.

“When I told Esme, she said I could stay right here in the palace!” Rosa’s eyes gleamed. “Isn’t that kind of her, baby?”

“So kind.” Julie’s shoulders relaxed. “We’ve loved having you, but—”

Rosa chortled. “I’m a grown woman, honey. I understand the problem.”

Julie’s cheeks turned scarlet. “I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t say another word.” Rosa wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Now, are you going to pop up to my new suite for a coffee? It’s stunning, and the views are amazing, although someone should have warned me that the little carved stone man outside the window was alive.”

Julie didn’t want to know. “I can’t right now. Sorry. Maybe dinner tonight, though?”

Rosa let out an ear-piercing squeal. “Yes! That would be perfect! I’ll call my Taylor-bear and tell him to come over.”

*Taylor-bear?* Julie stifled a smirk.

Eglantine giggled.

“Thanks, Mom.” Julie disentangled herself from Rosa’s arm. “Hey, how is Her Majesty doing?”

Rosa’s smile faded. “I’m sorry, baby. She’s not great. I was sad to see how much she’s declined since we visited before you left for the Gloaming.”

“Gleann,” Julie corrected absently.

“Yes, that, dear.” Rosa sighed. “It’s a tragedy, isn’t it?”

“It’s difficult for all paranormals.” Julie nodded.

“Of course, honey, but I was thinking of Esme herself. Whether she was a queen or a waitress, she’s a lovely person. Wise and sweet. I haven’t been such good friends with anyone since—” Rosa paused. “Since Lillie.”

Julie swallowed the lump in her throat. “I’m so sorry, Mom.”

“Don’t you worry about me, dear.” Rosa’s smile returned. “It’s wonderful to have a friend like her, even if she’s not long for this world. Now, if you’ll pardon me, I need to have a word with that funny little man about dinner.”

Rosa bustled off, and Julie watched her go, frowning. *Not long for this world? She swallowed. If she dies now, with the world so divided...*

*Rosa was right to point you back to Esmerelda’s existence as a person in her own right, but it’s true, Hat agreed. The effects of her death will go far beyond this room.*

Julie plodded up the last set of stairs to Her Majesty’s quarters. The door was ajar, and Dylan emerged as Julie reached the landing.

“Oh. It’s you.” He sniffed.

Julie fished for a witty retort and didn’t find one. “Can I see her?”

“Not if I had my way,” Dylan snapped, “but Her Majesty insists.” He swept away.

Julie nudged the door open, and her heart stuttered. She hadn’t seen Queen Esmerelda in weeks. The flesh had melted from the weakened fae’s face, leaving deep pits beneath her cheekbones and her eyes buried in sockets as deep as peat bogs. They were closed, and her hands sat limply on the silken covers. The stained-glass windows were open, admitting a fresh breeze that tugged strands of fading hair over the queen’s face. Her hair, too, had thinned. The scalp showed through, stark white under the steel-gray.

*Mom was right. Julie inhaled. She's...she's not going to be with us forever. I shouldn't be bothering her.*

She stepped back, and Queen Esmerelda's eyes snapped open. Buried though they were, their glittering intensity gripped Julie, freezing her in place.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty," Julie croaked. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"I was awake." Queen Esmerelda sat up with an effort and folded her hands in her lap with a sad echo of her former elegance.

"I'm sure you need your rest, ma'am." Julie stepped back again.

"I'm not dead yet, Julie." Queen Esmerelda chuckled. "What can I do for you?"

"I came to report on what I've been doing for the council and to ask a favor," Julie admitted.

Queen Esmerelda's eyes dwelled on the amulet around Julie's neck. "Of course. Dylan!"

The brownie instantly materialized beside the queen. "Your Majesty."

"I am tired of conducting affairs of state from my bed. Kindly assist me to the study," Queen Esmerelda ordered.

Dylan's eyes stretched. "Your Majesty should—"

"Now, if you please." Queen Esmerelda held his gaze.

Dylan shot Julie a look of pure vitriol. "Yes, Your Majesty."

He opened a portal by the bed, and an elegant wooden chair inlaid with selenite slipped to the floor. It had four equal-sized wheels that rotated silently when he pushed the chair nearer to the bed.

"Tell me about the favor, Julie," Queen Esmerelda commanded. "How can I help you?"

“It’s not a big deal, Your Majesty. It can wait,” Julie insisted.

“My dear young fae, have you *seen* my state? Nothing can wait.” Queen Esmerelda swung her legs out of bed. She wore comfortable but smart elastic-waist pants with a matching fleece jacket zipped up to her chin.

Julie hesitated.

“I’m joking, Julie.” Queen Esmerelda rose shakily, clutching a pillar of the canopy bed for support. “Go on.”

“I wanted to know if I could have a look through the royal archives, Your Majesty.” Julie exhaled. “I’m looking for more details on my birth family. I thought there might be something there.”

Queen Esmerelda lowered herself into the chair with a huff. She took a moment to compose herself as Dylan tossed a tartan blanket over her knees and tucked it in carefully, taking every opportunity to glower at Julie in the process.

“Of course you may, Julie.” Queen Esmerelda smiled. “In fact, I would love to accompany you to the archives.”

Dylan opened his mouth.

“Dylan, my old friend, I believe Rosa would like to speak to you.” Queen Esmerelda leveled a stare at him. “This would be an opportune time.”

Dylan gritted his teeth. “Yes, Your Majesty.” He portaled out.

The queen sighed. “You must forgive him, Julie.”

“May I push your chair for you, ma’am?” Julie asked.

Queen Esmerelda nodded graciously, and Julie grasped the handles on the back of the chair and wheeled her out of the room. The queen directed her down a curving hallway to a short ramp that led into the study.

Julie had expected something vast and formal, with a lot of wood paneling and drapes. Instead, the study was full of books, and Julie instantly loved it. A huge fire crackled

cheerfully in the huge hearth on one wall. The thick rug on the stone floor in front of it held two armchairs, their legs sinking deep into the brown fabric.

The armchairs were leather and elderly, the seats worn by many hours of cozy occupation. A loveseat occupied the bay window across the room, covered with pillows, with a little table suitable for snacks to the side. Only two spaces on the walls were open, and two portraits hung there: one of a distinguished male Lunar Fae and the other of King Arthur.

Julie had never seen Arthur depicted like that before. The king in this portrait wasn't warlike or majestic. He lay on a grassy shore, barefoot, propped up on one elbow, gazing across the water. His eyes had a piercing quality, as though he were looking into the heart of the lake.

The rest of the walls were occupied by bookshelves. Hundreds of spines reflected the light from the fire and the sun shining through the bay window. Several volumes were so old that the leather was cracked and worn, while others gleamed with newness. Illuminated manuscripts rubbed shoulders with first-edition hardbacks from the Victorian era. New paperbacks sat next to an e-reader, plugged in and charging. Julie spotted a whole shelf of romances and decided not to comment. Several looked brand-new.

"To my desk, if you please," Queen Esmerelda requested.

The desk was almost lost among the books. Broad and polished, it had drawers on both sides, but the laptop pointed toward the door. Julie pushed the queen into position behind the laptop.

"There." Queen Esmerelda sighed, resting her arms on the desk. "That's better."

"I love your study." Julie gazed at the books.

"So do I." The queen smiled. "My husband and I spent many happy hours here."

Julie realized the desk was so broad because it was two pushed together. She wondered what the king had been like.

Queen Esmerelda rummaged in a drawer and extracted a brass key with a beautifully wrought head. “All right. Now to the wall beside the hearth.”

“Uh, ma’am?” Julie stared at the blank patch of wall below Arthur’s portrait.

“Trust me.” Queen Esmerelda gripped the key.

## CHAPTER TEN

Julie pushed Queen Esmerelda across the floor, bumping over the rug, and stopped a few inches from the wall. The queen ran her hand over the stone, then frowned, focusing. A tiny segment of stone popped outward like a door, revealing a brass keyhole.

“A secret door?” Julie raised her eyebrows.

“When so many Lunar Fae records were destroyed, we cannot be too careful.” Queen Esmerelda turned the key, and a section of wall silently slid aside, revealing a tiny elevator.

“It requires my magical signature to operate,” the queen explained as Julie pushed her inside. The elevator could barely accommodate her chair. “Press the button to close the door.”

The button was alone and unmarked on the wall. Julie pushed it, and the door partially slid shut. The lines on Queen Esmerelda’s face deepened, and the elevator door closed, then the cabin hummed downward.

“Are you okay, ma’am?” Julie asked.

“Yes, yes.” Queen Esmerelda panted. “It tires me, that’s all. Please, make your report on the council to me before I grow too tired.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” Julie inhaled. “The council was as divided as the people it represents, so I sent them home for two weeks to find out more about the new divisions and unrest in each para group. In the meantime, I was working on an idea.”

Queen Esmerelda chuckled weakly. “I was hoping you would have one of your ideas.”

“We’re still discussing short-term solutions, but in the long term, I’m working on establishing more cities like Avalon Town. Places that are busy and diverse, where paras can learn to work together and be exposed to different species. We could establish multi-species schools where kids can learn about other cultures from the beginning.”

Queen Esmerelda nodded. “An excellent idea for bringing paranormals together.”

“Philomena Darkwing is helping me put together a committee for that. I think it’s going to work,” Julie told her. “I’m more worried about the short term.” She explained the problems plaguing the vampires and the Aether and Sylthana Elves. “I thought of having Ilsa tour the ancestral Aether Elf lands for a start, but that’s a security risk we might not want to take right now.”

Queen Esmerelda considered, one fingertip pressed to her chin, before responding. “The long-term solution will provide the understanding we so greatly need at this moment.”

Julie frowned. “Excuse me, Your Majesty, I don’t follow. It’s going to take years to build those cities.”

“Yes, but they need to be *built*, Julie.” Queen Esmerelda mustered a smile. “These cities should be built *by* our people *for* our people. Perhaps that way, those who have become distant will be less vulnerable to the machinations of those using the darkness in our family’s past to accrue power.”

Julie nodded. “I see. We’re encouraging all paranormals to work together to create something that will improve all their lives. That won’t start when the cities are finished. It needs to start now, as we’re planning them, and continue through construction.”

“Precisely.” Queen Esmerelda reached up and clasped Julie’s hand. The royal hand was bitterly cold and trembled. “You are wise for one so young, Julie.”

The elevator shuddered to a halt. Queen Esmerelda inclined her head toward the button, and Julie froze in place, her heart thudding. *What am I going to find in there?*

*Nothing that changes who you really are,* Hat whispered.

Julie shivered. *I'm not so sure.*

“Julie?” Queen Esmerelda prompted, her voice tired.

“Sorry, ma’am.” Julie hit the button, and the door slid open.

She was unsure why she’d been expecting a giant throbbing neon sign that would proclaim *YOU ARE MORDRED’S CHILD AND A BEING OF TOTAL DARKNESS* as she stepped through the door, but she didn’t see one. Her shoulders sagged as she exhaled, and she looked at an ancient basement of endless dusty pillars and long shelves carved from white stone.

“This was the treasury in Arthur’s day,” Queen Esmerelda explained.

At times, Julie forgot that the Eternal Palace had been built on the bones of Camelot after the Pendragon Wars. “I can tell it’s thousands of years old.”

Queen Esmerelda laughed. “A diplomatic response.”

Dust lay thick on the floor, undisturbed by footprints. The room had no windows, but selenite inlaid in the ceiling emitted a soft white glow that harshly illuminated the cobwebs in every corner and the dust on the white shelves that ran in two neat rows down the length of the archives. Each shelf began and ended at a fluted pillar. Statuettes decorated the top of each pillar. Julie leaned closer and blew the dust from the plaque at the bottom of the nearest one. It showed a rearing pegasus, ridden by a tall, straight-backed fae carrying an exquisitely carved lance and bore the name *LANCELOT*.

“Each of the knights can be found here,” Esmerelda told her. “Their stories are contained in these archives.”

“Oh, what a twelve-year-old Julie Meadows would have done for a summer down here,” Julie murmured. “May I?”

Esmerelda gestured with a trembling arm. “Of course. You are a Pendragon. It is as much yours as it is mine.”

Julie slowly and reverently stepped forward, her eyes skimming the shelves, whose contents were as varied as the stacks were uniform. Magnificent books abounded, great leather tomes with gold-leaf titles and brass clasps, as well as pocket-sized notebooks with well-thumbed corners and pages sticking out where they’d pulled loose and scrolls tied with ribbons and sealed with the sign of the dragon, plus crack-spined hardbacks and plastic binders.

Interspersed among the books were glowing memory orbs, CDs, velvet bags with mysterious bulges, and cases full of USB drives. Julie reached past a hardback—*Gawaine and the Green Knight, According to Eyewitnesses*—and picked up a CD. *Music of the Golden Age*, the permanent marker scribbled on the back informed her.

*This is amazing*, Julie whispered internally. She returned the case, feeling a faint tickle on her skin as her hand passed through an invisible ward.

“Are the shelves warded?” she asked.

“Not the shelves, but the objects they contain, yes.” Queen Esmerelda folded her hands in her lap. “Each one is bound by a separate ward. These prevent them from being removed from the archives. If they are taken beyond the elevator’s doorway, the bearer’s hands explode.”

“Seems sensible,” Julie acknowledged.

*That’s why there’s no dust on the books and orbs*, Hat explained. *The ward protects them.*

*Didn’t stop the dust from settling everywhere else.* Julie drew a finger across a fluted pillar, leaving a shocking white line in the thick grime. She ran her eye down a row of books, all odd sizes, on the shelf opposite.

*Battle of Camelot. Bards of the Postwar Era, Volume XII. History and Tradition of Draconic Bonds with Lunar Fae. Tristan and Isolde. Llamrei: Destrier Ultimate.*

Julie’s heart sank. *None of these are genealogies.*

*There might still be something helpful in here,* Hat encouraged.

*The dragon book looks interesting,* Eglantine added.

Julie pulled it from the shelf and flipped it open to gaze at an image of a rearing scarlet dragon, every scale edged with gleaming gold. *It does, but it's not what I'm looking for.* She returned the book. *There's no logic in how these archives are organized. It's chaos.*

*That surprises you?* Hat snarked. *We've been through this before, Julie.*

*Yeah, with every magical storage space I've been in.* Julie's hands flashed hot, and she flexed her fingers, inhaling deeply to soothe her annoyance.

Queen Esmerelda spoke up. "There is much here, Julie. I fear it will take much effort to unearth what it is that you seek."

Dust eddied around Julie's feet as she turned to the queen. "Yes, Your Majesty. I was thinking the same thing. I have three good friends in logistics at the OPMA who would be more than happy to help if that would be useful to you. They're brownies. I recruited them myself."

Queen Esmerelda's bright eyes held hers. "Your offer is kind, but I must refuse. It is far too dangerous for anyone to learn anything about Lunar Fae."

Julie opened her mouth to protest.

The queen held up an elegant but shaking hand. "I do not question your friends' loyalty, Julie, but this is information that many have died to defend. We have no desire for them to be next."

Julie inclined her head. "I understand, Your Majesty."

"Much has already been lost." Queen Esmerelda sighed. "I fear much more will follow if we are not careful. The only reason I do not think twice about allowing you into these archives, Julie, is that you are a Lunar Fae. Knowledge of your

species will not make you any more of a target in our enemy's eyes."

Julie tilted her head. "In that case, ma'am, I have a better idea." She grinned. "My new friends from the High Magic Division could help organize these archives. Maybe they'd learn something they don't know in the process, too. Although I'm guessing there's not a whole lot Chief doesn't know about being a Lunar Fae."

Queen Esmerelda's chuckle was like a dry leaf skittering across paving. "Even he has missing connections in his life. The same can be said of the other fae, too."

"Missing connections?" Julie asked.

"His story is for him to tell, not me. Suffice it to say, Julie, there are not many Lunar Fae who know all of their past. Many of our family trees have gaping holes," Queen Esmerelda explained. "Changelings have become common, and when they return to Avalon—if they return—they come back to fractured families with much knowledge lost."

"Torrent and Blaze were both changelings like me." Julie ran her fingers over a nearby book. "They found their families. I thought that meant they knew everything about them like I know everything about my human family."

"Sadly, that might not be the case. Our families have been torn to pieces by the persecution." Queen Esmerelda sagged in her chair.

Julie didn't know if she should ask, but she feared she might never again have the opportunity. "What was your family like when you were growing up? Before you ascended to the Eternity Throne?"

Esmerelda's smile warmed her eyes. "Ordinary. We knew we had Pendragon blood, but we kept it secret. A good thing, or we would have been pariahs in our community. My father was a farmer in the countryside on the edge of Avalon Town. The paras there were conservative folk who'd grown up learning about our family's war and the way it had torn Avalon and the human world apart."

“Your family were farmers?” Julie asked.

Queen Esmerelda chuckled softly. “It was during the seventeenth century in Earth time, Julie. Almost everyone was a farmer unless you were a noble. It had been so long since the Pendragon Wars that most paras had half-forgotten that our family was real, not mere figures of legend. We’d changed our surname generations ago. I only retook the name Pendragon when I was crowned Eternity Queen.”

“Your family must have taken you to be tested,” Julie murmured.

Queen Esmerelda nodded. “It was compulsory. We lived as common paras, but there was no denying our nobility. I did not expect to pass the test, much less become Eternity Queen. My father was shocked. My mother, though...” Her smile deepened. “It was as though she knew.”

“I’ll bet she saw the queen in you long before you wore a crown.” Julie laid a hand on Esmerelda’s bony shoulder.

“A kind thing to say, yet true. She was my rock. Your mother reminds me of her.” Queen Esmerelda rested her hand on Julie’s. “I searched for the rest of my family after I was crowned. We needed councilors, and I felt I could improve their lives, yet most of the Pendragons remained in hiding. My parents acted as Lunar Fae councilors before their deaths.”

*Oh, shit.* Julie’s gut clenched. *Hat, you told me the councilors before me died mysteriously.*

*Mysteriously and violently.* He sighed.

“I’m sorry.” Julie squeezed the queen’s shoulder.

“I hope you will find more of your extended family than I did, Julie.” Queen Esmerelda lowered her hand to her lap. “Yet I am grateful, as I know you are, for parents who stood by me. I will never forget their faces the day we came to the Eternal Palace. It was the first time either had entered a castle, and I was so caught up in their wonder that I nearly forgot my own.”

Julie smiled. “I know the feeling.”

“On that subject.” Queen Esmerelda raised her chin to meet Julie’s eyes with a sudden sharpness in her expression. “You are of the royal line. That much is certain.”

Julie shifted her weight. “Yes, ma’am.”

“This makes you eligible to be tested,” Queen Esmerelda told her quietly.

Julie swallowed hard. *Tested?*

*Hadn’t that occurred to you?* Hat asked.

*No! I thought only royal heirs were tested!* Julie spluttered.

Queen Esmerelda laughed softly. “Despite your best efforts, Julie, you have not succeeded in keeping your face blank this time.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am.” Julie cleared her throat. “I...*tested?*”

“Of course.” Queen Esmerelda held her gaze. “It has been a long time since a Pendragon attended that test. Not since my oldest daughter.” Her eyes dropped to the floor.

*Another dead person in Her Majesty’s life.* Julie bit her lip. “You want me to try to reverse Arthur’s curse?”

Queen Esmerelda raised her head, and her eyes were sparkling. “No, Julie. I believe you will succeed.”

It was silent except for the pounding of Julie’s blood in her ears.

Queen Esmerelda leaned her head back against her chair. “I grow weary.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” Julie gripped the chair’s handles and pushed the queen to the elevator, her thoughts tumbling over one another like rats escaping a sinking ship.

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“Julie?” Queen Esmerelda prompted.

Julie blinked, realizing that the elevator door had opened into the study. “Sorry.” She wheeled the queen into the cozy

room. “Can I take you back to your bedroom, Your Majesty? My mom’s expecting Taylor and me for dinner.”

Queen Esmerelda grinned and held up her phone, which had a liquid glitter cover. “Don’t worry. I know about the plan, and I’ve had Dylan take care of everything.”

“The plan?” Julie raised her eyebrows.

“We should take the staircase down one floor,” Queen Esmerelda instructed.

*We?* Julie wondered. *Why do I get the feeling that our cozy dinner-for-three has grown?*

She nudged the chair to the doorway, where the queen directed her onto the landing. Julie eyed the spiral staircase with trepidation.

“Press that button for me, dear.” Queen Esmerelda pointed at an ornate stone knob against the banister.

Julie poked it, and with a soft rumble, the staircase turned into a spiral ramp, ridged to prevent slipping.

“That’s neat.” She pushed the queen forward.

“The spiral is treacherous to navigate,” Queen Esmerelda acknowledged, “but I’ve always loved its curves.”

Julie imagined a young Esmerelda gaping at the gorgeous sandstone spirals that made up the staircase to her new rooms. “I’ll bet.”

The next landing featured an arched wooden door, behind which the soft rumble of conversation was audible. It was rippling, nuanced, and constant, not two people talking.

*Yep.* Julie sighed inwardly. *It escalated.*

Queen Esmerelda turned the knob and pushed the door inward, and happy conversation flowed over Julie as she gaped at the charming, cozy dining room. The ceiling was vaulted, wooden beams exposed, and a flowing fresco of knights on chargers galloped between the beams in dull shades of red, brown, gray, and blue. Below, a hearth contained a leaping fire, warming a floor that was covered with a rug

patterned in golden lions and dragons chasing each other on a dark red background.

A venerable iron chandelier hung from the ceiling, shedding flickering light on the round ebony table that took up almost the entire space. Candlesticks provided more light, which danced on the faces of the assembled guests.

Guests, plural. Rosa sat across the table from the door, beaming as she gazed at the crowd that occupied nearly every seat at the huge table. At her right hand, Taylor gazed at Julie like she was the most glorious thing in the world—to be fair, he had a point—and at her left, Ilsa clasped the stem of a wineglass and looked much more at ease than the last time Julie had seen her.

Malcolm and Cassidy sat next to Ilsa. The lines had faded from Malcolm's face, and he grinned as he wrapped an arm around his wife's shoulders. Beside Malcolm, Julius Nox, the king of the vampires, was engaged in an intense conversation with Kaplan. Droppelheimer and his wife Gloria watched with matching expressions of amusement. Next to the orcs, Alugon's bald head gleamed. The augur of the dragons wore a flowing robe of gold, blue, and purple to match the patterns on the backs of his hands.

Julie's heart stuttered at the sight of three pairs of diaphanous wings on the right side of the table. Chief and Shadow from the High Magic Division, and—

“*Morgan?*” Julie all but shouted.

“Hey, bestie!” Bianca appeared beside her and crushed her in a hug. “About time you showed up.”

“I didn't know there was anything except dinner with Mom to show up *to*,” Julie admitted, laughing.

A tall, curly-headed being strode up beside Bianca. Although he was more clothed than Julie had seen him on any other occasion—tonight he deigned to wear wrinkled suit pants and a shirt unbuttoned to the sternum, collar ruffled, sleeves rolled up to the elbow, feet bare—Bacchus' eyes held a

ferocious wildness as they swept across Julie. They creased in a grin, and he held out an empty gold chalice.

“Hey, Bacchus.” Julie took it.

The goblet filled with Fernwood mead, sweet and smooth. It had a kick like a trapped unicorn.

“Good evening, Julie.” Bacchus bowed. “Good evening, my queen.” He grasped the queen’s bony hand and kissed it delicately.

Queen Esmerelda uttered an unladylike giggle.

Bianca prodded his ribs. “Get your ass to the table, honey, before you give her heart failure.”

Bacchus inclined his head and withdrew.

“I apologize for the impropriety, Major Hartshorn.” Queen Esmerelda loosened her collar a little. “But he is, as you would say, a hot piece of ass.”

“He is, Your Majesty.” Bianca winked. “But he’s *my* hot piece of ass, you see.”

“Is that really Morgan?” Julie whispered.

Bianca grinned broadly. “Sure is.”

“I can’t believe she was able to leave Tintagel again so soon,” Julie commented.

“Dragon magic has done wonders for the king.” Bianca lowered her voice. “She’s started to speak of waking him for the first time in centuries. I thought she’d given up.”

*Waking the king.* Julie’s toes curled, and she shot a glance at the queen.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Does she really think I'm the one?*

*Why wouldn't you be?* Hat murmured.

“That is the miracle we must all hope for.” Queen Esmerelda gestured at the table. “If you please, Julie, I don’t want to miss a bite of this lavish repast.”

Two spaces were open next to Taylor, and Julie pushed the queen up to them. She’d had enough multiple-course meals to know this table was set for eleven.

“Hello, Julia, baby!” Rosa cooed deafeningly. “What do you think? Dylie arranged the whole thing. I gave him menu ideas, that’s all.”

Julie sank into her chair. “Mom, it’s...”

She fished for a tactful word, gazing at the table full of people. All she’d really wanted was to have dinner with her mom and her fiancé, then a long bath to soak away the bruises from her fight with the warlocks and an hour to read in bed. Now, as she looked at the faces of the paras she loved, Julie couldn’t stop a smile from blossoming on her face.

“It’s amazing.” She rested her hand on Taylor’s knee. “Thank you.”

Rosa beamed. “Knew you’d like it, honey. You missed the hors d’oeuvres, I’m afraid, but the amuse-bouche is on its way.”

Dylan appeared, accompanied by a small army of brownies with covered plates levitating over their heads. A plate moved

in front of each guest, and the covers were lifted in unison. The brownies disappeared without a sound.

“Oooh, shots!” Rosa grabbed hers.

“No, Rosa, don’t—” Ilsa began.

Rosa downed it in a gulp, then froze. Her face turned a deep green.

“It wasn’t an alcoholic shot, Mom,” Julie groaned. “It was pea soup.”

Everyone stared. Every other guest held a tiny spoon for the soup, including Kaplan, in whose gigantic paw the spoon looked like a shiny toothpick.

With a courageous effort, Rosa swallowed the mouthful of soup, then spluttered.

“Are you okay?” Ilsa asked.

“Fine, dear,” Rosa wheezed. “It’s a little, uh, discomfiting to think you’re sipping magical absinthe and find yourself with a mouthful of pea soup. That’s all.”

Taylor smothered a grin with a spoonful of soup, the corners of his eyes crinkling. Queen Esmerelda dabbed her lips with a napkin and coughed convincingly into it. Julie stared dead ahead. If she made eye contact with *anyone*, she’d burst out laughing.

The diplomatic silence ended with Bacchus waving a hand. Every glass on the table, excluding Julie’s brimming gold chalice, filled with sparkling mead. Everyone exclaimed in gratitude, and Kaplan downed his at a gulp, then held it out for more.

“Don’t start, Jack.” Bianca laughed. “You won’t win this one.”

Kaplan raised a shaggy eyebrow. “Be fun to try.”

Shadow laughed, startling Julie. She didn’t think she’d ever heard the quiet fae laugh. It was a bright, tinkling sound like a babbling brook.

*Come to think of it, I've never seen them without their armor before,* Julie observed.

*Few ever have. This is a deeply trusted party,* Hat told her.

Chief wore a beautiful gold tunic, the neck and sleeves embroidered with black horses, swords, and shields. The cloak spilling from his shoulders was royal blue. Beside him, Shadow's simple gown was sky blue. The shimmering hair that cascaded down her back was strawberry blonde.

Chief sipped from his glass. "Ah, Bacchus mead. One thing that never changes."

"Not in ten thousand Avalonian years?" Julie raised her eyebrows.

Morgan raised her glass, grinning at Chief. "Long may it stay that way."

Chief inclined his head and clinked his glass against hers.

The third course arrived with a silent brownie escort: a creamy seafood bisque that went down perfectly with sips of the hearty mead. Julie ate the last bite and swigged cheerfully from her chalice.

"Easy, girlfriend!" Bianca called. "Don't want you getting as shit-faced as at Beltane."

Taylor snorted, almost spitting out his soup.

"How did you know about that?" Julie squawked.

Bacchus guffawed.

"Did you tell her?" Julie demanded of Taylor.

He shook his head rapidly. "No. It wasn't me."

"Forgive me, Julie." Bacchus spread his hands, grinning wickedly. "It had been a long time since I had beheld the glorious sight of a thoroughly inebriated Lunar Fae."

"I was still human-presenting then!" Julie protested.

"Not to everyone." Bacchus' grin widened.

"Don't worry, babe." Taylor patted her shoulder. "I thought you were cute, even when you threw up into that giant lily."

“I threw up into a *what?*” Julie squealed.

“It’s okay. It wasn’t sentient.” Taylor chuckled.

“Stop it.” Julie dug him in the ribs. “My mom’s sitting right here. And the queen.”

Queen Esmerelda waved a hand. “What happens at Beltane stays at Beltane.”

“I’m happy you let your hair down sometimes, dear.” Rosa smirked. “I’m enjoying this story.”

“If anyone brings up yetis right now, you’re all dead,” Julie growled.

Malcolm blushed tomato-red. “Oh, look, here comes the appetizer!”

His ploy didn’t work. The brownies had hardly left after delivering the baked brie with pistachios and figs when Cassidy jumped in. “Honestly, I was honored to be there.” She raised a glass to Julie. “It was the birth of a true badass.”

Julie considered hiding under the table.

“Excuse me?” Taylor raised his eyebrows. “We got our asses handed to us. In a sewer. In *Brooklyn*.”

“Hey, what’s wrong with Brooklyn?” Julie protested.

“It’s not Staten Island, honey.” Rosa frowned. “You could have gotten botulism. What were you doing in the sewers, anyway?”

“Trying to save Malcolm,” Kaplan supplied. “After he went on a wild goose chase to capture a bunch of mind-controlled yetis.”

Malcolm cleared his throat. “That was a long time ago.”

Julius’ glare stated that in vampire years, it wasn’t *that* long ago.

“You should get tested.” Rosa grabbed Julie’s hand and inspected it. “You could have gotten rabies.”

“Yetis don’t have rabies.” Julie withdrew her hand.

“Rats do,” Rosa concluded reasonably.

“Yetis make formidable foes,” Chief interjected.

Shadow shuddered. “Don’t we know it.”

“Not as formidable as my healing magic,” Morgan reminded them. The three fae exchanged smiles that told their own story.

Julie leaned forward. “It seems like you’ve all known each other for a long time.”

“A very long time,” Chief told her smoothly. “Never mind yetis. I’m told you faced ghouls and wraiths long before you were a soldier, Julie. Those are dangerous beings.”

“I wasn’t alone.” Julie leaned her head against Taylor’s shoulder. “We fought them together.”

Taylor kissed the top of her head.

“They sure did.” Ilsa smiled. “They saved a lot of us.”

“Including their favorite damsel in distress.” Cassidy nudged Malcolm with her elbow.

Malcolm rolled his eyes. “You’re all forgetting that I helped capture my aunt. Who was in distress then, huh?”

“You were, as I recall,” Taylor teased. “There was a lot of screaming.”

“Taylor, help a guy out!” Malcolm protested.

Laughter rippled around the table.

“You kicked ass that day, dude.” Bianca offered him a fist to bump. “From one badass to another, that was amazing.”

Malcolm grinned and accepted the fist bump. “Thanks.”

The brownies arrived with the fanciest salad Julie had ever seen: roasted beets with a pomegranate glaze and fried cheese that squeaked pleasantly between her teeth.

“At least I don’t have the three of you under my feet these days,” Kaplan grumbled, poking at his salad with profound dissatisfaction. “There’s peace in my HQ without you lot running around causing chaos.”

“Sir, let the record show that I was dragged into most of the chaos against my will,” Taylor protested.

“Bullshit, babe.” Julie batted her eyes. “You know you did it all out of *love*.”

Taylor’s expression softened into a mushy grin. “Maybe.” He planted a long kiss on her lips, to whoops and cheers.

“We all do stupid things for love, I suppose.” Shadow buried her face in her glass.

Chief shot her a pointed look, and Morgan patted his shoulder.

“I, for one, sincerely miss your presence in my office, Meadows.” Droppelheimer smiled. “It was a sad day when we had to replace your desk. My new aide lifted the laptop pad to clean it and discovered the handprint-shaped scorch marks in the wood.”

“Oh, crap.” Julie’s cheeks burned. “I, uh, I’d forgotten about those, sir.”

“I’m not ‘sir’ to you anymore.” Droppelheimer chuckled. “I had the piece of wood framed and hung in my house as a warning to my children about uncontrolled anger.”

“Cadmeus, that was *not* uncontrolled anger.” Chief chuckled. “I’ve seen a Lunar Fae showing uncontrolled anger, and handprints aren’t it.”

Morgan grimaced guiltily, and Shadow giggled.

Droppelheimer eyed them. “As far as two little orcs are concerned, handprints are close enough.”

The fish arrived—trout stuffed with an incredible butter-garlic concoction.

“Yeah, we won’t talk about the time we nearly destroyed the home of the Morrigan.” Bianca shoveled in a mouthful of fish.

“*We*?” Julie clasped a hand to her chest. “I’m sorry, but that was *all* me, sister.”

Alugon rumbled a laugh. “I would prefer that to being trapped in a cave with a panicking wyrm and a Lunar Fae still learning to control her earth powers.”

Julie narrowed her eyes and focused on the stone floor beneath his chair until it juddered. Alugon yelped and slopped mead in his lap. The room filled with laughter, and the dragon made a brave attempt to glare, but he couldn't smother his smile.

“What is the meaning of that, young one?” he roared.

Julie stuck out her tongue. “Don't be an ass, Al.”

“Did you know you were the first dragon Julie ever saw?” Taylor asked.

Alugon raised his eyebrows. “I was?”

“You were flying over the rooftops of Avalon Town the first day I took her there. One of the first creatures she laid eyes on when she came to this world.” Taylor wrapped an arm around Julie's shoulders, his eyes misty. “I'll never forget the look in her eyes when she saw you.”

It was a moment that Julie would never forget: the vastness of Alugon in his dragon form, his glittering scales, the huff of smoke from his nostrils, the great amber eye that rolled to her as he swooped over her head.

“What were you doing in Avalon, anyway?” Julie asked.

“Occasional visits to the Eternal Palace were part of my duties as Augur for Ennowen,” Alugon explained.

Julie arched an eyebrow. “You were a long way from the Eternal Palace.”

Alugon smiled. “Perhaps I scented a Lunar Fae, one I had never heard of before, and I wanted to see for myself.”

“*Scented?*” Julie squawked.

Queen Esmerelda had only picked at her fish, and her movements were slow and tired, but her eyes sparkled as she held her napkin over her mouth to hide her laughter.

“He’s not talking about your perfume.” Cassidy wrinkled her nose. “I don’t think that Brooklyn sewer ever entirely washed off.”

“Cass!” Malcolm exclaimed.

“You were in that sewer too, girl,” Taylor reminded her.

“I think that’s quite enough talk about the sewer,” Kaplan rumbled.

“That was when I found out you were a weretiger!” Julie laughed. “I was too scared even to *imagine* what you shapeshifted into before that.”

Kaplan grinned, showing off every one of his pointy teeth. “I can’t imagine why.”

The laughter was as warm as the crackling fire as the main course of golden deep-fried turkey with a sticky glaze arrived. Flavors exploded on Julie’s tongue as she bit into a delicious morsel. She closed her eyes, savoring not only the incredible combination of sweetness and savoriness in her mouth but the gentle pressure of Taylor’s knee against her own under the table, his petrichor scent, the laughter of the people she loved, different species bound together by friendship.

The geas pulsed hot in her chest. *This is what I’m fighting for. For this, I’ll fight to the very end.*

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Whatever the elevator to the archive had been designed for, it wasn’t six battle-muscled Lunar Fae.

“Get your elbow *out* of my ribs, Landslide,” Blaze growled.

“Sorry.” Landslide shifted.

“*Ow!*” Torrent howled. “You’re on my foot!”

“Blaze, I swear, if you don’t remove your hand from my ass, you’re getting a sucker punch,” Shadow snapped.

“Oh, that’s *your* ass?” Blaze raised his eyebrows.

“Blaze!” Torrent exclaimed.

“Stop squabbling,” Chief boomed. “You’re not children.”

Smashed between the magnificent hulk that was Landslide and Shadow’s bony frame, Julie wondered why this elevator ride felt ten times longer than it had yesterday.

“I’m glad the queen had the elevator programmed to my magical signature,” she wheezed. “We would never have squeezed her in here with us.”

The elevator finally ground to a halt, and when the door opened, Julie and the five fae spilled into the dusty archive.

“Merlin’s crooked front teeth.” Blaze groaned. “This place is a *disaster*.”

Torrent blinked, running a hand over her brown hair. It was loose today, the straight tips brushing her shoulders. “Are we supposed to organize *all* of it?”

“It is a small task compared to many we have tackled together.” Chief rolled up the sleeves of his plain OPMA t-shirt. “Let us begin.”

Shadow walked over to the stacks, picked up a USB stick, and turned it over to read the label on the back. “*Arthurian Artifacts: Current Locations*.” Her elegant eyebrows rose. “No wonder Her Majesty is cautious about sharing the information hidden here.”

Blaze pulled out two books and moaned. “These weren’t even published in the same millennium.”

“That was quick reading for you,” Torrent teased.

“We need a system,” Julie decided. “Otherwise, we’re going to make this mess worse.”

Her classy black beanie rose from her head and spun in mid-air. With a soft *poof*, he transformed into a blue wizard’s hat, the tip slightly crooked, covered in silver moons and stars.

“All right, people!” Hat barked. “This is how this is going to work.”

Shadow’s eyes widened. “That voice. It’s so familiar.”

Chief caught her eye and shook his head faintly. Shadow nodded almost imperceptibly.

Hat ignored them. “The desk over there will be our center of operations. There’s a laptop in the drawer with no outside connection, which makes it secure. We can use that for reading the USB drives.”

“Why is the hat talking to us?” Blaze demanded.

“He’s cute!” Torrent grinned. “I like his accent. So old-fashioned.”

“I am not *cute*, madam.” Hat straightened his point to its full height. “I am the most powerful magical artifact in this room or any other, and I suggest you follow my instructions if you would like this day to go well.”

Fire enveloped Blaze’s hands, sputtering when it came into contact with the ward on the nearest memory orb. The ward flashed purple. “Well, *I’m* about to tear a hat in half.”

“Very macho, Blaze.” Torrent smirked. “So noble. What would we do without you to protect us from a scary hat?”

Two pink spots appeared on Blaze’s cheeks, and he grumbled, shuffling his feet.

“The hat is right,” Chief chastised. “Arrogant, but right.”

“*Thank* you,” Hat snapped.

“I’ll take the first shift at the desk and work on opening the drives, CDs, and memory orbs,” Julie suggested.

“I will begin making a list of topics,” Chief volunteered. “We can organize everything by subject since many of the authors’ names are unknown.”

“An excellent idea.” Shadow brushed Chief’s arm. “I’ll assist you.”

Blaze kicked the nearest shelf. The ward flashed purple, and he jumped back with a snarl of annoyance.

“I take that to mean that you and I will find boxes to help with temporary organization?” Torrent raised her eyebrows.

Blaze scowled. “Okay, fine.”

“What shall I do?” Landslide asked.

“Bring non-book items to Julie,” Hat ordered. “Now, get moving, everyone! This archive isn’t going to organize itself.”

The High Magic Division scattered. Julie sat at the desk in the middle of the archive and blew dust from the surface of the geriatric laptop she had placed on it. It was plugged into a magical battery, and to Julie’s surprise, it booted immediately when she hit the power button.

“How old is this operating system?” she muttered, clicking around. “It looks like Windows XP.”

“Here, Julie.” Landslide appeared at her elbow. The broad-shouldered fae had a freckled face and a mop of mahogany curls. His smile was sunny, but there was sadness in his dark eyes. “Memory orbs for you.” He spilled several on the desk.

Julie grabbed one to keep it from rolling off. “Thanks, Landslide.”

The big fae lumbered off.

Julie held up the orb. “Hat, if you please?”

Hat flopped onto the desk beside the laptop. Julie felt his hum through the surface, and the orb jumped from her hand and levitated over her head, then projected a memory on the stone wall opposite.

Julie gasped. “Hey! That’s the council hall!”

There was no sign of the microphones or raised seating, but she recognized the pillars and stained-glass windows. Where the banners of the OPMA and the Eternity Throne hung now, the heraldic banners between the pillars showed rampant lions, plunging unicorns, eagles with their wings flung wide, and a black stallion rearing on a field of gold.

The space in the middle of the marble floor with its streaks of gold, sapphire, and selenite was empty, but the witness whose memory this was stood facing the double doors.

“Bring it hither, friends!” he called in rich, warm tones like a sip of spiced brandy on a winter’s night.

Something clattered. Shadow stood beside a shelf, her hands empty, a CD case at her feet. She turned her stricken face to the projection.

“It’s been so long since I heard his voice,” Chief murmured, his face pale.

On the projection, a sweating, cursing group of Shajara Elves struggled into the council hall, carrying a massive round object. The memory’s owner strode toward them with a deep, rumbling laugh that made Julie smile.

“Is that him?” she whispered.

Hat’s voice broke. “That’s Arthur.”

All eyes in the room were glued to the projection. Arthur gripped the edge of the round object—the Round *Table*, Julie realized—and helped the Shajara Elves haul it to the middle of the room.

“One, two, three!” Arthur counted, and with a heave, the elves flipped the table onto its legs and settled it on the marble. They stepped back, admiring their work. Arthur clapped a few of them on the shoulder, complimenting their workmanship.

“Never hath such a splendid table been seen in this land, my friends,” he boomed. “Verily, every cut of these carvings be a testament to thy skill.”

“It is true, Lord King, that we feared coming to Camelot,” the tallest Shajara Elf admitted. “Our people have no good history in dealing with others, yet it has been an honor to build this table for thee.” He extended a hand as knotted as a tree trunk. “May peace between our peoples extend for all time.”

“Peace between *all* peoples, friend.” Arthur clasped his hand.

The memory winked out. Chief reached toward the wall as though he could bring it back.

“That was amazing,” Julie muttered, then picked up the orb and held it reverently. “I didn’t know there were any

surviving memories from the Golden Age, let alone from King Arthur himself.”

“Who knows what else we might find here?” Shadow murmured.

“Nothing if you all stand around staring at every memory orb we play!” Hat barked. “Get moving!”

“Oh, Hat, don’t be an ass,” Julie hissed as the other fae scattered into the stacks.

“They’ve underestimated how many memories this place holds for them,” Hat muttered.

“That’s why I brought them here.” Julie poked his brim. “To find these memories again.”

Torrent and Blaze showed up with a stack of boxes, several scorched, and set them on the desk in neat rows. Julie produced an enormous blank notebook from her backpack and opened it next to the laptop, then added a handheld label printer, the one Rosa had used to label everything in Taylor’s kitchen one day, much to his disgust. She printed a label for the memory orb and stuck it on. It hovered an inch above the orb, attached to the ward.

“I guess that works.” Julie smoothed it, ignoring the electric tingle of the ward on her fingers.

She’d labeled an entire box of non-book items when Chief and Shadow returned from their reconnaissance of the stacks, Chief holding a long parchment list of topics.

“Finally!” Hat grunted. “Label one box for each topic, and let’s get moving. Torrent, Blaze, as Chief and Shadow clear the stacks, you label the books for each topic.”

“Don’t stick the labels on too well,” Julie advised. “We’ll have to move things around as we go.”

“Move things around?” Blaze snarled. “No wonder they burned down the Library of Alexandria. Easier than having to organize it.”

Julie and Shadow clutched their chests as though they were mortally wounded.

“Sacrilege,” Julie spluttered.

“Barbarian!” Shadow shook her fist.

“Very provoking, Theophilus.” Torrent tugged his sleeve. “Complaining won’t get it done any faster.”

Julie hummed a woodland tune, one of her favorites, as she got back to work. Check, label if necessary, catalog, and place in the right box. Everything that passed through her hands was fascinating. Hat got bored with sitting on the desk and floated through the room, shouting unhelpful orders. Blaze shouted back, and their arguments were tempered by Torrent, laughter rippling beneath her words.

“Look at this, Julie.” Chief strode to the desk, holding an unrolled scroll. “It’s a record of the results of a tournament in the Golden Age.”

“Which one?” Shadow asked, placing a stack of books on the desk beside Julie.

Chief checked. “The one in the twenty-first year of Arthur.”

Shadow chortled. “I remember that. Wasn’t that the one where you were hungover from the banquet the night before?”

Chief made an effort to cling to his dignity. “I remember no such thing.”

“*I* do.” Landslide’s laugh boomed. “You were unhorsed in the first bout against that teenage prince of the Sylthana Elves. The one with the big pimple on his chin.”

Shadow giggled. “He nearly fell off his horse in shock.”

“As I recall,” Chief muttered, “it was Landslide’s fault. *He* was the one I had to drink under the table.”

“Oh, you drank *me* under the table?” Landslide planted his hands on his hips. “I was second in the melee that day.”

“All of you misremember.” Chief scoffed and strode away as Shadow and Landslide laughed.

Julie battled a sore temptation to check the name of the knight who had been second in the melee but rolled up the

scroll instead. *Their names are for them to tell me when they're ready.* She cataloged the scroll and slipped it into the box marked *Tournaments*.

“How many more do we have to do?” Blaze moaned, hefting the box marked *Pre-Arthurian History of the Lunar Fae*.

“None without refreshments.” Julie got up and stretched. “I think it’s time for a lunch break.”

“You heard her, people!” Hat barked. “It’s lunchtime!”

“Yes, Hat, we *did* hear her,” Torrent grumbled.

Blaze directed a puff of flame at Hat’s brim, and the hat shot up, shrieking. “What are you *thinking?*”

“He’s hangry.” Torrent poked Blaze in the shoulder. “Makes him violent.”

“I have good news for him, then.” Julie grabbed Hat as he fled to her. She reached inside his crown and pulled out an improbably large picnic basket so heavy that she grunted with the effort. Landslide took it from her.

“What’s inside?” Blaze asked eagerly.

Julie took the blanket from the top of the basket. “Help me unpack, and you’ll see.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Ten minutes later, with the blanket spread between the shelves, Blaze gaped appreciatively at the goodies piled at the center. Julie grinned, attempting not to look self-satisfied.

*You're failing,* Hat informed her.

Eglantine giggled. *Why not? Look at it!*

Plastic-wrapped croissants stuffed with chocolate hazelnut filling were piled next to a box of donut holes, sticky with sugar. Two bowls contained generous heaps of little round chocolates, one dark, one milk. Julie pulled a flask full of hot chocolate from the basket and filled mugs for everyone, then opened a packet of stroopwafels.

“I had a Dutch friend in high school,” she explained. “Do this.” She placed one of the thin, syrupy waffles on top of her steaming mug, and the syrup started to melt.

“I couldn't wait,” Blaze confessed with his mouth full.

“Are these flapjacks?” Shadow opened a steaming dish. “With chocolate chips in them?”

“Pancakes if you grew up in America, but yes.” Julie chuckled. “Courtesy of my mom. Oh, there are chocolate-dipped strawberries in the basket, too.”

“All we need now is whipped cream!” Blaze declared with enthusiasm.

Julie grinned.

“Wait.” Blaze’s face froze. “Tell me you have whipped cream.”

Julie fished it out of the basket with a flourish, and Blaze whooped in delight.

“You’ve found the way to his heart, Julie.” Torrent laughed as Blaze piled whipped cream on his stroopwafel.

“I didn’t know he *had* a heart,” Shadow muttered.

Blaze’s mouth was too full to protest.

By the time the basket was empty and the picnic blanket was covered in crumbs, Julie was groaning with fullness. She rolled up the blanket carefully, not spilling any crumbs in the archive, an act she would have considered worthy of execution.

“That was so good.” Landslide leaned against the stacks with a flash of purple from the wards. “I want a nap.”

“No naps.” Torrent prodded him with a toe. “Time to get back to work.”

“Can we burn it down *now*?” Blaze moaned.

“We’ve barely made a dent in all these treasures. Get moving, or we’ll be here until the next Golden Age!” Hat barked.

Blaze swatted him, making him spin through the air with a squeal.

“Don’t hit my hat!” Julie snapped.

“I’m not just a *hat*,” Hat protested.

“I take it back. Beat the crap out of him,” Julie told Blaze.

Blaze smirked. Hat retreated to a safe height near the ceiling and sulked there.

Julie returned to the desk, bent over her book, and wrote until her arm cramped and a crick made itself known in her neck. Hat had returned to the desk, still sulking, and she glanced at him. *What time is it?*

*Quarter to five, Hat informed her. Almost time to call it a day.*

*Yeah. I have other things to do, regrettably.* Julie dotted the last i.

“Oh! Oh.” Blaze sat down sharply on the floor between the stacks to Julie’s left.

“Blaze?” Torrent looked up from the shelf she was dusting with a cloth. “Are you okay?”

Blaze clutched a heavy old book in his arms. He was shaking.

“Blaze, what’s wrong?” Julie pushed back her chair. She reached him at the same time as Chief, Shadow, and Landslide did. Torrent was crouching beside him, her hand on his shoulder.

The red-headed fae stared at the book, his wings clattering against one another, folded on his back. Julie glanced at it. It was a simple census record, a list of names under a heading that looked like the name of a town.

“Blaze?” Chief prompted.

Blaze raised his head. Tears ran down his cheeks in glittering trails.

“It’s them, Chief,” he whispered. “I’ve found them.”

Blaze was a changeling.

Julie’s blood turned to ice. “Your parents?”

“Yes.” Blaze’s laugh bubbled with tears. “All I’ve ever known about them was their names, and no one could tell me more. I couldn’t find out where they lived or who they were, but here they are.” He pressed a fingertip reverently to the page beneath the looping letters inscribed with a quill.

*Cora of Tintagel Village. Widow of Fairfax.*

“Cora and Fairfax.” Blaze wiped his cheek. “They were my parents.”

“The date matches.” Chief rested a big hand on Blaze’s shoulder. “Indeed, you have found them.”

“They were from Tintagel,” Blaze quavered. “Someone there must remember. A dryad or a vampire. Someone old.”

“We’ll go there someday in disguise,” Torrent promised.

“Indeed we shall.” Chief nodded. “That is good news, Blaze. There might even be more details in this very archive.”

“Maybe.” Blaze grinned.

“Still want to burn it down?” Torrent asked.

Blaze elbowed her. “Shut up.” He mopped his tears away and handed the book to Julie. “Let’s get back to work.”

“Actually, I think we’re done for today.” Julie carried the book to the desk. “We’ve done a corner of this place, and it’s looking better.”

She put her hands on her hips and surveyed their work. The clean corner of the archive was labeled and orderly. Boxes full of cataloged and sorted items waited to be carried to their new shelves.

“There’s still a lot to do,” Shadow observed.

“We’ll do another section when we can.” Julie considered her schedule. “I’ve got a day off in three days that could work.”

Chief nodded. “That’s fine for us, too.”

“Yes! That’s perfect,” Blaze enthused.

Julie couldn’t help laughing past the twinge of envy in the pit of her stomach.

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Fingertips trailed across Julie’s cheek. She sighed and pressed her face deeper into her pillow. The fingertips were replaced by kisses that trailed from her cheekbone to the bottom of her ear and down her neck. She giggled.

“Morning, love.” Taylor planted a kiss on her forehead. “Time to wake up.”

Julie’s eyes felt like they’d been glued shut, but she forced them open. Everything was blurry.

“Your alarm went off twice.” Taylor smoothed the covers over her shoulder. “I wanted to let you sleep, but you said you have that meeting with the council today.”

Julie groaned. “I still have prep work to do for that.”

“Aw, babe, I’m sorry.” Taylor rubbed her back. “I thought you’d finished everything last night. You were up until three.”

“Mmhmm. Read Philomena’s reports.” Julie yawned. “Need to gather documents and finalize a couple of things.”

“Breakfast, then?” Taylor suggested. “Coffee by IV?”

Julie smiled. “Sounds good.”

Bolstered by a bacon and egg breakfast and several shots of espresso, Julie strode into the council hall two hours later, clutching her notes so nobody could see that her hands were shaking. Most of the council was already there. She glanced at the tiered seating, noting the downturned lips and furrowed brows.

*No wonder, Hat observed. Hardly anyone was happy about what they saw at home, judging by the reports they’ve emailed over the past few days.*

*Dissension is everywhere, Julie agreed, but hopefully, we can put a stop to that. I’m grateful that all the councilors I’ve spoken to have liked my plan.*

She took her place at the Round Table, nodding at the six other members of the high council. Danijah sulked, arms folded. His report had been succinct, saying little about the dragons of the Deep and proclaiming that they were at peace. The set of his mouth declared otherwise.

Arion grinned as she fished a telechip from among her notes and fumbled it into the hologram generator. “I’m excited to hear more about your plan,” he whispered.

Julie nodded. “It could change everything.”

“It could,” Malcolm agreed.

The last para, a spluttering Woodland Fae, scampered into the hall and skidded into her seat. Griffins shut the door, and Julie rose. “Order!”

Silence fell. *That’s better.*

“I have read your reports, and my heart hurts with yours,” Julie proclaimed. “The unrest and violence you have witnessed among your respective peoples is appalling. No species has been untouched by this problem, and the Mordred cult has taken full advantage of our division.”

She touched the hologram generator, and a large image flickered into life above the Round Table, rotating gently. It showed a city with a keep at the center, streets stretching out around it. High walls surrounded it, but the gates were open.

“No species will be left out of the solution, either.” Julie raised her voice above the chatter rippling through the hall. “This is how we are going to strengthen our alliance with the people: by doing what the Eternity Throne was designed to do from the very beginning. We’ll provide unity, freedom, peace, and opportunity for all paranormals.”

The hall went silent again.

*You’ve got their attention,* Hat commented.

*Go, Julie!* Eglantine cheered.

Julie explained her idea for multicultural, interspecies cities. The council listened, rapt, and her voice got stronger as she went on.

“These cities will not only boost the economy by providing employment and business opportunities, but they’ll benefit the Eternity Throne long-term as strongholds of peace and unity across our world.” Julie eyed the councilors. “They’ll do the one thing the Throne is designed to do: bring paranormals of all kinds together. Paras will come for the jobs, but they’ll stay for the diversity.”

She smiled. “Questions?”

A hand rose in the tiered seating: a leprechaun.

Julie nodded. “Yes, Councilor.”

“Your idea has good intentions, Councilor Meadows.” The leprechaun got to his feet and adjusted the small, round glasses on his green nose. “I can see how it would benefit paranormal species who are urban-oriented, such as brownies, elves, orcs, and many of the Were subspecies, but what about the paranormals for whom city life isn’t part of our nature?”

“Thank you for your question, Councilor Kildarran. You raise an excellent point.” Julie gestured at the hologram and it zoomed out, grainily displaying fields and farmlands. “That’s the beauty of cooperation and of the whole mission of the Eternity Throne. *Every* paranormal species has something to contribute without going against their essential nature. Cities of these proportions need more than builders and scholars. We need farmers, miners, and foresters. We need fishermen, conservationists, and park rangers, too.”

Councilor Kildarran leaned forward intently.

“Leprechauns are solitary, but you have much to contribute without being forced to live among others.” Julie inclined her head. “All those workers will need shoes, so you could establish a leprechaun-owned shoe factory well outside the city.”

The leprechaun councilor’s eyes gleamed.

The dryad councilor rose to his feet. “Councilor Meadows, my people will have much to contribute also. With our help, the trees on your farms and in your forests will flourish.”

“*Our* farms and forests, Councilor.” Julie grinned. “These cities won’t belong to a single species. They are for everyone, and they will need everyone to pull together and contribute our strengths to make them work.”

Glances flashed between the councilors. Then smiles sprouted.

“We all have strengths to contribute to this project. *All* of us.” Julie spread her arms. “Werewolves for law enforcement. Drow for shadow magic. Shajara Elves for crops. Sylthana

Elves as healers. Dwarves as jewelers and architects. Dragons for military protection. Every species can contribute to this project while holding true to their culture's strengths and ideals, and, at the same time, learn from other cultures. We will all grow as individual species and as a collective through this project."

Arion nodded. "Ultimately, this will address the needs of our peoples. Unrest blossoms from lack of resources and connection, and these cities will provide both. We will all be part of the solution."

"Exactly." Julie scanned the hall. "We're not going to beat the Mordred cult by playing their game. If we try to build unity by manipulation and force, we've already lost. Let the Eternity Throne step forward to solve the problems of our paras first and let their alliance grow naturally. Let us be worthy of the loyalty we ask for."

Liaine applauded, and everyone stared at her. She stopped applauding and sank down in her seat.

Hat snickered. *Should've studied the protocols more closely.*

*It's cool, Hat.* Julie smiled. *Look at their faces. I think they're going to be receptive to this.*

"What are the next steps?" Felix demanded. "How are you going to put these plans into action?"

"Once the council has approved the idea, each member will present a report on the duties their species is most suited to perform," Julie explained. "The next steps are choosing locations and drawing up city plans. For now, let us all consider how we can be part of the solution by defusing contention and providing an alternative to the Mordred cult that's based on cooperation, trust, and mutual growth."

The meeting ended, and Julie left the council hall with a spring in her step.

*You said "once" the council approves the idea,* Hat remarked. *Not "if."*

Julie grinned. *I think they're going to.*

*Of course they're going to. It's brilliant!* Eglantine gushed. *I want to live in the new city.*

*You'll need to hatch first, Eggles,* Julie reminded her.

Eglantine sighed. *I'm working on that.*

“Councilor Meadows!”

Julie stopped and looked around. It was Felix. He jogged up to her, his man bun in disarray.

“Can I help you, Councilor?”

“I think you already have.” Felix fell into step beside her as they headed for the door. “The root of the young Sylthana Elves’ problem is that the only way for an elf to be successful, or at least comfortable, in our society is to have an advanced university education. Your cities will open up opportunities for tradespeople that don’t exist in the Sylthana lands right now. If the opportunity to be a well-paid carpenter or electrician had been available to Artem?” Felix sighed. “He would not have been pushed to this level of desperation.”

“It’s not too late for him, you know,” Julie murmured.

Felix looked away. “You weren’t there. I’m not so sure, but I feel that there’s a way forward for other elves now.” He shivered. “The look in his eyes... No one should ever have to see that in someone they care about.”

Julie bit back a snarky internal comment about Felix’s ability to care.

“You’ll have my report by morning.” Felix’s eyes narrowed. “I expect you’ll move quickly on this, Meadows. There’s no time to waste.”

He stalked away.

*Still an asshole,* Julie muttered inwardly. *At least he’s in agreement, though.* She smiled. *I think all of them are.*

*How could they not be?* Eglantine asked proudly. *Your idea is amazing.*

*Thanks, Eggles.* Julie quickened her step. *Either way, I have the week free now, and I am so ready for some bestie*

*time! Bianca will be—*

*Oh, shit,* Hat groaned.

Julie stopped. *What?*

Hat sighed. *There's been another warlock smash-and-grab.*

Julie snatched Genevieve's keys from her pocket and broke into a jog. *Where?*

*A hairdresser's on Avalon Plaza. No need to run. The OPMA's already been there,* Hat told her.

*Call Bianca,* Julie ordered. *I want you in on this conversation, so I need a telepathic link, not a phone.*

Hat hummed as Julie strode from the Eternal Palace and made for Genevieve.

*Hey, girl!* Bianca chirped in Julie's mind a second later. *Are you on your way to Iris' place? Because let me tell you—*

*Bee, what's this I hear about another warlock break-in?* Julie asked.

*We're doing the last fitting of your dress today, Julie, and you've already changed the world enough with your meeting this morning. Can't it wait?* Bianca lamented.

Julie unlocked Genevieve and flung herself behind the Mustang's wheel. *Details, Bee, details. I need to know.*

*Of course you do.* Bianca chuckled. *First, though, tell me you're on your way here. We are not going on a wild warlock chase instead of fitting your dress.*

Julie hesitated.

*We've got the warlocks in custody,* Bianca added.

Julie rolled her eyes. *Okay, okay, I'm coming. Now tell me! Hat says a salon was involved?*

*Yeah, my hairdresser!* Bianca snorted indignantly. *They scared the shit out of poor Fabio, not that it takes much. He's the only guy who can handle succubus curls! But he's okay, and nothing was taken.* She sighed. *Mostly because the break-in there was a diversion.*

*For what?* Julie's hands tightened on the wheel as she drove out of the palace.

*A second burglary. They were smarter about this one.* Bianca paused. *They burgled Mina's home.*

*The one outside Avalon Town?* Julie asked.

*The same. Nothing was taken, but they'd planned it well. Two warlocks searched it while the housekeeper was in town for groceries. She had to turn back for something and stumbled on them in the act,* Bianca explained.

Goosebumps prickled Julie's arms. *Is she okay?*

*Girl, she's a vampire. She brought the warlocks to us hog-tied with a washing line.* Bianca chuckled. *She was mostly pissed because the fight messed up her hair.*

Julie cruised onto the main road, heading for central Avalon Town, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel in thought. *I'm guessing there were valuables in Mina's house that weren't taken.*

*Yep,* Bianca confirmed. *Shitloads of jewelry and so on.*

*They were looking for something specific. A magical artifact.* Julie ran a hand over her jaw. *If we eliminate the salon as a diversion, they were after something in Merlin's Tower, the reliquary belonging to the Sacred Blade, or Mina Nox's house.*

*You're right. They're not stealing willy-nilly. They've taken artifacts along the way, but nothing with any resale value,* Hat acknowledged. *You can't exactly flog Arthur's shield on the black market. It's far too recognizable.*

*They are stealing the items for their magical value,* Eglantine guessed. *Not their monetary value.*

*Crap! Who's that?* Bianca squawked.

*Oh, yeah. Bianca, meet Eggy.* Julie smiled. *Eggy, meet—*

*Bee!* Eglantine squealed. *I've seen so much about you in Julie's memories!*

A pregnant pause hung in the air.

*That's nice, Bianca ventured. Good to meet you, Eggles. Welcome to the badass bitch crew.*

*Hey!* Hat protested.

*Badass bitch and a hat crew,* Bianca corrected. *Where were we?*

Julie took the off-ramp to Avalon Plaza. *Talking about how the artifacts were stolen for their magic properties. What did we find in the creepy-ass bird bag, Hat?*

*Nimue's necklace and Arthur's helm and dagger,* Hat responded. *That was at my...at Merlin's tower.*

*I didn't see what they tried to take at the reliquary,* Julie admitted. *But the Knights of the Order of the Sacred Blade are tasked with keeping Arthurian artifacts, aren't they?*

*That's right.* Bianca paused. *The only non-Arthurian artifact they've tried to steal is the cohuleen druith.*

Julie grimaced. *I'm no artifact expert. What's that?*

*A cap that allows water creatures like kelpies and merrows to resume their true aquatic form after shifting into humans,* Hat explained.

*Then there was the break-in at Mina Nox's house.* Julie frowned. *Another glitch in the pattern.*

*Not necessarily,* Eglantine broke in. *All seven of the families that now make up the High Council were given Arthurian artifacts in the wake of the Second Pendragon War to acknowledge their allegiance to the Eternity Throne—Arthur's throne.*

*The cohuleen thingy might not be Arthurian, but I can see how it would be useful.* Julie chewed the inside of her cheek as she steered across Avalon Plaza. *You could disguise a humanoid as an aquatic creature, right?*

Yes, Hat confirmed.

*Shit.* Fear gripped Julie's chest.

*What?* Bianca wondered.

*You guys, these warlocks are stealing Arthurian artifacts of power. They've broken into only one home belonging to those seven families—Mina Nox's, the vampire whose mind was damaged by Nimue's geas. Julie bit her lip. What if those warlocks are from the Mordred cult? Does this have something to do with him?*

*Merlin's steaming turds, Bianca cursed.*

*It's got to be. Julie stopped for a red light at the edge of Avalon Plaza. When else have you seen so many warlocks working together and complete silence during interrogation?*

*The link is undeniable, Hat murmured. The question is, what is their goal? What are they looking for?*

*Could it be the pierre des âmes? Eglantine asked.*

Julie was grateful that she wasn't the only one to greet that statement with nonplussed silence.

*The what? Bianca inquired.*

*I shudder to speak its name, Hat hissed. Much less to bring it into this conversation.*

*What is it, Voldemort? Julie demanded. What's the big deal?*

*It's also known as the soul of stones or the darkstone, Eglantine explained. My ancestors were painfully familiar with it.*

*They cannot dream of stealing the darkstone. Hat was cold on Julie's scalp. Who would use a soul-stealing gem?*

*Soul-stealing? Julie raised her eyebrows.*

*Anyone whose life force is drained by the darkstone has to spend eternity with their consciousness trapped inside it, Eglantine clarified.*

Julie's hand slipped on the gear lever, and Genevieve roared in protest. *Shit.*

*What could anyone want with that? Bianca scoffed. I'm with Hat. It can't be.*

*The darkstone has powers that nobody truly understands. Dark magic beyond the comprehension of most mortals. Eglantine's voice was low.*

*Not even the cultists would go to such lengths. Handling the darkstone is madness. It is as dangerous to the user as to anyone else, Hat protested.*

*Julie shivered, but heat flashed through her palms. Nimue nearly killed an entire village full of paras to get my attention. There's no line the cultists won't cross if they think they can "save" Mordred from the prison realm.*

*Bianca sighed. I'm with you, Julie. Those assholes are a special kind of evil.*

*You both fail to understand, Hat argued. It's not about how evil the stone is, although there's no denying that it holds some of the deepest darkness any world has ever known. It's about the danger to the user. Proximity to the stone is enough to drive someone mad.*

*That's not very politically correct, Hat, Julie chided.*

*Mad, Julie. Not mentally ill. Mad with a madness that goes far beyond the brain. A madness that seeps into the very soul. Hat's brim was icy on Julie's forehead. Who knows how many of the thousands of voices that scream for release from the darkstone belonged to foolish paras who thought they were powerful enough to wield its magic?*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Julie turned down the narrow street that held Iris Fashions, spotting a leggy woman with gazelle horns and glorious curls waiting for her outside the boutique. *Hat, that was creepy as shit.*

*You're not taking this seriously, Hat argued. That stone is an evil unlike any you have faced before, and you fought Nimue's lightning magic.*

*You're the one who keeps saying it can't be the warlocks' goal, Bianca argued.*

Julie parked and stepped out. "Yeah, Hat, what about that?" She gave Bianca a high-five.

"That's because it *can't* be," Hat retorted.

"What if they're under mind control or geasa like the cult's other followers?" Bianca asked.

Julie followed the succubus to the sweet-smelling boutique, inside which several well-heeled clients browsed the designs. "Yeah. I mean, look at the yetis. They sacrificed themselves under Qbiit's mind control. What if the warlocks don't have a choice either?"

"Don't give me that codswallop." Hat scoffed. "You looked into the yetis' eyes. This isn't mind control."

"I looked into Mina Nox's, too. All I know about mind control is that it's a dark magic I don't understand," Julie admitted. "The cultists could still be after it, even if they know they'd wield it at tremendous personal cost."

Hat snorted. “It doesn’t matter. They’ll never get their hands on it anyway.”

Julie raised her eyebrows. “*Never?*”

*Certain things can’t be said out loud.* Hat sighed in Julie and Bianca’s minds. *The darkstone cannot be taken because it’s at Tintagel. Morgan locked it behind several layers of deadly warding. Even Merlin couldn’t lay his hands on it.*

Julie smothered a grin. “Even Merlin, huh?”

“Julie!” Iris burst out from behind a mannequin and seized Julie in a rib-crushing hug.

“You’ve been spending too much time with my mom,” Julie croaked. “She’s rubbing off on you.”

“A great compliment. Thank you!” Iris giggled. “Are you ready for your final fitting?”

“I don’t know if she is, but *I* am.” Bianca beamed.

“Let’s go!” Iris grabbed Julie by the wrist and towed her to the dressing room.

Bianca trailed behind them. “Okay, so it’s secure,” she acknowledged. “But they don’t know that. Do they?”

“No. Hey!” Hat protested as Iris grabbed him and flung him onto a nearby couch.

“Sorry, Hat, but you’ll have to wait. No boys behind the curtain.” Iris pulled the curtains closed around Julie.

“Do they?” Bianca repeated outside the curtains.

“I already told you no,” Hat snapped. “Almost nobody knows except Morgan.”

“Morgan and Julie’s magic hat, apparently,” Bianca retorted.

“He’s not just a magic hat,” Julie called, unbuttoning her blouse.

“What are we talking about?” Iris inquired, retrieving Julie’s dress from the hanger.

“The reason for all the warlock break-ins lately.” Julie shrugged out of her work clothes.

Iris grimaced. “They’re so sad. I’m glad the OPMA has kept anything from being taken, though.”

“So far,” Bianca muttered.

Julie lowered her voice. “We think they might be after an important artifact in Tintagel.”

Iris raised her eyebrows and let out a low whistle. “Something dangerous?”

“Very dangerous,” Julie agreed.

Iris held open the dress. “Step in.”

Julie rested a hand on the elf’s shoulder as she climbed into the dress and obediently allowed her arms to be shoved down the sleeves. Lace tickled her collarbones, and the sturdy fabric tightened around her torso as Iris fastened the back.

“Lovely!” Iris fanned out the train. “Let’s take a look in the mirror before we make the last adjustments.”

She held the curtain back for Julie, who strode to the dais and gazed at her reflection. The bride in the mirror smiled at her, the most splendid version of herself she’d seen yet. That included her badassery with fireballs and armor. This version of Julie looked no less strong, but she looked happier.

“This is all I want, you know,” she murmured.

“It’s all any girl could want—to look *that* perfect in her wedding dress,” Bianca quipped.

“Seriously, Bee?” Julie chuckled. “Where’s your inner feminist?”

“Does my feminist look inner to you?” Bianca swept a hand from the tips of her sharp horns to the heels of her tall boots.

“Your bestie clearly isn’t going to ask, so I will.” Iris fussed with Julie’s train. “What’s all you want?”

“Peace.” Julie raised her hands, admiring the way the chiffon sleeves floated with the movement. “I love being a warrior and fighting for what I believe in, but imagine a world where we didn’t have to fight for it. Where all good things are safe.”

“I don’t think we’ll see that in this life.” Bianca met her eyes in the mirror. “We can sure as shit believe in it, though.”

“Maybe even see glimpses of it right here, right now.” Iris beamed. “Look at you, Julie. You’re gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” Julie ran her hands over the shimmering skirt. “What adjustments are you thinking of, Iri? It looks perfect to me.”

“Magic is good, but hand-sewn adjustment here and there will make it perfect.” Iris held out a hand, and a pincushion zoomed from behind the curtains and landed in her palm. “Hold still.”

Julie obediently froze. “Hat, is there any way for the warlocks to find out where the stone is?”

“I would say no,” Hat muttered darkly, “but with the information Mina already gave the cult, it’s not impossible.”

“Then you had better do something about it before they crash the wedding to find it,” Iris suggested.

Julie tilted her head. “Iri, you’re a genius.”

Bianca grinned. “I know that smile. What are you thinking?”

“For the purposes of this conversation, nothing!” Iris straightened and tossed up the pincushion, which flew back behind the curtains. “No more work talk. It’s time for you to choose your accessories!” She sang the last words, hands clasped beneath her chin.

Julie batted her wings joyfully, reflecting that if anyone was going to be a fairy’s fairy godmother, Iris was she.

“Shoes first!” Iris announced. She gestured, and a giant wheeled chest upholstered in pale pink rumbled to her from one corner.

“Shoes?” Julie grimaced. “I think I’ll go with combat boots. No plan Taylor and I have made has gone uninterrupted by a fight. It took him so many tries to propose.”

“You are *not* wearing combat boots on your wedding day,” Iris squawked, horrified.

Bianca opened the trunk and scanned its contents. “Ooh, what about these?” She held up a pair of glittering six-inch stilettos. “You’d have weapons if it happens.”

“No!” Iris grabbed the stilettos and thrust them into the chest. “No, no, no, no, no. No weaponized footwear on one’s wedding day.” She pulled back the top two drawers in the chest, which disappeared by apparent magic. “Here, Julie. *These* are my best.”

Julie and Bianca leaned over the chest. With a soft *whoosh*, Hat appeared over Julie’s left shoulder, his point tipping forward as he peered inside.

“Wow.” Julie caressed a pair of dancing slippers that reflected the light in an explosion of rainbow colors. “Are these made of glass?”

“Modeled on Cinderella’s,” Iris explained proudly. “All of these are based on famous magical footwear.”

Bianca chortled.

Julie lifted a pair of silver sandals, their straps impossibly delicate and studded with tiny white wings, the feathers smaller than her pinky nail. “Let me guess, the Talaria?”

“Hermes’ winged sandals.” Hat chuckled. “Very good!”

“They’re gorgeous,” Bianca cooed.

“Will these take me to Oz?” Julie touched a pair of sparkling red crystal shoes.

“No, but they’re similar to the ones that took Dorothy. A braver knight never graced the annals of history.” Iris sighed. “Not convinced they’ll go with your dress, though.”

“What about these? They’re stunning!” Julie pulled out a pair of thigh-high boots made of supple leather.

“Yeah, no.” Iris briskly retrieved them. “I put too much of the original magic in them. They take seven-league steps.”

“Seven leagues?” Bianca arched her eyebrows. “That’s over twenty miles. Good luck making a stately walk down the aisle.”

Iris grimaced. “Groins were torn.”

“*That* would make for an unpleasant honeymoon,” Hat commented.

“No talking about the honeymoon, you gross old man.” Julie pushed the red shoes aside. “Oh, *these! These!*”

The shoes she raised from the chest were velvety soft, made from a softly shining fabric that felt thinner than paper but solid. They were a faint pearlescent pink where the light struck them. The tiniest pink lotus flowers, their lines finer than could be drawn with a pen, were embroidered around the soles, which were solid, but the peep toes and cutouts made them elegant.

“They’re perfect,” Bianca proclaimed.

“Based on the cloud-stepping boots, a treasure of the dragon kings of old.” Iris smiled. “The originals were woven from lotus fiber, but I made these from lotus petals and doeskin. They could fly, but these don’t.”

Julie brushed the toes. “They’re beautiful!”

“Put them on,” Bianca ordered.

Julie slipped the shoes on, and Iris laced them. Facing the mirror, Julie gripped her skirt and lifted it enough to wiggle her toes.

“I love them.”

“They’re gorgeous. I’ll add a little selenite to make them a perfect match for your dress.” Iris seized Hat from thin air.

“Ow!” Hat roared.

“Stop complaining and listen to Julie.” Iris held him out. “Talk to me about jewelry.”

Julie touched the space between her collarbones. “I don’t know. I’ve never worn earrings.”

“A necklace it is, then.” Hat *poofed* and appeared on Julie’s neck as a slender chain of selenite crystals in the shapes of raindrops and swirls. A heavy moonstone pendant hung elegantly in the V-neck of her dress, carved into a tongue of flame.

Julie’s breath caught, and she touched her fingertips to the pendant. “Perfect.”

“Have you ever thought about designing, Hat?” Iris asked seriously.

“Shut up,” Hat grumbled.

“The dress you created at Julie’s engagement party—” Iris began.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Hat interrupted.

*Guess who was the progenitor of the moon and stars motifs on warlocks’ hats and robes?* Eglantine whispered.

Julie smothered a giggle. *I thought those were magical!*

*Oh, no. Only stylish,* Eglantine told her.

Julie filed that under *Things to Give Hat Shit About Later*.

“Okay, get the veil!” Bianca squealed. “We need to see the full look!”

“Close your eyes,” Iris ordered. “This is the magical part.”

Julie obeyed, feeling faint tugs as Iris settled the veil on her head.

“Fan it out like this,” Iris instructed.

Bianca nearly yanked Julie’s head off.

“Ow!” Julie complained.

“You’re fanning a veil, not beheading a minotaur,” Iris protested.

“Sorry.” Bianca tugged the veil straight. “Like this?”

“Perfect.” Iris inhaled. “Wow.”

“Open your eyes, Julie,” Bianca encouraged.

Julie did so and saw herself as a bride, complete in every detail, for the first time. A woman in pure white. The fierce curves of her arms under the lacy sleeves, the strength in her bright eyes. The delicate folds of her veil and train.

It meant that she was about to marry the silly, funny, fiercely courageous, loving man who held her heart. It meant far more than a wedding day. It meant a marriage, something more precious and enduring than the brightest crystal on her necklace. Tears filled Julie’s eyes. She’d take off the dress, the shoes, and the veil, and her necklace would turn into a hat again, a warrior’s helm or a councilor’s fascinator. The marriage was far deeper. They’d be one.

She closed her eyes, hot tears spilling down her cheeks, and heard Taylor’s laughter in the kitchen while they made dinner together. Felt his kisses on her neck in the early mornings. Felt the pressure of his arms on lazy afternoons. Heard his battle cry beside her when they faced enemies together. Heard him sobbing on her shoulder when loss caught up with them. Whatever came, they’d face it together long after the dress had been put away. At that moment, nothing else existed.

Something soft brushed Julie’s shoulder. She opened her eyes and accepted a tissue from the box Iris proffered.

The elf beamed. “I think we’re done here.”

Bianca wailed, tears pouring down her tomato-red face. “I love you all so much!” She grabbed Iris and Julie in a crushing embrace.

Laughing, Julie leaned into the group hug.

“I’m being crushed,” Hat moaned.

All three of them ignored him.

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Julie stretched an arm out the window and let out a long whoop. Genevieve responded, her gear shift jumping from Julie's grip as the Mustang downshifted. The engine's bellow shook the car. Though she was going a hundred miles an hour, Genevieve accelerated.

"Yeah, baby!" Julie cried.

Beside her, Taylor's rich, melodic laugh echoed through the car. With the windows down, his brown hair streamed in the wind. "Go, Gennie, go!"

Genevieve didn't need to be told twice. The country road stretched out for mile upon mile, hill upon hill, and the needle on the Mustang's speedometer jumped.

Julie abandoned the wheel and raised both hands above her head. "Woohoo!"

Taylor's fingers grabbed hers. "That's it, Gennie!"

With Genevieve driving herself, Julie turned to Taylor. His shining dark eyes crinkled at the corners.

"I can't wait to marry you," Julie murmured.

His fingers tightened. "I can't wait to marry *you*."

Genevieve honked loudly in protest, slowing down.

"Sorry, Gennie. Are we too sappy for you?" Julie patted the dash.

"It's time for a lunch break anyway," Taylor pointed out.

The Mustang grudgingly allowed Julie to control the gearshift and steering wheel again, and she steered her onto the grassy verge. Not a soul was in sight as they stepped out of the car. Fragrant heather bloomed purple on the hills. The only living thing Julie saw, apart from Taylor and, arguably, Genevieve, was a curlew wheeling in the blue sky and a curious hedgehog snuffling the green grass.

Taylor spread out a tartan picnic blanket, a gift from Aitken, and sat. "Ooh, springy." He smirked at Julie, his eyes traveling up and down her body.

“Stop it, you,” Julie teased, then hauled a picnic basket out of Genevieve’s trunk.

“C’mere.” Taylor grabbed her by the waist as she bent to put the basket down.

“Hey!” Julie squealed and giggled as Taylor pulled her down beside him and rolled her onto her back, playfully pinning her down.

He grinned at her, hair wild from the drive. “I’ve got you now.”

“I’ll have you know, I can ignite my entire body at will,” Julie taunted.

Taylor chuckled. “I can ignite your entire body at will.”

“I refuse to comment on the grounds that I might agree with you.” Julie tipped up her chin.

Taylor planted a lingering kiss on her lips, then rolled aside. “What’s for lunch?”

Julie grimaced. “Romantic picnic a la Rosa. Brace yourself.”

Taylor wiggled his eyebrows as he opened the picnic basket. “Is this...spaghetti and meatballs?”

Julie groaned. “I only said that scene from *Lady and the Tramp* was the most romantic thing ever *one* time, and I was twelve!”

Taylor chortled. “Actually, you’ve said it at least twice since I’ve known you.” He produced a parcel wrapped in brown paper. “She packed beef sandwiches and apples.”

Julie prodded him in the ribs. “Asshole.”

“You fell for it.” Taylor unwrapped the sandwiches.

They ate in companionable silence, watching the curlew and the sunlight gleaming on Genevieve’s sleek, speedy body.

“So.” Taylor dusted crumbs from his shirt. “What’s highest on the list to check with Morgan when we get to Tintagel?”

Julie picked up Taylor's discarded crust and wrapped it in paper for the birds outside their apartment. "From what she's told me, she's got things handled."

"Unsurprising." Taylor held out a plastic container. "Strawberry?"

Julie took one. "She mentioned something about the decorations. We need to finalize the color scheme."

Taylor considered. "Red, gold, and cream."

"Really?" Julie raised her eyebrows. "Doesn't that strike you as a little loud?"

"Eh." Taylor shrugged.

"I was thinking of black, navy, and white," Julie suggested.

"Is it a wedding or a funeral?" Taylor inquired.

She mock punched his arm. "*Your* funeral, if you carry on like that."

Taylor stuffed a strawberry into her mouth. "I'm just saying it sounds dreary."

Julie rolled her eyes and swallowed. "Speaking of weddings and funerals..."

Taylor chuckled. "This sounds dangerous."

"It might be." Julie bit her lip. "We're not sure if the warlocks know where the darkstone is, but we're increasingly worried that their break-in at Mina's house might lead them to the castle."

"Uh-huh." Taylor tilted his head. "Did you find new information?"

"Maybe. The OPMA found several journals in Mina's bedroom. The older ones are boring, but you can clearly see where Nimue's magic took hold. When she returned from the kidnapping, her journals became erratic. Toward the end, there are sections written in a language that no one at the OPMA can translate." Julie shuddered. "Hat looked at pictures and said it was an ancient dark tongue."

“Well, shit.” Taylor groaned. “Let me guess; it has links to Mordred.”

“It could. We’re not sure what it says, but what if it explains where the darkstone is?” Julie ran a hand over her short hair.

Taylor sat back, hands on the picnic blanket, and gazed at the fields. The curlew dove out of sight with a cry. The hedgehog left the grass and shuffled into the heather, its little black nose twitching.

“That could be bad,” he murmured. “Far worse than anything we’ve seen so far during this war, and we’ve seen some shit.”

“Exactly.” Julie rested her hand on his. “That’s why I was thinking that, well, we might have the opportunity to lay a perfect trap for those warlocks in case they *do* know it’s at Tintagel.”

Taylor turned to her.

“You might not like this, but hear me out.” Julie raised a hand. “Security will be relaxed for our wedding rehearsal. What if we relax it even more? We could use it as a trap to draw out the warlocks.”

Taylor studied her, and Julie cringed inwardly. *Okay, maybe I’ve taken it a little too far this time.*

The elf prince nodded. “You know what? I was also thinking about how our plans have been interrupted by the baddies so many times. It’s probably a good idea to make sure our security measures for the big day will work.”

Julie laughed. “Wait, you’re cool with this on the basis that we need to make sure our wedding isn’t going to be gate-crashed by a crazy-ass battle?”

“It’s valid!” Taylor protested.

“It’s totally valid.” Julie gripped his hand. “I think you’re right, though I was mostly thinking it would be a good idea to catch the warlocks. I hadn’t even considered security measures for the wedding.”

“That’s why you have me,” Taylor teased. “You change the world. I’ll get us to our wedding day with as little bloodshed as possible.”

Julie leaned her head on his shoulder and gazed up at him, his petrichor scent surrounding her.

“For what it’s worth,” she murmured, “you change *my* world every day.”

His arms wrapped around her, and no more words were needed.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Julie stifled a yawn as she slid a heavy, dusty old ledger into a box marked *Fishing Records—1st Century of Arthur's Reign*. Her hands were sore and tired from turning the wispy pages with care to avoid tearing them, but she hadn't found mention of a single Lunar Fae fisherman.

Hat scoffed. *Did you really think the Pendragons were fishermen in that era?*

*I hope they were less snobby than you are*, Julie shot back. She hefted the box and plodded over to the shelf she'd cleared in the past few hours, then arranged the contents—mostly books, with several scrolls—on the cool, clean stone.

Hat floated behind her, his brim flopping like a jellyfish. *I'm realistic. If you're going to leave no stone unturned, at least start with the likeliest stones.*

Julie stretched, her shoulders sore from leaning over the desk all evening. *I'm going to clear this shelf next. We need more space for historical poetry from the Sylthana Era. They were pretty long-winded back then.*

*Still long-winded*, Hat grumbled.

Julie looked up and down the shelf. Though the wards on the objects in front of her kept them clear of dust, they were piled willy-nilly on the shelves. A memory orb teetered precariously on top of a stack of old books. A small heap of USB drives lay next to a crumbling scroll tied with a red ribbon and sealed with the Sign of the Dragon.

Julie leaned closer, curious, and her toe scuffed something in the corner. She lit a small flame on the tip of her finger and peered down. The cardboard box wedged into the corner was layered with dust and half-covered in cobwebs.

*What's this?* she wondered.

*Nothing important, considering it's not warded,* Hat suggested.

Julie crouched and dragged the box out of the corner with a puff of dust. Coughing, she waved the dust aside and lifted the lid. *That's a pity. Look at this stuff.* The box was full of pages that might have been splendid once. Under the dust, hints of gold and blue shone through, but the papers were torn and ragged, the calligraphic lettering so faded that Julie could make out only faint flowing curves instead of words.

*Those pages look like they came from a pre-Arthurian illuminated manuscript.* Hat floated nearer. *If you bring them into the light, I can have a look. I could possibly repair them.*

Julie hefted the box, which was heavier than it looked, and carried it to the desk. She set it down beneath the reading lamp, carefully lifted out several pages, and laid them on the desk. *I don't know, Hat. Look how creased they are. I can't see half the words.*

*Have a little faith,* Hat grumbled. *I am the most powerful warlock in the universe.*

Julie grunted. *Uh-huh.*

*What?* Hat squawked. *It's true!*

He perched on the desk beside the pages and leaned over them, humming.

The buzz of Julie's phone made her jump. She fished it out, smiling at Taylor's name on the screen. His profile image was a fat, shrieking goat.

Julie raised the phone to her ear. "Hey, babe."

"Hey, love. How's the archive going?" Taylor asked.

“Slowly,” Julie admitted, “but we’re making progress. No thanks to the HMD being out on assignment.”

Taylor slurped something. “Did you find anything more on Blaze’s family?”

“Not yet.” Julie stretched. “Not for lack of trying.”

“How about yours?” Taylor inquired.

Julie pinched the bridge of her nose. “Nope.”

“Sorry, babe.”

“It’s okay. At least this place is getting tidied up. Besides, there’s still a lot of information here.” Julie glanced at Hat. He was glowing, and the words were getting more defined on the pages. She gave him a thumbs-up, and his brim curled.

“I called to find out if you’d make it home in time for a late dinner,” Taylor continued hopefully. “I can make that pasta you like.”

“Mmm, sounds amazing, but I can’t.” Julie sighed. “I might be here for a few more hours. I found a box of loose pages that Hat’s busy repairing.”

“Any excuse to stay up late to read, huh?” Taylor teased.

Julie chuckled. “This is very important work, I’ll have you know.”

“Of course it is, babe.” Taylor chuckled. “In case I don’t wake up when you come in, sleep well.”

“Sweet dreams. I love you.”

“Love you,” Taylor murmured.

Julie tucked the phone into her pocket. *What do we have, Hat?*

*This looks like a marriage certificate.* Hat straightened. *It’s old. Thousands of years old.*

Julie leaned over the page, and her breath caught. The illuminations bordering the page were moving. Griffins and pegasi chased one another around the page, wings flapping in

a sapphire-blue sky. Plants writhed along the borders, sprouting thorns and brilliant flowers in dozens of colors.

*Wow.* Julie brushed her fingertips over the page.

*Pull up a chair,* Hat suggested. *We're going to be here a while.*

Julie did so and pored over the page, reading the record of a marriage between a prince and princess of the Sylthana Elves. "Many attended," she read aloud, "including Constantine III, king of the Lunar Fae, and his young son."

*Uther?* Hat wondered. *These do predate the Golden Age.*

*We haven't seen much from before Arthur's birth,* Julie noted, excited. She slipped the page into a nearly empty box labeled *Pre-Arthurian Records*.

*Well, you're about to see plenty.* Hat's tip bobbed. *These are done.*

Julie picked up a sheaf of repaired papers and spread them on the desk. *They're mostly records. Births, deaths, more marriages. This looks like a farming report.* She lifted a page. "Wet Bottom, mandrakes, ten bushels," she read aloud.

*Fields had weird names back in the day,* Hat remarked.

*Where are all these from?* Julie wondered. She pulled another page over. *Town Meeting, Bossiney, 20th Year of Constantine,* the calligraphic writing proclaimed. A pompous-looking Lunar Fae in a tunic frowned at her from beneath the title.

*Bossiney?* Hat leaned closer. *That's in Cornwall.*

Julie smiled. *Looks like a town meeting thousands of years ago wasn't all that different from the high council today.* She ran a finger under a line halfway down the page. *Two fellows fought duren th' dispute don horse racen don Sundays.*

*Sounds like horse racing was contentious thousands of years ago.* Hat chuckled.

*As if much has changed.* Julie frowned. *Wait, horse racing? I've never seen that in Avalon. Are these records from*

*the human world?*

Hat flipped through several with his brim. *Looks like they're from Tintagel. The original Tintagel. The one on Earth.*

*Wow.* Julie's eyes widened. *This is a treasure trove.*

She sorted through pages, ignoring the crick in her neck as ancient lives unfolded before her. *This is a biography of a blacksmith who served Constantine, Arthur's grandpa,* Julie murmured, awed. *It's fascinating how magic and ancient technology worked together then. Reminds me of the drow lands.*

*Look at this.* Hat nudged a newly repaired page toward her with his brim. *Uther Pendragon's birth certificate.*

*Oh!* Julie lifted the page.

*There are more accounts of paras' lives, too. That's where the best information will lie.* Hat leaned over another sheaf of paper. *I think these are the memoirs of the monks who ultimately became the Order of the Sacred Blade.*

As soon as the illuminations on the pages stirred to life, Julie took the papers. *You're right. This is incredible.* Her heart pounded.

*This was when the Lunar Fae kings were petty and isolated. Long before the Eternity Throne, Eglantine chipped in sleepily. It was every para for themselves in those days. Fine for dragons.* She winced. *Not so good for Woodland Fae or weremice.*

*If I'm going to find information on the branches of the Pendragon family anywhere, this is it!* Julie enthused.

She buried herself in a long-winded account of how Derowyn of Bossiney journeyed to Tintagel to petition the king for protection against the marauding Vikings, trusting that the Veil would keep him safe from the eyes of violent fae-killing humans.

Hat sighed. *Look at this.*

*Not now!* Julie waved a hand. *I'm about to find out what Constantine said.*

*Never mind that. You need to see this,* Hat insisted.

Julie dragged her eyes away from the narrative, stinging from the calligraphy. *What is it?*

Hat nudged a sheaf of papers toward her. *Nothing you've read before, that's for sure.*

Julie picked up the first page and ran an eye over it.

*Swords meet at dawn where the cow lows. The maiden weeps. Armor falters for the strong. It is the weak who will triumph at the cost of the buttercup's soul.*

She raised her eyebrows. *That's a load of beautiful bullshit.*

*Just because it's incomprehensible doesn't mean it's nonsense,* Hat retorted. *Look farther down the page.*

Julie grumbled but obeyed.

*Blue fire engulfs the throne. The seven will stand their ground. Darkness fades, and the moon chooses once more.*

*Wait.* Julie raised her head. *This sounds like the end of the Second Pendragon War, but you said that these pages came from before the Golden Age.*

*Exactly.* Hat squirmed. *Don't you see?*

Julie stared at the page. *Are these...prophecies?*

*Yes,* Hat confirmed. *This must be the account of a seer.*

Julie gaped at him. *That's a thing?*

*It is,* Eglantine murmured. *It's rare, but across the millennia, paras have been gifted with second sight.*

*Gifted?* Hat snorted. *I'm not sure I'd use that word, Eglantine.*

*I thought it was only the Morrigan,* Julie admitted.

*They're not seers,* Hat told her. *They simply have powers that transcend time. Those with second sight live in the present but see the future. It's different.*

Julie shuffled through the pages. *A lot of this seems meaningless, but look at this one and this one.* She pointed. *“Banner black as night. Crack of silver moon. Blue fire, magic of numbers. Lesser folk beware.” That’s the Dark Moon League. These predictions...they came true. Thousands of years later, but they did.*

*There might be something about how this war will end,* Eglantine suggested.

Julie bit her lip. *We saved Kaplan and the Eternal Palace because we knew what was coming. If we can figure out something about this war, it might give us the upper hand.* She seized a thick sheaf of pages and rifled through them. The seer’s writing was composed and elegant, painstakingly etched on the parchment. Julie could imagine her huddled over the pages by firelight, inscribing the words with careful strokes of a quill.

Julie skipped a page dedicated to a famine that occurred during Constantine’s reign, according to Hat, then stopped abruptly.

*What?* Hat asked eagerly. *What is it?*

Julie held up the page.

*Born to kingship, his rule inevitable. He will unite the surrendered scatterlings. All species bow. The Forever Throne.*

Hat explained, *Arthur.*

Julie skimmed the page. *This whole page is about him.* She turned it. *This one, too. And this one, and...* All of these are about Arthur.

Hat shuffled nearer. *They’re all correct. Every last one of them.*

Julie raised her head. *Who is this seer, Hat?*

The pause stretched.

*I don’t know,* Hat muttered.

*How can you not know?* Julie asked. *Look at this stuff! It’s pages and pages of predictions about Arthur. It reads like a*

biography.

*This seer was truly gifted. Astoundingly gifted.* Hat sighed. *But second sight is renowned for driving those inflicted with it insane.*

Julie raised her eyebrows.

*It is not an ability I would wish on my worst enemy,* Hat added soberly.

*Wow. Okay. Maybe that's why she faded into obscurity. I'd love to know more about her.* Julie looked around. *Maybe there's more in the archives.*

*Read the predictions first,* Hat encouraged.

Julie leaned over the page. The neat writing skipped cheerfully from one bright border to the other.

*The little prince named after the bear. Babe sleeping in the queen's arms. An heir, a hope, a future for the fae. The eternal king dreams. Small pale toes on a marble floor, stumbling. Laughter beneath the twin towers.*

*It's like she had to write everything down,* Julie remarked. *She's seeing the details of his childhood.*

*Go on,* Hat ordered.

Julie pouted at his tone but couldn't stop reading.

*Two times two pairs. Small wings on the battlements. Laughter amid the twin towers.*

*Two times two pairs?* Julie echoed.

*She must be talking about his foster brother Kay. He was a little older than Arthur, but they grew up together. I don't think Arthur even knew that Kay wasn't his biological brother until much later in life,* Hat explained. *The rules of succession were clear, though. Arthur would be king.*

*I see.* Julie kept reading.

*The prince waxes stronger. Fair of countenance and disposition, skilled with sword and bow and horse. Jewel of the royal crown. Lord of the future.*

*The life-giving becomes deadly. Danger, danger! The ailing king is unaware. A crown rolls empty upon the dark earth. Bloodthirsty masses tighten the noose. Pressure cracks the twin towers.*

Julie looked up. *Huh?*

*Uther Pendragon was poisoned by his human enemies, the Saxons. Eglantine talked over Hat. He was already sick by then. It didn't take much more than a few drops of poison in a well to finish him off.*

*That left the Lunar Fae throne at Tintagel vulnerable to attack, Hat added. Arthur was barely a teenager.*

*So? He should still have ascended, Julie argued. She turned her eyes back to the page to find out why he didn't.*

*No blood binds brothers. The elder twists their father's words. Fearful people seek strong arms. The elder rises, blade in hand. The eternal king forgotten.*

*What? Kay was behind the political situation? I've never found out why it went sideways when Arthur should have easily gained the throne.*

*You were there, weren't you?* Julie stared at him.

*Hat's crown folded. I thought Morgan was behind it. She was a rebellious teenager.*

Julie chuckled. *I can only imagine.*

She turned the page. The seer's writing was sloppier now, hasty.

*Behold! A bright blade, a great stone! Strength will not decide. The mighty one reduced to granite. Waiting, waiting. The king will be revealed.*

*Hey, check it out, Hat!* Julie smirked. *She talks about you.*

*That must have been boring, Eglantine remarked. More boring than being in an egg.*

*It was good meditation. I needed a break, Hat grumbled. Also, there was real satisfaction in watching all the big boys turn pink and purple when he pulled out the sword.*

Julie grinned. *I'll bet.*

*The eternal king approaches, the seer continued. Steel glides from stone, sweatless. There can be no question.*

The bottom of the page consisted of a glittering illustration: a dark-haired boy, maybe fifteen, drawing the blade one-handed. The distant hiss of steel on stone reached Julie's ears as she watched the drawing move.

She turned the page, then blinked, startled. *Is this the same seer's writing? It's a mess.*

*I told you, Hat muttered darkly. This is what second sight does.*

Blots of ink fouled several words. The rest were a mad, hectic scribble.

*Beware, beware! War will come. The nephew arises. Blood spills blood. Darkness, lightning. He rides with shadows. The round table trembles. Beware, beware!*

*A circle of knights. One holds darkness. Dagger to the back! The table splits. The gold is over. Fire, blood, and bone. Gold walls turn white. Weep, O widow. Weep, O warlock. Weep! Weep! Weep!*

*This is the part where it all goes to shit, I guess, Julie muttered.*

Hat sighed. *In a big way.*

Eglantine whimpered.

*Fire, FIRE. FIRE. FIRE.*

*Scales shimmer against the moon. THEY CAN BE DEFEATED.*

*DEFEATED.*

*DEFEATED.*

*DEFEATED.*

Julie turned the page, making out words here and there among the wild scrawl.

*The final battle. there is no reckoning. all goes*

*dark*

*beware!*

*BEWARE BEWERE BEWEAR BEEWR*

*My king. O, my lord and my king! why?*

Julie's heart squeezed. She swallowed against a dry mouth and turned to the final page. The words were a spidery scrawl, coherent but faint, as though the writer's arm was almost too weak to press pen to parchment.

*Betrayed by love, my liege will neither live nor die. His trusted cohorts will conceal the future among the blind. The heir is the key.*

*The heir is the key.*

The final sentence repeated to the bottom of the undecorated page.

Julie let out a breath. *Wow. That was intense.* She tilted her head. *"Betrayed by love." That's about Morgan being forced to make the blade, isn't it?*

Hat sighed. *Yes.*

*What's this other thing? "The future among the blind?"* Julie shook her head. *Ramblings, I guess.*

*Actually, I can answer that.* Hat paused. *During and after the Second Pendragon War, three of Arthur's most trusted friends worked together to protect innocent Lunar Fae children who were being killed, thanks to the fear that Mordred spread across both worlds.*

*Who were they?* Julie asked.

Eglantine responded before Hat could. *Lancelot, Guinevere, and Morgan.*

Julie sat bolt upright. *Did they turn those children into changelings?*

*They did,* Hat confirmed reluctantly.

*What's with the secrecy, Hat?* Julie snapped.

*Never mind him,* Eglantine chipped in. *Guinevere was a changeling. That's what gave them the idea. Her entire family was killed during the Saxon wars. Friends sent her as an infant to live with a human family in Tintagel Village in Cornwall. She only emerged when she was a teenager. Much like you, Julie.*

*She placed a bunch of kids with human families?* Julie's hands shook.

*It was the only safe place for them at the time,* Hat murmured. *Lancelot and Morgan helped her to hide Lunar Fae babies in the human world. They then destroyed any records or other evidence that could be used to find them.*

Julie stared at the seer's scrawl. *You're telling me that many Lunar Fae records were destroyed by my own people?*

*For the protection of the children,* Hat reminded her.

Julie let out a breath. *What about this last thing? It seems like the seer thought it was important.* She tapped the words. *"The heir is the key." Who was Arthur's heir?*

*He had none,* Eglantine murmured. *Not that we know of.*

*Unless Lancelot and Guinevere hid someone as a changeling,* Julie muttered.

*If that's the case, what is the heir supposed to do?* Eglantine wondered.

The silence hung from her shoulders like chains.

*Wait a minute. There was something in those earlier pages. Something about the future.* Julie shuffled through them. *Here.*

The prediction was from much earlier when the seer's writing was still clear and coherent.

*Death begets life. The accursed slumbers. An endless waking dream. Past and future combine to break, bringing strife to all who live for love.*

Julie swallowed hard.

*Is this about Arthur?* Eglantine wondered.

*“Past and future combine to break?” Why does that sound like Arthur waking? Julie’s heart thudded painfully. If that’s the case, why does it bring strife?*

*I’m sorry.* Hat’s tip drooped. *I don’t know.*

Julie put the papers together in a tight stack. *Morgan needs to see this.*

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Julie's arms trembled as she hugged the pages to her chest. The elevator rumbled, and the wizard's hat that perched on her shoulder was, for once, silent. The same could not be said for Julie's thoughts. They tumbled over one another, dozens of questions competing for her attention.

When she managed to pull one out of the chaos, it was unimportant. *Why weren't these pages warded?*

*In the condition they were in, they must have been overlooked,* Hat responded.

*Well, at least you have an answer today,* Eglantine snapped.

*Chill out, you two,* Julie ordered. *Hat, can you call Dylan and find out if the queen's awake?*

The elevator doors slid open, and Julie blinked, surprised. *Whoa, that was quick.*

Dylan looked up from a bookshelf three feet above the floor. He was running his thin index finger down a row of bestselling American murder mysteries.

"Councilor Meadows," he growled.

Julie smirked. Her chest throbbed with excitement over what she'd found, but there was always time to torment Dylan. "Whatcha up to, Dyl?"

"I am selecting a suitable book for Her Majesty, if you must know." Dylan sniffed.

Julie raised her eyebrows. “She’s awake?”

“Regrettably,” Dylan muttered.

“Fantastic. I need to talk to her.” Julie hugged the papers closer. “Now. Like, *right* now.”

“It is past eleven. That will not be possible.” Dylan used two hands to pull out a book, and a portal shimmered into existence below him.

“Dyl, this is important.” Julie stepped forward. “It’s about King Arthur.”

Dylan stared at her.

“I need to talk to her *now*,” Julie repeated. “She’s awake, right? Besides, she’ll be pissed if she finds out that I asked to talk to her, and you said no without asking her.”

Dylan’s thin shoulders slumped. “Very well, Councilor. If you absolutely must.” He gestured, and the portal vanished.

Julie followed him up the spiral staircase to the queen’s bedchamber. He gave her a withering glare as they reached the door, freezing her to the spot, and opened it a crack to peer inside.

“Ah, Dylan.” Queen Esmerelda’s voice was shaky yet composed. “Did you find it?”

“I found more than that, Your Majesty.” Dylan sighed. “Councilor Meadows is here. She wishes to speak to you. May I ask her to return in the morning?”

“Absolutely not,” Queen Esmerelda snapped. “She would not disturb me at this hour if she was not convinced that, whatever it is, this discussion is important. Let her in, Dylan.”

“Very well,” Dylan grumbled.

He pushed the door wide and stepped back, his glare burning into Julie as she brushed past him and entered the chamber. Queen Esmerelda was propped up on a pile of pillows, a book lying beside her on the covers. From the creases on its spine, Julie guessed it had been read and reread many times, like the volume that Dylan laid on the nightstand.

“I’m sorry to bother you so late, Your Majesty, but it’s important.” Julie held out the papers.

Queen Esmerelda frowned. “Did you bring those out of the archive?”

“They weren’t warded, maybe because they were damaged, but Hat repaired them.” Julie bit her lip. “They’re unlike anything else I’ve found there. They’re prophecies about Arthur.”

Queen Esmerelda took the pages and skimmed the words. Her eyelids fluttered as she read the final page.

“I think they have something to do with what will happen to Arthur next, not only what’s already happened to him.” Julie clasped her hands in front of her. “With your leave, Your Majesty, I want to take these prophecies to Tintagel. Morgan will be able to tell us more, and also, she should know what they say. I don’t think she does.”

“Neither do I. These are far older than Morgan or Arthur, so she might not be aware of their existence. They must have been lost for many thousands of years.” Queen Esmerelda held the pages out, her arm trembling. “By all means, Julie. If you believe these could lead to Arthur’s revival, take them to Tintagel.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Julie inclined her head.

“If Arthur awakens, it will be the miracle our age so desperately needs.” The queen sagged against her pillows. “I believe his rising would bring an end to the war.”

Julie nodded. “If anyone can end this war, it’s him...or this ‘heir’ the seer keeps writing about.” She studied the queen. “Maybe that’s you.”

Queen Esmerelda’s face stilled. “Me?”

“Yes. You are, after all, the first Lunar Fae to rule after Arthur,” Julie pointed out. “You’re the first of his heirs to gain the throne.”

The queen studied her, eyes unreadable. “Luna chose me for the throne, Julie. I believe the heir the prophecy speaks of

will follow me and be legitimized in the moon rite.”

“The moon rite?” Julie raised her eyebrows.

Queen Esmerelda smiled. “You were trained as a recruiter. You will have seen it.”

Julie rifled through her memories. “Oh! I saw yours, Your Majesty. I remember a silver dragon with moonlight shining between its scales. It stood in a glade and blew a ring of smoke that settled over you.”

“Precisely.” Queen Esmerelda nodded weakly. “Before my rule, that was the test for all heirs to take the throne. It is not as widely known, but before Arthur drew the sword from the stone, a moon dragon chose him.”

“Wow,” Julie whispered.

*Kay caused a lot of shit, Hat grumbled.*

“I never considered how the heirs were tested before Arthur fell into his magic coma,” Julie admitted.

“I introduced the new test.” Queen Esmerelda tugged her covers higher. “I had my reasons, but one was to give Morgan a sense of purpose. After so many centuries, her hope that Arthur would ever wake had waned. Testing the heirs allowed her to feel less alone.”

*She’s spent so many centuries watching over him, dedicating her life to finding a way to save him, Julie marveled.*

*I don’t know how she does it, Hat told her.*

Julie relived Taylor’s soft kiss from the afternoon on the picnic blanket. *I do.*

“Julie, there can be no more shrinking from the truth.” Queen Esmerelda straightened. “The time for *your* test has come.”

Julie’s jaw dropped. “Your Majesty, is this really the time?”

“There is no other time.” Queen Esmerelda’s hands tightened on the covers.

“What do you mean? We need to work on finding the heir the seer keeps talking about,” Julie spluttered. “Maybe it’s Eglantine.”

“Another heir is more important in the short term.” Queen Esmerelda held her gaze. Her hands were weak, but not her eyes.

Julie’s heart stuttered. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I am losing strength by the day, Julie.” The queen spoke fearlessly. “There is no time to waste if Arthur is to be woken and my heir found.”

Julie’s heart almost stopped.

“We might not yet know your full heritage, but you are a Pendragon.” Queen Esmerelda raised her chin. “You are eligible to become my heir if you pass the test.”

*What the actual f—* Julie squawked internally. Her mouth opened and shut, and she stumbled back two steps. For the first time in months, fear traveled down her spine, and the floor shuddered beneath her feet.

“Your Majesty—” she began. Her voice sounded distant and high-pitched.

*Easy, easy, Hat soothed. This is not the time to blurt, Julie. Breathe slowly. I’m here.*

*Me too,* Eglantine murmured.

Their voices gave her the strength to shut her mouth.

Queen Esmerelda’s face was lined and pensive. “You may go. Thank you.”

Julie’s feet felt as though they weren’t touching the floor. She staggered past Dylan and drifted down the staircase to the foot of the tower, hearing nothing except a faint buzz in her ears and the thump of her heart. Hat and Eglantine sounded tinny and incoherent.

She made it out of the tower before the slamming of the door brought her back to the present. Her knees wobbled.

“What is happening?” she asked, clutching the doorframe. “What. Is. Happening?”

*It’s okay, Julie, Hat soothed. It’s—*

“It’s *okay*?” Julie roared. She plucked him off her head and tossed him on an ornate stone bench nearby, then sagged down beside him. “It’s *okay*?”

“Nothing is certain yet,” Hat told her aloud.

“*Certain*? There’s a shitload that’s certain, Hat, and one of those things is that I cannot be named heir to the throne!” Julie shrieked. “This is ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous!”

*Why?* Eglantine asked. *It’s not so bad.*

“Of course it’s *bad*, Eggles. We had to kidnap you from your home and family to keep you safe and free!” Julie screamed. “How am I supposed to deal with this? I can’t be queen!” The sentence drove it home like a dagger to her chest, and she slumped against the back of the bench. “I think I’m gonna throw up.”

“You’ve been through much in both worlds, Julie.” Hat wriggled nearer, and his brim brushed her arm. “Whatever comes next, we’ll get through it together.”

*We will,* Eglantine added.

“I’m a councilor. *The* councilor for my species *and* the head of the council!” Julie grasped the amulet that hung around her neck and stared into its glimmering depths. “How far-fetched is that? It’s crazy enough, and now *this*?”

“I’ll always believe there’s nothing you can’t do,” Hat murmured. “Even this.”

“*This* is not happening, Hat.” Julie passed a hand over her face, muffling her words. “This can’t be happening.”

*Whatever happens, I’m here with you,* Eglantine whispered.

Hat waddled closer. “Me too.”

“Thanks, both of you.” Julie swallowed against the lump in her throat. “But the only person I really want right now is

Taylor.” She longed for the smell of the earth after rain.

Her phone buzzed. Grateful for the distraction, Julie fumbled it from her pocket, hating how much her hands trembled. The text was from Taylor.

**I’m on my way.**

Julie sniffed, blinking eyes that stung, and frowned. “I didn’t send this.” Her latest text read **SOS**.

“I did.” Hat’s brim engulfed her hand.

Hot tears spilled down Julie’s cheeks. “Thank you,” she whispered.

She found the resolve to gather up Hat and the pages and stagger to her feet. They carried her toward the parking lot where she’d left Genevieve. Her mind raced, images of moonlight, dragons, and the glimmering Eternity Crown flashing through her mind.

That crown was too heavy for her. Thinking of herself in the context of queenship made nausea roil in her gut, and as she staggered into the parking lot, her shaking arms lost their grip on a page of the manuscript. It floated to the ground, froze, and gently returned to her grasp.

Taylor jogged across the lot from where he’d been waiting beside Genevieve. “Babe, are you okay?”

Julie’s legs quit working. She stumbled to a halt and tried to squeeze out a word, but only sobs came.

“I’m here. I’m here.” Taylor gently fished the pages out of her grasp and wrapped his free arm around her. “It’s okay.”

He didn’t ask what happened or how he could help. All he did was hold her, his arm strong around her shaking body. She buried her face in his chest until the steady thud of his heartbeat drowned out the jagged rhythm of her sobs.

Taylor kissed the top of her head, his lips lingering on her hair for long seconds. “What do you need?”

Julie pulled back and dragged the back of her hand across her wet cheeks. “To get to Tintagel.”

“I’ll drive.” Taylor led her to Genevieve. The Mustang’s headlights turned on as they approached, and her engine started. She revved it to a ferocious roar and flip-flopped her wipers.

“Not now, Gennie,” Julie whispered. Taylor led her to the passenger door, and she brushed her fingertips across the car’s roof. “I love you, and you’re amazing, but I need to ask you to disguise yourself as something...” She winced. “Sorry. Something unremarkable.”

Genevieve’s engine purred and the Mustang leaned sideways, pressing against Julie.

“Please,” Julie whispered.

A blue glow oozed from beneath Genevieve’s hood, and Taylor gently pulled Julie back a few steps. Metal clanked as Genevieve levitated, panels twisting, color changing. With a flash of blue, the gleaming black-and-pewter Mustang was replaced by a white Toyota Prius that was about five years old.

Julie laughed and choked on a sob. “Not *that* unremarkable, Gennie. I appreciate it, but I won’t let you sink that low.”

Genevieve changed into a white BMW X3 with a scratch on the bumper.

“Perfect.” Julie brushed her cheeks with one hand.

Taylor held the door for her and placed the manuscript pages on her lap, then slid into the driver’s seat and touched the wheel. Genevieve’s engine was already running.

“Gennie, can you take us to Tintagel?” he asked.

Genevieve honked in assent. Taylor let go of the wheel, which turned as the car steered out of the parking lot and through the palace gates.

“Okay, babe.” Taylor turned to Julie. “You have my full attention. Do you want to talk about this? Do you want a nap? Takeout? Should I blast Metallica at full volume?”

Julie carefully placed the pages on the backseat and turned onto her side, then adjusted the seat belt over her hips.

“Nap?” Taylor guessed.

“No.” Julie reached over the center console. “I should tell you everything.” Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. “Otherwise, you’ll think somebody died.”

“Nobody died?” Taylor wrapped both hands around hers.

“Nobody died,” Julie confirmed. “But it’s pretty rough.”

“I’m listening.” Taylor’s gaze rested on hers.

Julie drew a long, shuddering breath. “Those manuscript pages I told you about? They’re prophecies about King Arthur. They need to go to Tintagel because I think there’s something there that could help Morgan wake him up.”

Taylor nodded. “Okay.”

“I went to Her Majesty to ask her permission to take them to Tintagel.” Julie clutched his hand. “She wants me to be tested *now*.”

“She still thinks you’re going to wake Arthur?” Taylor asked. “Which is totally possible, by the way.”

“Thanks for your faith, honey.” Julie closed her eyes. “She thinks more than that, though.”

Taylor waited in silence.

Julie opened her eyes. “She wants me to get tested because, as a Pendragon, I’m eligible to be her heir.”

Taylor’s eyebrows shot up before he regained control over them. His voice was admirably calm. “Okay.”

“Taylor, I can’t be the princess or whatever.” A lump formed in Julie’s throat. “I can’t. I love the responsibilities I have as councilor, but they’re *enough*.” More tears escaped. “How am I supposed to handle being the heir? I’ve seen how the other heirs have struggled. Malcolm, Ilsa, and even Mack. They’ve had a whole lifetime of training to face this, and it’s hard enough for them. It hasn’t been three years since I learned the paranormal world existed!”

Taylor let her sob while rubbing her hand between his.

“They’ve been preparing for the weight of a crown all their lives,” Julie choked. “Worse, I wouldn’t only be the heir to the throne of a species. This is the *Eternity Throne* we are talking about. How am I supposed to face that? How could I not?” Her free hand touched her sternum.

Taylor’s brow creased. “Your geas.”

“Exactly. If I refuse, I break it.” Julie’s hammering heart slowed. “Does that mean that if I’m chosen, being...being the...the queen...” The words weighed ten tons each. “That it would be the right thing for this world?”

Taylor’s smile crinkled the corners of the eyes. “You’re incredible at everything you do, love.”

“Thanks, babe, but I think being Eternity Queen would stretch that.” Julie managed a sob-laugh.

“You know I’m by your side, whatever happens,” Taylor promised. “There’s nothing we can do about this right now. Tell me more about these papers.”

Julie inhaled slowly. “They’re prophecies from an unknown seer. She was powerful, and all her predictions about Arthur’s early life and curse came true. Others about the world in general, too. There are only a few we couldn’t make sense of.” She frowned. “The last one appears to center around Arthur waking. She kept writing, ‘The heir is the key.’”

“‘The heir?’” Taylor raised his eyebrows. “Are you worried that could be...well, *you*?”

Julie slumped and stared at the long, smooth road before them. Genevieve cruised steadily across the hills. The moonlit heath slumbered in a country night punctuated by the flitting shapes of foxes and the wingshadows of owls. She stared at them, trying to focus on anything other than the new weight of the potential destiny hanging over her.

*Your destiny is immutable*, the Morrigan had told her. Did they mean it was going to be way bigger than Julie had ever dreamed?

*No, no. That's quite unlikely, Hat broke in. He wriggled onto the center console. In fact, when it comes to both the prophecy and the test, the queen's youngest daughter is the likeliest candidate.*

“Queen *Esmerelda's* youngest daughter?” Julie clarified.

Taylor shook his head. “All the princesses died. Didn't they?”

Hat sighed. *All but one.*

Julie groaned. “You're telling us this *now* because?”

“Because he's cryptic. What else is new?” Taylor grumbled.

*What happened to her, Hat? Eglantine interjected. Where is she?*

Hat's point drooped. *This knowledge is sacred. None of you can reveal it. Any of it. Do you understand?*

Julie and Taylor nodded in unison.

Yes, Eglantine confirmed.

*Okay. Hat stiffened. I don't know all the details, but when the queen bore her last child, she was ready to do anything to protect her.*

*Anything. Julie straightened. Like being separated from her at birth.*

*Exactly. Hat's point bobbed. I know Lancelot and Guinevere hid several Lunar Fae babies at the time of—*

*Hold up. Julie stared at him. Lancelot and Guinevere are still alive?*

*Of course they are, Hat grumbled. Stop interrupting. They hid many Lunar Fae babies around the same time as the queen had her last daughter. The public story was that the baby was stillborn, and Esmerelda's mourning at the memorial looked painfully real.*

Julie nodded. *What if she wasn't mourning the baby's death? Instead, she was mourning the fact that she had to give*

*her up to save her.*

*Precisely, Hat agreed. I suspect the little princess was hidden, and if that is the case, only Lancelot and Guinevere know where.*

*Then we need to track them down and get answers! Julie turned to Taylor. T, how do we do that?*

*Uh, I have no idea, Taylor admitted. Officially, nobody knows what happened to either of them. There are gruesome rumors about their deaths. If they're still alive, they're in hiding.*

*I know who will know. Julie glared at Hat.*

*Don't look at me, Hat protested.*

*He knows, Eglantine announced. I don't, though. My ancestors knew them, but they don't remember where they went. Their memories are foggy.*

*How? Julie asked.*

*They remember undertaking mind-wipes to protect Lancelot and Guinevere, Eglantine explained.*

*Hat, you're our only way of finding them. Julie grabbed him by the brim and held him up, fixing him with a glare. Behind him, through the windshield, the road shimmered in the moonlight. I'm begging you. I know you keep things from me. This once, be honest. Where are they? Who are they?*

*Hat crumpled. I'm sorry, Julie. I—*

*Hat, come on. Taylor glared at him. You've kept enough from Julie. Why are you keeping this, too?*

*Because I have to! Hat burst out.*

*If this is more bullshit about protecting me, I'm gonna feed you to a werewolf, Julie snapped.*

*It's not. This is about promises, Julie, Hat quavered. I gave my solemn word to two people I loved greatly in the wake of the Second Pendragon War that I would never tell anyone their identities. You can be angry, and perhaps you have a right to be, but I will not tell.*

Julie lowered him into her lap, her heart churning. Taylor eyed her nervously. On the distant horizon, two towers rose against the stars.

*I'll let it go, she muttered. For now.*

Except for the hum of Genevieve's engine as she drove through the night, there was no further sound.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Julie thought she was calm and composed when they reached Tintagel...until they met Morgan at the foot of Arthur's statue. When the tall fae embraced her, she burst into tears.

"What's wrong?" Morgan asked, stepping back.

Julie couldn't squeeze out a word.

"She found these." Taylor held out the manuscript pages. "When she showed them to Queen Esmerelda, Her Majesty suggested...well, that Julie might be her heir, as a Pendragon."

Morgan froze.

"They know about the youngest daughter who was hidden," Hat chipped in. "Still..."

"She might be impossible to find," Morgan murmured.

That didn't help. Julie tried to swallow her tears, but they flooded out.

Taylor wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "She's been up for twenty hours at this point."

"That's enough to make anyone feel overwhelmed, even *without* finding out that they might have to become queen." Morgan patted Julie's shoulder. "How does dinner sound?"

Julie swallowed. "Will there be sushi?"

Morgan chuckled. "All the sushi you want."

With her hand engulfed in Taylor's, Julie allowed herself to be led to the banqueting hall in the second tower. True to

Morgan's word, the table that ran down the length of the great hall, set with gold plates and goblets, groaned with piles of every type of sushi imaginable.

After three crab maki, four California rolls, and a couple of salmon unagi, Julie's tears dried up.

"Sorry," she mumbled around a mouthful of fish and rice. "That was embarrassing."

"It's okay to be overwhelmed, especially on an empty stomach and not enough sleep." Morgan sipped wine.

Taylor had explained everything while Julie was stuffing her face. Morgan had the manuscript pages spread on the table in front of her, and Hat was at her elbow.

"Nothing needs to be done tonight." The fae steepled her fingers. "I need time to prepare for the test—"

"Same, girl," Julie muttered.

Morgan grinned. "I also need time to go through these prophecies with Merlin's help. Besides, we need to talk about the wedding."

"Yeah." Taylor grimaced. "We really do."

Morgan raised her eyebrows.

"We'll explain in the morning." Julie waved a hand. She'd nearly forgotten about their plan to trap the warlocks during her wedding rehearsal.

"For now, I suggest we all get a good night's sleep." Morgan gave Julie a pointed look.

Julie didn't think she could sleep, but while Taylor was taking a shower in the roomy bathroom adjacent to the great chamber in the round tower, Julie passed out, fully clothed, on the four-poster bed.

---

Breakfast in the great hall was never as simple as muesli and yogurt. Julie waddled into the hallway that led to the ballroom,

one hand clasped to her belly, which groaned with sausages, boiled eggs, buttered toast, bacon, and hash browns.

“Those sausages!” Taylor groaned. “They were so good.”

“Did you really need to eat three of them?” Julie inquired. Hat, in his wizard’s hat form, was tucked under her arm.

“I did.” Taylor moaned. “No regrets.”

“Perhaps the great hall should stick to appetizers until all the guests are done dancing,” Julie suggested.

Morgan, leading the way, laughed merrily. “I think that’s a fine idea.”

She pushed open the double doors and strode into the ballroom with far too much energy for a woman who had packed away enough breakfast to feed a local militia. Julie followed and instantly forgot her complaining belly.

The once-bare ballroom was alive with texture and color. The purple curtains were gone, and silk drapes curved above each window and trailed to the floor in soft lines of gold and cream, complemented by hints of black and pale pink. Couches and tables surrounded the dance floor, which was polished to a brilliant shine.

There were lilies everywhere Julie looked.

Easter lilies were mixed with baby’s breath and pastel-pink phlox, each bouquet so huge that Julie would have needed both arms to grip it, and there was one on each of the pillars in the hall. Wreaths of golden-rayed and royal lilies, punctuated by the miniature bell shapes of lily-of-the-valley, dripped from the drapes between the pillars. On every niche and table, enormous arum lilies sprouted from crystal vases, accompanied by white orchids and alyssum.

Julie pressed her fingertips to her lips. “So many lilies.”

Taylor squeezed her hand.

“They’re all Earth lilies.” Morgan turned to her. “I can add Avalonian flowers, too.”

Julie shook her head. “It’s perfect.”

Taylor frowned. “How are they going to stay fresh until the wedding day?”

“Oh, they’re an illusion.” Morgan laughed and waved a hand, and the lavish decorations disintegrated into pixels and vanished. “I wanted to make sure you liked it.”

“I love it.” Julie grinned. “What do you think, babe?”

Taylor gazed at her smile. “I think it’s perfect.”

“Good!” Morgan clapped her hands. “Let’s head to the gardens.”

“There are gardens?” Julie raised her eyebrows.

Morgan chuckled. “You have no idea.”

They returned to the hallway and strode past the great hall toward the landward side of the second tower, a place Julie had never been.

“Since we’re on the subject of the wedding...” Julie glanced at Taylor, who nodded.

“I detected interesting vibes about that last night.” Morgan arched her eyebrows. “Is there something I need to change?”

“Not exactly,” Taylor admitted.

“We’re worried about the warlocks that broke into Mina Nox’s house and about the artifacts they’ve stolen, especially the Arthurian ones. We’re worried they might be after something specific,” Julie explained. “Something at Tintagel.”

Morgan stopped short. “What do you mean?”

Hat spoke up. “Morgan, we fear they might seek the darkstone.”

Julie had never seen Morgan look frightened. The color drained from her face, and the shudder that ran through her made her wings clatter against each other.

“Surely not,” she murmured.

“Could Mina Nox know—or have something in her house that could give clues—about where the darkstone is?” Julie asked.

Morgan ran a hand over her straight dark hair. “The Nox family has been deeply trusted for centuries. It is not impossible.”

“Then we need to be ready if the warlocks come.” Julie folded her arms. “I have a plan.”

“A plan,” Morgan echoed. “One that has something to do with the wedding.”

“Yes.” Julie nodded. “We both know security will be challenging during the wedding. We thought we could kill two birds with one stone by using our rehearsal.”

“We could rehearse the security as well as the ceremony.” Taylor grinned. “Plus, we could use the whole thing as a trap for the warlocks.”

“If they’re going to reach Tintagel, let them do it on our terms, not theirs.” Julie raised her chin. “We’ll be waiting for them.”

Morgan nodded and set off slowly. “As much as the thought of having enemies near Arthur fills me with dread, his tower will be thoroughly warded away from the festivities. I doubt any warlock could break through my wards.” She chewed the inside of her cheek. “You’re right, Julie. If they know where the darkstone is, they’ll come here. Let them do it when we lie in wait for them.”

“None of us wants to put Arthur in danger,” Taylor added.

“Of course not. That’s why we should trap the warlocks instead of waiting for them to come out of the blue.” Morgan nodded. “We’ll work on a plan and make it happen.”

“Thanks, Morgan.” Julie reached an arched door at the end of the hall. “I’m sorry it’s come to this.”

“It isn’t the first time Tintagel was attacked. It also won’t be the first time we’ve come out victorious.” Morgan’s smile returned, albeit flickering. She opened the door, and they stepped out onto a soft, deep lawn surrounded by perfectly trimmed hedges and rose bushes that bloomed midnight blue, pearl white, flame red, and butter yellow. Wooden benches were set beneath towering trees. The trees’ boughs hung low

with fruit that filled the air with its various scents and gleamed softly in myriad colors.

“Whoa,” Julie muttered.

“Come on.” Morgan strode forward. “I want to show you the best part.”

They wound between the fragrant trees to find a little humpbacked bridge over a trickling stream filled with fish whose scales flashed gold.

“Did you have time to read the prophecies?” Julie asked.

Morgan nodded, her hair bobbing with the motion. “I did.”

Julie’s gut clenched. “Could you shed any light on their meaning?”

“Not much. ‘The heir is the key’ is the most important part, but at the same time, the most vague. *Whose* heir? From the context, I’d guess Arthur’s, but there are other possibilities.” Morgan thumped over the bridge.

“Julie thought it might be Eglantine,” Taylor suggested.

Morgan turned to him, her hazel eyes unreadable. “Who do *you* think it is, Taylor?”

Taylor’s hand tightened on Julie’s as they crossed the bridge, and he said nothing.

“T, come on. Who do you think?” Julie pressed.

His soft brown eyes met hers. “If anyone’s the key to Arthur’s return, it’s you.”

“I believe it is the lost princess,” Hat chipped in.

“Ah.” Morgan sighed.

“Do you know what happened to her?” Julie asked. “Was she a changeling?”

“No. When that age group of babies was hidden among the humans, I was tethered to Tintagel and devoted to keeping Arthur alive. I knew Lance and Guin were busy saving those children, but I didn’t know the princess was among them.”

Morgan's mouth turned down. "If I did know, Julie, I would have told you long ago. I believe you were part of that group."

Julie blinked. "Lancelot and Guinevere hid *me*?"

"More than likely." Morgan nodded.

The image that flashed to Julie's mind came from one of her favorite books as a kid, one her dad had often read to her. The page in her memories was well-thumbed and creased down the middle—a black-and-white illustration of Lancelot on a plunging warhorse, lance held aloft, dark curls streaming in the wind. The version of Lancelot she'd grown up with was human, but the image still sent a thrill through her blood.

"Here we are!" Morgan spread her arms, grinning.

They had followed a path covered with smooth white river stones to a secluded corner of the garden where a stream trickled over mossy rocks, frothing white and singing as it fell. The path led to a wooden pagoda raised on three steps, its posts and intricate roof painted white. Jasmine wound around the posts and spilled in frothy profusion over the roof, filling the air with its sweet scent.

"A romantic spot I thought you'd love." Morgan stood back. "We could have the guests spend time in the garden while you take pictures after the ceremony. I have outdoor games they could amuse themselves with. This could be a spot for pictures."

Taylor grinned. "Shall we try it out?"

"You bet," Julie agreed breathlessly.

They climbed the steps in synchrony and turned to face each other inside the pagoda. The air was filled with the music of the rushing water and the sweet scent of jasmine. Taylor's arms surrounded Julie, and she could feel the thump of his heart where her hands rested on his sculpted pecs.

"Pretty romantic, huh?" he murmured.

Prophecies, tests, and heirs fell away, and the world condensed to this moment. Julie stood on tiptoe to kiss him... and Hat noisily gagged.

“Oh, Merlin, where is your sense of romance?” Morgan deplored.

“Anywhere but here,” Hat complained.

Julie pulled away from Taylor, laughing. “It’s perfect, Morgan. Thank you.”

“Wonderful.” Morgan beamed. “Let me show you the hall where we’ll hold the ceremony.”

They took a different route through the gardens, admiring beds of flowers: pink blossoms that danced to a silent tune, fat white blooms that spewed clouds of silver dust that smelled like almonds, and a tree from which golden bells sprouted like fruit and chimed when the breeze stirred them.

“There’s something else.” Julie inhaled deeply.

Morgan held the door. “You mentioned that last night.”

“Queen Esmerelda thinks I might be eligible to become her heir.” Julie’s throat tightened as she stepped into the hallway, followed by Taylor. “She wants me to be tested.”

Morgan shut the door behind them. “What do *you* want, Julie?”

A bolt of heat shot through Julie’s chest. She raised her hand to her sternum and answered honestly. “To restore unity among all paras. To uphold the ideals of the Eternity Throne.”

Taylor’s eyes shone.

“What does that mean for you?” Morgan asked.

Julie inhaled deeply. “It means I’ll take the test. Whatever I need to do, I’ll do it.” *No matter how scared I am*, she added internally.

*Courage is not the absence of fear but the triumph over it*, Hat murmured.

*A quote by Merlin Ambrosius?* Julie quipped.

*Nelson Mandela, actually. Earth has its heroes too*, Hat reminded her.

“You’re shaking, honey.” Taylor’s grip tightened.

Morgan spread her hands. “No one has ever taken the test unafraid.”

“Unafraid? I don’t even feel ready.” Julie croaked a laugh. “I feel crushed under pressure. Queen Esmerelda doesn’t just expect me to pass the test. She expects me to wake the king.”

Morgan’s eyelids fluttered.

“You already passed *that* test,” she murmured.

Julie’s heart stuttered. “What?”

“The day Ilsanthia came for her testing. Do you remember it?” Morgan asked.

Taylor rubbed his temples. “Vaguely.”

“Perfectly. Kaplan and Taylor couldn’t remember much,” Julie recalled. “Ilsa and I remembered everything.” She stopped.

“Ilsanthia passed the test, but she wasn’t the only one.” Morgan smiled. “Someone helped her. Someone who reorganized an entire library of memory orbs to assist Ilsanthia, everyone who came after her, and, not least, Arthur.”

Julie’s jaw dropped.

“Wait, that is coming back to me.” Taylor frowned. “Was it Julie?”

“Who else would it be?” Hat chortled.

“I-I passed the test?” Julie wheezed.

Morgan nodded. “You might not have woken the king, but you passed with flying colors.”

“How long have you known?” Julie squawked.

They left the tower behind and strode onto the bridge. Dragon wings cut through the noonday sky, and the sea thundered on the golden beach far away.

“Since the day it happened,” Morgan murmured. She glanced at Hat. “Certain people swore me to secrecy.”

Julie squeezed him harder than necessary under her arm. “Certain people have a habit of doing that,” she ground out.

“They’re going to hear about it later.”

“He has his reasons. If there’s anything I know about him, it’s that.” Morgan inclined her head.

“I already passed the test.” Julie clutched Taylor’s hand for support. “What about the other thing? The moon rite?”

Morgan nodded. “I suspect that is what Her Majesty has in mind. I appreciated the new test since it helped me find ways to revive Arthur, but I agree with her. If a Lunar Fae is going to sit on the Eternity Throne, then let them face the moon to prove their worthiness.”

*The Eternity Throne.* Julie’s gut churned.

“She mentioned that her heir would be legitimized by the rite,” Hat croaked, half-squashed.

Julie squared her shoulders. “Then let’s do that.”

Morgan met her eyes. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

“I’m *not* ready.” Julie swallowed. “But I *am* sure. What do I have to do?”

“It’s not about what you do.” Morgan touched her arm. “It’s about who you are.”

“Fantastic,” Julie muttered. “The one thing I don’t know.”

“You know,” Hat interjected. “Your identity is much more than your biology.”

“Very philosophical, but it doesn’t answer my question,” Julie pointed out. “What are you going to assess me on?”

“I’m not going to assess you.” Morgan looked at the dragon-studded sky. “Luna will make the decision.”

Goosebumps rose on Julie’s skin. “L–luna herself? As in, the Lunar Fae whose essence is captured in the moon?”

Morgan nodded. “The same.”

Julie swallowed. How was she supposed to measure up to Luna’s standard?

*Allow grace to surprise you,* Hat murmured.

She exhaled. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

Morgan held her gaze, then smiled. “Very well. First, though, you need to give me feedback on something almost as important.” She held the door of the first tower for them. “The decor for your ceremony!”

Julie grinned, allowing herself to get lost in excitement as Morgan hastened to the towering doors made of oak bound with iron.

“Ready?” the fae asked, beaming.

Taylor clutched Julie’s hand. “Yes!”

Morgan pushed the doors wide, and Julie’s breath stopped.

The heavy tapestries and drapes had been removed, and the hall was alight. The stained-glass windows were open, allowing shafts of sunlight to pool on the stone floor. Stone pews, intricately carved and inlaid with selenite, stood in neat rows on the right and left.

From the end of each pew, a stone sapling rose, the bark so rough and real that Julie couldn’t tell if it was a living tree or a breathtaking carving. Each sapling held a fluffy white cloud in its branches instead of leaves, towering above their heads but not reaching the vaulted ceiling from which a chandelier dangled, the candles’ flames a brilliant white. The pillars were all decorated with wreaths and bouquets of lilies, echoing those in the ballroom.

At Julie’s feet, a runner extended the length of the hall, pearl-white with the crests of the Eternity Throne and the Aether Elves side by side. White rose petals as smooth and shining as silk lay in luxurious swathes on either side of the runner. The petals were everywhere, scattered over the pews and strewn across the dais at the far end of the room.

“This was the throne room when a king reigned in Tintagel,” Morgan murmured. “You will wed in the spot where Uther Pendragon held his court.”

The stone dais rose six steps above the floor, and a stone lectern stood beneath an archway that made a quiet, calm sound like the ocean waves outside. It was composed of

something frothy white that stirred and sparkled in the chandelier's glow.

"What is that?" Julie asked. "It looks familiar, but I can't place it."

"Seafoam." Morgan smiled. "Woven in the manner of the merrows. What do you think? Is it too plain?"

Taylor shook his head. "No."

"I agree. It's perfect, Morgan." Julie gazed at Taylor. "I can't wait to marry you."

He wrapped an arm around her and kissed the side of her head. "I can't wait to marry *you*."

Morgan laughed. "Very well. I won't change a thing." She waved a hand and the illusion faded, replaced by the usual rush-strewn floor and grim statues. "That was all I wanted to show you for the wedding. Everything's under control. Well, everything except the new plan to use the rehearsal as a trap for warlocks, but we have time to work on that."

Julie's mouth had gone dry again. "When..." She swallowed. "When are we going to do the moon rite?"

"This evening." Morgan held out a hand. "First, Merlin and I must go over the prophecies in more detail and prepare for the rite."

Julie handed Hat over. "What should I do?"

Morgan tucked Hat under her arm and rested her free hand on Julie's shoulder. "Whatever you need to do to clear your mind. Come to the rite with your heart and mind open for Luna to judge."

She strode away. The hall seemed dull and empty in her absence, and a shudder ran through Julie before she could hide it.

"That archway with the seafoam. It's perfect." Taylor shook his head and snapped out of it. "Okay, done daydreaming. How can I help you? What do you need?"

Julie squeezed his hand. “There’s only one way I can think of to clear my mind right now.”

He met her eyes and grinned. “Then go do it.”

---

Genevieve shifted gears. The engine’s rumble became a high-pitched roar, and the speedometer needle jumped. One-sixty. One-seventy. One-eighty. Julie pressed her foot flat to the floor, wind howling through her hair as Genevieve surged down the quiet country road that wound through the blooming moor.

The thrill in Julie’s veins was almost enough to banish the pressure crushing her shoulders. Almost.

“Go, Gennie.” Julie leaned forward, straining against her seatbelt. “Go!”

Three hundred seventy-five horses screamed a battle cry in unison, and Genevieve accelerated until the needle of her speedo jammed on the other side of the number 200.

“Yeah!” Julie whooped. “*Yeah!*”

The horizon rushed to meet them at the top of the next hill, and Julie eased off the gas until Genevieve’s engine returned to a quiet rumble. They cruised over the top of the hill at a hundred or so, and Julie blinked.

“I guess driving at that speed gets us places faster, huh?” she told Genevieve.

The drive from Tintagel Castle to its neighboring village had taken less than ten minutes. The village far below basked in the afternoon sunshine. An ordinary collection of single-story homes, most constructed of stone and thatch, wrapped around a cobblestoned market square among fields and farmlands and copses of silver birch.

Julie downshifted and slowly drove into the village. She paused a few yards from the square to allow a flock of sheep to trot across the road, their curly fleeces bouncing with the

motion. A centaur strolled behind them, carrying a shepherd's crook. The dog at his heels had a black coat streaked with gold and silver. The centaur raised a hand in thanks. Julie waved back, and beneath his tweed cap, his leathery face creased into a smile.

With the sheep gone, Julie rolled into the square and brought Genevieve to a halt near the sidewalk. Parking spaces weren't a thing in this little village. She stepped out and leaned against the car, breathing deeply. The kids playing around the well in the middle of the square—two orcs, an elf, and a werebadger—gave her curious stares. Julie waved at them, and the smallest orc grinned, gap-toothed, and waved back.

Leaning her elbows on Genevieve's roof, Julie gazed at the shops. They were small and basic, with hand-painted wooden signs: *Greengrocer*, *Barber*, *Milliner*, *Butcher*. Although the doors were open, hardly anyone moved between the shops except a big white duck carrying a basket in her mouth who waddled purposefully into the greengrocer's.

"Scuse me, miss."

Julie looked down. The boy standing by her feet was little more than knee-high. A mad tousle of sandy curls topped his round, freckled face, and his words whistled past buck teeth. Tiny antlers sprouted from his head, and a short, furry tail, white on the bottom, protruded from a neatly sewn hole in his corduroy pants.

"How can I help you?" Julie asked.

The little fae pointed. "That a Mustang, miss?"

Julie patted Genevieve's roof. "She sure is. One of the classics. A '71 Mach 1."

"Whoa," the boy lisped. "The 429 or the 351?"

"You know your cars, huh?" Julie grinned. "She's the 429. We call her Genevieve."

"I look at videos on the paranet," the boy admitted.

"That's cool. Do you want to be a mechanic when you grow up?" Julie asked.

The boy gazed at Genevieve, then at Julie, and shook his head. “Nuh-uh. I want to be a soldier.”

Julie had been a soldier once. She’d held a friend as he drowned in his own poisoned blood, and her heart stuttered at those words. The boy stared up at her with the huge, soft, dark brown eyes of a deer, ringed by long dark lashes.

“That’s a brave thing to be,” Julie managed.

“Erwyn!” A nearby door burst open, and a female Woodland Fae bounded out, pale and clutching her purse, the white underside of her tail showing through her mom jeans. “Erwyn, come here!”

The little boy turned around. “It’s all right, Mum. I was just—”

“Come *here!*” the fae yelled, panicking.

Erwyn shrugged. “Well, bye.”

“Bye.” Julie smiled.

The fae mom grabbed Erwyn’s arm and yanked him away. “Darling, how many times have I told you not to leave my sight?”

“Mum, stop it!” Erwyn twisted out of her grasp. “Why do you always have to hang onto me? You never used to. I’m not a baby!”

“No, darling.” The fae took a shaky breath.

“I used to play with Tommy and Hera all day. Now you won’t let me leave the house,” Erwyn complained.

“Things were different then,” the fae snapped.

Erwyn folded his short arms. “Yeah. Dad was still here.”

The fae froze, and Erwyn stomped off, kicking at a pebble on the sidewalk. Without taking her eyes off the boy, the fae mom covered her mouth with both hands, and her shoulders shook with a sob.

Julie stepped forward. “Are you okay?”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” The fae wiped her tears. “I’m fine.” She fumbled in her purse for a tissue.

Julie fished one out of Genevieve and offered it to her.

“Thanks. I’m sorry. I’m such a mess.” The fae blew her nose. “Don’t think harshly of Erwyn. Everything’s been different since his father died during a riot in the Sylthana lands. He was on a business trip, and—” The fae swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Julie murmured.

“I stifle the boy, I guess. It’s my own fault he’s like this.” The fae wiped her eyes again. “I’d better go after him. I can’t bear to let him out of my sight. He’s all I have now.” She stared at Julie with exhausted, reddened eyes. “I wish this war would end.”

The fae plodded off, head hanging, clutching the tissue. Julie watched her go.

Her mind had never been clearer than at that moment.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Twilight had settled over the twin towers when Julie drove under the portcullis and parked at the foot of Arthur's statue. She briskly walked toward the second tower, eyes fixed on her destination.

Taylor sat at the desk in their chamber, typing on his laptop. When Julie closed the door behind her, he looked up.

"Babe! You're back." He pushed out of his chair and hurried to hug her. "How do you feel?"

Julie returned the embrace, burying her face in his chest. "Like I know exactly what I need to do."

Taylor pulled back and cupped her face in both hands. "What's that?"

Julie smiled. "Whatever it takes to end the war and bring peace to Avalon again. If that means taking the throne, then that's what it means."

Taylor kissed her forehead. "I love you."

"I love you." Julie stepped back. "Morgan said we should meet her at moonrise."

Taylor nodded. "In Arthur's orchard."

"Let's go." Julie took his hand.

They walked in silence. The land was dark except for the shimmering reflections of stars in the sea. As they reached the first tower, a gleaming sliver of moon appeared on the horizon and slowly rose.

Taylor held the door, and Julie stepped into a torchlit hallway. They followed it to another door at the center of the tower, the one that led to Arthur's resting place. Julie paused, inhaled deeply, and pushed it open.

She had never seen Arthur's clearing except in full sunlight. Morgan usually kept it in a state of eternal noon. It was beautiful then, but now, with the first rays of moonlight striking the grassy space, Julie saw the pale petals of the cherry blossoms and the pure glass of Arthur's casket with a new clarity. Candles set in sconces along the walls glowed with silver moonfire. Between the trees surrounding Arthur's casket, magical artifacts gleamed in the moonlight: a staff with a shovel at one end and a blade in the shape of a crescent moon at the other. A gold bow dangled from a branch, with a single arrow levitating beside it. A pearl the size of two fists hovered over a nearby stump, flickering with silver fire.

Eglantine laughed. *Hello, Julie.*

Julie whipped around. "Eggy?" She sounded so close.

A ring of paras waited near Arthur's casket. At the sleeping king's feet, the dragon's egg lay in the grass, the size of a small car. Her obsidian eggshell absorbed the moonlight, which ran in pulses through the curled body of the unborn dragon, showing Julie faint hints of Eglantine's form through the shell: folded wings, a long, lithe tail, and claws held close to her chest. Three hairless cats sat in a half-circle in front of the egg like a guard of honor.

"You brought her *here*?" Julie asked.

Horusiris, the leader of the Sphynxes, curled his naked tail around his paws and nodded.

"Thank you," Julie mouthed.

Three Lunar Fae stood side by side at Arthur's head, their gossamer wings rising above their heads. Morgan was at the center, flanked by Chief and Shadow. They wore identical silver robes, so bright that they could have been spun from moonlight. The hems were embroidered in black thread in the shapes of the phases of the moon.

“Chief? Shadow? What are you guys doing here?” Julie asked.

“They’re representatives of your species,” Hat explained. He perched on a stump next to Morgan, tall and straight, his crown high. “There aren’t many around, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Julie glanced at Arthur. The king slept, his face pale and his hands folded over the hilt of Excalibur.

Morgan stepped forward, her hands white at the ends of her long sleeves. “Are you ready?”

Julie remembered the fear in the eyes of the Woodland Fae she’d met in the village and the sincerity in the freckled face of the little boy.

She raised her chin. “I am.”

Morgan nodded. “Then let us begin.”

The three fae moved, weightless on the deep grass, to form a circle that included Arthur, Eglantine, and the Sphynxes.

“Let the heir to be tested come forward,” Morgan ordered.

Her voice was deep and powerful, ringing with the magic that had spun life and death for centuries.

Taylor’s fingers tightened on Julie’s. “Go on, love.”

She squeezed back, then let go and found the courage to take the first step into the deep grass. Cherry blossoms fell as she moved, bright pink against the chalky white of her dragonscale robe when they landed on her, as light as dawn kisses. Julie couldn’t look into Morgan’s intent eyes, so she kept her gaze on King Arthur.

*Whose blood will Luna see in me?* The thought came unbidden, but it clanged in Julie’s mind like a gong. *The blood of the king who brought unity and built Avalon, or the blood of the monster who destroyed it all?*

Julie’s chest felt like an iron band was wrapped around it, crushing her ribs. How could her friends ever see her the same way if they discovered that she was a child of Mordred’s line?

She thought about Pompeii, the dragon battle that had claimed tens of thousands of paranormals and humans. Mordred had been responsible. Was he her great-great-great-whatever-grandfather?

She'd lost her shit one time and nearly destroyed the clearing of the Morrigan in a flood of emotion that had turned her still-developing powers into a death trap for anyone near her. Morgan had told her then that it was normal for young fae to lose control over their powers once in a while. What if that was her true nature shining through?

The thoughts clattered madly through Julie's head, as panicky as a herd of bolting horses, and she nearly stopped. Every instinct screamed at her to flee, but then she was beside the dragon egg. She pressed two despairing hands to the warm obsidian shell, and a bright pulse of moonlight ran through Eglantine's body.

*I don't think I can do this*, she admitted.

Eglantine's love flooded Julie. *I know you can*.

Julie inhaled shakily.

Eglantine pressed closer, and the shell creaked where the unborn dragon leaned into Julie's touch. *I love you*.

*Mordred killed your mother*, Julie whispered. *Your ancestors' memories showed you all the things he's done*.

*No matter whose blood is in your veins, Mordred is not you*, Eglantine stated firmly. *Go on*.

The weight around Julie's chest lifted, allowing her to take a deeper breath. *Thank you*.

She moved on from the egg and made it as far as the sleeping king. Dragging her eyes away from the horrific blackened wound in his side, she focused on his face, peaceful in his magical coma. Her gaze dropped quickly to the grass. If her ancestor had done this to him... The thought made it impossible to look at him.

Julie had never asked Morgan if Arthur could hear or sense anything in his sleep. She guessed not, but this felt important.

Without meaning to, she sank to her knees and rested her forehead on the cold glass of his casket.

“Sir.” Julie swallowed the lump in her throat. Was she worthy to address him? “Whatever happens tonight, I vowed to uphold your ideals. You not only imagined a world where all paras could live in harmony, but you made it happen. Whoever I’m descended from, I promised to do the same as far as it is in my power.”

She peered at him through the glass, but the king slept on.

“Julie?” Morgan gently prompted.

Julie inhaled sharply, summoned all of her strength, and rose, then stumbled to the center of the circle of fae. Morgan smiled and held out her hands, and Julie gripped them, surprised by how cold they were.

Moonlight shimmered on Morgan’s black hair. She closed her eyes, and the moon got brighter. No, not the moon. The light came from all around them, from underneath and beside them. Julie’s breath caught as she glanced around. She’d never noticed the selenite crystals inlaid in every surface of the orchard before, but now they all glowed, swirling patterns in the path and walls, the stone benches, and Arthur’s bier. They lit every inch of the orchard as though ten thousand tiny moons glowed together.

The glow spread. Eglantine’s shell oozed silver light, and a soft luminescence poured from Chief, Shadow, and Morgan. When Julie glanced down at her hands, they emitted a steady shimmer of moonlight. Hat’s embroidered patterns shone.

Morgan’s eyes were still closed. “Luna, bless this night, this land, and this fae who offers herself to your service.”

Her hands tightened on Julie’s, then released them. The moonlight grew so bright that Julie couldn’t keep her eyes open. She closed them and stood trembling in the center of the circle, conscious of the tense silence, broken only by the rush of blood in her ears.

Something told her to raise her hands toward the moon. The moonlight pouring over her palms and over her fingers

felt physical, like she was touching a gentle waterfall at body temperature. Magic seeped into her pores and rippled through her veins, binding with her cells like oxygen. Julie's breaths grew slow and deep.

Whatever she was, whoever she was, she wanted Luna to see it. All of it. She opened herself like a blooming flower and waited to hear from the moon.

When the voice came, it was from inside her, closer than her own skin. She did not hear the words the way she heard Hat or Eglantine telepathically. They were not spoken. They simply *were*, existing inside her as though they had always been there, waiting patiently for her to hear them.

They came from the distinct and intimate power that resided at the center of her soul. The place from which Julie's magic came, where it had rested, latent, since before she drew her first breath.

It was Luna's presence.

*Hello, my little love.*

Julie's breath caught. Luna felt like home. Though the words came from within Julie, she was aware of being surrounded by something ancient and powerful. Luna's mind cradled her.

*Luna, test me. Try me.* Julie opened her shaking hands, terrified of what the first Lunar Fae would see, yet longing for her presence.

Luna's gentle laugh rippled through the world. *Test you? I already know you. I know your love, your determination, your goodness, and your self-control. I know your willingness to give of yourself. I know your hope in the face of extremity. These are echoes of myself in you, my little love, and at the same time, all yours.*

Julie swallowed hard. Was Luna all-knowing? Was there a "but" coming? *But you are born of pure evil?*

*Do not be afraid,* Luna murmured. *Your fears are unfounded. The blood of Mordred does not run in you.*

Julie's breath stopped.

*No, my little love. You are a descendant of the once and future king,* Luna told her.

Julie breathed deep for the first time since she'd learned she was a Pendragon and found the words. *How...how can you know? No one's been able to see around the concealment spell.*

*That was my doing.* Luna's presence felt like sinking into loving arms. *You are the last hope of our people, Julie Meadows. When Esmerelda's plea for her youngest daughter's safety reached me, I expended every drop of power I could summon to grant her wish.*

Julie's world froze. *Wait. Wait. What? Do you mean—* She stopped. *I'm sorry. I'm out here squawking at, like, the creator fae or whatever you are.*

Luna chuckled. *Squawking is fine. Squawk on.*

Julie sucked in a breath. *Queen Esmerelda is my birth mother?*

She waited for the answer, every fiber of her trembling with terror and hope.

*Yes,* Luna bubbled. *You can be traced directly to Ygraine, who is my direct descendant.*

Julie clasped her hands to her chest. Her heart felt like it had been plunged into warm water, and she floundered for breath.

*When I gave you my protection,* Luna went on, *I also bestowed all my blessings upon you, to be granted should you prove worthy of receiving them.*

*Worthy?* Julie panicked. *I'm not perfect, Luna. Is this why I'm being tested? To prove I'm worthy?* At that moment, she felt that the only thing she was capable of proving was the presence of her regrettably large breakfast.

Luna laughed. *Have I not told you already, love? Life was the test. You have never failed to prove your worthiness. Worth and perfection are not the same thing.*

Memories flooded Julie's mind, but whether they came of their own accord or Luna summoned them, she didn't know. She saw herself tucking a blanket around Lillie, then flying Genevieve across the Atlantic. She saw Taylor's eyes brightening as she hauled him out of his apathy, then the shimmer of her moonstone engagement ring when he proposed.

She saw Malcolm bleeding on the sidewalk as she pulled up to help him, then his father's patient expression as he doled out advice. She saw herself pursuing yetis through the sewers of Brooklyn, then her appointment in Tactical Command. She saw the Siege of the Eternal Palace and how she'd fought to the bitter end to protect it, then the queen's amulet in her hands as she strode into the council hall as its leader.

Finally, she saw the tiny dragon's egg, dead and silent in the belly of the Haunted Hill, no bigger than a watermelon, and her tears brought the egg back to life. She heard Eglantine's voice, rich and husky, rustling through her mind.

*Every good thing in my life came from tribulation,* she realized.

*It came from how you handled tribulation, love,* Luna told her.

Julie frowned. *Then why did I need to do this rite?*

Luna chuckled.

*I mean, don't get me wrong. It's been amazing to meet you.* Julie stretched her hands higher above her head. *I want to understand.*

*I have one final gift to bestow upon you.* Luna drew closer. *The desire of your heart.*

Julie's eyelids fluttered, but the brilliance of the moonlight forced her to shut them. *Anything?*

*Anything,* Luna confirmed.

The most powerful fae in existence had offered her one wish. Julie's heart swelled within her, fishing for what she wanted. All she could think of was what she already had:

Taylor's arms around her, Rosa's bubbly laugh, Hat's cranky voice, and Eglantine's warmth. She had work that she believed in and a place to belong.

*I guess I could ask for the concealment spell to be removed,* Julie thought.

*You could,* Luna affirmed.

*I could, but I don't need it.* Julie lowered her head and slowly opened her eyes, waiting for them to adjust to the dazzling light. The first thing she saw was Morgan, head bowed, hands raised, bathed in moonlight. A smile lifted Julie's lips.

*Luna, she murmured, tell me how to heal Arthur.*

*Is this what you truly want?* Luna asked, unsurprised. *There will be no gifts after this, Julie.*

*I've never been more sure of anything.* Julie glanced at Taylor, who hovered near the door, squinting at them through his fingers. *Well, almost anything. This is what I want. To see Morgan happy and to see the world restored by its Eternity King.*

Luna's laughter lifted her like a swelling wave. *Very well.*

*What do I do?* Julie asked.

*Let me work within you,* Luna murmured.

Julie rose, as buoyant as though she were made of helium. Her wings remained motionless as she floated between the blossom-bedecked branches. Beside her, grass and roots creaked, and Arthur's bier broke loose from the soil that had held it for thousands of years. Chunks of damp earth tumbled away from the stone and roots snapped, white against the dark ground. Arthur rose level with Julie, still motionless, still in his coma.

When they stopped rising, Julie looked down at the perfect circle of the orchard, dotted with pink trees. Her friends were like chess pieces bathed in moonlight. The orchard was patterned by the selenite, and Julie squinted. It formed a shape...a familiar one.

The light briefly dimmed, and then bolts shot from every selenite crystal, so bright that they blinded Julie. When she blinked the purple burns away, she saw the pattern the selenite formed.

A dragon rampant—the crest of the Pendragons.

*The crest of my family*, Julie realized. Her heart thrummed like a stroked harp.

*Lay your hands on the hands of the king, love*, Luna instructed.

Julie turned to Arthur. The glass disintegrated into a million swirling points of light, which were absorbed into the moonlight's glow. Julie's pulse bounded in her wrists. She stretched out her hands, aware of their shaking, and wrapped them around Arthur's fingers where they lay over the hilt of Excalibur. They were icy to the touch, colder than death, colder than frosted stone. They lifted only slightly when Arthur's chest moved, a breath that barely stirred the air.

*What now?* Julie asked.

*Be still*, Luna told her.

Julie closed her eyes and breathed deep in her diaphragm, imagining a lake, mirror-still. She inhaled to a count of four, held the breath, released it slowly, and waited another four beats. Calm spread through her, and she raised her face to the moon.

This time, the power came from everywhere, a rushing tsunami of magic that crashed through her. It came from the moon, the air, and the sky, from the cherry blossoms and battlements, from the sea, and from her soul. She cried out with the force of it, but there was no pain. No control, yet no destruction. Julie opened her eyes to see a tornado of magic enveloping her and Arthur, veiling them from the rest of the world. The magic had moonlight in it, and seafoam, and falling stars, and the smell of the earth after rain. Julie realized she was laughing and crying with the glory of it all.

Everything evaporated—the hot tears on her cheeks, the brilliant magic, the yelps from her friends below—and her

world coalesced into a single sensation: heat surging through Arthur's hands.

She stared at the king. Color rushed to his cheeks, banishing his morbid pallor. The wound in his side changed; dead black flesh flushed pink, healthy muscle knitting over exposed bone, and smooth skin formed, scarless where the avulsion had been.

Arthur's warm fingers twitched, and his eyelids fluttered.

The king awoke.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Julie opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

Arthur drew a long, deep breath, filling his lungs. His grip tightened on Excalibur, and his folded wings rustled.

“Sir?” Julie squeaked.

Arthur’s eyes opened. They were bright like Esmerelda’s and every shade of blue, shifting like the sea. Peace beyond anything Julie had ever seen lay behind them. He gazed at her. “Who are you?”

The voice was deep and sonorous, with hints of breaking waves. Julie’s jaw dropped. She stared at him, still floating.

“You look much like my mother.” Arthur lifted a hand from Excalibur and touched Julie’s cheek with his fingertips as if to check that she was made of flesh. “Can it be?”

“You’re not dead,” Julie blurted.

Luna’s giggle vibrated through the moonlight.

Arthur considered that. “You are not Ygraine.”

“I’m, like, her great-great-great-great-great-grandkid or something,” Julie offered.

“Ah.” Arthur stirred his shoulders. “A fight. The dragon’s blade! I must stop Mordred!” He sat up.

“Sir, don’t!” Julie grabbed his shoulders.

“Merlin’s glorious waxed mustache!” Arthur clutched the edges of the bier.

They still floated several hundred feet above the orchard. Arthur's wings stirred and unfolded slowly, trembling with weakness.

"Uh, Luna?" Julie raised her eyes to the moon. "Can you, like, put us down, please?"

Gently, Julie and Arthur drifted between the branches and onto the grass. Morgan, Chief, and Shadow had joined hands, but none of them moved, their heads still bowed. Hat trembled on his stump. Eglantine's moonlit pulses came faster now. Two of the Sphynxes had fallen asleep. Horusiris leisurely cleaned the underside of his left hind leg, his little pink paw sticking up above his head.

"Look at you!" Taylor was the first to move. He ran across the orchard toward Julie, his grin huge. "Look at you, baby!"

He shoved Morgan and Chief unceremoniously aside and flung his arms around Julie, pulling her close to his chest, laughing.

"Look at me, ' what?" Julie squawked. "Am I glowing?"

"You're..." Taylor held her at arm's length, fishing for words. "You're more *you*."

Arthur's voice quavered. "Morgan?"

Morgan's eyes snapped open, and she gasped. She stared at the king, frozen. Arthur sat up slowly and swung his legs off the bier. Excalibur fell to the ground.

"Morgan," he croaked.

"Arthur!" Morgan sprinted to him and cupped his face in her hands. "My love!"

Arthur's eyes filled with tears, and he wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her close. "You were beside me all those years," he whispered. "I knew nothing but the passage of time and the sound of your voice."

Morgan pressed her lips to his. It was the kind of kiss that made Julie consider practicing with Taylor if they wanted to approach its quality at the altar.

A rending crack echoed through the orchard like a gunshot and Julie whirled, flames leaping to her hands.

All three Sphynxes were wide awake. They stood facing the egg, their tails straight up and quivering, muscles tight in their backs. A white crack spread down the side of the eggshell, and steam seeped into the air.

*Eglantine!* Julie screamed.

*I'm okay.* I'm okay! Eglantine's laughter bounded through Julie's mind.

Julie's flames winked out, and she ran to the egg, then pressed her hands against the shell. Heat scorched her palms, and she jumped back with a yelp.

*Stand back,* Eglantine cried. *Here I come!*

Julie staggered back a few steps, open-mouthed and staring.

Arthur exclaimed, "The egg hatches!"

"No shit, Artie," Hat grumbled.

"*Merlin?*" Arthur squawked in a less than majestic manner.

With a sound like rocks shattering, another crack snaked down the shell. The Sphynxes retreated and hid behind Julie's legs, yowling.

"Go, Eggy!" Julie cheered. "Go, moondrop, go!"

Something sharp protruded from the top of the egg, flashing white and curved like a claw. Steam poured from the growing hole, and scales scraped the inside of the egg as Eglantine writhed.

*Almost,* she growled. *Almost!*

Julie stepped forward, but Horusiris jumped on her foot, claws first.

"Ow!" she protested.

"Wait!" the Sphynx ordered. "She needs to do this on her own."

Julie understood. A second claw appeared alongside the first, facing away from each other. Each gripped the shell on one side of the hole, and a deep rumble rose from inside, sounding like a growl of effort. The obsidian shell creaked under the strain, and steam jetted from the growing cracks. Julie strained to see past it but glimpsed only a flash of scales.

The growl intensified, changed, and became a roar that shook the earth.

Julie jumped up and down, wings buzzing. “Come on, Eggles! You’ve got this!”

“Eggles.” Hat chuckled. “If only Alugon was here to see this.”

The creak of obsidian rose to a scream.

“Cover your ears!” Arthur yelled.

Julie clapped her hands to her head, but the crack of the obsidian shattering was still loud enough to rip through her eardrums, filling her head with ringing. A flash of brilliant moonlight and a cloud of steam filled her vision, and she stumbled back, tripped over a Sphynx, and landed flat on her ass in the grass, blinking at the towering silhouette behind the clearing steam.

The steam dissipated, and for the first time, Julie gazed at the princess of dragons.

Eglantine’s scales were white. Every scale sparkled, gem-bright, as though her skin was studded with moonstones. Droplets of condensation glittered all over her body. She sat on her haunches, front paws spread wide on the shattered pieces of her eggshell, tendons tight as her curving claws, as bright as polished steel, flexed and pressed the shards of obsidian into the dirt. Her long, sinuous tail was curled around her, studded with spikes the same color as her claws, ending in a tapering point that sported a dorsal fin.

Julie’s gaze traveled up Eglantine’s lithe body. The spikes got larger as they marched up her tail and along her spine. Two pale wings sprouted from the dragon’s shoulders, damp and folded and trembling, composed of a white membrane as

lustrous as silk. Her neck was a long, proud curve, her head chiseled and vaguely equine in the flaring nostrils, but the long mouth was predatory. Three horns rose from her forehead, one curving to each side and the third curving backward.

Eglantine's eyes were closed, her mouth open, a forked pink tongue spilling over silver fangs as she panted.

"Eggy?" Julie rose to her feet.

Eglantine raised her head and opened her eyes. They were huge and strangely human with white sclera and round pupils, except that the irises held the whole night sky. Their color was more than black. They held the mysterious blues and purples of space and were studded with tiny silver specks, constellations in her gaze.

She blinked, and a white membrane flicked from left to right as her eyelid closed. Then she looked at Julie.

"Hello, moondrop." Julie laughed and stepped forward to hold both hands up to the dragon.

Eglantine spoke her first word out loud, and her voice was as husky as it had been in Julie's head. "Julie!"

She rose, wobbly on her new legs, and lowered her massive head, which was bigger than Julie's torso. Her nose bumped clumsily against Julie's fingers, hot and damp from hatching and hard with scales. She huffed out a steaming breath that spilled over Julie's bare forearms.

"You're so beautiful." Julie couldn't stop staring into those eyes.

Eglantine grinned, teeth flashing. "Not so bad yourself. I like your robe."

Julie stared at her reflection in Eglantine's left eye, and her breath caught. Her robe had lost its bone-whiteness and now shimmered like Eglantine's scales. Her wings had changed, too. They were taller than before and rose to swallowtail points, emitting a soft blue glow. Her features seemed the same, but her eyes were brighter and had more colors.

"The concealment spell," she whispered.

“It’s lifted!” Morgan laughed. “Julie, you’re the spitting image of Ygraine.”

“I was just telling her that, my love,” Arthur informed her.

With difficulty, Julie turned away from Eglantine. Morgan stood beside Arthur, her arms around his shoulders. He hugged her, his face pressed against her stomach, beaming. Taylor just gaped, adorable. Horusiris and Ranubis groomed each other. Cleo rolled in the grass, pink belly in the air.

“Luna told me I’m...” Julie touched her sternum. “I’m Queen Esmerelda’s daughter.”

Hat’s glow intensified. Chief and Shadow exchanged glances.

“*What?*” Taylor squealed. “*WHAT?*”

Julie laughed, giddy. “That’s right, babe. I outrank you.”

“What is happening?” Arthur inquired.

Morgan stepped back and held out a hand. “It’s a long story, my love, and one I look forward to telling you over dinner.”

Arthur took Morgan’s hand and rose, his limbs strong and steady. The moonlight caught their spreading, gossamer wings and shattered into a thousand sparkling fragments that drew silver lines on their dark heads. Morgan tilted back her head to gaze into Arthur’s eyes.

“During the thousands of years I slept,” he murmured, “it was the look in your eyes I most longed for.”

Morgan’s smile was unlike anything Julie had seen on her face before. The peace and joy in her gaze were as immovable as a standing stone. Behind them, Chief and Shadow watched. Shadow’s hands were clasped beneath her chin, and tears glistened on Chief’s cheeks.

“You loved me with a devotion none could deserve,” Arthur whispered.

“I love you that way still, Arthur.” Morgan raised a hand and rested it on his cheek.

Arthur pressed a kiss to her forehead, as tender as a falling blossom, then turned to the rest of the group. An awed hush fell over them, all eyes fixed on the returned king.

“I have woken,” he called. “This lovely princess is my heir, and a dragon is born. Let us rejoice! Let there be feasting!”

His voice gathered strength and echoed around the orchard as it once had echoed through the halls of Camelot. He gripped Morgan’s hand and stepped forward. Morgan made a tiny, painful sound and swayed, clasping a hand to her head.

“Morgan?” Julie stepped forward. “What’s wrong?”

“My love?” Arthur turned to her and gripped her shoulders.

“I...” Morgan’s eyes were wide and scared. “I feel so weak.”

Her glow had vanished. As Arthur’s radiance intensified, a terrible gray pallor crept into her cheeks.

“Something’s wrong,” Taylor quavered.

“Morgan, what’s the matter?” Arthur cried.

Morgan’s breathing got ragged and weak. Her knees wobbled, then buckled, and she fell forward into Arthur’s embrace.

He sagged onto the grass, cradling her in his lap. “Morgan!”

Julie ran to her, but Chief and Shadow beat her to it. The three fae knelt around Morgan, whose eyes were glassy, and her breaths came shallower and shallower. Julie grabbed Morgan’s hand and squeezed it. The fingers flexed feebly in her grasp.

“Hat, what’s happening?” Julie yelled.

Hat floated over and landed on Morgan’s stomach, his point drooping. “Her magic is fading.”

“What do you mean, fading?” Julie yelled.

Arthur froze, horror in his eyes. “No.”

“I’m sorry, Artie,” Hat whispered.

“No!” Arthur raged. “Turn it back!” His eyes glistened with tears. “Merlin, I beg of you, reverse it.”

“Reverse it?” Julie squawked. “What are you talking about?”

Morgan’s pulse fluttered in her wrist.

“My curse fell upon her,” Arthur sobbed.

Julie’s blood turned to ice. She clutched Morgan’s hand and raised her face to the moon, her eyes stinging. *Luna!* she cried out in her soul. *Luna, please! I didn’t mean for this to happen. This wasn’t what I meant. Help us!*

Luna’s response came instantly. *Nor was this my will, little love. This is not my doing.*

*Well, whoever did it, undo it!* Julie screamed.

*I’m sorry, little love. The magic at work here is as old as I am.* Luna sighed. *This is Sol’s work.*

*There’s nothing you can do?* Julie cried.

*I’m sorry,* Luna whispered.

“Morgan, please! *Please, my love.*” Arthur cradled her, the fae’s long dark hair spilling over his arms. “Look at me. Look at me, love.”

Morgan’s eyelids fluttered, and her glassy, vacant eyes twitched and found Arthur’s face. Trembling fiercely, she lifted a hand, but it rose only a few inches before falling hopelessly onto her chest.

“Arthur.” She breathed the word on the cusp of hearing.

He leaned closer. “Shh, Morgan. We...we’ll help you.”

“Arthur...” Morgan’s eyes closed. “I love you.”

Her head lolled back.

“No!” Julie screamed. “Hat, do something!”

“I can’t stop it,” Hat whispered. “I’m sorry.”

Julie looked around wildly and saw Taylor hovering nearby. Eglantine still sprawled among her shell shards, huffing steam. “What about dragon magic?”

“I can’t access it.” Eglantine hung her head.

“She’s a newborn, Julie,” Horusiris chided.

“Then *you* do something,” Julie snapped.

The Sphynx blinked green eyes. “Sol prevents us, too.”

Julie didn’t know where else to look or turn. She stared at Arthur as he cradled Morgan to his chest, weeping. The fae was limp and motionless in his arms. Her chest twitched, and the breath that escaped her was...

Her last.

Julie’s gaze caught the empty stone bier.

*Luna!* she called. *Can you place Morgan under the same enchantment that kept Arthur alive? The sleeping curse?*

*Indeed, I shall.* Luna’s power surged in response. Tendrils of moonlight as thick as smoke burst from the selenite. They raced across the grass, weaving between the blades, and wrapped around Morgan’s arms and legs.

Arthur raised his tear-streaked face. “That is the spell under which I slept.”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty.” Julie swallowed. “It’s the only way to keep her alive.”

Arthur’s arms tightened around Morgan as the moonlight wrapped around her torso, neck, and face.

“Let her go, Artie,” Hat murmured. He hopped into Julie’s lap.

Arthur bowed his head. “I’m sorry, my love,” he whispered and allowed his arms to fall onto his lap.

The moonlight lifted Morgan a foot into the air, twining around her and mummifying her in its brilliance. Julie’s tears burned her cheeks. Shadow sobbed in Chief’s arms, and Julie clutched Hat tightly, her fingers digging into the thick fabric.

Slowly, the glow faded, and Morgan sank into Arthur's arms once more. Her face was moon-white, eyes closed, composed in the familiar attitude of deathly peace. Her limbs sagged uselessly as the magic released her.

*She sleeps,* Luna murmured.

Arthur gathered her in his arms and tried to rise but sagged onto one knee.

"Lancelot," he croaked. "Guinevere, please. Help me."

Shadow detached from Chief's arms and ran to his side. Chief was right beside her.

"Oh!" Taylor exclaimed. "That's...that's who Lancelot and Guinevere are."

The words drifted through Julie's mind but found no purchase. She scrambled to her feet as the three fae lifted Morgan together. Chief...Lancelot or whoever...lifted Morgan's torso while Shadow raised her feet almost reverently, keeping her body level. Arthur cradled Morgan's head.

Together, they carried Morgan to the stone bier that had been Arthur's resting place for so many years, and in gentle unison, they lowered her onto the velvet, carefully folding her wings beneath her. The bier had been designed for the king, so it was too long for Morgan. She looked tiny lying there.

"We must cover her, my liege," Lancelot whispered.

Arthur fell to his knees beside the bier. With shaking hands, he brushed the dark strands of Morgan's hair from her face, then pressed his lips gently to hers.

"Sweet dreams, my love," he whispered.

The weeping king stepped back. Guinevere raised her hands, and grain by grain, sand, soda ash, and limestone separated themselves from the fertile earth and trickled into her palms. When she had two full handfuls, she held them out to Lancelot.

Silver fire flickered over Lancelot's hands and arms. Then his eyes met Guinevere's, and he stepped forward to meet her.

Their hands clasped, and molten glass trickled between Guinevere's fingers.

Hat squirmed out from between Julie's arms and floated over Morgan's motionless body. As glass oozed from Guinevere's hands, he hummed, his silver insignias glowing, and the molten glass rose at his bidding. Pinging as it cooled, it covered Morgan, and in minutes, it solidified into a crystal-clear rectangle, safely sealing her away from outside influences.

Julie stumbled to Morgan's side and rested her hands on the still-warm glass, heedless of the smudges she made on the perfect surface. Cherry blossoms drifted onto the covering. A tear splashed between Julie's fingers, but Morgan didn't smile or stir or pull her in for a comforting hug. She slept, caught between life and death.

Would she, too, slumber for millennia?

A warm hand rested on Julie's shoulder. "Your quick thinking saved her, Your Highness."

The title slid over Julie's skin, not sticking. She raised her head. "Wh-what?"

"You are the princess, are you not?" Arthur smiled. "I told you. You look exactly like my mother, yet your bearing is not that of a queen. Not yet."

Julie brushed tears away with the back of her hand. "Sir, I'm sorry that your awakening meant Morgan's sleeping."

Arthur spread his hands. "I heard Luna. This was not the plan, yet if I woke, what is there to say that she will not?"

Julie inhaled shakily. "Something good came of this, sir. Something *very* good."

Arthur's blue eyes held hers.

"You're back," Julie whispered. "You've returned as foretold, and you're going to take the throne and end the war. It's still your Eternity Throne, sir. You are the king who can save us."

Arthur's hand tightened on her shoulder. "Alas, Your Highness, my destiny was never to resume the Eternity Crown." He looked at Morgan. "I must stay here with my lady love and show her the faithfulness she showed to me all those years."

"But, sir, we need you!" Julie cried. "You're the only one who can unite all paras."

"The only one?" Arthur smiled, two dimples showing below his cheekbones. "You have been blessed by Luna, Your Highness. You have been granted the sacred dragon bond."

Eglantine rose on wobbly legs and stumbled nearer, then pressed her hard muzzle against Julie's shoulder. Despite her grief, Julie felt a dim kick of excitement. She raised a hand to Eglantine's nose and leaned her cheek against the warm scales. Steaming breath warmed her face.

"Look at her!" Arthur boomed a laugh and stepped back, raising his arms. "She is a dragon of moonlight and nightfall. She calls the tides and commands the stars. She bends the night winds to her will and summons moonfire with her breath. She is a princess among dragons, soon to be their queen, and she will rule the greatest of all paranormals with a steely claw that alights gently. She has wisdom and honor, magic and light. She is power and majesty!"

Eglantine preened, arching her neck this way and that to let the moonlight sparkle on her scales.

Arthur coughed. "When she is fully grown, of course."

Eglantine stomped a paw. "Hey!"

Julie giggled despite herself.

Arthur smiled at her and took her hands. "My precious young princess, do not feel alone. You have the power of the moon dragon with you and a wealth of advice from the wisest counselor any monarch could hope for." He glanced at Hat. "Besides that, you have Lancelot and Guinevere by your side, and they will fight for you as they fought for me."

Chief and Shadow—Lancelot and Guinevere—stepped forward and knelt.

“My liege,” each declared.

Julie floundered, but Arthur’s touch grounded her. “You are surrounded by love,” he told her, “and you are imbued with the presence of Luna. You will bring the unity she intended.”

Julie’s breath caught as Arthur bent down and gripped Excalibur’s hilt. When he raised the broadsword, it captured moonlight in a long, luxurious flash down its gleaming length. Ancient runes glowed on its blade. Julie didn’t need to understand them to remember what they said: *Take me up* was inscribed on one side, and *Cast me away* on the other.

Arthur hefted the blade, an expert, balanced movement that contained the same ease with which he hefted his arm. Then he reversed it and held the hilt out to Julie. The grip was well-worn, but the selenite that formed its pommel glowed with the same intensity as the day it was mined.

“Take the blade, Princess,” he murmured, his eyes holding hers. “You are the natural heir to the Eternity Throne.”

“I’m not ready,” Julie blurted. “I can’t be the Eternity Queen! Sir, I didn’t even know that fae *existed* until a few years ago. How am I supposed to lead your world?”

“Not alone.” Arthur smiled. “Never alone. Princess, Luna revealed your great courage and virtue to me. I know *you* know this is your destiny.”

Julie took a deep breath. *I vow to restore unity among all paras*. Her geas pulsed in her chest, and despite the fear that tingled in her fingertips, a sense of peace and rightness settled inside her.

“Go with my blessing.” Arthur offered the sword. “Banish the evil that has overtaken Avalon while I slept away these long years.”

Julie slowly wrapped her fingers around the hilt. She had expected Excalibur to be far too heavy, but it felt like taking the hand of an old friend.

She squared her shoulders.

“I will.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Arthur held Julie's gaze, then inclined his head. "Now, Princess, if you will all allow me to do so, I must go to Morgan's tower to learn how she maintained the magic that kept me alive so that I might do the same for her."

He turned on his heel with a swirl of dark hair and pale cloak and strode out of the orchard with strong, steady steps.

Julie looked at Excalibur, then at Eglantine, then at Excalibur, then at Eglantine. She whisper-screamed and tried not to pee her pants.

"Julie!" Taylor rushed to her, bouncing up and down like a little kid. "You're the princess? You've got the sword?! You woke the king!" He waved his arms above his head, unable to express his excitement in words and settling for a desperate squeaking sound.

"We're both going to be queens!" Eglantine boomed. She bounded a circle around Julie, her limbs now stronger. Her leaps shook the earth, and the Sphynxes scattered. Horusiris was a second too slow, and Eglantine's claw descended on his tail. He yowled and shot up the nearest cherry tree.

"I don't know what to feel," Julie spluttered, clinging to Excalibur. "I mean...Morgan."

"We'll find a way to save Morgan." Hat settled on Julie's head. "If Arthur woke, so can she."

Eglantine butted Julie in the back with her nose, nearly knocking her flat on her face. "We get to be together at last."

Julie laughed and petted the dragon's nose. "At last."

"Plus, you have *Excalibur!*" Taylor squealed. "Do you know how many wooden Excaliburs I had when I was a kid? Can I hold it? Please? Can I?"

Julie giggled. "Sure." She held out the hilt.

Taylor took it and all but melted into a puddle of delighted goo.

"Your Royal Highness," Lancelot murmured.

Julie turned. He stood beside Guinevere, who was staring at her.

"Please don't," Julie pleaded. "'Julie' is fine. Give me some time to come to grips with the 'Your Highness' shit."

Guinevere continued to stare through Julie's soul, but Lancelot inclined his head. "Very well, Julie. I have a humble request."

"Seriously, Chief? You were ordering me around and yelling back in the drow lands. You're ten thousand years old. There's no need for humble requests. Spit it out," Julie commanded.

Lancelot's lip quirked. "Okay, then. Please don't reveal our identities, even if you choose to reveal your own." He reached for Guinevere's hand. "It would compromise not only our safety but perhaps the safety of the little ones we worked so hard and so long to protect."

"Of course." Julie nodded. "My lips are sealed."

Lancelot's shoulders relaxed. "Thank you." He glanced at Eglantine, who was engaged in chasing a hapless Cleo around the orchard at that moment.

"Eggles!" Julie yelled.

Eglantine skidded to a halt, plowing grooves in the dirt with her claws. She crashed headlong into a cherry tree, which fell over.

Julie winced.

“Sorry.” Eglantine gripped the tree and lifted it back into place, then fussily patted the dirt down over the roots. “Did you say something, Julie?”

“Come over here, moondrop.” Julie held out a hand.

Eglantine jogged over. “Yeah?”

“We need to keep Lancelot and Guinevere’s identity a secret, okay?” Julie rested her hand on Eglantine’s shoulder.

Eglantine nodded. “I would never tell. Never. Promise. Pinky promise.” She held out a giant claw.

Lancelot and Guinevere stared at it, nonplussed.

Julie pressed Eglantine’s paw away. “That’s...uh, that’s an Earth thing, moondrop.”

“Oh. My bad.” Eglantine shrugged.

“Your secret’s always been safe with me,” Hat declared.

Lancelot chuckled. “As yours has been with us, Merlin.”

“I have told you repeatedly,” Hat snapped, “I go by Hat.”

“Asshat for short,” Julie added.

“Hey!” Hat protested.

“Prince Taylor?” Guinevere directed her stare at Taylor.

The elf bowed with impressive grace, holding Excalibur expertly over one hip. “Sir Lancelot, Lady Guinevere, I am honored to stand in your presence. You were my heroes and the heroes of hundreds before me and hundreds to come.”

“Really?” Julie sighed. “I thought we’d had enough speechifying for one night.”

Taylor ignored her. “If you request that your identities remain secret, I know as surely as I know your stories—nay, your legends—that you have good reason to do so. All you do is protect and uphold the paranormals who rely upon you, and I assure you, sir and lady, that you may rely upon me to remain discreet in this matter.”

Lancelot grunted. “Thanks.”

Taylor bowed again, his cheeks flushed.

“Can I have my magic sword back, please?” Julie inquired.

“What? Oh.” Taylor blushed deeper. “Sure, babe.” He handed Excalibur over.

Hat *poofed* and became an ornate sword belt that crossed Julie’s torso, made of red leather patterned with gold thread.

“Thanks, Hat. That’s handy.” Julie sheathed Excalibur. “Let’s get down to business.”

“It cuts through iron like it’s wood,” Taylor whispered.

“What?” Julie stared at him.

“Excalibur. It cuts through iron like wood. Can we go cut something?” Taylor requested.

“Babe! Focus.” Julie laughed. “We need to concentrate on what this means.”

“Your inheritance of the Eternity Throne?” Lancelot asked.

“Not that. I’m not there yet.” Julie ran a hand through her hair. “I’m thinking of Arthur’s safety and the safety of Tintagel. Will he be able to maintain the wards Morgan cast here?”

“Supported by the magic of the dragons who moved here, probably,” Guinevere supplied. “They’ll provide him with both wisdom and power. That was how Morgan was able to leave Tintagel of late.”

“Good.” Julie bit her lip. “Then there’s the question of our wedding rehearsal.”

Lancelot’s eyebrows shot up.

“I’m sure Arthur will still be cool with us getting married here, love.” Taylor rested a hand on her shoulder. “And if he’s not, we can find another venue. We don’t have to worry about the wedding right now.”

“I’m not worried about the wedding.” Julie smiled. “I know we’re getting married one way or another. I’m thinking about the trap.”

“Trap?” Lancelot looked at them blankly.

Taylor explained the plan to capture the warlocks at Tintagel using the wedding rehearsal as a trap.

“Wait.” Lancelot’s eyebrows were glued to his hairline. “You plan to lure in a large portion of Mordred’s cult using *yourselves* as bait?”

“Sort of.” Julie shrugged. “They’re after the darkstone, not us, so technically, *we’re* not the bait. Just potential collateral damage.”

Guinevere face-palmed.

“I’m not worried about our safety. We’ve kicked bigger asses,” Julie added. “It’s Arthur who worries me. Is he back at full strength? Will he and Morgan be safe if we bring the warlocks here?”

Guinevere tilted her head, strawberry-blonde curls spilling over one shoulder.

“The plan sounded harebrained at first,” Lancelot murmured slowly, “but the more I consider it, the more it makes sense. I am certain His Majesty would not be against it. We must protect the darkstone at all costs and thus capture the warlocks, no matter what it takes.”

“I agree,” Guinevere chipped in. “The plan must go ahead. Lancelot and I will personally ensure the king’s safety.”

“Good.” Julie exhaled. “I believe it’s the right call. They’ve already stolen several of Arthur’s things. I’m worried they’re using them to fuel their magic or something.”

Guinevere laughed and punched Lancelot in the arm. “I told you it would work.”

“It’s been thousands of years,” Lancelot grumbled, aggrieved.

“Still works.” Guinevere beamed.

Julie just stared at them. “Huh?”

“The other Arthurian artifacts have no bearing on unlocking the darkstone,” Guinevere explained. “It was a

misdirection and a *clever* one.”

“Not to blow your own trumpet or anything,” Lancelot grumbled.

“I still don’t get it.” Eglantine grumped out a smoke ring.

“Morgan was not alone in forging the casket within which the darkstone is locked,” Lancelot elucidated. “It was made by combined magic from Morgan, Merlin, and Arthur, as well as the knights.”

“Including Lancelot and me,” Guinevere added.

Lancelot nodded. “We founded the Order of the Sacred Blade with our Woodland Fae allies in part to protect the darkstone. Their reverence for Arthurian artifacts is real, but it is also, as Guin says, a useful misdirection.”

“After the king slept, we planted clues that would lead anyone who wanted to steal the darkstone to believe that his armor and weaponry and other artifacts were the keys to opening the casket.” Guinevere grinned. “This is not so.”

Julie’s jaw dropped. “So there’s no value to the artifacts.”

“There is value of a kind,” Lancelot corrected. “Not least because of what those artifacts inspire in the hearts of those who behold them. They have magic, too.”

“Not to mention that they now belong to somebody who is alive and conscious and might want them back,” Hat muttered.

“But they are meaningless in terms of capturing the darkstone,” Lancelot finished.

Julie drew Excalibur and gazed at the polished blade. “The warlocks believe that this is the only way they can get the darkstone.”

Lancelot nodded. “Precisely.”

Julie looked at Lancelot, then at Excalibur, and grinned.

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Philomena Darkwing looked green around the gills, but Julie didn't dare point that out to her.

The stern Starlight Fae had both arms wrapped around one of the tall golden spines protruding from Alugon's neck, and her hands were turning white with her death grip. She'd chosen a plum-colored pantsuit for today, and it was still immaculate, even though her legs were wrapped tightly around Alugon's neck. Along the way, she'd lost a high heel, but her makeup was still perfect.

"We're nearly there, Philomena," Julie yelled.

The leathery thud of Alugon's wings turned into a whistling stillness as he spread them wide to catch a thermal. The warmer air tickled the bottom of Julie's wings, and she spread hers, joining the massive dragon as they rose in steady circles.

Philomena quietly groaned.

"Are you airsick, madam?" Alugon inquired.

"I would have preferred to fly with my own wings," Philomena admitted.

"Your battles are intellectual," Alugon pointed out diplomatically.

"He means you're not fit enough to fly this far," Eglantine yelled.

The young dragon swooped alongside Julie, puppy-sized in comparison to Alugon, and her white wings fluttered eagerly.

*This is going to be a disaster,* Hat announced.

*Shhh. Don't say that. This has to work if we're going to get those cities started.*

*I would have thought there were other priorities the day after you learned you are the heir to the Eternity Throne,* Hat pointed out. *Such as...oh, I don't know. Telling your mother?*

*Which one?* Julie inquired.

*Both,* Hat shot back.

*I couldn't move this. You're supposed to broadcast the city sites to the entire council, in case you'd forgotten,* Julie argued. *So help me out, or shut up.*

*Prickly, prickly,* Hat grumbled. *I'm ready to broadcast. Let me know when we're there.*

“Julie, look what I can do!” Eglantine attempted to barrel-roll and dropped like a stone.

“Eggles!” Julie squawked.

“Leave the child,” Alugon advised as Eglantine plummeted toward the sea. “She’ll figure it out.”

“She’s falling!” Julie exclaimed.

“Her bones are mostly composed of metal. She’ll be fine,” Alugon told her serenely.

A few feet above the ocean, Eglantine’s flailing limbs rediscovered their coordination, and she clawed her way back up the thermal with a series of heavy thumps.

“You okay there, moondrop?” Julie asked weakly.

“That was awesome!” Eglantine gushed. “I’m doing it again!” She promptly did.

“If I may ask.” Philomena attempted to sit up, then hugged Alugon’s spine again. “Why are we being accompanied by that uncoordinated dragon?”

“I couldn’t find a sitter,” Julie admitted. “The Sphynxes said she’d trash their temple now that she’s hatched.”

Philomena raised her eyebrows.

“Behold,” Alugon interrupted. “The unnamed isle.”

A blob on the horizon rapidly took shape as they flew toward it. The island was bowl-shaped, and its startlingly white cliffs descended to pitch-black beaches. Fistfuls of rubies washed onto the shore.

“Pretty rocks!” Eglantine dove toward the beach and noisily crash-landed on a sand dune. She popped up, shaking black sand from her scales, and pounced on the nearest ruby.

*At least she's entertaining herself.* Julie sighed.

Alugon landed gracefully on the grass and Philomena fluttered down from her perch, landing beside Julie at his feet.

*Ready, Hat?* Julie tapped him. He was a fedora today. She'd left Excalibur on the dresser at home.

*I'm not a microphone. Don't tap me,* Hat grunted. *Broadcasting in three, two, one. You're live in a hologram to the council. Their responses will be experienced telepathically by all three of you.*

"This island has been uninhabited by language-capable life for several hundred years," Julie explained. "The merrows who own this part of the ocean are amenable to selling it. They have a vicious reputation, but a new king came to power a few years ago, and he's eager to join the Eternity Throne since overfishing by the Mordred cultists on this coastline has caused his people plenty of problems."

"Very well." Philomena frowned at the mainland, a distant green strip on the horizon. "How far are we from shore?"

"Two-point-seven miles," Julie informed her.

Philomena nodded.

*Councilor, a question.* Arion spoke up in their minds. *Who owns the mainland near the island?*

*They are Sylthana lands, although remote and sparsely inhabited,* Julie replied.

Felix grunted. *Our people would have to consent to increased traffic in the area, not to mention the addition of infrastructure.*

*A terrible blow to your economy, I'm sure,* Malcolm commented dryly.

"Felix's concerns are valid. The Sylthana Elves would be approached with a proposal," Julie countered.

"Unfortunately, that might not be necessary." Philomena shook her head. "This location is too remote. The logistics, not to mention the expense, of building a bridge suitable for all

types of para transport will make this very difficult. It is a pity since the island is perfect, but we need a more central location.”

“In that case, let us proceed to the next site,” Alugon suggested.

Julie fished a portal maker out of her pocket and clicked a button on the side of the little device. The air swirled in front of them, and a dragon-sized portal appeared.

Philomena gaped at it, then at Julie. “What, pray tell, was the purpose of flying here?”

“Honestly? Trying to get rid of Eggy’s extra energy,” Julie confessed.

“I *wish* you wouldn’t call her that,” Alugon grumbled.

Julie shouted for Eglantine, and they shuffled through the portal. The crisp sea breeze vanished, replaced by a dry heat that pounded down from the clear sky. Julie’s boots crunched on red sand. Around them, sandstone formations twisted in grotesque shapes punctuated by cacti.

“More sand!” Eglantine cooed and buried her snout in it.

“This location is on the edge of the dwarf lands in a neutral territory primarily occupied by Sandmen,” Julie explained. “It’s only a hundred miles from the Copper Stronghold, and this spot is twenty miles from the nearest interstate.”

*Proximity to the Copper Dwarves could make it easier to obtain construction supplies and suitable magic to power them, the Were councilor offered. If the Sandmen are amenable to selling a piece of land, this might be a good location.*

“There’s also a high concentration of minerals in the area,” Julie added. “It looks pretty empty, but there are plenty of natural resources.”

“Yes, except water.” Philomena frowned, looking around. “Politically, this might be a good site, but I have concerns about the climate. Many paranormal species cope well with heat, but many would be incapable of living here in comfort.”

*The one who plans and measures is true in her sayings.* Randkluft, the yeti councilor, spoke in a slow, meticulous rumble. *The people of the wind and snow would be lost in such a land of sand and sun.*

*He's not alone,* Liaine agreed. *No site will suit every species, but the drow, too, would wilt there.*

*What about the dragons?* Danijah shot back. *Such a site would be ideal for them. There are plenty of paranormals who would be well-suited to a city built here.*

*As well as plenty who would not,* the siren councilor shot back.

“Let’s inspect the last site,” Julie suggested. “We are striving for a solution that will benefit all parties.”

She hit another button on the portal maker and followed Alugon and Philomena through the new portal. Eglantine bounded after them with reckless glee and nearly knocked Julie over as she plunged past.

“Eggy!” Julie yelled.

Eglantine leaped onto a steeply sloping mountainside and fell on her face. She rolled down the grassy slope, laughing and yelping, and came to a halt in a heap of wings and scales at the bottom.

*Elegant,* Hat commented.

Julie dragged her eyes away from Eglantine and cleared her throat. “This is Nessie Ridge, part of the foothills of the Northwestern Spine. We’re north of Fernwood Deep and a couple of hundred miles from Dragonwall. This is wild, neutral territory that has never been under the command of any king as far as we know.”

Philomena planted her hands on her hips, surveying the space. The slope was covered in scattered boulders and sparse yellow grass. It ended in a long, open meadow devoid of any plants except grass, which spread out to meet with a lake that lay as still as a mirror in the bottom of the valley. The lake’s pebbly shores were silent, and no birds pecked in the shallows. There was no sound except Eglantine’s laughter as she

bounded mad circles through the meadow, cutting paths in the deep, dry grass.

“The area is fairly temperate, too,” Julie added. “Rain falls throughout the year, and winter can be a little frosty, but it generally has nice, sunny days. Summer is slightly wetter and warm but not hot.”

“Perfect,” Philomena proclaimed. “A wide range of paranormals could live here. While Dragonwall was a tiny village when you helped reestablish it, Councilor Meadows, it is now large enough that building a road from there to here could easily be accomplished.”

*The more social woodland paras have flocked to Dragonwall in the past year, the dryad councilor agreed. Its economy is growing but would benefit from a boost of this nature.*

*There is plenty of natural water, too, Felix chipped in.*

“Since no one has laid claim to this land, the Eternity Throne will have little difficulty and expense in acquiring it. That means that more money can go to building the city.” Philomena grinned. “So far, this appears to be an excellent site.”

A murmur of contentment ran through the councilors, and Julie exhaled for what felt like the first time since she’d stepped into that orchard last night. *If I’m okay as a councilor, maybe being a princess isn’t too far off.*

“Hey!” Eglantine yelled. “Look what I can do!”

“Your Highness—” Alugon boomed.

He was too late. Eglantine had wrapped her prehensile tail around a large, smooth rock on the lake’s shore, and she flung the rock across the lake. It sailed an impressive distance before landing in the water with a heavy plop.

The ripples spread, then grew larger.

“Eggy, get away from the shore!” Julie broke into a run.

Eglantine crouched like a puppy in a play bow. “Look at it go!” She looked around for another rock.

The ripples became foaming waves, and the entire lake shuddered. Whatever was moving under the surface was *big*.

“Eggy!” Julie screamed, leaping into the air.

Alugon beat her to it. The huge dragon overtook her in a single bound, his multicolored scales shimmering, and lunged across the meadow with his wings half-open.

Julie’s wings hummed as she pursued him, but they were both several hundred yards from Eglantine when the center of the lake foamed white and a creature broke the surface.

She thought that the creature was a kelpie when it leaped like a breaching dolphin since it had the same long neck and the same bullet-shaped body, but this was an older species and far larger. Stubby spines covered its back and neck, and four short legs protruded from its scaly body, ending in fat paws and short, sharp claws. The eyes were yellow, and it had the long, powerful tail of a crocodile. It snapped at the air, and Julie’s heart stuttered at the sound of the bone-crunching thump of its strong yellow teeth.

“Eggy!” Julie shrieked. “Get back from the shore!”

The hatchling dragon spotted the creature as it plunged back into the lake and became a silent dark torpedo toward the shore. Eglantine’s spines rose with metallic clanks and she snarled, smoke pouring between her teeth.

“Eggles, no!” Julie bellowed.

The creature’s wake approached the hatchling.

“Eglantine, Heir of the Deep, get your ass away from that lake, or so help me—” Julie began.

The wake vanished. Eglantine stiffened, her head swinging left and right. Julie pulled up hard, heart hammering.

*Where did it go?* she hissed.

*She,* Hat muttered.

*What?* Julie squawked.

*She. It’s a she. All nessies are,* Hat supplied.

*Nessies?* Julie demanded.

The creature appeared out of thin air and landed on the grass ten feet from Alugon with a heavy thump. Before he could turn, the nessie sprang close, seized his front leg in her powerful jaws, and threw herself to the ground. Alugon roared as the nessie rolled, flinging him onto his side. His huge head swung around, flames licking from his open jaws.

“What do I do?” Philomena shrieked. She wavered on the mountainside, hands clasped to her mouth.

“Stay out of danger!” Julie roared back.

Silently, the nessie vanished.

Julie landed beside Eglantine and grabbed her by one horn. “You want to give me a heart attack, moondrop?”

“Ow!” Eglantine shook Julie’s hand away. “Let me go!”

Unhurt, Alugon spun this way and that, looking for the nessie. To Julie’s relief, her teeth had done no damage to his scales.

“There!” Eglantine sprang forward.

The nessie reappeared six feet behind Alugon and grabbed his tail in her jaws. He whipped around and spat a plume of fire. The nessie vanished, then reappeared under him. She snapped at his belly, and Alugon opened his wings. Before he could take off, the nessie translocated again, appearing in midair next to his left wing. She snapped her jaws shut on the base of his wing and dangled there, claws harmlessly raking his shoulders.

“Got you!” Eglantine bellowed.

She pounced, jaws wide, coughing a smoky plume of half-combusted plasma.

“Eglan—” Alugon began.

The nessie vanished, and the plasma and the leaping dragon slammed into Alugon, knocking him onto his side. Eglantine sprawled over him in a heap of smoky rage.

The nessie landed with a crunch amid the pebbles at the lake's shore. Her tail whipped from side to side, spraying water over her flanks.

“Leave my home!” she roared. “This is my lake. *Mine!*”

Julie stepped forward, holding out our hands. “Our apologies, ma'am. We—”

Eglantine leaped off Alugon and coughed a few sparks. “Get back here!”

“Eglantine, no!” Julie bellowed.

Eglantine rushed past her, the wind of her passage nearly knocking Julie on her ass, and launched herself at the nessie. Her steel teeth snapped shut on thin air, and the nessie reappeared beside her. The nessie seized Eglantine's tail in her jaws, and with a swift jerk of her long neck, she sent Eglantine flying onto the grass. Paws paddling, Eglantine skidded helplessly across the meadow, spitting sparks. Flames flickered into life in the dry grass.

*This is going well,* Hat observed.

Unhurt, Eglantine sprang to her feet and snorted a plume of white smoke, then charged the nessie again.

“She doesn't learn, does she?” Alugon lumbered over to Julie.

Julie summoned fireballs. “I'd better help her.”

“Don't.” Alugon shook his head. “The nessie cannot harm anything except her ego, which could stand a little damage, don't you think?”

Julie groaned as Eglantine charged the nessie. When she disappeared, the dragon whipped around, tucking her tail. The nessie translocated to Eglantine's side and slammed her full weight into the dragon, sending her flying into the water this time.

Julie covered her eyes. “I can't watch.”

Spitting water and steam, Eglantine sat up and shook her head. The nessie appeared above Eglantine's head and belly-

flopped onto the baby dragon, WWE-style. They vanished in an explosion of white spray.

“The councilors are watching this,” Julie whispered.

“She will live,” Alugon told her. “It is a rite of passage for all young dragons.”

“What, getting your ass kicked on live TV?” Julie demanded.

Alugon rumbled a chuckle.

When Eglantine and the nessie broke the surface, the nessie had Eglantine’s neck firmly gripped in her jaws. Eglantine clawed fruitlessly at the nessie’s face as the older creature spun faster and faster until Eglantine was a white blur. Then she let go. Eglantine sailed through the air, roaring and flailing, and slammed into the mountainside with a force that sent a plume of dirt into the air.

Alugon, Philomena, and Julie winced in unison.

As Eglantine scrambled out of the new crater, snarling, the nessie reared and slammed her front paws into her chest like a silverback. “This is *my* valley,” she roared. “What little it has belongs to *me!*”

Julie frowned. *This isn’t about territorial aggression.* She looked at the lifeless lake and the wispy meadow. *This is about guarding her resources.*

*I beg your pardon?* Hat inquired.

Julie ignored him. She bent her knees, then jumped, wings humming, and rose until Eglantine looked small enough to pick up and cuddle. Below, the valley was a lifeless amalgam of rock, dirt, dry grass, and water.

Julie grinned. *Let’s fix that.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Julie focused, feeling the steady heat of her geas and the strength of her power. When she stretched her hands out toward the lake, the magic came to her as easily as a breath.

As Eglantine charged down the mountainside, the lake churned with dozens of scaly tails slapping the surface, and the nessie's nostrils twitched. She whirled, yellow eyes wide, as a school of fish exploded through the water, flashing silver from Julie's vantage point. The edges of the lake flushed green, and reeds sprouted, alive with birds, as Julie's ripples of creation magic extended across the lake. The magic made the nessie sway as it pulsed past her and burst into the meadow.

The dry grass turned verdant green and grew, peppered with wildflowers, until it was knee-deep. Trees sprouted along the edges of the meadow, fruit dripping from their branches. Squirrels scampered around their trunks, chittering. A magnificent stag strode out of the trees, head high, antlers branching, and bent to nibble the grass.

Eglantine stumbled to a halt in the deep green grass and stared around, then grinned at Julie with a mouthful of steel fangs.

The nessie sank onto her haunches and stared at her valley. As Julie fluttered down beside her, she saw two tears trail down the nessie's scaly cheeks.

"What is this?" she whispered. "I haven't seen my valley like this for a hundred years."

“It’s a gift,” Julie told her. “An apology, too.” She shot Eglantine a look. “We had no idea that we were trespassing on your land.”

“*My land?*” The nessie exhaled. “It hasn’t felt like my land for so long.” She pressed her nose into the grass and inhaled, then raised her head. “What are you doing here, in any case?”

Eglantine had the decency to look sheepish, a remarkable feat for a half-ton reptile with smoky breath and wings.

Julie chose her words delicately. “I was hoping to discuss a proposal with you.”

“What kind of proposal?” the nessie asked.

“One that might involve bringing more life to your valley.” Julie searched her mind for nessie protocol but, even with Hat’s help, found none. She settled for a bow. “My name is Julie Meadows. I’m the, um…” She cleared her throat. “The head of the high council for the Eternity Throne.”

*The crown princess*, she added silently. The words weighed on her like a heavy tiara.

The nessie stared at her.

“What’s your name?” Julie ventured.

“Oh!” The nessie blinked. “No one’s asked me that in a very long time. It’s Diedra.”

“Thank you, Diedra. Will you hear me out?” Julie asked. “We will leave your home if you’d prefer.”

Diedra spoke quickly. “No. Stay.” She cleared her throat. “Tell me.”

Alugon and Philomena edged nearer. The nessie nodded civilly at them both.

“First, if I might ask, what happened to your valley?” Julie gestured around. “Was it once like this?”

“Once! For hundreds of years, it was like this.” Diedra hung her head. “I hardly knew what was happening until it had already happened. The topography shifted. There was a battle between several giants nearby—oh, don’t worry, they moved a

couple of centuries ago—and that didn't help matters. The end result was that the river feeding this lake and this valley was cut off.”

The nessie gestured around. “All the pebbles you see used to be covered in water, and much of the meadow, too. When the river dried up, everything changed.” She sighed. “Everything died.”

“I'm sorry.” Julie tentatively rested a hand on Diedra's shoulder. Her scales were rougher and harder than Eglantine's. “Couldn't you translocate elsewhere?”

“I can travel only short distances by translocation. Certainly not to the other side of the mountain. Besides, this is my home.” Diedra looked around. “I couldn't leave.”

“We can help you by opening the waterway back into your lake,” Julie told her. “If you want.”

Diedra's eyes narrowed. “What do you want from me in return?”

“For the river to be reopened? Nothing. That will happen regardless of whether or not you listen to my proposal,” Julie assured her. “That's a simple duty of the Eternity Throne.”

Diedra raised her massive head. “It is, huh? Let's hear the proposal.”

Julie described the multicultural city.

“Your home is perfect for many different kinds of paras. If we build a tunnel through that mountain over there, we can use the plains on the other side as farmland, and the lake is perfect for aquatic paras. For the rest, we'll build a city here on this meadow.” Julie inclined her head. “If you agree to the city plan, you won't only be helping the Eternity Throne restore unity. I promise that your valley will never feel empty again.”

Diedra grinned, showing off her stubby teeth. “You mean that thousands of paranormals would live in this valley with me?”

“If you agree,” Julie repeated.

Diedra tilted her head.

“I can understand that that might be an unattractive idea. Our research didn’t warn us that this land belonged to anyone,” Julie added apologetically. “I’m not sure if nessesies are currency-using paras, but if not, we’ll find a way to recompense you.”

“Do you think I could open a daycare?” Diedra asked.

Julie blinked. “A what?”

“A daycare for aquatic para kids.” Diedra’s tail twitched. “They could play in the lake all day with me while their parents were at work in the city. My world would be full of voices and laughter.”

Julie smiled. “Would you like that?”

Diedra studied her. “My kind are rare, Councilor. We live lonely lives. I have never met another nessesie and likely never will. Before the river shifted, there was a small dwarf village on that meadow, but they moved away when things died. I’ve missed them every moment of the past century. I would love to be part of a huge community.”

Julie struggled to subdue her grin. “You’d be amenable to meeting with a number of councilors and our city planner?” She indicated Philomena.

“Whatever you want.” Diedra waved a claw. “Anytime you please. I’ll be here.” She grinned. “Right now, I have fish to chase for the first time in a hundred years.”

Julie allowed her grin to surface as the council cheered in her mind.

The nessesie lumbered back and slipped into the water. When she breached a few hundred yards from the shore, her laughter echoed around the valley, blending with the birdsong.

*The matter is settled, then. Even Felix sounded pleased. We look forward to the next council meeting, after Ms. Darkwing meets with Diedra.*

*Thank you for your time, Councilors. Julie inclined her head, knowing they’d see it on the hologram. The council is adjourned.*

Hat disconnected as Eglantine lumbered over to Julie, her tail tucked between her legs. “I’m sorry I fought with Diedra.”

“It’s okay, moondrop.” Julie patted her neck.

Alugon chuckled, shaking the ground. “You’ve learned your lesson, young one.”

Eglantine grimaced. “I guess.”

“Al, are you okay to take Philomena back to town?” Julie asked. “Eggy and I need to hurry to the Sacred Blade’s reliquary. I’ve got a meeting with Shadow and the abbot to get to.”

Alugon winced over both nicknames but acquiesced.

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Eglantine’s laughter filled the sky. The young dragon zoomed past Julie, her ungainly paws flailing in all directions, wings thundering. For all her gracelessness, she outstripped Julie with shocking ease.

Laughing, Julie spurred her wings to greater speed. “I’m coming for you!”

Eglantine giggled and barrel-rolled. This time she finished the maneuver, but it slowed her down enough that Julie could dive, wind shrieking in her ears, and slap the dragon’s left haunch.

“Hey!” Eglantine protested. “No butt-slaps!”

“I’d like to see you reach my butt,” Julie teased.

Eglantine huffed a smoke ring. “You’re going to regret saying that.”

Julie blew a raspberry and beat her wings faster, shooting forward. Ahead, Avalon Town was a bright mass of color on the edge of the sea. A patchwork of farmland dotted with golden sheep stretched across the hills beneath Julie and Eglantine, and fat little clouds cast dark green shadows on the landscape.

“You still coming, slowpoke?” Julie called.

There was no response. Julie slowed, her heart tightening, and looked around. The skies were empty.

“Eggles?” she yelled.

Nothing. How could a whole dragon disappear in seconds?

*I’m not supposed to tell*, Hat sniffed.

*Tell what?* Julie squawked.

The burst of laughter exploded from the cloud above her, and Eglantine plunged from it like a thunderbolt. Julie tried to roll out of the way, but the young dragon’s forelimbs closed around her like arms, and they tumbled through the sky together. The rumbles of the dragon’s laughter shook Julie’s body.

With a leathery thump, Eglantine opened her wings and caught a thermal. In silence, she soared upward, and they gazed at Avalon Town.

Julie exhaled a laugh. “It’s good to finally be together.”

“Finally,” Eglantine agreed.

“Sneaky little dragon.” Julie wriggled free of Eglantine’s paws.

Eglantine grinned. “I’m learning.”

“Having all that ancestor knowledge has to be an advantage, considering you *were* born yesterday.” Julie chuckled. “Hopefully, in a few months, Diedra’s valley will look like that.” She pointed at the town.

*All thanks to you*, Hat piped up.

*What do you want?* Julie asked suspiciously.

*Can’t I praise my protégé sometimes?* Hat retorted.

*Not given your track record*, Julie shot back.

They landed in Avalon Plaza with a clump of boots and an ungainly clatter of dragon claws. Eglantine stumbled and smacked her chin on the stones with a force that knocked a teacup off a table at a nearby outdoor cafe.

“Ouch,” she complained.

“Sorry.” Julie waved at the elf who’d lost her teacup.

A teenage werewolf pulled out his phone and snapped a picture of Eglantine. His mother yelled at him.

“You okay, moondrop?” Julie smoothed her suit and straightened her hair.

“I’m fine.” Eglantine bumbled along beside Julie as they strode across the plaza to the reliquary. A trio of gargoyles were perched on the roof, mending a tile, and the dragon watched them with interest.

“Want to go talk to the gargoyles?” Julie asked.

“Yes!” Eglantine’s tail lashed.

“Go ahead, Eggles, but try not to break anything,” Julie yelled after her.

Eglantine flapped ponderously to the roof. She hoped the gargoyles were up to answering the six thousand questions they would be asked, rapid-fire, in the next twenty minutes.

When Julie reached the door, a young Woodland Fae in a brown habit awaited her. His brown button nose twitched, and the hedgehog spines on his head flattened as he grinned at her. “Councilor Meadows, welcome. Thank you again for your actions the other day.”

“Uh, that was the Knight.” Julie cleared her throat. “Not sure what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t fret, madam.” The fae bowed. “We are in the business of keeping secrets. Lady Guinevere and Sir Bedivere await you in the study.”

Julie followed him into the reliquary and up to the abbot’s study. The young fae pushed the door open and announced her. Guinevere stood beside Bedivere at the back of the room, inspecting the suit of armor. Guinevere turned at the sound of Julie’s footsteps, but Bedivere only turned his head with a ruffle of feathers and looked backward at Julie.

*Owl Fae are creepy as shit*, Julie admitted in the privacy of her mind. Bedivere's huge, unblinking amber eyes did not help matters.

Hat snickered.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Julie croaked.

Bedivere turned the rest of his body, to Julie's intense relief. "It is no problem, Lady Knight." He bowed deeply. "I hear you've been occupied with other matters. Please, take a seat."

Bedivere perched behind his desk, arms folded in the sleeves of his robe as usual. Guinevere and Julie settled on the hard wooden chairs facing him.

"I must thank you for the increased presence of the Order of the Round Table of late, Lady Knight." Bedivere's mouth turned down at the corners. "Much as we strive to keep the artifacts safe, it appears that our order needs help from yours for the first time since the Second Pendragon War ended."

"That's what we're here for." Julie smiled. "To help one another."

"Yes, yes." Bedivere sighed.

Julie thought she knew why the old fae's face was so lined and troubled. "Shadow tells me you're worried that someone inside your order is feeding information to the warlocks."

"They must be," Bedivere spluttered. "How else did they infiltrate this building so easily? It might not look like much, but I assure you, Ladies, the wards upon it are all but impenetrable unless one knows which amulets will break them." He shuddered. "Never has such treachery been known in the order, and I fear it, my lady. It was that same treachery from the cursed Mordred that shattered the Order of the Round Table."

"The Round Table recovered, and so can you." Julie smiled. "I have a plan to draw our enemies into the open." She told him about the wedding rehearsal as a trap to lure the warlocks.

Bedivere stared at her, then chuckled, a deep, rolling sound. “Lady Guinevere told me about the rising of my king. He will forgive me, Lady Knight, if I tell you that this is exactly the kind of madcap scheme he would have come up with in his younger days.”

“You have a better idea?” Julie inquired, arching her eyebrows.

“I have no argument against yours. The most madcap of Arthur’s schemes worked the best.” Bedivere inclined his head. “How do you plan to carry it out?”

“If the warlocks believe Arthur’s artifacts are the key to obtaining the darkstone, they’ll be after the greatest artifact of all.” Julie grinned. “Excalibur.”

Bedivere sucked in a breath. “It has been many years since I cast that sacred blade into the lake to save it from Mordred. I know Morgan retrieved it for the king.”

“I-I have it now,” Julie murmured.

Guinevere glanced at her, and Bedivere’s owl eyes drilled into her soul for several seconds. When he spoke again, though, it was not about the succession. “May I see it?” he whispered.

Julie slipped Hat from her head, and in the motion, he transformed into a scabbard, the broad strap encircling her shoulder and hip. She waited until she heard the faint clink and felt the weight of Excalibur landing in its sheath, then slowly drew the sword.

Bedivere’s eyes filled with tears, and he lowered his hands—or rather, *hand*. His left sleeve fell limply to his side, empty as he extended his right hand toward the sword. Julie offered him the hilt, but he brushed his fingertips across the runes on the blade. *Cast me away.*

“I followed this blade into many a battle,” he whispered. “The day I cast it away was the day the world ended. Perhaps it is about to see a new beginning.” He raised teary eyes to Julie’s.

She hesitated. “Maybe Excalibur should stay here with the order it’s named after.”

“No.” Bedivere’s word slammed like a door. “Excalibur was made to be wielded and has lain too long. Bear it well, Lady Knight.” He bowed until his forehead nearly touched the desk. “Tell me your plan.”

Julie turned to Guinevere. “You’re going to need to gush. Can you do that?”

Guinevere grimaced. “I’d rather disembowel a four-stomached minotaur, but I think I can make it happen.”

Ten minutes later, Julie, Guinevere, and Bedivere stepped into the hall. The abbot led them, his arm swinging at his side as he strode along. A tapestry covered the entire wall to Julie’s left, depicting the Battle of Camlann.

“It is good to see the sacred blade again,” he announced loudly.

A knight scrubbing the floor nearby raised his head and stared as they went past.

“We hope there’ll be no need to wield it.” Julie felt the blade bump her wings as she walked. “And with the new wards in place, you should be safe.”

“Excellent.” Bedivere nodded. “I appreciate your effort in checking them for me.”

Julie poked the wall, which flashed purple. “Yes, those are some excellent wards.”

Hat groaned in the privacy of her mind.

“Very thaumatechnical,” Julie added.

*Slightly better*, Hat conceded.

They descended to the next floor, where the remaining knights were gathered, dusting glass cabinets that contained Arthurian artifacts. Julie shot Guinevere a pointed look, aware of the glances flying in her direction.

“Oh, right,” Guinevere whispered. She cleared her throat. “Julie! I’m so excited for your wedding rehearsal. I understand

it's going to be quite the party." It sounded like she was announcing the death of a dear friend.

Julie groaned. *Couldn't Lancelot have done this? He's the dramatic one.*

*Work with what you've got,* Hat snapped.

Julie let out a high-pitched squeal and Guinevere jumped, moonfire flickering on her fingers.

"Merlin's magic fingers, I am *so excited* about my *rehearsal!*" Julie shrieked.

Guinevere grimaced, then sucked in a deep breath. She clasped her hands under her chin and cried, "Oh, Julie, it's so *romantic!* It's going to be *such* a great day. I'm so glad everybody gets to be there! Everything will be *perfect!*" She squealed the last word and did a little tap dance on her tippy-toes.

Julie gawped at her.

*You wanted dramatic,* Hat pointed out.

Julie discreetly glanced at the knights. Most of them continued working, occasionally glancing at Excalibur.

"Are you going to wear that at the rehearsal?" Guinevere simpered, pointing at the sword.

"Don't you think it's the ultimate wedding accessory?" Julie gushed. "Of course I'll be wearing it!"

Bedivere stared at them like they'd grown three heads.

"Will there be a lot of people?" Guinevere asked.

"Oh, everybody!" Julie grinned. "We decided to take advantage of the rehearsal and make it a party in its own right. Why have one party when you can have two?" *Because having an army of friends is useful when your friends are warriors and are literally an army,* she added privately.

Guinevere beamed. "I'll bet *everyone* will wear their very best, heirlooms and all."

Julie slid a glance at the knights but couldn't tell if anyone was overly interested in the news. "The real thing will be even more spectacular. I'll have a huge honor guard from the OPMA, and the para media will all be in attendance, too. It is a royal wedding." She added an affected giggle.

Guinevere echoed it. "Oh, Julie, it's so exciting!"

They descended to the bottom floor.

"Do you think it worked?" Julie whispered.

Hat shushed her. *I'm sensing something.*

*What?* Julie paused on the landing.

*Outside. Someone's sneaking away. Quick! Look through that window!* Hat urged.

Bedivere, Julie, and Guinevere hurried to the narrow window at the end of the hall. They peered through, Bedivere from a much greater distance than the ladies, and Julie spotted a stout Woodland Fae in overalls slipping through the vegetable garden to one side of the reliquary. He had leathery wings and enormous black ears covered in fine brown fur.

*He's a Bat Fae,* Julie observed.

*Better yet,* Bedivere added via Hat, *he is not a knight, only a gardener with exceptionally keen hearing.* The abbot's shoulders slumped in relief.

*The Order is as sacred as it ever was, Bedivere,* Hat assured him.

*Still in trouble, though,* Julie growled.

*I see him!* Eglantine announced from the roof. *Should I chase and eat him?*

*No!* everyone chorused.

*Fine,* Eglantine grumbled.

*Hat, can you open a channel?* Julie asked.

*Of course.* Hat hummed.

*Are you sick?* Julie inquired.

*No. Why?* Hat snapped.

*You're being unusually cooperative, that's all,* Julie told him.

*Shut up. He's on the line,* Hat grumbled.

*Ah, yes, Major Meadows!* The familiar voice was high-pitched and tinny.

Julie grinned. *How's it hanging, King of the Faeries?*

The faerie laughed. *I liked it better when you called me "the faerie dad."*

*Okay, faerie dad. You ready?* Julie asked.

*For violence?* He cackled. *Always.*

*Dude! No!* Julie spluttered. *I want you to tail the guy, not strip his flesh from his bones.*

*That was one time,* the faerie dad grumbled.

*Are we clear on the plan?* Julie asked.

*Yes, yes, don't worry,* he muttered testily. *My squadron of OPMA-trained faeries will follow the subject to the warlocks' base, where we will stand by until the trap is set at Tintagel. We will strike when they are distracted, backed up by the OPMA. Happy?*

*Totally.* Julie paused. *Thanks for doing this.*

*Of course.* The faerie dad paused. *I'm sad that we will not taste hot, pulsing blood today as our victim screams until death claims him, but I'm happy to help with this operation. I'll report back.*

Julie looked at Guinevere and Bedivere and grinned. "The plan is in motion."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Taylor sniffed suspiciously. “Did you fart?”

Half-asleep, with a plush blanket pulled up to her chin and her feet in her fiancé’s lap, Julie glared at him. “Did I what?”

“I know the smell of those little fae toots.” Taylor’s eyes narrowed. “They’re not as glittery as one would expect.”

Julie laughed. “I did not!”

“If you say so.” Taylor raised his eyebrows.

“Bullshit.” Julie prodded his thigh with her toes. “*You* farted.”

“Ah, marriage will be glorious.” Taylor grinned at her. “Sitting on the couch, arguing about farts while watching *The Lord of the Rings*.”

Julie laughed. “Sounds like living happily ever after to me.”

*The Return of the King* played quietly on the TV. Julie had watched it so many times that the soundtrack alone made the scenes flit through her head. She glanced at the screen and was unsurprised to see Legolas surfing downstairs on a shield, firing arrows.

“He’s so cool,” she observed.

Taylor scoffed. “Not as cool as *your* elven prince.”

“No, babe,” Julie loyally declared.

“Hey!” Taylor protested.

“I’m teasing.” Julie smiled. “He’s not a kick-ass diplomat like you. How’d the meeting with the dryad liaison go?”

“Better than expected.” Taylor exhaled. “We ironed out the issues they had with the city plan so far. Of course, the plan will have to change again now that we have a site for the city, which is what I told them from the start, but they seem happy.”

“Keeping paras happy is what we do.” Julie chuckled. “Unless they’re murderous assholes.”

“Speaking of murderous assholes, you said it wasn’t a knight who was ratting on the Order?” Taylor asked.

“Uh-uh. It was the gardener. Sir Bedivere was happy about that,” Julie told him.

“Sir Bedivere’s the abbot?” Taylor asked. “No fair. How come you get to meet all the heroes?”

“When it comes to heroes, you’re still my favorite.” Julie prodded him with her toe again, fondly this time.

“Aw.” Taylor stroked her calf. “You’re mine, babe.”

Julie blew him an air kiss, too lazy to sit up and smooch him. “Love you.”

“Love you.” Taylor squeezed her toes. “How’d it go with tracking the guy to the warlocks’ hideout?”

“Perfectly.” Julie grinned. “The faeries aced it.”

“No getting sidetracked, looking for ovine snacks?” Taylor inquired.

“Not this time.” Julie laughed. “They’ve located their base, and they’re surveilling it. When the warlocks are weakened by the Tintagel trap, the OPMA will move in. Jack gave the green light.”

“Fantastic.” Taylor grabbed one of her big toes in each hand and massaged, thumbs pressing into the sore spots at the bases. “Hey, how about we *don’t* call our wedding rehearsal ‘the Tintagel trap,’ though?”

“Fair,” Julie agreed. “I’m excited about it, and not only because of catching the warlocks.”

“I’m glad we were forced to hold a huge party so we could hide an army in Tintagel without arousing suspicion.” Taylor chuckled. “It’ll be good to catch up with everyone.”

“As well as root out anyone who might get, uh, *unfun* when the mead starts flowing?” Julie raised her eyebrows.

“Our friends aren’t like that!” Taylor protested.

“Dude, you haven’t seen my mom after a few shots of aloe vera vodka. Maybe we should uninvite some people while we have the chance,” Julie reflected.

“That’s so mean!” Taylor shook his head. “I’m not getting married without Mom.”

Julie exclaimed, “Not fair!”

Taylor laughed and moved his massage to the aching balls of her feet. “I’m kidding, love.” His eyes crinkled at the corners. “You know I’d marry you even if we were alone, chained upside-down in a dungeon.”

“Don’t say that.” Julie giggled. “The way our lives go, that might end up happening.”

“I don’t care as long as I get to marry the hottest Lunar Fae on the block.” Taylor smirked.

Julie threw a pillow at him. “Excuse *me!* I’m the hottest Lunar Fae in the *world.*”

“I stand corrected.” Taylor inclined his head. “I was thinking of something...about the wedding.”

“Yeah?” Julie rescued the pillow from the floor with a quick breeze and tucked it back under her head.

“Who do you want to officiate?” Taylor asked softly. “Assuming Morgan doesn’t wake up in the next few weeks.”

Julie bit her lip. “I don’t know. Something to think about, I guess. Mom is an Internet-ordained minister, but let’s not go there.”

Taylor groaned. “Let’s not. Hey, speaking of Mom, how are you feeling about tomorrow?”

Julie sagged against her pillows. “I don’t know.”

Taylor waited patiently for her to gather her thoughts, moving his kneading fingers down to her heels.

“Mom will be cool about it. *Mom-Mom*. You know, Rosa.” Julie bit her lip. “Actually, I’m kidding. She will not be cool about it. She will be stoked out of her mind.”

“Accurate.” Taylor grinned. “She’s going to lose her shit now that you’re the crown princess. You know she’ll be in your corner all the way.” He paused. “Esmerelda too, Julie.”

“Yeah, I guess, but she’s the *queen*, T. I don’t even know how to tell her,” Julie admitted.

“She’ll be happy to know that her lost daughter is okay,” Taylor told her quietly.

“Maybe.” Julie’s eyes stung. “Unless...” She stopped.

“What is it?” Taylor’s hands moved to her ankles.

“Unless she hoped I’d be different.” Julie dropped her gaze.

Taylor chuckled. “Babe, I promise you, if she’s dreamed about what her daughter grew up to be like, she couldn’t hope for any better than you.”

Julie picked at her blanket, saying nothing.

“She gave you her amulet,” Taylor murmured. “She’s got to think of you as a daughter already.”

The thought hadn’t occurred to Julie, but it made sense, and her nose and eyes stung with tears of relief. She mopped them away with her pajama sleeve. “You’re right. Thanks, babe. I needed to hear that.”

“I know it’s nerve-racking, but it’s going to be amazing.” Taylor smiled, his fingers pressing into the tight muscles of her calves. “You’re finally going to be with your birth mother. You’ve been waiting for this for a long time. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you, babe.” Julie laughed, wiping away tears again. “Can I tell you something?”

“What?” Taylor smiled.

Julie overcame her laziness and sat up with a lurch to throw her arms around Taylor’s neck and bury her face in his chest. His embrace encircled her.

“I’m so happy I’m marrying you,” she whispered. “I can’t believe it’s only a few weeks away, and I can’t wait.”

“It hardly feels real.” Taylor’s words vibrated his chest. “How did I get so lucky that I’m nearly married to my best friend?”

“Are you friend-zoning me?” Julie mumbled into his chest.

“Oh, no.” Taylor drew back, his grin wicked. “Would a friend do this?”

He pulled her close and kissed her until they were both breathless.

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Julie’s hands wouldn’t stop shaking.

She stood in front of the door to Esmerelda’s receiving room, taking deep breaths. Hat had agreed to stay in Genevieve, citing his desire to avoid “feminine drama.” The ten-minute argument that ensued had been a welcome outlet for Julie’s anxiety, but now it squeezed her chest again, and she focused to keep her fear-fueled earth magic from shaking the tower.

Julie pressed her hands to her chest, eyes closed, and reminded herself of Taylor’s words from last night. *I know. I finally know where I come from, whose genes I have, and why I was hidden.*

The memory gave her the strength to raise a hand to knock.

Dylan portaled into existence a few inches from her face and brought his tiny hand down on her wrist with an audible slap. “No!”

Julie jumped back, clutching her wrist. “Dyl! What are you doing?”

“Preventing you from committing a heinous crime, madam!” Dylan spluttered, his cheeks scarlet. He planted his hands on his hips. “One does not knock on the door of a queen!”

Julie couldn’t resist. “Not even when you’re the crown princess?”

Dylan’s jaw dropped. “Wh–what?”

Julie forewent knocking and shoved the door open. She strode into the receiving room, the soft light from the sea serpent filtering onto cozy furniture. Rosa’s beige flats lay on the carpet. She was curled up on the couch in her stocking feet, a cup of tea cradled in both hands. Esmerelda sat opposite her, comfortable in a deep armchair with a blanket neatly wrapped around her knees.

The door swung shut behind Julie, and she checked over her shoulder. Dylan hadn’t followed her in.

Good. This was a conversation between two moms and one daughter.

Julie’s feet felt a long way away.

“*Juliaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!*” Rosa sang out. “So glad you’re joining us! Sit down. Have some tea!”

*Julia.* Was that her real name? Julie guessed she’d find out. She floated over to the nearest chair and flopped into it.

“Julie, my dear.” Esmerelda stared at her. “You’re as white as a sheet. Are you all right?”

Julie summoned the courage to look into Esmerelda’s eyes. They were less bright than before, she thought. Her cheeks and eye sockets were deep pits, hollowed out, and her skin was stretched tight over her temples and cheekbones.

*Mom.* Julie tested the label on the ailing queen and couldn’t seem to bring the two together.

“You do look peaky, honey.” Rosa grabbed her handbag and pawed through it. “I know just the thing!” She produced a spray bottle and spritzed random shit on Julie’s face.

“Mom!” Julie reared back. “What *was* that?”

“Pheromones, honey!” Rosa beamed.

“Ew!” Julie slapped at her skin.

“*Pheromones*. Not *hormones*. They’ll cheer you right up.” Rosa tried for another spritz.

“Mom! Cut it out!” Julie laughed.

“See? Better already.” Rosa beamed.

Esmerelda watched her keenly. “You said you wanted to tell us about your test, Julie. I’m excited to hear about it.”

*You have no idea*, Julie thought and gathered herself. If nothing else, the cold liquid and indignation had grounded her. Her voice was surprisingly steady.

“So, I didn’t have to try to figure out how to wake Arthur.” Julie glanced at Rosa.

“Why?” Esmerelda asked. “It is custom.”

“Turns out I passed that test when I came with Ilsa.” Julie bit her lip. “He did wake up, though.”

“*What?*” Esmerelda spilled her tea.

“Oh, wonderful!” Rosa returned to her handbag-rummaging. “I’m sure I can find something to help him readjust to being alive.”

“I’m getting ahead of myself.” Julie rubbed her temples. “Okay, let me take it back to the beginning. Morgan said I’d passed the traditional test when I accompanied Ilsa. I reorganized this chaotic library... Anyway, I didn’t have to do that, but she wanted me to go through the moon rite. The same one you went through, Your Majesty.”

Esmerelda nodded, breathless.

“Morgan...” Julie inhaled, thinking about her friend lying pale and still on the bier, and pulled herself together before a

raincloud appeared. “Morgan gathered us in the clearing. Hat was there, and La...Chief and Shadow, and Eglantine and the Sphynxes.”

“Eggy is magnificent!” Rosa gushed. “I showed Esme the pictures.”

Considering Julie had sent Rosa ninety-six pictures of Eglantine, that was impressive.

“She is indeed beautiful.” Esmerelda smiled. “Great magic must have occurred during the rite to hatch the dragon’s egg.”

“It did.” Julie forged on. “Arthur was there too, in his casket. Morgan started to talk to Luna, and I felt her presence.”

Esmerelda’s eyes filled with tears. “It is magnificent. Incomparable.”

“All that and more,” Julie agreed. “She told me things. Things about myself that I’d never known. She offered me a gift.”

“Like, a wish?” Rosa’s eyes widened. “Did you wish for children?”

“What? Mom, no!” Julie squawked.

“They don’t come out of thin air, honey,” Rosa retorted. “Not everyone has perfect ovaries.”

Abruptly, Julie realized she had come out of Esmerelda’s ovaries.

“Mom, I do not want to talk about ovaries!” she wailed.

Rosa raised her hands. “Okay, okay. I’m just saying.”

“I did not wish for children.” Julie cleared her throat. “I wished for Arthur to wake up.”

Rosa threw up her hands and stared around her as if she despaired of the world.

Esmerelda leaned forward. “He woke.”

“He woke.” Julie smiled. “He rose again, as it was written.”

Esmerelda’s smile stretched. “Oh, Julie!”

“Then Eggy hatched.” Julie’s heartbeat quickened. “But when Arthur’s power returned, Morgan’s failed. We had to place her under the same enchantment as Arthur to keep her safe.”

Esmerelda hung her head. “That is terrible news.”

Julie swallowed tears. “I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

“You are not to blame, my dear.” Esmerelda patted Julie’s hand with cold, shaking fingers. “There is still much to rejoice about. For one thing, Arthur has returned. He will bring about an end to the war.”

“Actually, no.” Julie swallowed. “Arthur won’t take the throne.”

“*What?*” Rosa demanded. “Why?”

“He says someone else is destined to heal the paranormal world.” Julie looked into Esmerelda’s eyes.

The queen held her breath.

“Someone who?” Rosa demanded.

Julie inhaled. “His heir, the descendant of Ygraine. The one Luna chose.” She found Esmerelda’s hand and clutched it. “The lost daughter of the Eternity Queen.”

Esmerelda’s eyes flooded with tears, and she snatched her hands to her lips.

“Oh?” Rosa asked brightly. “Who’s that?”

Julie couldn’t stop her tears from spilling over. “Me, Mom,” she croaked. “It’s me.”

Rosa’s jaw dropped. She gaped from Esmerelda to Julie and back.

A pale glow grew beneath Esmerelda’s skin, then burst from her—moonlight. “My love,” she cried. “My daughter, my baby, my love, my love!”

She threw her arms open, and Julie darted into her biological mother’s embrace for the first time since she was an infant.

Esmerelda's thin arms encircled her with surprising strength. Julie sagged into her lap, and the queen—her mother—pulled her closer still. Her nose pressed into Esmerelda's neck, which smelled of lavender and soap, exactly the way a mother should smell.

"I've longed for this day for so many hard years," Esmerelda whispered. "From the moment I met you, I knew there was something powerful and special about you, Julie. I never guessed you were the baby I loved so much, though."

Julie's tears fell freely as she pulled back and perched on the edge of the coffee table. "It took so long to find you because Luna put the concealment spell on me herself. She was keeping me safe."

"She had good reason, my Julie." Esmerelda clasped Julie's hands. "I lost all my other children. Every last one of them. It was the slow and insidious beginning of the war that now rages. I couldn't see another child suffer." Tears spilled through the network of wrinkles on her face. "I had to lose you to give you a chance of making it."

"I know," Julie whispered.

"Oh, Julie. My baby." Esmerelda's words fragmented into sobs. "I've waited all these years to tell you I loved you from the moment I felt your first little kicks in my womb. The few hours I had to hold you were among the most beautiful in my entire life. Everything about you was perfect from the moment that you were born. I never wanted to give you away. I never, never wanted to be separated from you."

Julie couldn't speak. Her tears gushed, spilling into the hole inside her, the throbbing, open wound that had waited for healing since the day she'd learned she wasn't human.

"The only thing strong enough to pry you from my arms was how much I loved you." Esmerelda wept. "Please, please understand. I never wanted you to feel alone or abandoned. I only wanted you to be safe."

"I understand, Esmerelda," Julie choked out. "I understand."

“I love you now, I loved you then, and I’ve loved you every second, every moment, and every breath in between.” Esmerelda cupped Julie’s face in her hands, her trembling thumbs stroking Julie’s cheeks. “It means everything to me that you know that.”

Julie placed her hands over Esmerelda’s. “I know.” She swallowed. “I know...Mother.”

Esmerelda pulled her close, and they wept together. When Julie’s sobs slowed, another set of arms surrounded her and Esmerelda, squeezing them both in a warm, soft, bosomy hug.

“Julia! Esme!” Rosa howled with happy tears. “You’ve finally found each other. I can’t believe you’ve finally found each other. This is the best day of my *liiiiiife!*” The last word trailed off into damp sobs.

The fae’s sobs turned into giggles.

“Mom, you’re crushing us,” Julie groaned.

“Sorry.” Rosa stepped back, releasing them. Her mascara ran down her cheeks in black trails, but her grin curved like a crescent moon. “I’ve hoped for this day since Julia told me that she wasn’t biologically mine and Esme told me she’d lost her youngest. I have an inkling of what that feels like, you know. I might not have known that my baby died until recently, but I’ve grieved for her these last few months.”

“Mom, I had no idea.” Julie took her hand. “I’m so sorry.”

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry about, sweetie. That’s my grief, and I’m walking with it. But I had *you*.” Rosa squeezed her hand. “I can only imagine how horrific it must have been, my poor Esme, not to know where your baby was or if she was okay. I’m so happy this day came for both of you.”

“Rosa, my dear.” Esmerelda took Rosa’s other hand. “I spent the past twenty years begging Luna to give my child a mother who’d love her like I did. I could never have dreamed she would grow up with someone as wonderful as you.”

Fresh tears rolled down Rosa’s cheeks. “Thank you, Esme.”

“Thank *you* for raising our daughter to be the woman she’s become,” Esmerelda whispered.

“We’re family now, you know?” Rosa beamed. “We’re really family.”

Julie wiped her tears away and breathed. Her shoulders felt lighter, and the air seemed to hold more oxygen. Still, a pang ran through her as Esmerelda’s hand quivered in hers.

She’d finally found her birth mother, but she wouldn’t have long with her.

“I can’t wait to tell you everything,” Esmerelda whispered. “About your brothers and sisters who came before you and about your biological father. From everything that your mother has told me about David, they would have loved each other.”

Julie blinked back new tears. “I’d love to hear about him.”

“On that note.” Esmerelda turned to Rosa. “My dear friend, your discretion thus far has been exemplary, but I can hardly expect you to keep *this* from your husband. You hereby have my permission to bring Ernesto to Avalon and tell him everything.”

Rosa’s eyes lit up. “Esme, are you sure?”

Esmerelda nodded. “Absolutely.”

“Poor Ernie. He’ll have a coronary. He barely believes in homeopathy, let alone faeries.” Rosa chuckled.

“Dylan could be of assistance with the transition,” Esmerelda offered.

Julie felt a twinge of sympathy for her hapless stepfather, who had had no idea what he would be getting into.

“I think we need more tea,” Rosa announced.

Dylan appeared, wiping his own tears—Julie didn’t blame him for eavesdropping—and dispensed teacups. Rosa added homeopathic drops to each cup.

“Rock rose, clematis, and cherry plum,” she announced. “To help us all calm down.”

Julie sipped the hot tea. She was usually a coffee person, but now the sweet liquid soothed her rough airways.

“That’s better. Can’t you *feel* that natural goodness shooting through your neurons?” Rosa slurped.

“I don’t think that’s how it works, Mom,” Julie pointed out.

Rosa happily ignored her. “So, baby. Since you’re Esme’s only living daughter, does that mean you’re going to be queen?”

Julie shot a look at Esmerelda.

“As King Arthur decreed, so it will be.” Esmerelda inclined her head. “Though I hope it will be some time yet.”

“Of course, dear. Of course.” Rosa nodded vigorously. “May you live a thousand years, or however long you people are supposed to live. Still.” She grinned. “Adopted Queen Mother has a nice ring to it.”

“Mom!” Julie protested.

“It does, baby. You can’t deny it.” Rosa sipped more tea. “Can I have a castle?”

“I don’t have any castles to give out,” Julie told her weakly.

Esmerelda chuckled. “There are going to be big political implications, Julie. You have long been a target, and you will now be the prime enemy of the Mordred cult.” Her face sobered. “For that reason, it’s important that you keep this information within your most trusted circle.”

Julie laughed. “The secrecy makes me feel more Lunar Fae than anything else.”

Esmerelda smiled. “It is nothing new to you.”

“No, it’s not, and that’s why I don’t want to keep the secret.” Julie gripped her teacup. “Secrets get out, Mother.”

Esmerelda smiled at the word. Rosa grinned so broadly that Julie feared the top of her head might fly off.

“I would prefer to get ahead of it. Beyond that...” Julie inhaled. “You not having an heir has contributed to this war. If I can bring peace and unity to parts of the world with the news, I can’t hold it back.”

“That’s my baby girl.” Incredibly, Rosa’s grin stretched.

Esmerelda studied her. “I couldn’t be more proud of you, my precious girl. You might not have known you were a princess until now, but you’ve conducted yourself like one all your life.”

“Except for that goth phase in the eighth grade. That was weird,” Rosa chipped in.

“Mom!” Julie protested, her cheeks burning.

“Oh, yes, baby. This is happening.” Rosa gestured at Esmerelda. “Make no mistake. She missed out on all your awkward phases. I plan to fix that pronto. I have pictures.”

Julie groaned. “Mom, no!”

Esmerelda beamed. “I cannot wait.”

Julie had not considered the implications of having *two* embarrassing moms. She cringed.

“Oh!” Rosa grabbed Esmerelda’s arm and shook her. “You’re just in time to see your daughter get married!”

Esmerelda beamed.

“Taylor’s going to be king!” Rosa screeched, bouncing up and down.

Esmerelda laughed. “The implications are many and varied, but you’re right, Rosa. Julie and I will handle this situation as princess and queen soon enough. For now, let’s handle the wedding rehearsal as mother and daughter, shall we? We’ll discuss the rest afterward.”

Julie met Esmerelda’s eyes. “I’d love that.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Julie's wings buzzed at a higher pitch than usual as she fluttered to the top of Tintagel's tower. Her boots thudded on the stone as she landed at the base of the flagpole from which the Pendragon banner snapped lazily in the breeze.

Droppeheimer turned, tensing, and his hand went to the pistol at his side. He shook his head when he saw Julie.

"Councilor Meadows, what are you doing here?" the orc asked.

"Checking on the defenses." Julie glanced at the dragons circling in the sky. "Everything in order?"

Droppeheimer chuckled. "All is going according to plan, Councilor. Now go worry about your wedding rehearsal. Leave the trap to Jack and me. We have it under control."

"Can I be honest?" Julie asked. Her wings wouldn't stop buzzing.

Droppeheimer raised his eyebrows. "Are you ever anything else?"

"Okay, fine. I guess not." Julie laughed. "I'd rather plan the trap than the wedding. It's alien territory to me."

Droppeheimer stepped forward and laid a hand on Julie's shoulder. "May I give you some advice, Julie, as an orc who has been married to the love of his life for centuries?"

Julie met his eyes. "Please do."

“No matter what happens and what goes wrong, this will be a day you will never forget. Nothing can change that.” Droppelheimer smiled. “Go enjoy it.”

The knot in the pit of Julie’s stomach unraveled. “Thanks, Sarge.”

Droppelheimer patted her shoulder. “Rest assured that all is going exactly as we planned it so far. Most of the dragons were sent to guard Tintagel Village under the guise of not frightening the human guests. The orchard is strongly warded and guarded by kobolds, which are invisible but powerful. From the outside, Tintagel appears to be a sitting duck.”

Julie nodded. “Good.” She turned left and right, making sure that Excalibur’s selenite pommel caught the light where it was sheathed in Hat in scabbard form on her back. “I guess I’ll get back to the wedding thing then.”

“Go on.” Droppelheimer shooed her away.

Julie stepped off the edge of the tower and fluttered around the massive sandstone tower in broad loops, making sure that Excalibur was visible.

*Told you, Hat grumbled. You’re supposed to be getting dressed right now.*

*You’re a fine one to talk, Julie shot back. I hope you’re not going to be a scabbard for the rehearsal dinner. Are you working on what form you’ll take?*

Hat scoffed. *My true form, of course.*

*The tatty old wizard’s hat? It doesn’t go with the decor,* Julie argued.

With a thunder of wings, Eglantine joined her, and they glided side by side.

“What did Cadmeus say?” the dragon asked.

“Everything is in order.” Julie smiled. “Basically, he said to forget about the warlocks and focus on the rehearsal.”

Eglantine sighed. “This is such a beautiful day. Aren’t you worried that the warlocks are going to ruin everything?”

Julie smiled. “No. We have a solid plan to keep all our guests safe. Every vulnerable guest has been assigned a military buddy to look after them.” She grinned. “Also, there will be several dragons in attendance.”

“Of course there will.” Eglantine’s smirk revealed a lot of pointed steel teeth.

“The dragons at Tintagel Village also have a portal maker. They can be here in seconds if we need them,” Julie added. “We’ve managed the risks, and all the guests are aware of them. Everyone agrees we need to catch these warlocks, regardless of the cost.”

Eglantine nodded. “I agree as well.”

Julie spotted a massive feline striding across the bridge. “There goes Jack. I need to talk to him.”

They banked to the left and swooped down to the bridge. Kaplan, in tiger form, raised his head as Julie and Eglantine sped toward him. Eglantine landed with a click of claws and bounded around him, tail lashing from side to side, trying to lick his face. Kaplan yowled and slapped her nose away with a huge paw, but his claws were sheathed.

“Hey, Jack!” Julie fell into step next to him, folding her wings so Excalibur was visible.

“What do you want?” the weretiger demanded.

“A huge-ass favor,” Julie told him.

Kaplan sighed heavily. “What is it? I’m not making any speeches, before you ask. I give enough of those. Get Cadmeus to do it if you want speeches.”

“No speeches.” Julie smiled. “This is kind of last-minute, but will you walk me down the aisle?”

Kaplan stopped dead and stared at her. “What?”

“I mean, my dad’s not with us anymore.” *Neither of them are*, Julie added silently. “I asked Mom if she wanted to do it, but she cried so much at the thought of me walking down the aisle that we agreed it wasn’t a good idea. Mom’s going to be

a happy wreck. That's fine, but she said she'd rather watch me come up the aisle while crying rather than walk while crying."

Kaplan continued staring.

"So, I don't have anyone. I could do it on my own, but I thought..." Julie stopped. "The truth is, Jack, I'm nervous, and I'd love to have a grounding presence beside me. Somebody I trust and look up to. Someone who's always looked out for me." She stared at her boots, suddenly shy. "I know it's late to ask, but if you don't mind..."

"Mind?" Kaplan croaked. He transformed abruptly, stepped forward, and wrapped Julie in his arms.

"Are you...crying?" Julie inquired.

"No," Kaplan wailed, his shoulders trembling with sobs.

Julie laughed, blinking back her tears as she hugged him back. "It's okay if you don't want—"

"Nothing would honor me more." Kaplan hugged her tighter, almost crushing her ribs into powder, then released her.

"You'll meet me in front of the great hall, then?" Julie asked. "Before the rehearsal?"

Kaplan cleared his throat. "Yes. Yes, that would be fine." He blinked rapidly. "I, uh, I have to go and, uh, check on the weapons. Yes." He hurried off.

"Aw, he's so cute," Eglantine cooed.

"If you want to live, maybe don't say that again." Julie brushed away her tears. "I'll meet you back here before the rehearsal starts. I'm going to check on Arthur and make sure the great hall is ready."

"Sure. I'll listen for you." Eglantine lay on her belly on the warm sandstone and stretched out her limbs and wings, sunning herself, her hind legs splayed out like a corgi's.

Julie rubbed the dragon's muzzle. "How are you so majestic and so adorable at the same time?"

"It's an art I take very seriously," Eglantine informed her.

Julie laughed. Leaving Eglantine behind, she strode into the tower. The door to Arthur's orchard was heavily warded with blue and purple runes, and neon letters proclaimed, **KEEP OUT!** in mid-air.

Julie touched the door, and purple flickered across the wood, sending an electric tingle through her fingers. She stepped back, shaking them. *Yep, that works.*

*Would you like me to open the ward for you?* Hat asked.

*No, it's cool. I'll stay out here until I explode,* Julie retorted.

*Would it kill you to ask nicely just one time?* Hat hummed, and the door clicked open.

Julie stepped inside and was immediately confronted by six feet of sharpened steel, the tip resting on her chest, so light that she barely felt it. She yelped and stuck up her hands. "Your Majesty! It's me. It's me!"

"Oh." Arthur lowered the sword. "I beg your pardon, Princess Julie."

The title felt weird, but it sounded epic when he said it in his deep baritone.

"Sorry to intrude." Julie lowered her hands.

"Not at all." Arthur smiled, but there were dark circles under his eyes. "How goes the preparation for both the rehearsal and the trap?"

"The trap is set. Everything's fine there." Julie followed him across the deep grass to Morgan's bier. "I think everything is in place for the rehearsal. There's so much to do and remember, and I don't even know where to be or what to check." She grabbed two fistfuls of her hair. "I've been drinking coffee and peeing all morning!"

Arthur chuckled. "Sounds like any other bride to me."

They stopped beside Morgan's stone catafalque, and Julie pressed her fingertips to the glass, staring at her friend's motionless, ashen face.

“She was looking forward to this day so much.” Julie swallowed the lump in her throat. “I can’t believe she won’t get to see it.”

Arthur rested a hand on her shoulder. “I might not have spoken to my Morgan for thousands of years, but I can imagine how much she would have enjoyed this.”

Julie bit her lip. “I’m so excited. Looking at her now, that feels wrong.”

“No.” Arthur gripped Julie’s forearm. “Princess, don’t go there.”

Julie looked up at him, startled by his fervent tone.

“My love might be here, but yours will be with you.” Arthur smiled. “You are both young and alive, and a glorious day approaches. Take it from someone who has been separated from his beloved for centuries. Let nothing stand between you. Let nothing ruin your joy in one another. There will be many trials ahead, Princess, and your love and joy for one another will get you through those. Let this trial be no different.”

“Thank you,” Julie whispered.

“None of our loves are beside us forever.” Arthur gazed at Morgan’s unmoving form. “While they are with us, let us love them with everything we have. For you, that means you should go enjoy your rehearsal and fight beside your beloved with everything you have.”

“I will.” Julie nodded. “I will.”

“Don’t worry about Morgan and me.” Arthur touched the hilt of his sheathed sword. “I might be old, but I can still handle a blade if Merlin’s wards fail.”

“They won’t,” Hat assured him.

“I don’t doubt you, my wise friend.” Arthur inclined his head.

Julie left the hot noon of the orchard and hurried down the corridor to the great hall. The afternoon sunlight slanted through the windows, rich and golden. *What time is it?* she wondered.

*Time for you to get dressed, as I've been trying to tell you for hours,* Hat grumped.

*Oh, Hat, don't be so—* Julie rounded a corner and squealed, fire leaping to her fists, as three paras pounced on her.

“None of that, thank you!” Bianca slapped Julie’s hands and beat out the fire. “We’ve got you now.”

“You’re not going anywhere.” Iris grabbed Julie’s left arm.

Ilsa grabbed her right. “We’ve been trying to get hold of you for an hour. It’s time to get dressed.”

“Thank you!” Hat spluttered.

Julie allowed herself to be propelled back the way she’d come. “But the decor—”

“Is under control,” Bianca interrupted. “You, however, are not.”

“Your *hair*,” Ilsa wailed.

“It’s fine. It’s okay, girls. We can make this happen,” Iris decreed.

“This isn’t the wedding,” Julie croaked weakly. “I’m not wearing my gown.”

“Of course not. Don’t be absurd! The groom can’t see you in your gown until you walk down the aisle,” Iris chided. “But you can’t go in there looking like you just fought a dragon.”

“I didn’t *fight* a dragon,” Julie clarified. “I *flew* with a dragon.”

“The wedding day is going to be impossible,” Ilsa moaned. “Impossible.”

“We’ve fought armies and ruled kingdoms, ladies,” Bianca reminded them. “We can handle this.”

Julie giggled, her nerves wobbling in her stomach. That had nothing to do with warlocks.

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They got through the rehearsal, to Julie's intense relief, without anyone getting blown up by warlocks.

That wasn't to say everything went perfectly. Rosa's happy tears caused her to go through an entire box of tissues, and one of the brownies had to portal out and find another. Taylor dropped Julie's ring twice. Julie accidentally set the drapes at the front of the lectern on fire. Sir Bedivere, who was standing in for the officiant at the rehearsal, fell asleep in the middle of the vows, and they had to start over. Eglantine knocked over a statue of Sir Galahad, which nearly squashed Esmerelda, except that Sergeant Levin Shulme managed to catch it and return it to its pedestal. Since he was a centaur, that was not difficult.

The final run-through had not resulted in any major disasters, however, and Julie and Taylor now strode arm-in-arm across the bridge, with their guests trailing behind. Julie kept a watchful eye on the star-strewn sky, conscious of Excalibur's weight on her back.

"Sorry about the rings," Taylor told her for the umpteenth time.

Julie giggled. "At least you didn't light anything on fire."

"Sir Bedivere was chill about that. I guess he's seen crazier things in a lifetime with Lunar Fae." Taylor grinned. "I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted."

"Me too!" Julie agreed. "Also *starving*."

"Hopefully, we can eat before our, uh, *other* guests get here," Taylor mused.

Julie glanced around again. "The second tower is less fortified than the first. I still think they'll likely come at us on the bridge."

"Too exposed out here," Kaplan growled from beside Julie. "They'd be worried about aerial support from the dragons. They'll strike after we're inside the second tower."

“As long as we get snacks first,” Eglantine complained. “I want food.”

“If they attack before dinner, you can snack on *them*,” Julie pointed out.

“Julie! Don’t teach your child to eat people,” Rosa chided.

“She’s not my child,” Julie pointed out.

Eglantine nudged Rosa with her nose. “I *am* your grandbaby, though. Right, Granny Rosa?”

Rosa beamed and patted the dragon’s cheek. “You are absolutely my grandbaby, Eggles.”

Julie laid a hand on Excalibur’s hilt as Kaplan pushed the doors to the second tower open, but the hallway was quiet and peaceful, torches flickering in their brackets.

“Will you take the guests through, Mom?” Julie asked. “I want to check on something. Eggy will go with you as protection.”

“I sure will.” Eglantine’s tail lashed.

“Sure, baby. Come on, sweetie. Let’s go get you snacks.” Rosa rested a companionable hand on one of Eglantine’s horns.

Julie, Taylor, and Kaplan stayed by the door as Rosa and Eglantine went ahead. Bianca stood on the battlements, pretending to admire the view, but Julie saw her vigilance in the set of her wings.

“You’re ready, right?” Julie whispered as Ilsa and Iris passed.

Ilsa put an arm through Iris’. “I’ve got my vulnerable buddy. Don’t worry.”

“Thanks.” Julie exhaled. “Did you bring weapons?”

Ilsa wore a shimmering floor-length blue gown with hints of purple and black in the skirt and a silk wrap studded with tiny gems. She unfolded the wrap, allowing Julie a glimpse of the twin daggers she wore at her hip. They were slender and elegant and very deadly.

Ilsa and Iris passed, and the rest of the guests followed, all decked out in their party clothes and armed to the teeth. Julius' and Malcom's long black cloaks hid daggers and guns to complement their claws and fangs. Isaiah, the werewolf who'd served with Julie in the military, had succeeded in putting a sniper rifle down his pants. The High Magic Division's ceremonial robes concealed broadswords.

Julie raised her eyebrows as Raven, Korin, and Jae shuffled up to the doorway. Raven clanked.

"Um, Korin?" Julie ventured. "Tying pink ribbons around your war hammers doesn't hide them."

"You want them?" The Copper Dwarf glared, which intensified her resting bitch face. "Take them."

"It's okay, Korin. Go right ahead," Taylor told her hastily.

Jae lifted the corner of her cloak, showing Julie her longbow and quiver. "Please say something nice to King Julius about the flowers," she whispered. "He was up all night working on them and asked my opinion far too many times."

"Aw, thanks, Jae." Julie grinned.

Raven clanked up to her. "I'm not sure I brought enough." She unbuttoned her beautiful pink fur coat and held it open. The inside of the coat was covered with weapons: three stilettos, a selection of throwing stars, a small mace, a pair of ivory-handled six-shooters, a horse bow with several bolts, and twelve grenades. "Think I should've brought more?"

"Uh, no," Julie managed. "I think you're good."

"Okay, cool." Raven buttoned her coat and flounced inside.

"They're not going to know what hit them," Taylor whispered, taking Julie's arm.

Julie smiled. "That's the whole idea."

Kaplan and Bianca brought up the rear as Julie and Taylor headed down the corridor toward the ballroom. With Arthur still learning the magic of the banqueting hall, they'd opted to

have the rehearsal dinner in the ballroom. Meggie and an army of brownies had been only too happy to help.

Julie stifled a yawn. “I could use a nap.”

They’d reached the end of the hall, and Rosa stood at the door of the ballroom, grinning. “Baby, I’m pretty sure you’re going to forget about that nap in a moment.”

Julie stared at her.

“Open the doors, Eggles,” Rosa urged.

The doors swung wide, and Julie stared into a glittering wonderland. Lilies in a bright explosion of colors—red and blue, purple and pink, and butter yellow—were arranged in thick bouquets and elegant wreaths on the windows and the tables. Warm light poured from the chandelier and glimmered from every surface as lightning bugs and will o’ the wisps floated among the flowers.

The joyful, folksy music typical of the woodlands trickled through the room from a dais on one side. Julie gaped at her favorite woodland band, Three Pipes and a Pixie, as the lead singer leaned close to the microphone and chirped the first stanza of a jig. Tables were set around the edges of the room with crystal glasses, gold cutlery, and fine china.

“This was supposed to be a simple dinner,” she croaked.

“It was Julius’ idea, honey,” Rosa told her. “He’s been so nervous about the flowers for your wedding that he wanted to practice.”

Julius, the high king of vampires, looked sheepish.

“They’re amazing, sire.” Julie grinned. “I love them.”

Julius lit up.

“Who hired the band?” Julie asked.

Rae and Korin guiltily shuffled their feet.

“They’re my favorites!” Julie wrapped them both in a hug. “Thank you.”

“I love the will o’ the wisps.” Taylor gazed at them. “They’re beautiful. I’ve never seen so many that aren’t restrained in orbs.”

“That’s because *I* brought them, son.” Ember Floraison stepped out from among the guests, his jolly eyes sparkling above a beard composed of grass and leaves.

“Thank you!” Julie hurried over to hug the Green Man, too.

Twittering, a trio of faeries led by the faerie dad swooped over and sprinkled a ton of faerie dust on Taylor.

Adrenalin surged through Julie’s limbs. She dove forward, grabbed Taylor, and shoved him out of the way. “Look out!” she yelled, throwing up her hands to protect her face from the caustic dust.

The faerie dad laughed as the glittering motes fell on Julie’s hands and arms, tingling pleasantly, like eating sherbet.

“I told you she’d fall for it.” He chortled. “Did you really think I’d sprinkle acid on you?”

Julie considered. “Yes. I did.”

“Thank you very much for the compliment.” The faerie dad bowed. “This is happy faerie dust. Totally harmless.” He blew a fistful of it into Taylor’s face, which made him sneeze. “See? It’s decorative.”

Julie grinned. “Thanks, faerie dad.”

The faeries fluttered off, scattering their harmless dust, which glimmered in rainbow colors and made several guests scream when they made the same assumption Julie had.

Feet soundless on the floor, Baccus bounded into the middle of the ballroom. He had deigned to wear a larger sprig of leaves than usual. Julie spotted the hilt of a dagger hidden among the leaves. Waving his staff, he boomed, “Are we here to stand around, or are we here to *party*?”

With soft gurgles, every glass in the room filled.

“Technically, we’re here to capture a bunch of warlocks,” Julie whispered.

Taylor wrapped an arm around her and kissed her cheek. “We’re also here to celebrate. Time for dinner!”

The guests flocked to the tables—Taylor’s seating chart was perfect—and a host of brownies appeared, clad in the tiniest, most adorable tuxedos Julie had ever seen. They served the first course, delicate crumbed Sylthana fish with buttery mashed potatoes and salad. Six carried a huge platter across the floor to Eglantine, who had curled up beside Julie’s chair. It contained an entire roast pig.

“Perfect!” Eglantine proclaimed, burying her nose in it and cracking the ribs.

“Eggles, you really need to work on your table manners,” Julie informed her, cutting off a piece of fish.

“Leave her alone, Julie,” Rosa scolded.

Eglantine crunched happily, failing to drown out the cheerful music or the merry conversation and bursts of laughter that flowed from the guests. Julie kept an eye on the windows but sipped her wine and laughed at Taylor’s jokes as he untied his bowtie and allowed it to hang from his neck.

The brownies reappeared for the second course, and the crystal glasses refilled themselves. Julie took a bite of succulent grilled chicken.

“The food is amazing,” Taylor gushed. He raised his glass. “To Meggie!”

The weremouse blushed as the guests echoed, “To Meggie!”

Julie lifted her glass to her lips, and the smell of honeyed mead flooded her senses.

Eglantine raised her head, grease dripping from her jaws, and let out a growl that rattled the windows. Silence fell on the ballroom, except for the squeal of bagpipes deflating as everyone stared out the windows.

Julie saw a flash of blue as the wards crumbled, falling as easily as they had planned. She clenched her fists, and moonfire covered them.

Kaplan shifted to his tiger form and jumped onto the table, scattering cutlery and glasses.

“They’re here,” he snarled.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The first warlock burst through the window in a shower of fractured glass and flung a bolt of purple magic at Julie.

Lancelot roared. A plume of golden fire poured from the fae's fist and leaped to meet the bolt of magic, which disintegrated in an explosion of purple sparkles. The warlock drew back his arms, terrified eyes shimmering behind his harlequin mask, and clapped his hands together to form another bolt.

"Get behind me, Mom," Julie ordered.

Rosa pulled up a chair near them, still clutching her glass of mead. "Oh, don't worry, baby. I'm sure we're quite safe with all your big, strong guests." She hiccupped, her eyes trained on the rippling, muscular back of Sergeant Derek Adamos, the minotaur.

Eglantine pounced over the tables and landed inches from the purple warlock. Her jaws snapped shut on his torso, and purple lightning crackled harmlessly across her scales as he attempted a last spell. Then Eglantine flung him into the air and opened her jaws wide. He disappeared in a few brisk crunches.

"You're right, Julie!" the dragon called cheerfully. "They *are* crunchy snackies."

Kaplan's roar echoed through the ballroom as more warlocks poured through the broken window. The tiger rushed toward them, and with a unified hiss of metal, the guests drew their weapons.

A tall warlock in black swooped through the window, riding a shrieking cockatrice with the body of a black wyvern and the head of a gray rooster.

“Forward! Forward!” he roared. “Claim the Sacred Blade!”

Julie drew back a fist, a fireball building, but Bianca struck first. Her red magic shot toward the warlock in black. He dodged, and it blew a hole in the pillar behind his head.

Cassidy’s shriek ripped through the air—pure rage. The vampire burst across the floor, her fangs and claws extended. Malcolm was right beside her, red eyes burning, and they flung themselves at the warlock in black. His cockatrice reared, squawking, and two other warlocks sprang in front of him. One summoned a crackling ball of electric magic to his hands, but Cassidy ducked beneath it and plunged her claws into his chest, and he went down hard. Malcolm dodged a blast of magic from the other and sank his fangs into the warlock’s throat.

The ball of magic sailed toward Julie and Taylor, and she tensed to answer it with two tongues of moonfire. With a roar, a sandstone-colored dragon leaped in front of them, and the electric magic harmlessly exploded on his scales.

Unfazed, Rosa held up her empty glass. “Think Bacchus has time for a refill?”

Baccus slammed his staff into a warlock’s chest and thorny vines exploded from it, wrapping around the warlock and pinning him to the nearest pillar.

“I think he’s a little busy,” Taylor ventured.

“Thanks, Axl!” Julie drew Excalibur. “Stay here with my mom. I’m going to give this blade a taste of the enemy.”

Livius landed beside her in dragon form, smoke wreathing from his nostrils. “Madam, we can’t allow that. This is your rehearsal dinner! Enjoy the chicken. It’s excellent.” He wheeled and plunged into the fight that now raged across half the ballroom. Victor Barkhands and Ilsa fought side by side, daggers flashing, and Livius coughed a cloud of smoke at their

opponents. The warlocks shrieked when the two Aether Elves' daggers found their marks.

Julie gripped the sword tighter, looking for another target. A green warlock burst through the window in a ball of lime-colored magic. He located Excalibur and raced toward Julie, firing bolts of magic right and left.

"Come at me, bro," Julie hissed, grinning. She raised the sword.

The warlock's eyes narrowed behind his mask, and as he brushed past the nearest bouquet, he raised both hands, gathering green magic in his fists. Before he could fire, the bouquet, which was composed of red and blue lilies, came to life. The lilies reared back on their green stems, shrieking, and opened mouths filled with sharp yellow teeth in their centers. The warlock faltered and turned back, then let out a scream as the lilies struck. They sank their fangs into him and yanked him into the center of the bouquet like a sea anemone dragging its prey to its slow, acidic digestion. The warlock's shrieks suggested this might be similarly unpleasant.

"Yes!" Jae cried from the other side of the room. "It worked!"

Julius, holding a groaning warlock by the hair, grinned and raised a hand. Jae gave him a vigorous high-five.

"No fair, guys!" Julie complained. "I want to be part of the fight too."

"Oh, don't be silly, honey." Rosa patted her knee. "Sit back and relax. You do love action movies."

Julie noticed that Rosa had helped herself to Taylor's wine.

Soundlessly, Dylan appeared at Julie's elbow, more uptight than ever in a perfectly tailored tuxedo. "Princess?" The word was almost inaudible over the shrieks, bangs, and roars of the fight.

"Yes?" Julie raised her eyebrows.

"Your mother told me you would feel left out and requested that I tell you to sit back, relax, and enjoy the fight,"

Dylan reported.

“Which one?” Julie asked.

“Both.” Dylan reached into thin air and pulled out a jumbo bucket of salt and vinegar popcorn, which Julie and Taylor loved. “Rosa told me to give you this.”

“Aw, thanks, Mom.” Taylor beamed at Rosa.

A shriek cut through the fight, and a warlock sailed over Julie’s and Taylor’s heads. He crashed through the window, shattering the glass, hotly pursued by Ember surfing on a giant leaf.

“Why not?” Julie took the popcorn, pushed her chair back, and put her feet up on the table. She adjusted her favorite party dress, the one she’d worn for their engagement party, around her knees and grabbed a handful of popcorn.

Rosa chuckled. “That’s the spirit.”

Taylor did the same. Kaplan roared, and a bunch of warlocks ran for their lives.

Julie set Excalibur on the table in front of her. “Wanna make bets on which one will deliver the longest monologue?”

“Definitely the one on the cockatrice.” Taylor crunched popcorn.

Julie pulled a face. “I think it’ll be that guy.” She pointed at a white-bearded warlock in the back corner of the room, doing some weird waving-around shit with his staff while a line of warlocks protected him. “He looks like the monologuing type.”

“He looks a little like I used to,” Hat opined. He transformed into a wizard’s hat shape and perched on the table beside Excalibur.

“My point exactly,” Julie told him.

“Oh, shut up,” Hat grumbled.

Rosa giggled and hiccupped.

The warlock in black wheeled his cockatrice around as Drollpelheimer fired a round into the monster's hip. The bullet ricocheted with a whine and slammed into the wall, producing a puff of dust. The cockatrice shrieked and lunged at Drollpelheimer, who sprang back and raised his gun, aiming for its chest. The warlock bellowed and punched out a ball of black magic. Drollpelheimer dropped and rolled, narrowly avoiding the spell, which hit the nearest table. It exploded in a shower of splinters and flung cloth fragments into the air.

"The one true king will not be thwarted!" the warlock snarled. "Surrender the Sacred Blade, and your deaths will be \_\_\_"

A roar echoed through the ballroom, deeper and louder than the cry of a tiger or a dragon, and Derek leaped onto the central table. He reached up and, without apparent effort, plucked a chandelier off its chain.

"Oh, *my*." Rosa fanned herself.

"Mom! You're *married*," Julie hissed.

The warlock in black shrieked and wheeled his cockatrice away from Drollpelheimer as Derek threw the chandelier. The warlock in black ducked at the last second, but the chandelier slammed into some warlocks who were to squeeze through the window. They screamed and vanished amid glass shards.

"Go, Derek, go!" Julie cheered.

"Oh, yes." Rosa leered. "Most certainly."

"What *is* that warlock in white doing?" Taylor muttered.

The white warlock was still at the back of the room. The funny shit with the staff had produced threads of magic, as gray as smoke, that spread out between the limbs of the warlocks trying to protect him. The magic shot into the fight, avoiding Julie's friends and twining like tentacles around the ankles of the warlocks.

Julie got up slowly. "What the—"

An orange warlock yelled a spell that flew from his mouth like a boomerang and shattered on Kaplan's coat. The tiger

whipped around, snarling, his coat smoking, and pounced. His front claws slammed into the warlock's shoulders and bore them both to the floor, and Kaplan bared his fangs, huffed out a hot breath, and bit down on the warlock's throat. His teeth clanged as though they'd met something made of steel. With a yowl, the tiger sprang back, tail puffing. Unscathed, the warlock lurched to his feet, smirking, and gathered another bolt of magic.

*It's an invincibility spell, Hat told her. Those warlocks can't be hurt as long as the white warlock weaves the spell.*

The white warlock's staff still wove and danced as he stood protected behind a line of warlocks holding back Julie's friends.

"Onward!" the black warlock roared, brandishing his staff, and the cockatrice crowed. "Seize the Sacred Blade!"

Rallying, the majority of the warlocks formed a tight group and drove toward Julie and Taylor. With a roar of fury, their guests massed around them, holding them back, but the warlocks' screams were replaced by clangs as bullets and weapons met the invincibility spell.

Kaplan's roar turned human, and he rose and seized the end of the nearest table. Hefting it effortlessly, dishes and glasses flying, the weretiger swung the table like a club. Warlocks scattered, yelping, and fell in a heap on the floor, but they scrambled to their feet as quickly as they had fallen and came back for more.

"Woohoo, Jack!" Taylor bellowed. "Kick their asses!"

*Hat, patch me through to Isaiah, Julie ordered. This is a job for the pack.*

Hat hummed. *You're connected.*

*Isaiah?* Julie asked.

*Yeah?* Isaiah panted, clawing and biting at a pink warlock's throat while two of his buddies, Teddy and Noah, held his arms down. The warlock giggled like he was being tickled.

*You see the white warlock?* Julie asked.

Isaiah looked up. *See him.*

*You need to take him down to stop the warlocks from being invincible. Think the pack is up for it?* Julie asked.

Isaiah drew back his lips from his sharp white teeth. *Absolutely.*

He yipped to the pack, and five werewolves, one with a bionic front leg, rallied around him.

Eglantine bounded up to them, grabbed the pink warlock by the legs with one snap of her jaws, threw him into the air, and swallowed him. His screams proceeded wetly down her throat and into her belly.

“Yeah, Eglantine!” Julie yelled, punching the air.

“That’s my granddaughter!” Rosa pointed boozily.

Taylor shoved a handful of popcorn into his face.

“Ooh, that tickles.” Eglantine scratched her belly with a front claw and nudged Isaiah with her nose. “Go on!”

Isaiah yipped again, and the werewolves plunged into the fight, effortlessly weaving around wrestling knots of warlocks and allies, heading for the line of warlocks protecting their brother in white.

Blake was the first to pounce out of the chaos. He snarled and snapped at the warlocks in the center of the line, jumping and dodging to avoid the bursts of magic from his enemies.

“Go, Blakey, go!” Julie cheered.

“Soda?” Taylor offered her a paper cup that had appeared out of nowhere.

“Thanks.” Julie took it.

Blake reared, snarling, and slashed the nearest warlock’s face with his front paws, one flesh, one steel. Despite the spell, the warlock stumbled back with a cry, throwing up hands that glowed with magic.

“Now!” Julie yelled. “Get them now!”

With every warlock focused on Blake, the rest of the pack lunged, as quick as shadows. They sprang between the warlocks' legs, brushing them aside, and four snarling werewolves charged the white warlock.

He was so absorbed in his staff-waving that he didn't notice until Isaiah stood right in front of him. The golden wolf's hackles made him twice his normal size. His brown eyes glowed like coals in his face, and his snarl shook the floor.

"Get him, Isaiah!" Julie shouted.

Isaiah pounced, and the warlock shrieked. The other wolves closed around him, and the warlock's cry cut off.

The other warlocks turned on the werewolves, but the wolves were not alone. Korin, Raven, Victor, and Ilsa pulled free of the fight and charged. Korin's hammer sent the first warlock flying across the room. He landed heavily on Julie's table and skidded toward her, spluttering and scattering crockery.

Julie ate more popcorn, watching with interest as the warlock slid to a halt in a pile of plates and rumped cloth a few feet from Excalibur. He raised his head, groaning, mask askew, and froze when he saw the sword a few feet from him.

"Dude." Julie shook her head. "Don't. Come on. You've got to see that this is not a good decision."

The warlock's eyes narrowed. "Yours is the foolish decision," he spat. "You follow weaklings when you are offered strength. Bow before us. It is the easy choice!"

"Hard no." Julie shrugged. "Sorry. Can't get behind the murdering and pillaging, you know."

The warlock's face twisted with fury, and he reached forward. Julie summoned fire. Before she could unleash her flames, Sir Bedivere appeared out of nowhere in a swirl of gray feathers and blazing amber eyes.

"Do not touch Arthur's blade!" he snarled.

The warlock looked up. One-armed, Bedivere wielded a sword bigger than he was. The blade sliced through the air, and the table fell to the ground in two halves. The warlock was similarly cloven.

Julie grabbed Excalibur and Hat before they could hit the floor.

“Well, that was violent,” Rosa commented.

Bedivere bowed and flourished his bloody sword, then plunged back into the fray.

The enemy was thinning. Warlocks lay groaning or huddled under tables, weeping. The ones who remained raced to the back of the room, plunged through the broken glass, and fled into the moonlit night. Only a handful stayed with the black warlock, who still rode his cockatrice. They gathered around the steed and raised their hands, magic crackling as Julie’s guests advanced.

Ilsa was at their head, a bruise on her cheekbone and her daggers in her hands.

Julie cupped her hands around her mouth. “Say something awesome, Ilsa!”

“You go, sis!” Taylor encouraged.

The corner of Ilsa’s lip twitched, but her dark eyes blazed. She gestured sharply, and her allies came to a halt behind her.

“This is your last opportunity to surrender,” she hissed. “Allow yourselves to be restrained, and no harm will come to you.”

“We will never surrender!” the black warlock raged. “We have the power of Mordred behind us!”

He raised both hands and dark energy crackled through the room, creating goosebumps on Julie’s skin. With an eerie rattle, every abandoned weapon and table knife rose and turned toward Julie. She tensed, gripping Excalibur. Taylor edged in front of Rosa.

“The one true king will be sated,” the black warlock hissed. “When he finds that he was thwarted, you will incur

his wrath. You will regret this. You will—”

Alugon laid a hand on Eglantine’s shoulder. “Now, young one!” he boomed. “Exactly as I taught you.”

Eglantine reared and threw her wings open, then opened her jaws. Silver light glowed from her chest, then rose past her shoulders into her neck, then her throat.

The warlock screamed defiance, and the weapons all stirred as one.

Eglantine huffed out silver moonfire in a torrent of destruction that engulfed the warlock and the cockatrice in a splashing ball of flame. The warlock had no time to shriek. The knives and weapons clattered harmlessly to the floor, and when the flames died, the warlock was a pile of greasy ashes on the ballroom floor.

Julie jumped onto her chair, waving her arms. “That’s my Eggy!”

Rosa wept into her wine. “My grandbaby’s all grown up.”

“Cuff the assholes!” Taylor shouted.

The werewolves, Korin, Raven, and Jae produced magic-nulling restraints, and the guests made short work of clapping them on the warlocks. They had to drag several of them out from under tables to do so. Jae worked hard to convince the lily bouquet to spit out the traumatized warlock it was trying to digest.

“Is that all of them?” Kaplan looked around, slapping his hands clean.

Hat’s brim turned down. *Wait. I still sense one—*

The drapes nearest Julie were thrust aside, and a warlock charged Rosa, his cracked harlequin mask revealing his snarl of rage. He raised a hand, fist filled with magic, over Rosa’s unsuspecting head.

Julie had no time to scream. She leaped out of her chair and swung her right fist in a wild arc, roaring flames trailing it. Her knuckles met the warlock’s jaw with a bone-shattering

crack, and he was flung back, silver flames exploding across his body. He turned to ash before he could hit the ground.

“Oh, *shit*, honey.” Rosa wobbled to her feet and peered at the ashes as they drifted to the floor. “You killed him.”

Taylor grabbed Julie’s arm as she sank into a chair. “Babe, are you okay?”

Julie swallowed hard, staring at the ashes.

Wings buzzing, the faerie dad landed on the table beside her. He grabbed Julie’s other hand and raised it.

“All hail Julie Firefist!” he roared.

A deafening cheer rocked the ballroom, and Julie’s tension dissolved into a grin. She squeezed Taylor’s hand. “I’m good, babe. I don’t like killing, but nobody messes with my mom.”

Kaplan opened a portal to Avalon HQ, and the captured warlocks were unceremoniously bundled through it. Then the guests drifted back toward the ruined tables. Strips of tattered fabric hung from the pillars. Flower petals littered the floor, mingling with pools of blood and shards of glass.

Rosa waved her empty glass. “I’m going to need more of that wine.”

“As you wish, madam!” Bacchus sprang onto a shattered table and waved his arms, and every glass and goblet in the room rose and filled with wine or mead.

Bianca stepped up beside Bacchus and threaded an arm around his waist. “Weren’t we in the middle of a party, people?”

“The darkstone is safe. The enemies are gone,” the faerie dad called. “Let us eat, drink, dance, and rejoice!”

Bacchus waved a hand, and the entire ballroom was restored to its previous state. Brownies in tiny tuxes flooded the room with dishes bearing the third course. The terrified band reemerged from their hiding places behind the tables and scraped out a shaky tune, and conversation once again flowed around the tables.

Eglantine waddled over to Julie. “Feel a bit funny,” she confessed.

“Funny how?” Julie asked, concerned.

Eglantine sat down on her haunches, raised her head, and unleashed an echoing burp accompanied by a huge silver mushroom cloud that scorched the restored chandelier and melted the candles. The guests all stared, and Alugon face-palmed.

“Ah, that’s better.” Eglantine grinned.

“That’s what happens when you eat too much junk food,” Julie scolded. “Indigestion.”

Laughter filled the room.

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The murmurs from the dying party barely reached Julie as she picked her way along the cool, smooth stones of the paths in Tintagel’s garden barefoot. She raised her face to the cool night air and inhaled the scent of jasmine.

Taylor’s strong fingers tightened around hers. “Quite a party, huh?”

Julie laughed. “You could say that.”

“Mission accomplished, though.” Taylor’s smile was a white crescent in the moonlight.

Julie nodded seriously. “The darkstone is safe, and the warlocks might have good information on the cult when we question them.”

Taylor chuckled. “I was talking about me remembering my vows.”

“Oh, yeah.” Julie grinned. “That too.”

She bumped her hip affectionately against his as the sound of rushing water grew louder. Pale in the moonlight, the pagoda awaited.

“Do you think things will change when people find out who I am?” Julie whispered.

Taylor glanced at her. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Everyone’s been supportive since I found the paranormal world. Will everyone treat me differently when they find out I’m the crown princess?” Julie gripped his hand. “The world’s going to change, Taylor. *Our* world is going to change.”

Taylor raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Of course it is, love. We’re going to get married. That will change everything in all the best ways.”

Julie smiled as they reached the pagoda. Taylor released her hand and bounded onto the top step with surprising agility for someone who had put away all that mead.

“Tomorrow, you face the world as the lost princess. Many things will change.” Her prince smiled at her from the jasmine-draped pagoda and held out a hand. “But not the way I love you.”

Julie blinked away her tears and joined him, then placed her hand in his. “Or the way I love you.”

He drew her close, his petrichor scent surrounding her like an embrace, and Julie rested her head on his strong chest. The steady thump of his heartbeat reassured her.

Though there was no music, when they launched into a slow waltz, they were exactly in sync.

## THE STORY CONTINUES

The story continues with book thirteen, *Royal*, available at Amazon.



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AUTHOR NOTES RENÉE  
JAGGÉR

WRITTEN SEPTEMBER 22, 2023

Thank you for reading through to the back of book twelve. I appreciate you so much!

**It's finally autumn where I live!**

Recently, the temperatures here in the desert at thirty-five hundred feet have fallen. The nights drop to the low sixties, and the days are in the mid-eighties. For Arizonans, that's almost cold. When I go out for coffee, I wear a sweatshirt because it's only about seventy-two around 9 a.m. Some people think that's warm, but since we have almost no humidity and we're coming off weeks of 105-plus days, it's downright chilly!

As I think I mentioned in an earlier author's note, we have four seasons here:

- Bloody cold (hibernation inside with the heater on and possibly a fire)
- This is Why We Live Here I (with lovely flowers like lilac and wisteria and the first bloom of roses)
- Bloody hot (hibernation inside in the AC and a tall, cold iced tea or six)
- This is Why We Live Here II (when the roses valiantly produce a second or third round of blooms after largely hibernating for the summer)

We are into This is Why We Live Here II, and my roses are going crazy. When I sit out on the patio in the morning with my coffee, the waterfall tinkles, the hummingbirds and

butterflies busily hum around the buddleia (butterfly) bushes, and my nose appreciates the roses. Life is good!

I think I mentioned that one of my roses is an autumn damask, which is what attar of roses is made out of. One rose next to me while I'm writing, and I am transported to a Turkish harem or whatever for the whole day.

Wait. That didn't come out right. I am talking about the exotic scent. Get your mind out of the gutter!

### **More Autumn scents**

I recently made a sourdough starter from scratch because who doesn't want fresh-baked bread in the autumn? Well, any time, but it's hard to turn the oven on in the summer. It's about three weeks old now, and I have made three loaves so far, even though that's a bit premature. They don't rise much, but they sure taste good! I will be experimenting with sourdough pancakes from the discard tomorrow.

Oh, and because I'm impatient and mine doesn't rise much, last night, I decided to use up an old packet of sourdough starter I had lying around and make a second batch. The directions were to add two cups of unbleached white flour, two cups of lukewarm water, and the starter packet, cover with plastic wrap, and leave for twenty-four hours at eighty to eighty-five degrees. I put it in a forty-ounce container and set my new super-wowie oven (see last author's note about space-age machines) on Proof.

This morning, I thought, well, I'll put a cookie sheet under it, just in case. I mean, it was up to about the three-quarters mark in the jar.

An hour later, I went back. The jar's lid had popped off, and the starter was dripping on the cookie sheet. I had ten and a half hours left for it to "sit" (there was no sitting going on), and if you never see another author's note from me, you'll know it engulfed the house!

I hope you're still enjoying these as much as I am enjoying writing them. I had so much fun with the wedding rehearsal! Stay tuned...

Until we speak again, I hope your skies are sunny and your days are filled with happiness and good books!

Renée

# BOOKS FROM RENÉE

## **Para-Military Recruiter**

(with Michael Anderle)

Drafted (Book 1)

Recruiter (Book 2)

Accepted (Book 3)

Lead (Book 4)

Recruited (Book 5)

Soldier (Book 6)

Tactical (Book 7)

Officer (Book 8)

Leader (Book 9)

Victor (Book 10)

Appointed (Book 11)

Councilor (Book 12)

Royal (Book 13)

## **Piercing the Veil**

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