

MYSTICAL MIDLIFE IN MAINE

DEADLY QUIPS & FURRY LIPS



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BRENDA TRIM

DEADLY QUIPS & FURRY LIPS

MYSTICAL MIDLIFE IN MAINE BOOK 12



BRENDA TRIM

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“The greatest discovery of all time is that a person can change his future by merely changing his attitude.” ~Oprah Winfrey.

CHAPTER 1



*M*y legs bounced in anticipation as Aidon turned down the long drive to my house. Layla, Aidon, Tarja and I had been gone for two weeks delivering the new familiars to their witches across the globe. In an ideal world, I would have liked to spend more time with the witches, but I was too worried about Mom to do much more than a cursory introduction. It wasn't ideal but I set up times where we could do a video conference for Tarja to see her children and give advice where needed. That thought brought on another round of guilt.

Turning in my seat, I looked back to where Layla was sitting next to my familiar. I met Tarja's unique green gaze. "How are you doing? I remember how difficult it was for me to send Jean-Marc off to school. I can't imagine how this has been for you. And, I made things worse by rushing through the process so we could get home sooner."

"Our quick visits were for the best. We weren't in one place long enough to be targets. And not having a prolonged goodbye was better for me. My instinct as a mother was to keep them close longer and it was intensified by the fact that Binx has remained in the house with me."

A weight lifted off my chest and one corner of my mouth ticked up. "I hadn't considered how difficult it would be to follow us from place to place. That was definitely a bonus. I'm just glad I didn't cause you more pain. My worry about Mom consumes me."

Layla placed a hand on the top of my seat and her fingertips rested on my shoulder. "You're also far more emotional than usual because of your pregnancy. Not to mention what has happened to Mom is fucking awful. I never considered what a blessing it was that Myrna changed me so young. I

don't remember much beyond the pain.”

Hattie had saved Layla and Tseki from a life of servitude to Myrna which was Myrna's undoing. If she'd been able to keep control over a dragon shifter and powerful wolf shifter, her dastardly plans of taking over might have worked.

I squeezed her hand. “That you survived and have thrived, is evidence of how extraordinary you are, Layla. Seeing how you've moved beyond the torture gives me hope for Mom.” The only thing that kept her from losing her mind entirely was Binx. He'd stabilized her to an extent but wasn't yet able to do more than that.

Aidon pulled into the circular driveway in front of the house. Layla and Tarja were out faster than I was. Aidon came around and grabbed my hand. “Are you okay?”

Tears filled my eyes and my throat closed up. All I could do was shake my head. How did I explain the sudden terror that washed over me? I was afraid of going in there and seeing Mom in a worse state than when we left.

Aidon pulled me into his arms and wrapped them around me. “What can I do? How can I help?”

“Just hold me for a second. I need to gather myself. I've been so anxious about getting back to her and now I can't seem to bring myself to go inside. This happened to her because of me. If I wasn't the Pleiades she would still be her normal self.”

Aidon put space between us and cupped my cheeks. “This is the path you were meant to follow. It is the same for her. Your mother does not blame you. She loves you more than anything and I couldn't be happier that she is going to be my kids' Gammy. Much like you had to adjust to having magic, Mollie needs to come to terms with this and learn how to live her best life as her new self. And she is going to do that with her wonderful daughter's support.”

I nodded and went to my tiptoes to press my lips to his. “Alright, I'm ready now.” My stomach was in knots and my heart was racing as we climbed the stairs. Nina and Selene were talking to Layla and Tarja in the kitchen archway when we entered.

A smile creased my face as I hugged my daughter then my friend. I kept my hope close to my chest as I looked in the kitchen. Mythia and Nana were each setting down cookie sheets with lemon tarts on them but Mom was nowhere to be seen.

Nana gave me a tight smile. “I tried infusing energy into these. I’m no kitchen witch like Mollie. She needs to get out of that room and rejoin the family. I’m ready to kick her tail end.”

I shook my head and smiled as I grabbed one of the tarts. I blew on it to cool it before taking a bite. “Nana, you know we can’t do that. She’s already been through enough.”

Nina nodded in agreement. “Gammy needs our understanding and support right now. I just wish she would see that we are safe around her. She hasn’t even looked at my neck once.”

My mind went back to the scene with Mom covered in blood as she crouched next to a dead body. She’d been put in a position where she was starved and then enthralled so she reacted against her will. It happened with a Fae woman as well. There were a handful of survivors of these horrific experiments. Stella had set them up in a house just outside of town that I was planning on buying soon. I refused to leave anyone without help.

I gave Nina an exasperated look. “You realize Gammy can likely hear everything we are saying right now. I have no idea, but I know vampires have sensitive hearing. She went through a lot and there are reasons for her fear. We just need to help her see that none of them are valid now that she’s not under that witch’s thrall.”

“How has she been while we were gone? We didn’t learn much about her current condition before we had to leave. Is she still able to remain awake during the day? Has she been exposed to the sun yet? Is she still eating regular meals? What about blood?” I was confused for a second about who Tarja was asking.

She rarely bombarded anyone with questions like that. She was usually the one with answers, so this had to be difficult for her. What happened to Mom was entirely new and no one had any information about what would happen to these tribred.

Nana waved an oven mitt through the air. “She hasn’t come out of her room once. She rarely says more than three words and she showers several times a day. I hear her in there crying and scrubbing herself.”

“She is still trying to get the blood off her hands. She thinks it’s staining them,” Binx replied from somewhere in the house.

Mythia cleared her throat as she nodded in agreement. “I’ve been delivering food to her. She doesn’t join us for family meals anymore.”

“How about blood? Had she asked for any?” Tarja asked.

That had been a debate I'd had with Mom before I left. In the weeks before we had to leave with the kittens, she had refused all offers of blood, saying she didn't need it. She was still in control, but knowing Mom she would never let anything as silly as bloodlust take over.

Nana pursed her lips and shook her head. "No. She refuses to even discuss it. But she seems weaker now. I think she does need it. Maybe not as often as a vampire."

"I've been thinking the same thing. I brought her cookies one day and sat with her for a little bit. She ate them but she didn't seem to get more energy like she should have," Nina said.

Selene chewed on the corner of her mouth as she looked around the group. "I think part of it is depression. She doesn't know who she is anymore. Having a purpose and focus helped me. I tried to get her to teach me how to create a cream to treat psoriasis but she refused. I hoped she could embrace being the coven potions expert."

"Has she worked on her anti-aging cream? That was something she seemed invested in perfecting," I asked.

Nana's expression became exasperated. "No. But she needs to snap out of it and get back to it soon. I'm almost out of the last one she made. It was okay but it didn't get rid of my fine lines."

I snorted and wagged a finger at her. "Nana, your lines are more like ravines. Nothing is going to make them go away. They're carved too deeply into your face."

Nana smacked me then started laughing. "You have underestimated your mother's talent. I have faith that she can improve things greatly."

"And that is what we need to show Mollie. Knowing your belief in her hasn't wavered will go a long way to helping her find her way. Showing her that she is still the woman we know and love is vital. She's different, but hasn't lost her talents."

"Tarja's right. And it's time we talked to her together and let her know how we feel," I said.

Nana jerked her chin toward the landing where the staircase split into two directions. "Go get her. We will prepare some snacks for this family meeting."

I nodded and headed for Mom's room. Aidon stopped me with a hand on my arm. "I'll head out so you guys can have your meeting."

I scowled at him and thrust my hands on my hips. "Are you saying you

aren't part of this family? Because I thought mating me meant that we were in this together."

Aidon's face split into a wide grin and he picked me up. "We are. I've wondered how you felt and if you wanted me involved with your family for the messy stuff. I'll go help Nana and Nina. Love you, Queenie." He pressed his lips to mine and set me down.

My body yearned for his as he walked away. The damn man knew better than to rile me up like that. Shoving those desires aside, I climbed the stairs and knocked on Mom's door. She didn't say a thing. I waited a couple of seconds then entered. I sucked in a breath and almost cried out when I saw her sitting in her armchair. She'd lost significant weight. Her clothes were hanging off of her shoulders.

"We're back, Mom." I smiled at Binx as he lifted his head from his front paws. He was laying at Mom's feet.

Without looking away from the wall she was staring at, she said, "I heard."

My footsteps echoed as I crossed the room and crouched in front of her. "Mom, we are all worried about you. Come down with me. We want to talk."

Mom's anger when she finally looked at me took my breath away. "You have no idea what I went through and what I did. I'm right where I need to be. Leave me alone."

My heart was breaking. The agony of seeing her like this and hearing her despair nearly brought my tears back to the surface. "That's not going to happen, Mom. I love you too much to allow you to waste away. You aren't defined by what happened to you. You are the strongest woman I know. We are going to figure this out as a family. But you have to be involved. Now, I need you to get up and come with me."

Mom's expression shattered and her agony nearly killed me. "I can't show my face after what I did."

I clasped Mom's hand. "If our situations were reversed, what would you say to me?"

Mom averted her gaze and shook her head. "That's not fair. You're better than me."

I wanted to continue talking and trying to get her to open up, but she had been hiding in her room for weeks on end. I needed to drag her out of here. Standing up, I gathered my power while watching as Mom's expression shifted yet again. This time it became one of despair. She was giving up.

The yelp she let out when my power lifted her off her chair was as satisfying as her cursing. I'd left the door open which was a good thing. I hadn't used my telekinetic spell much, which meant my control was shaky at best. I didn't want to drop her down the stairs, so I stood at the top and made her float down to the bottom. Once there, Selene took her hand and led her into the living room. I followed right after, happy to see Mom hadn't tried to take the back stairs up to the second floor.

I hurried my steps when I heard the back door open. It wasn't that I was concerned about danger. Anyone that meant us harm couldn't cross my wards. It was that I knew who it was. Aidon's parents had been staying at his house on and off since discovering the pregnancy. Not that they should have been surprised. It was Persephone who ensured I got pregnant with her magical pomegranate seeds.

"I heard there was a family meeting," Hades said as he walked in and scanned the living room. With a grimace, he waved his hand and suddenly the space doubled in size and a second set of couches appeared.

"Don't you have the Underworld to run?" Nana asked. "I bet your absence is the reason all these demons have been getting out. Lazy management makes for dangerous situations."

Hades lifted a shoulder. "Aidon's men have that covered. We're here to help Mollie."

Mom's head swiveled around and landed on Hades. "You are?"

"How did you hear about this?" I asked as I shifted my gaze to Aidon.

Nina lifted her chin. "I sent Grimpops and Flowergram a text. They're part of the family, right?" Hades and Persephone loved the nicknames Nina had given them. Her desire to spend time with them and see them as grandparents were some of the reasons they'd remained on Earth so long. They loved being around her and Aidon.

I narrowed my eyes on my daughter wondering what her angle was. "Yes. They're part of the family." Nina was the most loving child I'd ever met. It was possible she wanted them to act like grandparents to her. I'd ask her later. "I'll start this meeting by letting the newcomers know that we don't interrupt one another. We never put each other down. We respect what someone has to say. And we always listen with an open mind and give honest, yet supportive feedback."

Persephone inclined her head, approached Mom and wrapped an arm around her while leading her to one of the new couches. "I'm going to need

you to teach me how to be a grandmother. I don't know the first thing about it. So once this meeting is done, I would love to talk with you."

Mom actually smiled at the Goddess of the Underworld. "It's not hard. You just love on your grandchildren and spoil them at every chance."

Nina looked at Mom with tears in her eyes. "I miss you, Gammy. I miss cooking with you and talking to you."

Mom's head dropped and her shoulders curled in. "I need to go back to my room." Binx wound around her leg, stopping her from moving. The two looked at each other and I knew they were having a private conversation.

I nearly crumpled like a doll when I saw Mom lean back another inch. "Mom, you can't hide in there forever. We can't understand what you've been through, but we are here for you."

Hades knelt in front of Mom and placed his hands gently on her arms. "You, Mollie, have been dealt a bad deck of cards. But your life isn't over. You need to snap out of it and start living. You survived. That's admirable. You're this new and exciting creature. You still have your beauty and you might not have the weaknesses of each species. I know you have vampiric qualities, how about your other side? Can you shift?" Hearing Hades be so direct with Mom made me worry for her, but I didn't interrupt because she was listening.

Mom lifted her hand and claws sprouted from her fingers. "Partially. I can grow fur, but I haven't really tried anything more. I'm terrified."

Nana leaned forward in her chair. "There's nothing to be afraid of in this house. You explore who you are, Mollie." Binx jumped into Mom's lap when Nana said that as if he agreed with her.

Persephone lifted Mom's hand and traced one of the claws. "You aren't a danger to those you love. I can feel your bloodlust and yet you're sitting right next to me and not making a move toward anyone. And it isn't because there are three gods in the room. Your will and determination are remarkable. I've never seen anyone with more grit."

"I've done awful things and I have no idea how I am feeling half the time. It's best if I stay in my room," Mom insisted.

Nina crossed her arms over her chest. "What about the other victims, Gammy? Do you ever think about them?"

"Phoebe bought a house where they are living. Lilith, Bridget, and Clio have been working with them as they cope with life and find a new path for themselves. They aren't isolating themselves," Nana added. I wasn't aware

I'd purchased the property already. That was good. I wouldn't have to worry about them destroying anything.

"They have all consumed blood and food, so we know you need both," Selene told Mom. "They maintain their magical powers too. Hades is right. You are extraordinary."

Mom looked at Nina, then Selene with tears in her eyes. "They're all I can think about. The witch, whom we hadn't been able to identify, was unsuccessful until she took my blood. I swear she practically drained me. Turns out my blood was the key to her succeeding with these *improvements* as she called them. And now I hardly recognize myself. I crave things I shouldn't and I grow fur on my body. And the anger. There are times it eats away at me."

I ran a hand over my chest as I watched the grief and guilt cross Mom's face. "None of this is your fault, Mom. The witch was a sick bitch. Keeping it inside makes it worse."

Hades cocked his head to the side. His gaze landed on me for a second before it moved back to Mom. "I know a thing or two about anger. Your daughter is correct. Keeping it bottled up is more likely to result in you blowing up. And I'm not saying that you might yell at our beautiful granddaughter here. With what you have going on inside, we would be looking at blood and gore. Find a way to let some out a little at a time."

"Kickboxing is a great way to let off steam," Tseki interjected from the corner of the room.

Mom listened as everyone shared some way to let out how she was feeling without having to say anything. Mom was always a big proponent of talking things through. To see her eagerly taking these suggestions in reminded me of all the changes she'd gone through while in that witch's clutches.

As I pondered the changes Mom went through, I considered what I'd noticed about myself lately. Ever since the fight with the witch, I had been craving rare steaks and pickles dipped in marshmallow cream. While those were the most common ones, I had also wanted fried snickers bars, raw onions, boiled eggs with horseradish, and tuna fish with chocolate milk. The witch had thrown spells at me left and right. There was even a potion or two in there. Had she done something to me? Or was this a normal part of being pregnant with gods?

The ringing of a phone brought me out of my thoughts. It was the hotline

we'd set up for paranormals to call for help. Nina was up and headed to the cell when I lifted my hand. "I got it, sweetheart." I picked it up and put it on speaker. "Mystic Enigma, how can I help you?" Nina had decided we needed to have a name when we answered the phone, saying it made people trust us more.

There was a muffled sob on the other end that sent my heart into a gallop while my body braced for bad news. My gaze connected with Mom's. The veins in the side of her neck stood out and her hands were clenched into fists. She was braced for even worse news.

"Is this where I can reach the Pleiades? I need the most powerful witch." The woman on the other line devolved into a crying jag.

My head lowered to the phone that I placed on the counter. "That's me. I'm here. How can I help you?"

"My daughter, Kaida, has been kidnapped. She's only five years old and has no defenses. Her wolf isn't big enough to protect her yet." The tears started up again.

Nina's wide eyes reflected mine. As did the tears shining in hers. It had to be bad if the woman was calling me rather than asking her alpha for help. My heart broke for this mother and what she was going through. Her little girl was missing.

CHAPTER 2



“*W*hy are we heading to see Sullivan? Seems to me like the mother doesn’t have faith in him and putting that in his face might be a bit upsetting for an alpha,” Stella pointed out as I drove across town.

The phone call earlier this morning had ended the family meeting. Mom had stayed while I called Stella over to help me handle the case. Hades and Persephone had to return to the Underworld before Stella arrived. And as we discussed how to approach the case, it had been my mother who said we had to talk with the Alpha before we went to see the parents, otherwise we’d risk animosity.

“It’s common courtesy to let him know what we are doing on his land. Not to mention safer. Besides, he’s an ally.”

Stella tilted her head to the side. “Makes sense. Becoming puppy chow is not on my agenda.”

My eyes popped open wide and a laugh burst out of me. I smacked her shoulder. “It’s a good thing we aren’t close enough for the shifters to hear that comment. Behave while we are here.”

Stella chuckled as she nodded. “On a different note. It was great to see your mom out of her room. Maybe now she will start dealing with her condition. Did she say how we can help? I’ve been by daily to see her. It’s killing me to watch her waste away.”

An ache started up in my chest as I considered how frightened Mom was of acknowledging her need for blood. And for good reason. Her only experience was when she was forced to rip out an innocent woman’s throat. “I think we might have made progress with her. And oddly enough, Hades and Persephone were instrumental in helping Mom see she isn’t a danger to

us.”

“I tried telling her she would have already attacked if she wasn’t able to control herself. I even told her I bet there’s a certain amount of revulsion to the thought of drinking blood. I’m not sure I could go through with it.” Stella shuddered, placing a hand to her stomach.

When I considered it, my stomach roiled and I gagged. “Good point. But we can’t react like this when she starts drinking it like she needs to. Which reminds me, Persephone had a point about Mom and how she might have the strengths of each species without the weaknesses.”

Stella’s mouth formed an o as she gaped at me. “For your mom’s sake, I hope that’s true. We know the witch was creating an army. What better way than to give creatures all these powers for her to control. She was a sick, twisted bitch.”

“Tell me about it,” I said as we turned onto pack lands. The tingle of their wards traveled through me as the paved road gave way to a dirt one.

Lush forests dominated the landscape around us, with towering evergreen trees reaching towards the sky. It created a majestic canopy that provided shade and shelter as we parked where the road ended. We got out of the car and glanced around. There had to be shifters watching our every move. Would they lead us to Sullivan’s house?

Sunlight filtered through the leaves, casting a gentle dappled glow on everything below. The scent of pine and moss filled the air, carrying with it the invigorating freshness of the outdoors. To our right, I could hear the sounds of tranquil streams and babbling brooks. I pictured them meandering serenely through the pack lands. It made me want to lounge by the creek’s edge and watch the crystal-clear waters flow peacefully.

Stella met my gaze and shrugged. We started walking, looking through the trees for any sign of life. We’d walked several seconds without anything. In the midst of the massive trunks, I spied hidden clearings. We ended up in the middle of the biggest one that I imagined provided the space needed for communal gatherings and celebrations. The verdant meadow was adorned with colorful wildflowers, painting the landscape with vibrant hues.

Given the location, there had to be rocky outcrops and cliffs scattered throughout the territory. They would offer the perfect vantage point to observe the breathtaking vistas of the Atlantic Ocean. The sounds of the babbling brook vanished and were replaced with the ocean crashing against the shore.

I marveled at how the pack lands were carefully preserved and protected, ensuring that the delicate balance of the ecosystem remained intact. Shifters needed that to thrive and be able to roam freely within their lands. Being there gave me a sense of the life of shifters. It might have been pregnancy hormones but I suddenly felt like crying. Shifters had solace, connection, and a true sense of belonging. They also lived in harmony with the raw beauty of the natural world that surrounded them. And someone had come in and ripped that to shreds when they took a little girl from her family.

The houses we passed incorporated elements of rustic charm and modern comforts. Some were constructed using weathered stone and what looked like reclaimed timber. Nestled beneath the protective canopy of the towering trees, the homes offered a peaceful retreat from the outside world. One thing all of them had in common was expansive windows.

People started walking out of their residences to stand on their spacious porches and watch us walk onto their lands. It was incredibly intimidating when we passed clusters of houses with their pristine gardens and yards. The beauty of the community was marred by the intimidating looks on the faces around us. My skin prickled as we continued.

Sullivan's house was obvious. Not only because it stood at the heart of the pack lands, but also because it was built with sturdy timber and adorned with intricate carvings that paid homage to the strength and unity of the wolf pack. For such an austere home, it exuded a sense of warmth and protection.

Sullivan stood shirtless on his porch watching as we walked up. "To what do I owe this pleasure?" The alpha's amber eyes narrowed on us.

I lifted a hand in greeting. "We are here on a case and wanted to talk to you before we visit Owen and Aurora."

Sullivan's nostrils flared and his eyes darted down to my abdomen before rising to my face. "It'll be better if we talk inside." He turned and entered his home, leaving the door open behind him.

Stella and I entered the spacious home that smelled like bacon. The entry immediately opened to a large room. I imagined it was where pack members came together to share meals and stories. The place fostered a strong sense of community. I couldn't put my finger on what gave me that impression. It was the feel of the place. And the fact that there were more couches in there than a furniture store.

Sully gestured to one of the brown leather couches. "I assumed the Blackwoods would call on you. You've built quite the reputation for solving

cases.”

I sat across from the handsome alpha. “When you say it like that, I feel like we should be driving around in the Mystery Machine. I do what I can to help the magical community. What can you tell us about what happened to Kaida? How did someone get past the pack?”

Sullivan ran a hand across the back of his neck. “She wasn’t taken from here. I’ll leave her parents to fill you in about the details. I am looking into it. I just got back from following a scent trail.”

My stomach rumbled embarrassingly loudly. My cheeks heated as I said, “Did you find Kaida?”

Sullivan got up and crossed to the kitchen. He picked up a platter with bacon and eggs and set it on the table between us. “Help yourself. I think you need this more than me. I did not find Kaida. I lost her trail very quickly.”

While Aidon and I wanted to keep my pregnancy secret, so I didn’t become even more of a target, we knew that wouldn’t last forever. Still, my mind worked through the ramifications of the shifters knowing about my condition. Sullivan frowned at me. “We aren’t going to tell anyone about your condition. No shifter would ever put a pregnant woman in danger.”

I blew out a breath and picked up a piece of bacon. “What can you tell us about Kaida? Her mother indicated her wolf isn’t strong enough to protect her.”

Sullivan stuffed some food into his mouth. “No shifter can at her age. She’s one of the few we’ve allowed to attend school in the mundie system. It is becoming harder and harder to keep the pack safe with members out in the world. Technology is a pain in the ass nowadays.”

“And you can’t position them in jobs without the proper education,” Stella guessed.

Sullivan inclined his head. “Precisely. Kaida’s generation are the first to be educated in the mundie system.”

I chewed the salty deliciousness of the bacon, wishing I had some marshmallow cream to dip it in as I considered his statement. “Why don’t you do online schooling? You can get an accredited education that most colleges and universities will accept. That’s where being in the mundie system really matters.”

One of Sullivan’s eyebrows lifted as he gestured out the big picture window. “Does it look like we have internet service out here?”

I pointed to the cell phone on the table. “You have cell service. You can

use your phone's hotspot to do the schooling. It'll keep the kids safe on your land."

Sullivan blew out a breath. "I should have reached out to you when the elders were debating how to approach our future."

"How do you have cell service? You're out in the boonies," Stella said.

Sullivan laughed. "We had a pack member install a tower decades ago. We own and maintain it."

I snagged another piece of bacon before getting to my feet. I wanted to go see Owen and Aurora. "We should talk about the possibility of opening a school for paranormals in the area. My daughter has struggled since getting her magic and my babies will have an even harder time. It would give our kids the chance to socialize with each other. It would give parents a break, too. We can set up a time to meet about this later. For right now, where can we find Kaida's parents?"

"Their house is the yellow one about a hundred yards to the southeast of mine," Sullivan gestured to his left.

Stella and I thanked him and headed out the door. Owen was pacing the porch as we approached. Even if Sullivan hadn't told us theirs was the yellow house, I'd have known by the pall hanging over the place. Owen's dark brown hair was standing up around his head and his eyes were red and puffy when he lifted them to us. "Thank you for coming so quickly." He opened the door and waved us inside.

Several shifters had followed us throughout our journey across their lands and backed off when they saw us enter the Blackwood's home. The inside was dark and gave me a feeling of being closed in. It was far smaller than Sullivan's. The décor was modern farmhouse with furnishings that were comfortable and well-built. Typically, it would have felt cozy. Their grief overshadowed everything, making me want to go to bed and throw the blanket over my head.

"Aurora, the Pleiades is here with her friend," Owen called out.

A tiny woman with black hair and green eyes came around the corner, blotting her eyes with a tissue in one hand while extending a hair brush with the other. "Here's her hair. You can use this to scry for her. Do it now. Find my baby."

My hand went to my stomach as my heart thumped in sympathy for the mother. "I need to scry in my Sanctum at home. But before we go, we'd like to gather more information first. I'm Phoebe, by the way. And this is my best

friend, Stella.” Sanctum was the name Nina had come up with for the basement area where we kept our magical supplies. I really liked the name. It defined it perfectly.

Stella pulled Aurora into a bone crushing hug. “We are going to do everything in our power to find Kaida.”

Owen stood awkwardly behind his mate and watched the exchange. I glanced around. “Is there somewhere we can talk for a few minutes?”

Owen nodded and walked to the back of the house. “Would you like something to drink?”

“We’re alright,” I said as I took a seat on the blue sofa. “Can you tell me where she went missing from? Sullivan indicated it wasn’t here.”

Stella and Aurora were right behind me. Stella took the seat next to me while Aurora went to the chair beside us. Aurora’s eyes filled with tears and her shoulders shook as she began crying again. Owen perched on the arm of the chair next to her and put a hand on her shoulder. “She went missing between Camden Elementary and the shopping center on Children’s Way.”

I tried to keep my surprise from showing on my face. It wouldn’t make them feel any better. “I don’t understand. Why was she going from the school to the shopping center?” I looked from Owen to Aurora when he refused to answer.

Aurora sucked in shuddering breaths. “It...it’s my...fault. I get twitchy when I go into town to pick her up. I almost shifted once and ever since then we have her walk to the shopping center where I wait for her. There are less mundies and no parents hovering over their kids.” Tears continued streaming down Aurora’s face as she spoke. Seeing how torn up she was made me feel awful for her.

Owen rubbed his mate’s back. “Aurora never left pack lands before we had Kaida. She wasn’t used to interacting with mundies. Sullivan approved Kadia to walk to meet Aurora.”

And this was a major problem with isolating members of the pack from the rest of the world. They had no idea if the stories they were told about mundies were true or not. I couldn’t imagine being frightened of people you were told would kill you if they discovered what you were. For the most part I understood the magical world’s fear of humans and what many of those humans would do if the paranormal was discovered. The witch trials were proof that they had a tendency to react violently.

"Okay, so rather than wait in the pick-up line, you parked a few streets

away. Are you certain she left the school? Is it possible that she is still there?" I had to make sure if she went and spoke to someone.

Aurora's shoulders shook as she dropped her head. "I went to the school when she didn't show up. Most of the parents and kids were gone by then. The staff said they watched her walk toward the shopping center like always."

Stella gasped. "Did they call the mundie police?"

Aurora nodded. "Sullivan said he would handle them for us." Aurora was beside herself, shoulders shaking as she sobbed.

Stella smiled at the mom. "My husband is the Sheriff. I'll reach out to him when we leave."

This next question was going to be difficult to ask but I needed to know. "Do either of you have any enemies? Anyone that would use your daughter to get to you?"

Aurora and Owen partially shifted. Because Owen was closer, his claws wrapped around my throat and pushed me up against the wall across the room. My magic ignited in my core and I called up a protection spell before the claws could prick through my skin.

Stella bounced a ball of pink witch fire in her palm. "You don't want to hurt her. We won't help you find your daughter if you do. She has to cover everything, even the hard topics. If we spend all of our time looking in one direction when there is another possibility, we could waste precious time Kaida might not have. The first twenty-four hours are crucial."

The front door burst open and Sullivan entered the cabin with a scowl on his face. "Release the Pleiades. Now. She came here to help. Answer her question."

Aurora backed away and sank into Sullivan's side. "Sorry. It felt like she was accusing us. I have no enemies. I don't go anywhere except to take Kaida to school and pick her up."

Owen glared at me as he released my throat and took his mate from their alpha. I noted that he said nothing as the couple sat back down. I asked about what they both did for a living. Owen worked at an automotive repair shop owned by another shifter and Aurora stayed home, helping out with whatever the pack needed.

Stella and I looked through Kaida's room. That was heartbreaking for her mom, so I was careful to be quick. I wanted to get a feel for the child. It would help when I scried for her location.

“How likely is it that Kaida will shift while in captivity?” I didn’t want to tell them that I was worried about a mundie having her. Given where she was taken from, it was a very real possibility and I wanted to be prepared for anything when I found her.

Sullivan walked with us to the porch of the Blackwood home. “Shifters have a natural instinct that kicks in to protect them from being discovered. For most shifters their wolf erects a shield around itself to avoid breaking through when under duress. Her mom doesn’t have one at all while her dad’s is as strong as mine.”

I nodded, thanked them for the information and promised to stay in contact. I felt for the parents at the same time I wondered what Owen was hiding. I couldn’t prove anything. Not to mention it wouldn’t make sense for mates to keep secrets from one another. From what I understood about mates, they could pick up on what the other was thinking. So, what was I missing? Or was I misinterpreting his lack of a response?

CHAPTER 3



Stella climbed in the passenger seat of my SUV and buckled up. “Was that weird to you?”

I shot her a glare and backed up without saying a word. “Sorry!” She yelped.

It was several seconds later before I relaxed my grip on the steering wheel. “We have to be careful when we are anywhere close to pack land. They can hear a mouse fart in the woods.”

Stella wrinkled her nose. “Can they really?”

I chuckled and lifted a shoulder. “I have no idea. Call Todd and ask him about the investigation.”

Stella pulled out her phone and dialed her husband. He answered on the third ring. “Hello, sexy. How’s Mollie today?” A grin stretched across my mouth as I heard the love Todd had for Stella in his voice. They were one of my favorite couples. And had been relationship goals for me. To be that in love after over twenty years was practically unheard of.

“Mollie was out of her room when I got there which was great to see. I’m going to bring the girls over to see her later. But I was calling to ask you about a missing girl.”

“Hold on a minute, Dewdrop.” The sound of a door closing echoed over the line before there was a rustling. “Is this about Kaida Blackwood? Is she paranormal?”

“Yes, her parents called Phoebe and asked us to find her. She’s a shifter.”

Todd cursed a blue streak. “Everyone wondered why the other parents were acting so strangely. They all think they did something to their little girl.”

Stella sucked in a sharp breath and shared a look with me. “No, Todd. You have to help Owen and Aurora. While Owen is a bit sketchy, I can say he didn’t do anything to his daughter.”

“What do you mean by that? What did he say to raise your suspicions? You always see the best in everyone.” I had to agree with Todd on that one. Stella’s vibrant personality was based partly on her positive outlook.

“It wasn’t anything he said or did. It was how he never responded when Phoebe asked them if they had any enemies that would hurt Kaida to get to them. It was clear they both adore their little girl and need to find her. They even risked the wrath of their alpha to call us,” Stella said

Todd sighed, the sound crackling through the speaker. “That’s certainly suspicious, but it’s not a crime. I have to say, I’m honestly relieved to hear they’re shifters. I was dreading the investigation into them. Parents who kill their kid tend to have some pretty nasty skeletons in their closets.”

I leaned toward Stella. “Have you learned anything about Kaida’s disappearance?”

“We know she was last seen crossing along the side of the road across from the orthodontics office,” Todd said.

“You mean closest to where the trees are thicker?” I clarified. It made sense given the girl was a shifter. She would be most comfortable in an environment close to her home.

“Yeah. She always walked on that side of the road.”

Stella hummed for a second as she thought it through. “Is it possible she ran through the trees to get away from someone and got lost?”

Todd snorted. “You know the answer to that, Dewdrop. Wolves have a better sense of direction than Google maps.”

Stella rolled her eyes even though her husband couldn’t see her. “Good point. We’re on our way to talk to the school staff. Is there anything you can do to keep this case local? We don’t need the FBI getting involved.”

“I can keep from calling them in for a day, at most. After that, I will have no choice unless the two of you have any magic you can use to make this vanish from memories and the system.”

I grimaced, hating that there was nothing we could do without the help of certain paranormals. “I have people that can hack in and erase the case, but memories are another thing altogether. I’m not comfortable calling in vampires to help with the mundies. We are going to have to work with Sullivan to broadcast when we find Kaida.”

Stella's gaze jerked in my direction. "What about the media? Have they been alerted already?"

I held my breath waiting for Todd to answer. Kaida was an adorable little girl with curly black hair and bright eyes. She was exactly the kind of child newscasters would fall in love with and plaster everywhere. Normally, in a missing person's case that was exactly what you'd want.

"We haven't said anything," Todd said. "I will tell the other parents to keep quiet for now in the hopes that we can catch the parents in a lie. They all believe they are responsible, so they should be eager to corner them, which won't be possible if they are being stalked by cameras."

"Thanks, babe. I'll call you later," Stella said before she hung up the phone.

I made a hasty left turn into a fast-food drive-through. "Want some chicken? I'm starving."

"You've got some wicked pregnancy cravings. I could go for a drumstick."

"It's these babies. They want some buffalo sauce. The meat is just the delivery device." I stopped by the menu and looked it over. "They also want some mashed potatoes with ranch dressing."

Stella chuckled as I ordered a bucket of chicken with ranch, hot sauce, chocolate chip cookies and honey mustard. We were barely out of line when I grabbed a piece. Stella opened a packet of hot sauce and squirted some on my chicken for me. I moaned in happiness as I drove across town. The steering wheel was covered in grease by the time we pulled into the school parking lot. I grabbed a wet wipe I always kept in my car to clean the thing before we got out.

"Crap. I have to pee," I said as we walked into the office.

Stella slapped a visitor sticker on me and waved me out the door. "The bathroom is down the hall on the right. I'll talk to Darla until you get back."

I heard her greet the secretary by name as I walked out and down the hall. It paid to know everyone in town. I hurried, noting that the building was empty except for teachers. School had let out two hours before, which was when Kaida went missing. I felt every tick of the clock like the beat of a drum.

I relieved myself and was back inside the office a minute later. I wasn't surprised to see Stella sitting in the principal's office with a woman, chatting about how her kids were doing. Stella smiled at me. "Here's my partner,

Phoebe. She went to elementary school here with me, decades ago. Phoebe, this is Stacy,” she gestured to the woman behind the desk, “and Cordelia, the Kindergarten teacher.”

Stacy was in a business suit and looked to be in her late-thirties. She looked from me to Stella. “I didn’t know you and Todd divorced. I saw him the other day at Home Depot and he never mentioned a thing.”

I choked out a laugh as understanding dawned. “You think she and I are together? Oh, no. We’re in business together.”

Stacy’s cheeks turned pink. “Oh! That was a huge assumption on my part. What’s your business? What do you do?”

“Phoebe owns Silva Enterprises and together we own Mystic Enigma. We are private investigators which is why we’re here, Stacy. Owen and Aurora hired us.”

Stacy’s expression shuttered as she clasped her hands on her desk. “That was fast. Your husband hasn’t even had time to investigate.”

I pursed my lips. “If it was your child, would you wait? Because I would do whatever it took to get mine back.”

Stacy’s eyes widened and she shook her head. “I meant no offense. The school should have insisted on a better system for Kaida getting home, so I feel somewhat responsible.”

Cordelia chewed on her lower lip. “We’re all terrified about what could have happened to her. We have been scouring the wild parts around the school for the past hour. We just came in to regroup and call the Sheriff for an update.”

“Don’t stop the search. The more eyes the better,” Stella told her.

I nodded in agreement. That was true. They weren’t going to stumble across the paranormal, so it couldn’t hurt. Especially if a mundie took Kaida. “What can you tell us about Kaida? Who were her friends? What kind of a student was she?”

Cordelia looked to Stacy who dipped her head. Having the teacher seek approval to talk to us, pissed me off even as I understood it. There were certain things that couldn’t be shared with just anyone. I hadn’t considered getting a release of information from the parents until this moment.

“Kaida is a shy child. She is smart as a whip. Great with her letters. In fact, she is the only one in the entire class that started reading last week. It was hard to get through to her initially, but I feel like we’re making progress,” the teacher said.

“Had she ever been in any trouble?” Stella asked.

Stacy shook her head. “She’s never so much as looked at anyone cross. She’s the sweetest little girl. A lot like her mother from what I could tell. Aurora was timid and shy when she came in to enroll her. Her brother, Sullivan spoke for her. I’ve never met her father until today. He was an odd man. Cold and detached.”

Cordelia pulled at a thread on the bottom of her sweater. “He was angry, as was expected, but he seemed to be holding something back.”

I pursed my lips and narrowed my eyes. “Did you ever consider that he was just as nervous as his wife? Not everyone displays it the same way. I can tell you he is beside himself over his missing daughter. Both parents are, which is why they asked us to look into the case.”

Stacy sat up straighter and kept her gaze on Stella. “Please understand we aren’t trying to say anything other than he was different than we thought he would be given Kaida. We know he loves his daughter.” She was trying to cover the school’s ass as she back pedaled faster than an Olympic cyclist.

Stella smiled and reached across the desk for Stacy’s hand. “We know. It’s awful investigating the disappearance of a child. Back to Kaida. What can you tell us about her friends? Who were they? Did you ever hear them talk about anyone following Kaida or anything like that?” Kids often shared with their friends before going to adults with stuff that scared them. It was a long shot that a shifter child would confide in mundies, but we had to ask.

Tears shone in the back of Cordelia’s eyes. “Kaida didn’t have many friends. She stuck to herself for the most part. She knew some older kids but never hung out with them or anything.”

“Who were these older kids? Could they have done something to her?” I asked as I took out my phone to take notes.

Stacy pursed her lips. “There’s little chance they were involved. They were released later than the Kindergartners and their parents picked them up on time.” The principal gave me a list of names I was certain were shifters, but would check with Sullivan later.

“That’s really helpful,” Stella said. “What else can you tell us about her?”

Cordelia opened her mouth but Stacy stepped in with, “Nothing. She hasn’t been here all that long.”

That bitch was keeping something from us and I wasn’t going to allow it. Lifting my hand, I cast a spell to loosen their lips before I continued questioning them. “What else is there? A child’s life is on the line here.”

Stacy sighed. “We heard that she was being bullied but we hadn’t gotten to the bottom of things yet. All we have are rumors.”

“Who did this?” I ground out.

Stacy held up her hands. “We can’t say for sure.”

My jaw dropped open then snapped shut with a clack. “You’re saying that she was being bullied yet you didn’t take the accusations seriously?” My anger snapped out and my vision turned red again. I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth, praying I didn’t lose my shit on this lady.

Stella scowled at her friend. “How could you condone any kind of bullying? Did you even talk to Kaida about this?”

Stacy had the decency to look sheepish as she shook her head. “We have not spoken to Kaida but I don’t think Xander would be mean to anyone.”

I was still seeing red but I no longer thought it had anything to do with the needle mark in my arm. What this child, Xander did to her was simply vile behavior. “Staff here needs to do better and I’m going to make sure the world knows it. You can expect to lose a number of students after this,” I informed them. I would make sure we had a school for the shifters by the week’s end. This was bullshit. “If you ask me, you’re as culpable in the bullying as the child because you knew about it. You’ve been covering for that kid to avoid getting on his parent’s bad side. And you’re biased against Kaida because she is a child that isn’t like the others.”

While the principal stared at me, Stella growled low in her throat. “Are you talking about Elizabeth Sinclair Whitman & Charles Whitman III’s son? I didn’t realize he went by his middle name.” It was a challenge not to judge this Xander kid given that he was the son of what sounded like a pretentious and rich family.

Stacy looked away. “Is there anything else I can help you with?” Her fear combined with Cordelia’s and nearly choked me. These bitches were not going to give us any more information.

Stella must have sensed the same thing because she stood and leaned over the desk, putting her face in Stacy’s. “You are both disappointing. I’m aware of Xander’s reputation and the fact that he is only at your school because he got kicked out of every private academy on the East Coast.”

I got up and scurried after Stella as she turned and stormed out of the office. “How old is this kid? Do you think he did something to Kaida?”

“Xander is nine years old. He seems like a sociopath if you ask me, so we can’t rule him out.” Stella’s words chilled my blood.

She got behind the wheel and hit start before I was able to open the door. I got in the passenger side and was silent for several seconds. “Where are we going?”

“To pay Xander and his parents a visit,” she replied through gritted teeth.

I nodded, holding on as she sped down the streets to the wealthier side of town, then turned down a drive similar to mine. I hated that anything about this place reminded me of my house. Thankfully, the drive was where the similarities ended. This house looked like a concrete monstrosity with no charm or warmth to it at all. It was cold and sterile.

Stella took the stairs two at a time and was pounding on the front door. A blonde woman with a snarl on her face yanked the door open. “What is your problem?”

“Hello, Liz. Let’s have a chat.” Stella pushed past Liz as she gaped at my best friend. I’d never seen Stella act this way. I followed behind before I could get locked out. “Where’s your son? We need to talk to him about being an asshole.”

I cleared my throat. “We need to talk to him about a missing girl.”

Liz scowled at me. “Xander had nothing to do with that girl’s disappearance.”

“What’s going on, Liz?” A guy with dark blonde hair and beady eyes called out as he entered the room.

A young boy that looked more like the woman followed behind his dad. It had to be the infamous Xander. Given what I’d learned, I wasn’t surprised by the dirty look he shot me.

“Stella is here to accuse our son of kidnapping that poor girl.” Liz crossed her arms over her chest.

“Xander had nothing to do with that,” Charles said with a frown. “You’d better watch what you say to those above you. We can make your life a living hell and take what little you have.”

“Money doesn’t buy class. And you have no idea who you’re talking to.” Part of me wanted to turn this guy into a pig along with his wife and son. It was clear they looked down on anyone they thought had no money.

Stella cocked her head to the side. “You should really look at who the development arm of Silva Enterprises does business with, Phoebe. You might want to make some changes.”

Charles’s eyes widened as they took me in. “You’re Phoebe Dieudonne? The new owner of Silva Enterprises?”

“I am. Not that it matters right now. I want to know what your son did to Kaida.” I turned my gaze on the child who wasn’t afraid in the least. “Did you see her after school today?”

Xander scowled at me. “So, what if I did.”

I would never allow my son to talk to an adult that way. His parents stood by looking down their noses at us. His dad was busy trying to determine if I could cut off his business but that didn’t stop the disdain that I felt coming from him. “What did you say to her?” I followed my question by casting a spell to make him talk. Kids were usually easier to get through to. This one took significant effort, making it clear he had some pretty good natural defenses.

“I told Kaida she was a baby who cried all the time and that she needed to grow up already.” Xander lifted his chin in defiance as he spoke.

Stella stood over him with invisible energy crackling around her hands. “How did she react?”

Xander lifted a shoulder. “She ran away from me. Cut down an alley and I lost sight of her.”

“Did you tell anyone this information?” I asked.

Xander looked at me in disbelief. “Why would I?”

“Because a child is missing!” I shouted.

Liz put her hands on my shoulders and shoved me. “Get out of my house. You’ll be hearing from our lawyers.”

“Honey, I own the law firm they work for. You will be hearing from the lawyers for Kaida’s parents by end of day. Your son is culpable in her disappearance.” With that pronouncement, I turned on my heel and stormed out of their house. I couldn’t look at them for another second.

I wrinkled my nose, disgusted as we left the Whitman’s home. Rich people like that were despicable. They had no idea what life was really like for the rest of us living a normal life. When you could afford cleaners and cooks full-time, it disconnected you from everything.

I stumbled a step when I realized I was now counted as one of those rich people. I’d inherited my business and money from Hattie, but I still had it. Did it matter that I didn’t pay for a cleaner or cook? Or that I didn’t look down my nose at anyone?

I remembered precisely what it was like not to have money and to live paycheck to paycheck. I was not the same as ugly individuals like that who looked down on a little girl because she was different. No wonder Aurora got

twitchy when she went to that school. I would too.

Anger surged through me when I thought about how the Whitmans had treated little Kaida. As I wondered whether this family really was behind Kaida's disappearance, my rage made my vision flicker and turn red. That made my heart freeze. Had I dismissed the concern about the needle mark I found in my arm after my fight with the witch too soon? Was I becoming something other?

CHAPTER 4



“*M*om! Can you wait just a second?” Nina called out as she leapt down the stairs like she was a parkour expert. Watching her made my heart race. My mom instincts kicked in as I opened my mouth to tell her to slow down, moving to catch her in case she fell. She landed safely at the bottom of the staircase before I got any words out.

I smiled back at her while my heart raced a million miles an hour. “You cannot descend those stairs like that or you are going to give me a heart attack. What’s up? Is everything alright?” I tried to gauge her emotional state. It was constantly shifting at her age.

However, Nina wasn’t your average teenager. She was just starting to date before Miles and I divorced and I’d moved us to Maine, upending her life. Nina had just begun making friends and getting her footing at school before we’d inherited magic. She hadn’t been as social since then as she had been before. In fact, she hadn’t really made any friends until Stella’s kids realized they had magic too.

Nina chewed one corner of her lower lip. “I know you’re busy and if this isn’t the right time I understand, but I was hoping you could call the Twisted Sisters and ask them if we can plan my party? I know we can’t go there and have it at the plantation. You have to find Kaida. I was just hoping they could come here.” Nina’s gaze moved from me to the front door and she lowered her chin and shook her head. “Forget I asked. Kaida is too important. It doesn’t matter if I never get a party.”

She turned to go and I grabbed her into a hug. My heart was torn in two. It was imperative that we find the little wolf shifter. Kaida had to be terrified, but Nina had lost her entire life because of the magical world. I was going to

give her this. “You are the most considerate child I have ever known. I love you to pieces and think now is the perfect time to call the Smith sisters.”

Stella nodded and wound her arm through Nina’s as we headed to the kitchen to FaceTime the Twisted Sisters from the iPad. “I wasn’t terribly imaginative with Charley’s sixteenth. I did a sweets theme and set up an old-fashioned candy counter for her and her friends. I can’t wait to see what they suggest for you.”

Nina cocked her head and looked at Stella. “What you did sounds fantastic to me. I would love a candy counter like that.”

Stella’s smile was wide. “Well, it wasn’t great. Todd built some shelves that I put jars of treats on and stood behind it to fill orders.”

I chuckled as I imagined the Sheriff handing out candy. I grabbed the iPad and dialed Dre’s number. There was a main number for Willowberry Plantation, but I wanted to talk to one of the sisters directly.

Nina and Stella crowded to the sides of me as Nana entered the room. “What’s going on? Who are you calling?”

Dre answered then. “Hey, Phoebe. Are you calling to check on Adèle?” Dreyra was the oldest of the six Smith sisters. The scenery behind her blurred as she walked across their property. Based on the sound of a machine running, I guessed she was going into their laser silo. I had only seen it once and was in awe of what they’d set up there.

I smiled and shook my head. “While I would love to see Adèle, I was calling for business. Specifically, to ask about you guys coming up to host Nina’s sixteen slash seventeenth birthday party.”

“We would be honored to do this for you guys. Let me get Dani and Lia. The others aren’t here right now.” Dre reached for something in front of her then the noise of the machine got louder. “Dani, Lia, Phoebe is on the phone for Nina’s party!”

Nana stuck her head in from the side and looked at the screen. “She’s the oldest of the Twisted Sisters, right?”

Dreyra looked down at the screen with a smile. “I am. Name is Dreyra. There are a lot of us and remembering our names often confuses people.”

Nana pshawed and waved her hand in front of her. “There are only six of you. That’s not difficult. My problem is that I haven’t met you all yet. Plus, at ninety my memory isn’t what it used to be. I can see the family resemblance,” Nana said as Dani and Lia came around to stand next to Dreyra.

Dani and Lia introduced themselves then Dani pointed to the right. “What

are you thinking for a theme, Nina? We have a barn full of stuff we can bring up.”

I tilted my head and watched my daughter’s face turn pink. She looked like a deer caught in the headlights. Stella placed a hand on Nina’s shoulder. “I was telling her how we did an old-fashioned candy counter for my daughter, Charley’s sixteenth. She seemed to like that.”

The sisters started moving again. Lia’s head was bobbing as she tried to remain in screen. “We found an old counter that we refurbished. It’s got the glass fronts for the candy and the bins behind. We could rent a van and bring it up.”

Dani nodded. “But that’s not a theme. Well, it could be with some work. The real question is what kind of décor you want. We always have the sweets counter for sixteenth birthdays, so don’t let that limit you.”

Nina’s wide eyes turned to me. “What do you think, Mom? I have no idea.”

The sisters entered a large barn and Dani picked up a hand painted cut out of a giant hibiscus. “We can do a tropical theme. Or a garden theme,” Dani pointed to Lia who was holding up a valance of flowers next to a backdrop of greenery.

“What about doing something like a sixties or seventies theme. If you’re into retro stuff. It’s popular right now,” Dreya added.

Dani set down the flower and picked up a peace sign. “We have many things that go with both decades. But if you went with seventies, we could take an old VW Bus and use the front of it for the sweets counter instead of the old-fashioned one.”

Nina perked up at that and focused completely on the sisters. “You have the front of a VW Bus? Can I see it? I love that idea. Could we do disco balls and have vinyl records?” Nina preferred listening to them on her record player over any of the music streaming services.

Dani shook her head while Lia and Dre shared a look. “Not right now, but I will find one. We have an entire network here that will scour every junk yard for one.”

Nana stepped fully in front of me with her mouth hanging open. I was right there with her. “You’re going to find an old car and cut it into pieces so you can turn it into a display for candy? For a birthday party?”

Dani lifted a shoulder. “Yep. If it fits in the budget we will.”

Lia clapped a hand on Dani’s shoulder. “Dani’s visions are always

elaborate. She plans things down to the tiniest detail to make our events memorable for people.”

Nana shook her head from side to side. “What happened to having cake and giving gifts?”

Dani laughed. “We do that too. We create moments for people. Opportunities for them to bond further with their friends and family.”

I wrapped an arm around Nana’s shoulder. “I love your approach. It’s all the little things that count. And we have enough money to make this the best birthday for Nina. Do you want the seventies’ theme?”

Nina chewed on her lower lip. “Yeah, it’s one that fits me.”

Stella gently pulled Nina’s ponytail. “Not to mention you want the VW candy display.”

Nina’s face brightened. “If we can find one, yes. Can we paint it teal? Or Purple?”

Dani paused as she was typing into her phone. “Either color would fit if we stuck to a mutli-colored theme. I’m thinking we hang fringe curtains with five or six colors for one backdrop and another with arches and a peace sign.”

I nodded in agreement. “I can have Tseki and Murtagh look for a VW here. That will be easier than shipping it from your place. I can fly you guys here. We can fit more in my private jet than a regular plane and you won’t have to drive.”

We worked out some more details and Dre surprised me by asking about Mom and how she was doing. Emotion choked me for a second before I could reply. “How did you hear about what happened? Is it going around the magical world?” The last thing I wanted for Mom was to be judged and possibly not accepted.

Dre shook her head from side to side. “No one else knows. We spoke to the Backside of Forty and Fiona told us since we were closer to you than most. She hoped we could offer support to you guys.”

Lia nodded. “I can’t begin to imagine what she is going through, but we are here if she ever needs anything. We know what it’s like to have multiple species inside us--kinda like mutts. We weren’t tortured, but we are more than simple hybrids.”

“That means the world to me. I will let her know. She’s struggling to integrate the changes,” I replied.

“Part of the reason I picked this theme is because Gammy loves the music and clothes from this era. I want her to enjoy herself and not isolate in the

corner like she is now,” Nina interjected.

Lia looked at Nina. “We will do everything we can to make this perfect for you both then. Send us her favorite things and we will integrate them.”

Dani nodded in agreement. “We can also look for outfits if you guys want us to. I know how busy you are with cases.”

Lia rolled her eyes. “Dani just likes to shop. And part of the little details she likes to see to, when possible, are the clothes worn.”

That made me laugh. “In that case, she can pick out my clothes. Just make sure the waistband is stretchy.” I ran a hand over my stomach.

Dreya’s forehead furrowed then she gasped and lifted her gaze to mine. “You’re pregnant?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I’m doing a terrible job of keeping this secret. My enemies are going to find out and use it against me any day now.”

Nana clenched her jaw and narrowed her eyes. “You need to stop putting that out in the universe. You’re not helpless and you’re carrying the babies of a god. They have powers of their own.”

“We won’t say anything.” Dre promised. Dani and Lia agreed. Lia changed the subject back to Mom when she asked, “If your mom is open to advice about learning to love yourself, I have some workbooks I can recommend. They’re written for mundies, but the lessons are extremely helpful.”

I sighed, wishing it was that easy. “Honestly, I’m not sure they’d be of any help. What would really help her is information about how the shifter and vampire traits manifest in her. She’s worried about losing control and hurting someone.”

“There has to be books about this somewhere, right?” Dre asked.

I lifted my hands and let them fall to my sides. “That’s the problem. To my knowledge, this has never occurred. I’ve thought about going to *The Library* that Fiona talked about.”

Lia’s eyes widened. “Be careful if you do go. From what she said it sounds dangerous just getting there.”

“Yeah, you need to be careful if you go,” Dani added. “And before we let you go, we need to talk budget for Nina’s party.”

I looked to Nana since Mom wasn’t there then thought better of asking her opinion. She was already appalled that we might be buying a car to take apart. “I haven’t given this any thought. What is a typical budget?”

Dre gave Dani a look that spoke of exasperation and annoyance before

her gaze settled back on me. “If you ask Dani, it’ll cost as much as most weddings. But we can work with most budgets. It helps that we have a lot of stuff we can bring with us.”

That didn’t help me in the least. “I was just thinking about how rich, entitled people annoyed the hell out of me. While I have more money than I know what to do with, I am not one of those people. I want to make this party amazing for Nina. She’s had to sacrifice more than any kid ever should because her mother was given magic. This is one small way to try and make up for that, so you tell me what you need to do that for her.”

Nina grabbed my arm. “Can we find an old car? I *really* want to help cut it up and make it into a display unit. I could use it in my bedroom after that for my records.” She gave me her puppy dog eyes and stuck her lower lip out.

Nana snorted. “I’ll tell Tsekani that he and Murtagh should start looking for one.”

Dani beamed into the phone Dre was holding. “We will start looking as well. It might cost a bit to get one shipped to your house.”

Lia held up her phone. “There are VW wrecking yards and they have a lot of buses. I don’t know cost but it is a place to call and get an idea.”

My gut cramped over the thought of spending thousands on what would become a shelving unit. Nina squeezed my arm. “I know it seems extreme, but we would be repurposing something that would continue to rot and contaminate the soil.”

I pulled my arm away and wrapped it around her shoulders. “It’s not about the money. I have no problems repurposing something like that. However, we need a plan for what happens to the back half of the bus.”

“We could always use the back here. We can turn the back end into something similar that we will use for parties at the plantation. I can see adding shelves and having it store barbeque supplies. You could use it next to your pool and put plants on the shelves or goggles and shit. It could be a lawn sculpture. Or you could turn it into a fish tank,” Dani said. “The latter would need to be done by a professional, but with a little work you could create something that people would want to buy and make your money back.”

My mind boggled at the number of ideas she rattled off. “I like the way you think, Dani. Do you guys redo homes too? You’ve got a talent for seeing the larger picture.”

Dre was shaking her head rapidly. “Don’t fill her head with any more ideas.”

“We redid the NOLA council building and now Dani wants to expand, but we are too busy with cases and parties,” Lia interjected.

Dani lifted her shoulder. The jerky movements and pursed lips told me she was not happy with her sisters. “We will get a list of decorations together and I will call the salvage yard and see what they have. It’ll be cheaper to find one without an engine in it. But if we do find one that has an engine, you can sell the good parts for money.”

We thanked the sisters and hung up the phone. Nina gasped. “We didn’t tell them when we wanted to do the party.”

“What party?” Mom asked as she and Binx walked into the kitchen.

Everyone went silent and froze. I broke first and approached Mom. “Nina’s birthday party. The Twisted Sisters are going to do it.”

Nana got up and came around the island. “You will never believe what Nina wants them to do. Dani gave her the idea to cut an actual VW Bus in pieces and use the front as a shelving unit to have candy in jars on during the party. I’ve heard it all now.”

Mom smiled as she looked at Nana, making my heart swell. “It’s extreme, but you could use it for your records later.”

Nina beamed at Mom and laughed. “That’s exactly why I want it. You could help me with it, Gammy.”

Mom’s shoulders curled in and she dropped her head. “I’m not sure about that. Sounds like the Twisted Sisters will be taking care of that part.” Binx nudged her leg with his head, making her look down.

Nina’s face fell as she nodded. I met Nina’s gaze and jerked my chin at the tablet. “Why don’t you text one of the sisters the date we want and share my Venmo info so they can send a request for money to me. And then you can go out and talk to Tseki and Murtagh.”

Nina nodded and did as I asked while I led mom into the living room. “You don’t have to withdraw from everything, Mom.”

Mom started pacing back and forth in the bigger room with Binx following her. The space hadn’t been changed back after Hades expanded the dimensions. Even though the room was open to other areas of the house, walking into it was now like walking into TARDIS from Dr. Who. It was bigger than it should be.

“I can’t get past the guilt. I tore that poor woman’s throat out. It haunts me.”

“*You are not to blame for that, Mollie.*” Binx stopped in front of Mom,

stopping her pacing.

I wanted to pull Mom into a hug but her body language said she would not be open to the affection. “I can’t begin to imagine how that is for you. And I understand why you struggle to remember that none of it was your fault. You were forced to act after being tortured and turned into something new. All of that is a lot to take in without the magic that bitch was throwing at you. How can I help you cope with this? Nina needs you right now. So do I. In fact, when I was faced with how much to spend on Nina’s party, I wanted to talk to you.”

Mom grimaced. “But I wasn’t there for you.”

Great, I’d just added something to her burden. “You’re here for me. I was going to visit you after Stella and I checked an alley for a missing shifter girl. What I want you to consider is how you are honoring the woman that died. And yourself. Remaining isolated and away from us is giving that vile witch the satisfaction of ruining your life. She was hoping to punish me and those I love.”

“It’s not that easily done, Phoebe. I’m trying and I will continue to try.” Binx started purring as he leaned against Mom. The young familiar was learning how to do his job and I wondered if that was his way of comforting her.

I thought about the changes in my behavior and decided to force Mom back into her care taking role. “That’s all I can ask. Before I go, can you tell me what your transformation was like?” Mom flinched and I continued. “I found a puncture mark after I fought that witch and I’ve had some things I worry about. I can’t be sure she didn’t inject me with the serum to change me too.”

Mom grabbed my hands and looked into my eyes. “Do you have blinding pain in your head? How about the middle of your back? How are your ears?”

I lifted a shoulder. “I feel pretty good. It’s more anger stuff and cravings. If she did something, it’s not changing me as fast. Do you think that’s possible? I worry about the babies.”

Mom looked down at my stomach. Her shoulders straightened and when she looked up, she was clearer than she had been. “That’s not how it happened with me. It’s possible you’re different than me because of the pregnancy. You are carrying Aidon’s kids, so they have powers. Whatever is going on, we will get down to the bottom of it together.”

I choked back a sob and wrapped my arms around her. This promise was

a huge step for her. I prayed it was a sign that she was back. “Together,” I promised.

CHAPTER 5



“*H*ow’s Mom?” Stella asked as we drove across town.

I eased my foot off the pedal, slowing my speed. We’d spent forty-five minutes talking to the sisters. I couldn’t regret that because it was important to Nina. She’d asked me for so little and my work as well as the magic had taken so much of my attention over the past year. I was trying to find a better balance between our cases and my family life.

“She’s struggling, but I think she’s going to be coming out a lot more.”

I saw Stella’s head turn toward me from the corner of my eye. “How did you finally get through to her?”

I pulled my lips between my teeth then tilted my head to the side for a second before focusing back on the road. “I asked her for help with some symptoms I have been having.” She was going to pester me, so I told her everything about the needle mark and cravings and moods.

Stella’s leg bounced up like she was trying to soothe a fussy baby. “Those symptoms don’t mean the witch did something to you too. You’re the Pleiades. Surely, nothing she could do would hurt you. It could be your babies. And the mood swings are normal for a pregnant woman.”

“It wasn’t like that when I had Jean-Mark or Nina. I know this isn’t even remotely the same, but I am worried because I did have a needle mark. And in the end, it doesn’t matter because it is getting Mom out of her room. She will do anything to help me.”

Stella chuckled. “Using that was ingenious. Moms can never ignore the plight of their children no matter how old they are. We want to be there to help them when they’re sick or hurt. And next time you are worried about something, you had better let me know. You don’t have to carry shit alone.”

Emotion was once again burning the backs of my eyes and making it difficult to talk. Damn pregnancy hormones. They made me cry over soap commercials. It took a second for me to gather myself. “I didn’t keep this from you on purpose. With everything going on, I wanted to make sure that I wasn't overreacting to pregnancy hormones.”

Stella narrowed her eyes on me. I could feel her scrutiny burning into the side of my face. “You know better. You’ve dealt with thousands of pregnant women and know what to expect.”

I held up a finger. “Ah, but none of them ever carried the baby of a god and Pleiades witch. Between my powers and Aidon’s, anything is possible with these babies. They’ve already created a protective bubble when we were in danger.”

Stella unbuckled as soon as I parked. “You have a point there. You ready for this?”

I took a deep breath and blew it out as I climbed out. “I hope this gives us a viable lead on Kaida. Every minute that passes is killing me. These missing person’s cases need to stop. This feels much harder to do when a little girl’s life is on the line.”

“Especially when there’s a child involved.” Stella smoothed her suit jacket down and touched the corners of her lips nervously.

“We’re going to be okay,” I reassured her. “We aren’t walking into Tartarus. A filthy alley in downtown Camden is nothing compared to stealing blood from an ancient monster that can’t be killed.”

Stella chuckled as she brushed her knuckles on the lapels of her jacket. “That’s right. We’re bad asses.” She strutted in her heels for a couple of steps then turned wide eyes to me. “But what if there’s a creepy serial killer hunting in the area?”

“How can you be afraid of a mundie when you can make him freeze with one word? You have magic Stella. And that isn’t something a serial killer can combat. Unless it’s a supernatural. Then he might be able to break through your magic.”

“I can’t help what terrifies me. It’s like elephants being afraid of mice. Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, and David Berkowitz were all the boogeyman growing up. How can you not be afraid of people who are capable of killing indiscriminately?” Stella shuddered as we walked.

My heart sped up and a shiver worked its way up my spine as I turned to look behind us. “The Green River Killer always terrified me because he left

his victims in areas that were a lot like places Mom and Nana would take me.”

“See,” Stella hissed. “Assholes like that are scary as hell.”

“You’re right. But we aren’t going to encounter one here. We’re here to gather evidence and possibly scry for Kaida.”

Stella nodded and her heels clacked on the pavement as we walked down the street then turned down the alley. The noise of her shoes made my pulse pick up with each step. The stench of urine, vomit, decaying food, and mold made me gag. It mingled with the slight nausea that was now part of my daily life. There was a second where I fought against reenacting Linda Blair from the Exorcist. The dim, dank alley was the perfect place to snatch an innocent kid. How the hell did Kaida have the courage to walk down this? That was more of a testament to how mean that asshole Xander was to her. Talk about psychopaths. That kid was a serial killer in the making.

Concern for this child won out over disgust and my heart pounded in my ears as we moved slowly through the smelly alley. As we walked, I scanned the black pavement. It would be nice if we found Kaida holed up in a corner somewhere. I knew that was a long shot. I’d take her backpack. Or the kidnapper’s wallet.

We walked the entire stinky length and stopped at the end. Hands on my hips, I scanned the buildings around us. “We need to check the backs of these businesses. The question is, do we ask for permission or cast an aversion spell that makes mundies look away from us.”

Stella grabbed her necklace and played with the diamond hanging from the chain. It was a new gift from Todd and was gorgeous. “Why don’t we just make ourselves invisible and silent? It would solve the problem of being seen.”

My eyebrows drew together. “Honestly, I’m hoping she is hiding in one of these buildings and she will come out if she can see us. I know that seems ridiculous. In reality, we want to be able to talk to any supernaturals that might be in these places. However, I like your idea of using silence. We don’t want mundies to hear us and paranormals won’t be put off by it.”

Stella nodded and walked over to the first store. The back door was white at one point in time. Now the bottom was covered in black smudges and the top looked like it was the preferred place for the local pigeons to poop. The door handle was rusted and filthy. I yanked my hand back and looked over my shoulder at Stella who was laughing silently.

“You open the door.” I wasn’t a germaphobe by any means, but being pregnant, I was extra sensitive to things like bird crap. I’d dealt with several cases of bird flu in my career. Those patients bitched about aches and pains more than anyone.

Stella moved around me on the small stoop. A shudder moved through her as she reached out. I laughed when she cast a cleansing spell before her fingers closed around the handle. I’d have done the same thing.

The door wouldn’t budge, so we cast a spell to unlock it next. With that done, I grabbed her hand and cast the spell to avert mundie attention while she cast the silencing spell.

I reached for the door knowing it was clean and pulled it open, stepping inside. As I turned down one of the aisles, I stumbled over a box. Curses flew from my mouth as I considered pulling out my cell phone to use its light. The single bulb in the middle of the room was not enough.

Stella pressed her mouth to my ear. “I can’t see anything. Let’s find a light switch.”

“We don’t need to whisper. You silenced us.” I glanced around the area and pulled my cell phone out. “This will draw less attention. What store is this, anyway?”

“It’s the kitchen store.” Stella held up a frying pan. “Kaida! Are you in here?”

We called out to her a few more times and continued through the storage area. There were boxes on the floor waiting to be unloaded but nothing else to indicate Kaida might have come in here. We looked in the break room and bathroom then left and went to check the clothing store next door. My hope was dwindling as we cleared the back of that one and moved on.

It was in the fourth business, a souvenir t-shirt shop, that my magical senses were triggered. “There’s something here.” I hurried through the door, not caring if the handle was dirty or not. Thankfully the light was on in the back of this place. “Kaida! Are you in here, sweetie? Your mom and dad sent us to find you. It’s okay to come out.”

“You’re not in trouble,” Stella added.

“Would you two shut your big traps?” A man said in a deep voice.

I spun around scanning the back door, looking for the guy that said that. My forehead furrowed when I didn’t see anyone. “Who’s there? Where are you?”

“You don’t have to remain invisible,” Stella said.

“I’m not invisible, just overlooked like always. I’m down here.” The anger in the guy’s tone was unmistakable. “My name is Finnian Thistlewood.”

My gaze dropped along with the corners of my mouth. The brownie standing in the doorway was bloody and looked exhausted. I crouched down and extended my hand. “Can I help you outside so we can talk?”

“Aye. That would be grand. I haven’t recovered yet from the attack.”

I laid my palm flat and gave Finnian a finger to help him climb on my hand. Brownies were tiny creatures and he fit comfortably in my palm with his feet hanging over the side. “I’m Phoebe Dieudonne and this is my best friend, Stella Hawkins. We’re here looking for a missing shifter girl but I am happy to help you find whoever attacked you and ensure they can’t hurt anyone again.” We didn’t need another task, but I couldn’t just leave the poor man.

Finnian clutched his side while Stella closed the door. I moved to the other side of the dumpster and away from the business. “You’re in luck, Pleiades. The two tasks align. I was hurt when I tried to help the girl. I smelled her wolf and knew she was a paranormal and jumped into action when I saw her being pulled away.”

Stella rummaged through her purse and pulled out a bottle of water. “Who attacked you?” She extended the liquid to Finnian.

“Would you mind pouring some in the cap for me? And if you have a healing potion, I’d be forever grateful.”

I patted my bag and felt a couple of potion bottles. I hadn’t restocked because we were just looking through an alley so I wasn’t sure if I had what he needed. I opened the flap and reached in to pull out a vial. “You’re in luck.” I poured some of the healing tonic into the cap he’d just emptied.

“Thank you. The rumors about you seem to be true,” Finnian said. “It seems Kaida’s parents couldn’t have picked a better person to look for their little girl because an invisible monster took her. I came out of my hole when I heard a terrified scream.”

“You couldn’t see who it was?” My heart sank. “Damn, I was hoping it was a mundie so we could scry easily for her. A witch will likely hide her from us.”

Finnian sighed and dropped his head. “I tried to help her but when the magical knife cut me, I was paralyzed for several seconds and all I could do was watch her disappear into the home goods store. I tried to go inside when

it wore off and was zapped. I woke up when I heard you calling her name.”

I scanned the brownie’s side. “You live in a hole here? I have plenty of safe space on my land. You’re welcome to come live there.”

Stella patted my belly. “It’s a bit early for those nesting hormones to start acting up. You’re going to run out of space if you keep collecting people.”

I rolled my eyes as Finnian looked between the two of us. “I’ve just fallen on a bit of bad luck. I’ll be back on my feet soon. I couldn’t be a burden.”

I scowled at Stella then smiled at Finnian. “Nonsense. Anyone who stepped up to try and save a little girl is welcome at Nimaha. Would you like to stay here while we investigate?”

Finnian shook his head. “I can’t leave her with that Dark being.” He shivered, almost falling off my hand. I caught him, set him on my shoulder, then we walked down to the home goods store. My magical senses were pinging with all kinds of alarm bells as we got closer. Stella and I paused a few feet away from the door and extended our hands.

Stella shook her head. “We aren’t getting through that way without blowing up the building.”

I opened my senses wider and picked up on the intricate spells woven around the door. Stella was right. The spells were layered and braided together and would require the equivalent of a magical bomb to deconstruct. There would be no pulling it apart because I couldn’t find an end to tug. The way my mind saw the spells was as if a thousand tiny plastic beads were melted together.

The hair stood up on the back of my neck as I picked up a familiar signature. “Zaleria,” I muttered. “How is this possible? We stopped her. Hades confirmed she was still in the Underworld a few weeks ago.”

“This is fresh,” Stella pointed out. “Perhaps the Zaleria in hell is an imposter. She could have gotten free and glamoured a demon to look like her and take her place.”

My head jerked to the side. “That seems like a lot of work. I wouldn’t put it past Zaleria, but let’s hold that in reserve.”

Stella shrugged. “You want to go inside through the front door and talk to the clerk?”

It was a long shot, but there was a chance the clerk saw something even if she was spelled to forget. “That’s not a bad idea. Would you like to hide under my hair, Finnian? Or ride in my purse?”

“Your purse is fine, thank you.”

I put him in the leather bag as we walked around to the front. I ended my spell so the mundie clerk wouldn't look away from us, and Stella stopped the silence spell, as we entered a cute little store that reeked of Dark magic. It was cloying and made me nauseous.

The young woman behind the counter lifted a broad smile to us. "Welcome to Abode Essentials. How can I help you?"

Stella walked forward with her award-winning smile. "Hi there. I'm Stella and this is my friend Phoebe. We're looking for a missing girl. She was seen in this area and we were hoping we could check your back room and make sure she didn't sneak back there."

Leaving my bestie to deal with the clerk, I used my magical feelers to look for Kaida and any other powers that might be in the place. I came up against the same mass of spells. It was impossible to tell if it was just around the back of the building near the door or over the door leading from the main part to the storage area. There was nothing magical for me to latch onto except the spells. My sensors extended to the clerk to see if she had cast the spells. On the surface she seemed like a mundie and I needed to make sure she wasn't a witch in hiding. I was even more confused when I encountered nothing. She was definitely a mundie which begged the question of who cast those spells.

The clerk's forehead wrinkled. "There's a missing child? I haven't heard anything about it. Why aren't the police looking into it?"

Stella's smile turned brittle. "My husband is the Sheriff and he is looking into it, but so am I."

The woman shook her head. "That's got to make for tense conversations at the dinner table. Well, I can tell you there's no one in the back. I keep the door locked and the alarm on at all times."

"Can we check?" I asked.

"No, you can't. I will make sure there is no one here before I close up in a bit. If there is, I will call the police." The clerk's eyes narrowed on me.

My eyes widened as I realized what her dirty look was about. "You don't believe us." Was she trying to dissuade us from investigating? Could she be involved?

The clerk lifted a shoulder. "It would be on the news if that was the case."

I sighed and bit back the anger I was experiencing. It would do no good to get mad at the woman. "That's because only the rich and famous end up on the nightly news. Your help would be greatly appreciated. We have a lot of

places to still searchl.”

The woman waved to the exit. “You should move along. I assure you I will check my store thoroughly.”

Stella grabbed my arm and pulled me outside as my anger grew. I didn’t know if it was feeling Zaleria’s power or the woman’s refusal, but I was close to snapping at her. I couldn’t blame the woman entirely. It must seem strange that no police had gone to her store looking for Kaida. She was protecting her property. For all she knew we were thieves.

I followed Stella a few feet away from the storefront. It wasn’t long before Stella looked at me with a serious expression. “I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but we need to talk to Hades and Persephone.”

My stomach twisted into a sailor’s knot to match the cursing going on in my head. All I could do was nod in agreement. I had the in-laws from hell, literally, and I was not looking forward to asking them for help.

CHAPTER 6



Finnian climbed out of my bag and perched on the console between Stella and me. “What are you going to do now? It’s suspicious that there were magical locks on the back door and the woman refused to let you look around, right?”

I sucked in a breath as I turned down the street leading to my house. “I’m going to go home and get you situated then invite Hades and Persephone over for dinner so I can ask them a few questions.”

Stella snorted. “You mean you’re going to accuse them of lying to you.”

I glared at my bestie. “I plan on asking them where Zaleria is at the moment. We keep encountering her magic. I want to make sure the witch they have in hell is the right one.”

Finnian’s tiny body was shaking as he looked up at me with terrified eyes. “You’re going to have the God of the Underworld to your house? Perhaps I should get out of here and make my home in the woods. I can forage for food.”

Placing a finger on Finnian’s back, I tried to send soothing vibes to him. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. I know it sounds scary. He’s a frightening man, but he won’t harm you in any way. He’s nice, mostly, when he visits. He actually participated in a family meeting about my mom and had some helpful things to say to her.”

Stella’s hand joined mine. “Phoebe is right. He’s softened even more since her daughter started calling him Grimpops. As long as you don’t try to hurt anyone that he loves, you’re safe.”

“What did I stumble into?” Finnian asked.

Stella and I shared a brief look then burst out laughing. “I have to admit

that our lives are crazy and filled with dangerous cases. Finding Kaida is the latest.” I sobered as I recalled the last case. “My mom was hurt in horrible ways during our last case. We do everything we can to protect those we love. Nimaha is one of the most secure places you could be, and all we are offering you is refuge.”

Finnian shuddered and grabbed my arm when I turned down my driveway. “I thought the spell around that backdoor was strong. Your wards make that pale in comparison.” The brownie seemed to stand taller now. “When I am healed, I want to be of help. I cannot live here without earning my keep. And I cannot tolerate when the powerful hurt those they see as beneath them.”

Stella patted Finnian on the shoulder. “You tried to save Kaida against an unknown enemy. That took great bravery.”

I parked the car and extended my hand for the brownie. Finnian climbed aboard and took a seat with a hiss. Broken ribs were painful as hell. I cupped my hand to support him better as we got out of the car and headed for the side door. I kicked off my shoes before entering the kitchen.

Nana turned around on her stool and looked at us. “He doesn’t look like a young shifter girl. Who did you bring home this time?”

I set Finnian down on the island. “This is Finnian Thistlewood and he was injured while trying to stop Kaida from being kidnapped.”

One of Nana’s eyebrows lifted. “That’s impressive coming from a little thing like you. Where do your kind prefer living? Inside the house? Or in a hollowed-out tree?”

Stella choked out a laugh. “He’s not an elf, Nana.”

Nana rolled her eyes at Stella. “No, he’s a brownie and they are connected to the natural world. The pixies prefer living in their mounds. I wasn’t sure about his kind.”

Finnian smiled up at Nana. “You are correct about brownies. Most of us prefer living among trees and plants so we can use our power to help keep them healthy. I have fallen on hard times and was in between homes when I encountered Kaida.”

Nana leaned on her elbows and bent her snowy white head closer to Finnian. “How does a brownie fall on hard times? Don’t you just live off the land?”

Finnian chuckled then sucked in a breath. “We might make a home in a tree but we have expenses too. I prefer tacos to root vegetables. And I can’t

weave cotton into cloth to make shirts and pants from. To pay for the things I need, I've worked as a gardener, cook, handyman, and personal assistant."

Nana whistled. "Can you repair a leaky toilet? Mine started acting up last week and I've been meaning to call a plumber."

Finnian nodded and clamped his jaw shut as his face paled. I held up a hand. "He broke some ribs, so that's going to need to wait. I can call Clio over to help you."

"No. That expense won't be necessary. You need to focus on inviting Hades over. It would be better to prepare for that. I imagine the God of the Underworld requires a feast when he visits," Finnian said. "All I need to heal is a bed."

Nana's eyebrows went up and she focused on something behind me. "Mollie! You're right on time. We need your assistance."

Mom's forehead creased in confusion as she crossed to the island. "What is it?" She looked from Nana to Finnian as she spoke.

Nana gestured to the brownie. "Finnian here is the latest addition to the family and he has been injured while trying to stop the little shifter from being kidnapped. He needs you to whip him up some soup and infuse it with some healing power. And Phoebe needs help whipping up a special dinner for Hades."

"And Persephone," I added, cutting Finnian off when it looked like he was going to speak. "I need to question them and have to ply them with food."

"Is this because you feel bad about yelling at them for making you get pregnant?" Mom asked before her shoulders drooped and she took a step back. "I can give you some suggestions. As for the soup, I'm afraid I can't do that anymore. We have the healing potions though."

I grabbed Mom's hands and held her close. "You haven't lost your magic. You're still a kitchen witch of the highest order and I could use your help."

Finnian got to his feet and walked over to the edge of the counter closest to Mom and I. "You have as much power as your daughter. It's different. Not something I've ever felt before. Don't you feel it?"

"Can you feel how volatile it is?" Mom asked at the same time I said, "Can you tell where the power comes from?"

Finnian's gaze bounced between the two of us. Sweat dotted his brow and my heart swelled when Mom made a noise that she did any time she was worried about one of us. "You need to sit. Let me get you a lemonade." Mom

poured a glass of the drink, set it next to the brownie, then moved to grab a straw and towel.

Finnian took the corner of the towel and wiped his forehead. “Your power is not volatile but you are. Your emotions and power aren’t interconnected.”

Nana pursed her lips and pinned Mom with a look. “I believe we have been telling you this for days.”

Mom inhaled deeply. “I said I would try and I meant it. That’s why I came downstairs. I knew you’d returned and wanted to find out what you learned. Did you find Kaida?”

Tarja walked into the room as Stella and I explained what happened when we went to the alley and what Finnian had done. By the end of it, Mom was pulling out supplies for a chicken soup and had crafted a bed on the island for the brownie. Tarja and I were discussing why we would be detecting Zaleria’s powers as we watched mom fuss over Finnian. Tarja’s explanation that Zaleria could have spelled the business for some reason seemed to be the most likely explanation, but it didn’t fit entirely.

Mom stood at the stove with her back to the rest of us. “I’m not sure if this will work. Phoebe, make sure this doesn’t turn Dark.”

Nana made an impatient noise. “Mollie, you aren’t going to poison us. Your magic is light. You aren’t a mean or malevolent person.”

Mom turned around and glared at Nana. “I am not the same person I was before that witch took me. You have no idea what I am now.”

Nana got up and crossed the kitchen and cupped Mom’s face. “I know precisely who you are. You are my daughter and no matter what some insane woman did, you still have the biggest heart of anyone I know. Your magic was flowing from you the entire time you were cooking. It’s full of positive thoughts centered around healing and love.”

Tarja wound around Mom’s legs. “*She’s right, Mollie. I could see it flowing from you. Kitchen witches infuse their food and potions naturally.*”

That was news to me, but a relief to know. “You’re doing great, Mom. I believe in you. Can you help me make a spicy feast for the devil? I sent him a message asking that he and Persephone come over for dinner. I need to question them and, after the fiasco of me yelling at them for the pregnancy thing, I don’t want to piss them off.” Yeah, Stella had a point. I might be playing on Mom’s sympathy for me, but there was a risk.

Mom’s eyes were filled with tears as she nodded and Nana released her face. “What did you have in mind? There’s some mahi in the freezer that will

defrost quickly. We could do blackened fish along with Hellfire pasta.”

“I’d be happy to taste test that,” Finnian called out.

We separated and all looked at the brownie at the same time. Mom nodded to him. “I’ll take you up on it. I’ve never made the recipe I have in mind for the Hellfire sauce.” I wanted to fist pump the air when I heard her say that. Mom was back. Well, for the most part.

“What are you thinking for it?” I asked as I moved to the pantry.

Mom, bent over the freezer drawer, tilted her head. “I’m thinking a tomato-based sauce with red pepper flakes and lots of garlic. We can cook the mafalda pasta Nina likes so much.”

We set about cooking together while Tarja and Nana watched. Stella had stuck around to back me up, so her girls decided to bring over a pizza to share with Nina. It was comforting to be doing something as simple as making a meal with Mom already. A day ago, I worried we would never do this again. When Mythia came in to start dinner, I thought the pixie was going to cry over the sound of Mom’s laughter.

Aidon arrived as the garlic bread was coming out of the oven. His mother was with him and Hades arrived a few seconds later as I was kissing my mate. I missed him. Aidon ran a hand over my stomach as I asked his mom what kind of wine she would like.

Persephone’s focus was on Aidon’s hand and my belly. “I have a nineteen seventy Sauternes.” She snapped her fingers and three bottles of wine appeared on the island.

Mythia picked up a bottle and flew it to the counter top bottle opener. “I will open these and bring them in. Go have a seat in the dining room, dinner will be served soon.”

“Why did you call us for dinner? Was it to see how well Mollie is doing now?” Hades asked. “You’re welcome for that.”

I grabbed Aidon’s hand under the table. “We talked about this before, but I need proof that Zaleria is still in your hold in the Underworld. I found her magical signature at the scene where Kaida went missing. It’s too much of a coincidence that we keep feeling her. She’s a wily witch. She could have glamoured someone to look like her and switched places at some point.”

The room went silent and Hades’s eyes turned all black as he looked at me. The air crackled with black electricity. Aidon’s father suddenly slammed his hand down on the tabletop making it crack and break into two pieces. “Are you accusing me of lying to you last week when I went to check on

her?”

I backed up as my hands flew to my abdomen instinctively. “I am saying I need to verify that the witch you have is her. Because if not, someone is using her powers to kidnap children and I can’t have that.”

Aidon laid his hand above mine. “Watch it, Father. There are vulnerable people in this house. Your grandkids are among them.”

To my surprise, it was Persephone that got through to Hades. “Phoebe is not challenging you, love. We can use one of my pearls to show her the witch.”

Hades cracked his neck and the electricity vanished as quickly as it appeared. “As usual, you are right. I apologize, Phoebe. I did not mean to scare you. I tend to react first and ask questions later.”

Tell me about it. I was lucky to still be alive. Shaking off the trembling in my limbs, I inclined my head. “I could have explained more but I got nervous and just blurted it out. I am not insinuating you did or didn’t do anything. I just don’t trust a bitch resourceful enough to get ahold of venom to kill a god.”

“As you should,” Tarja interjected. “*Being wary and keeping your eyes open is the only way you will survive in this world.*”

Persephone waved her hand, fixing the table so she could place a pearl in the middle of it. She chanted something in ancient Greek then waved her hand over the object on the table. It began to shimmer as mist oozed up from the orb to create a screen of sorts above it.

Images flickered until a large flame filled the mist. Persephone put two fingers above the image and squeezed them together as if she were zooming out on a phone. The fire receded and a group of men that had more dirt on their bodies than there was on the floor became visible. They were standing above a woman who was curled in a ball. She was covered in cuts and bruises. She turned her face and my stomach rolled.

There was no mistaking that it was Zaleria. I focused on her grimy black hair, sunken eyes and crooked nose. Her bones poked through her skin and the black sack she wore barely hung on her body.

“Can I cast a spell to reveal her true Identity to ensure she didn’t fool me?” I asked Persephone.

My mother-in-law extended her hand. “As long as you’re touching me, your magic will travel through my pearl. Be very specific in what you say so there is no chance of the words getting warped.”

I winced as I watched one of the men grab a poker from the fire and press the white-hot end to Zaleria's side. Her mouth opened and I imagined she was screaming bloody murder. That made the demons laugh and continue their torture. When a second one came at her with a glowing weapon, Zaleria started saying something. The first demon yelped and swung the poker at the witch. I wasn't sure if she cast a spell on him or not.

I couldn't get upset over the karma she reaped so I closed my eyes as I clasped Persephone's hand. Once I had my intent clear, I cast my spell and opened my eyes. I watched as a teal light surrounded Zaleria. The witch's head swiveled around and she tried to push herself up.

"It's her," I said when nothing else happened.

"See? The fire demons are keeping her secure. They're not mindless demons driven by the need for destruction and violence so she can't provoke them to make them lose their focus. Most live and function as a part of your society. I thought their particular talent would help break her."

My mind was whirling with this information. I looked up and met Aidon's gaze. "Who the hell could possibly be behind this kidnapping?"

Mom's gaze landed on me. "It could be anyone. You can't be sure Zaleria's Objects of Power weren't stolen before her home was secured, right?"

"Right," Stella said.

CHAPTER 7



The thought made my blood run cold. “There is no way we can know what she had in that hellhole she called a home. There could be countless artifacts out there. Do I just dismiss it when I come across her power? It’s the only piece of evidence I have right now. I was hoping it was the key to finding Kaida.”

Aidon grabbed my hands. “You can’t stress about that. It’s the likeliest explanation for feeling her magic so much lately.”

Nana frowned and jabbed a finger in our direction as Mom brought dinner to the table. “You should make that new Relic Keeper aware of this issue. Her powers are designed to locate and secure Objects of Power, so it makes sense to get her on the job.”

I winced as I thought about what I knew about Nylah. “She has a life and a job. I can’t expect her to drop everything and go galivanting around the world in search of Zaleria’s Dark relics.”

Hades scowled at me. “This is far more important than anything she could possibly be doing. These items pose a threat to my grandchildren.”

I inhaled, trying to tamp down my annoyance. He was a self-centered god. That was nothing new. “We cannot run around treating people as if they are here to do our bidding. Nylah’s struggling with being dumped in the deep end by Artemis as it is. I am not going to make it any worse for her. It’s enough that she will be there to secure any items we find.”

Stella nodded as she filled her plate with fish and pasta. “We just need to think this through. We thought the witch was the culprit because she was in the house and fought me. There’s a chance she wasn’t working alone.”

Mom set a plate in front of Tarja and her own familiar Binx, who were

looking from Stella to me. *“Zaleria likely had a large following in addition to her relics,”* Tarja said. *“Go back to what you have learned about the Dark witch over the last week. And do not forget that you still need to scry for Kaida. The delay in doing so will give the kidnapper false hope that they have gotten away with their actions. Before you took over, the shifters wouldn’t have called so early in a case. I loved Hattie, as did the magical world. However, she lacked a certain quality that you possess.”*

Persephone paused with her fork midway to her mouth as her brow furrowed. *“It’s your humanity. It makes you see life in a way few in our world would even consider because the violence desensitizes us. There is too much violence and that causes a person to become jaded.”*

Tarja’s green eyes focused on Persephone. *“You are correct, Goddess. Hattie handled cases of all kinds. Yet, she was never the go to solution for most people. She also never bothered fostering a deeper relationship with others. Nor did she help so many like Phoebe. What Myrna did to her made her distrustful. Which is probably why she didn’t offer sanctuary to as many as you have, Phoebe. The pixies and others living in the woods were already here when she was born.”*

I’d learned enough about Hattie from others to know what Tarja was talking about. And while that was fascinating, I didn’t know how it helped us and I said as much.

Tarja’s scratchy laughter reached my ears. *“We might have gotten slightly off track there, but the point I was trying to make was that you have contacts and friends all over the globe –ones that you can use to discover as much as possible about what was taken from Zaleria’s house. And don’t forget about her daughter. She could be picking up where her mother left off.”*

Aidon bent a fork he was holding in his hand. *“Do you think she could have been working with that witch that took Mollie?”*

I dropped the piece of fish on my plate and it landed on top of my pasta. Stella and I exchanged a glance. *“Honestly, I don’t know. She was there in the basement where the two of us were being held. However, I don’t get the impression she was too involved.”*

“Regardless, she wouldn’t be the reason they keep feeling Zaleria’s magic,” Tarja interjected as she nibbled on the fish on her plate. *“Each witch has a signature all her own. Nina’s magic doesn’t feel like Phoebe’s just like Mollie’s doesn’t resemble Amelia’s.”*

I sucked in a breath and took a bite of food then groaned at the flavor.

“This is so good, Mom. Thank you for cooking. And the recipe for the pasta sauce is brilliant. We confirmed Zaleria didn’t pull one over on us which means someone must be using her Objects of Power. The question, is how we can know if anything went missing before Mohan secured the house? It took him some time to arrive on scene.”

Stella took a sip of wine, then gestured with her cup. “Rather than going back around in that circle, we start there. With Mohan. We know the paranormal police secured the house and removed everything from there after they arrived.”

Mom nodded as she chewed the bite she’d stuffed in her mouth. “Mohan would know if anything was stolen from them. Give him a call.”

I was up and running into the kitchen before she finished talking. I dialed his number and turned to watch Mom, Nana, and Stella standing in the archway between the kitchen and dining room.

“Please tell me there isn’t another mess to clean up. I’m looking for a child that went missing at a Little League game in Kansas.”

My blood ran cold as I considered his words. “Who went missing? Was it a shifter?”

“It was a ten-year-old warlock. The mother was in the bathroom when he was taken and none of the mundies saw him leave.”

“Are you saying he was taken in the middle of the day during an activity attended by mundies?” I asked as I started to pace. Whoever had done that had some pretty big balls to act in such a setting. Little League games were attended by a lot of people that should have seen a child vanish.

“Pretty much. It was before the game began and about a third of the team was there. It seems the boy also went to the bathroom and was taken from there. Is this what you called about?”

I sucked in a breath and stopped pacing. “No, it’s not. We’ve had a kidnapping here in Camden. Kaida was taken this afternoon when she was walking from the local school to meet her mom nearby. A brownie witnessed an invisible magic user take her. When Stella and I investigated the scene, we encountered remnants of Zaleria’s magic and I was calling to find out if any of the artifacts you took from her house have gone missing.”

My mind was going over an alternative method for how we could handle scenes if the paranormal police couldn’t be trusted. It was ridiculous to even consider. I didn’t have the time or energy to take on another task and neither did my family. There was no proof anything went missing while in their

control.

We should consider how we could set them up to work more efficiently and safer. I was a problem solver and couldn't leave the thoughts until I had a way to deal with what I saw as a potential problem.

Mohan was still spitting several curses when I shook myself out of my thoughts. "Two kidnappings is too much of a coincidence. Are you certain Zaleria isn't back on Earth?"

The breaking of a glass in the dining room told me that Hades had likely heard the question. "Hades and Persephone are here and have provided definitive proof that Zaleria is in the Underworld being tortured by some fire demons. And I would agree with you on the kidnappings. There could be more than one person involved. We have talked about Zaleria's followers or her daughter continuing her work."

"Thatcher went missing two days ago on Saturday. I picked up a weak magical signature from the park. His mother has been scrying for her son ever since he was taken. I used an Echo Elixir in the men's restroom and didn't get anything aside from the boy using the facilities. Did you gather the residual signature from the scene?"

I looked at Stella with a frown. "Umm, no. How would we go about doing that?"

Mohan blew out a breath. "You would use a Nexus Collector. I forget how much you don't know. You're always so competent and handle the toughest cases like an expert. Because I know you're going to ask. It's impossible for me to think of everything you should be told, but it's important that you understand we have modeled many of our evidence collection devices after what mundie cops use. It is vital that we gather all evidence which has required our R&D department to come up with magical artifacts to help us with that. When you encounter something that you want to collect, call me and I can help with the supplies."

That wasn't very efficient, but him spending days trying to give me everything I might need wouldn't be either. Nana nodded her head. "Once we understand what Phoebe needs, Mollie and I can work on creating them for her."

I gaped at Nana over her offer. It was audacious and didn't seem possible, but when I saw my mother nod her head, I kept my mouth shut. "We will cross those bridges when we get there. We need to share information about these kidnappings. Aside from that, do you know if something was stolen

from you?”

“Nothing was taken from our holding warehouse in Charleston. I don’t know about after they were moved from there to permanent storage. I’m going to have to investigate this and call you back. It’s not something I monitor unless there is a problem.”

“If you haven’t been notified of a theft, that means there hasn’t been one, right?” Mom asked.

“Typically that’s the case but, given the bullshit that’s been happening lately, I’m not ruling anything out. I will be in touch.”

Mohan hung up the phone before anyone could respond. I put mine down and headed back to the dining room to finish my dinner. “Are you going to Kansas to look into Thatcher’s disappearance?” Aidon asked when I sat down.

The pasta heated my mouth as I considered his question. “Not unless I have to. Mohan has been looking into it and I need to stay focused on Kaida. I can’t spread myself so thin that I lose sleep. Pregnancy is hard enough. I’ve got babies I have to consider.”

Aidon smiled and ran his hand over my stomach. Persephone’s smile was grand as she waved a hand in front of her. “Sleep is vital for pregnant women. To make your life easier, I will procure you some of those Nexus Collectors.”

I froze with my fork inside my mouth with the food still on it. What the hell just happened? “Umm, thank you?” I said around the pasta after pulling my utensil from between my lips. “What made you offer that?”

Persephone’s smile had yet to diminish. “I want to do anything I can to help make your pregnancy easier.”

“You could find Kaida for her,” Nana said as she gulped her wine.

“Or you could tell her she hasn’t been infected by that witch that changed me so she doesn’t have to worry about that too,” Mom added. She gasped, one of her hands flying to her mouth when Aidon started growling.

Aidon leaned over, pinning me with his body. “What is she talking about?”

My gaze dropped as the bite I’d just swallowed got stuck in my throat. Coughing, I grabbed my water to get the fish to swim down my gullet. I wanted to avoid this conversation but I couldn’t, so I told them about the pinprick I found after fighting the witch and the symptoms I had been having.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” Aidon demanded.

I opened my mouth then closed it several times before I was able to form words. “I wasn’t sure it meant anything and I didn’t want to worry you.”

Aidon’s jaw clenched so tight I heard something crack. “You’d rather go through this alone? I am here to help you, Queenie.”

Hades got up and moved around the table to crouch next to me. I scooted back when his hands came up to the sides of my head. I hit the wall as they moved down my sides.

“Father. That’s not necessary,” Aidon told his dad.

Hades made a noise that sounded like the rattle of a snake’s tail. “I beg to differ, son. There is foreign DNA in her bloodstream. However, her magic and the babies are working together to rid it from her system. I doubt she would have been able to get rid of it on her own. With the babies helping, I have faith it will be purged.”

I leaped to my feet and my stomach bumped into Hades’s face. I stepped around him as my heart hammered in my chest. Aidon’s fury scalded me as he joined me. “How did that bitch manage to inject you? That isn’t something you would miss.”

Persephone’s hand landed on Aidon’s shoulder. “Try to calm down, Aidon. She is lucky I intervened when I did and ensured she would get pregnant. Your father is right. The babies are as powerful as gods and they will save Phoebe from her mother’s fate.”

A growl left my mouth as I pushed my way around Aidon. “You’d better watch how you talk about my mother. What happened to her doesn’t make her less than she was before. In fact, she’s even better now. She is a vital part of this family and my rock. I cannot get through life without her and if anyone will help me through this pregnancy it’s her. I don’t need you to get shit for me. My family and I have it handled. You can return to the Underworld. We don’t want you here.” I knew I was being harsh but what she had said hit a nerve. It was precisely what my mother worried about.

Familiar arms wrapped around me from the side. “You don’t need to stick up for me, Phoebe. While I appreciate it, I’m a big girl.”

Tears filled my eyes. “What she said was awful and showed how prejudiced she is about people who are different. I don’t want you to think you’re a danger to us because you aren’t.”

Mom smiled at me. “I’m not so sure about that, but I’m not going back into my room. I need to learn more about what I am now so I can manage it better. I regret shutting all of you out but I feared I was a risk to everyone

around me and I didn't want to chance hurting anyone. What's important here is that you aren't a risk to anyone either. I know that's what you've been worried about as well."

Hades pushed my plate away and sat on the edge of the table then licked the sauce off his hand. "My compliments to the chef. That was delicious. Is there any way I can persuade you to come cook for us, Mollie?" Mom shook her head as a flush crept up her cheeks. Hades sighed. "I figured as much. We will have to settle for invitations to dinner. Back to the matter at hand. You are at risk, Phoebe, because you are a wildcard. That's not the only reason. You also have Dark elements throughout your body. They've been trying to take hold for a while now. You've been able to hold them off but your system is diverting much of its power to creating life."

Nana sat forward with a scowl for the God of the Underworld. "When we want to hear from the peanut gallery, we will ask you." I loved that Nana wasn't afraid of my father-in-law. Her bravery usually inspired me. This time Hades's words hit too close to home.

My phone rang after Hades dropped his bomb. I got up and went into the kitchen to answer it. "That could be about Kaida," I said as I left the room. While I hoped it was, I needed a break from the conversation. My heart sped up when I saw Mohan's name.

I pressed the green button and put it on speaker. "Tell me you have news, Mohan."

Mom's eyes widened as she came to a stop next to me. There was a red tint to her eyes now, but she was becoming more and more like herself as time passed. It eased the tension binding my chest a little more. She was going to be okay.

"You aren't going to like it. There was a break-in at our main storage facility."

Mom scowled. "Why didn't you tell us earlier?"

Mohan sighed. "I didn't know about it. I would have looked into it more if I had."

I clasped Mom's hand. "I know you would have. What was missing? And where is this facility located? Who knows about it?"

"The police department has one location for everyone to use. It is located in a secret location on an uninhabited island that is supposed to be warded and impossible to reach. Staff told me they found several items missing from Zaleria's possessions but I hadn't gone to check the inventory yet. I wanted

to let you know right away given our earlier conversation.”

And boom goes the dynamite. Talk about complications. There were an unknown number of OOPs out there for witches to use as they carried out their dastardly deeds. “Mohan, there is no way for your department to secure Objects of Power. You might not be aware of this but we now have a Relic Keeper. Her name is Nylah Gilbert. You can contract and pay her to keep powerful items while you continue storing the rest on your island.”

“That would have been nice to know a week ago,” he replied.

“Tell that to the missing girl. Send me the list of what’s missing when you have it.” I hung up and fought the nausea making me want to throw up. Kaida might never have been kidnapped if the magical world had their shit together. Unfortunately, I was part of that system and as much to blame. I should have informed Mohan when I learned about Nylah. No one communicated with one another. That needed to change right away.

CHAPTER 8



Mom handed me a cup of tea and gestured to the island. “Sit down, sweetheart. You need to take a moment. I can hear how fast your heart is beating and know you’re beating yourself up about the missing artifacts.”

My gaze skittered to the dining room. I should go in there to help clean up then send Hades and Persephone home. Mom grabbed my shoulders. “You don’t have to go back in there. They know what you’re dealing with and should be ensuring you are able to take a moment. If they get bent out of shape for you not seeing to their needs, they can fuck right off.”

I gasped then started giggling. “Mom! You never curse like that.”

Mom smiled as she released me. I felt the tension in her hands before she lost contact with me. She was shaken by what she’d said. “There comes a point when you get tired of catering to what everyone thinks you should be. I’m not only Gammy. I’m a woman who has an opinion, gets pissed, and has sexual needs. None of which I should repress.” Binx walked into the kitchen at that moment and went to Mom’s side.

Nana walked in and wrapped Mom in a hug. “It’s about time you found your true voice. I knew you had to have picked up a few things from me.”

I rolled my eyes at the two women I loved most in the world. “I should at least help clean up. You cooked.”

Nana pshawed and took a seat next to me. “Not necessary. We don’t cater to gods and goddesses in this house. They can snap their damn fingers and have everything cleaned and put away. Mollie is right. The bags under your eyes look like someone punched you.”

Aidon came in and stood behind me, massaging my shoulders. “The

dishes are taken care of. Tarja is talking to my parents before they leave.”

Stella and Selene came in carrying their glasses of wine. Selene had been quiet the entire evening. “What do you think our next steps should be?” I asked Selene.

Selene tilted her head to the side. “I’m glad you asked. I’ve been thinking about that very question while you guys discussed other issues. It’s why I was so quiet. I think you should go to that *Library* Fiona told you about then return to scry for Kaida.”

My head jerked and I gaped at the woman. “Why would you suggest I visit a library when a child is missing?” Had we been wrong about Selene all along? Was she really good at hiding her sociopathic tendencies?

Selene crossed her arms over her chest as if she was defending against the venom she heard in my voice. “I’m not saying that lightly. You have so much going on, and your mind and heart are pulled in a dozen different directions. That makes it difficult to focus. And you need to be focused to scry. And for the record, I am not convinced scrying will yield anything. Given that, I figured it was better if you got some answers that might help Mom before you revisited Kaida’s case.”

Hades paused as he was walking past Selene. “You’re a wise woman. I was planning on having Melinoe scour the library at home for any information on Mollie’s condition as a peace offering.”

Selene’s eyes widened as she nodded her head. Aidon paused his massaging and gestured for his parents to leave. “We will talk to you later. Call if you find any information that is helpful.”

Selene watched them go then blew out a breath. “He scares the hell out of me.”

Stella clapped her on the shoulder. “Same here. It can’t hurt to take a trip to the *Library*. How do we get there?”

My phone rang before I could reply. I saw Sullivan’s name on the screen and my gut twisted with guilt. “Hey Sullivan.”

“Phoebe. I’m calling to find out if you have an update for me. Kaida has been missing for over eight hours.”

I took a deep breath. “We found the location she was taken from. There was a brownie in the alley that was injured trying to stop an invisible being from taking Kaida.”

A growl rumbled through the cell’s speaker. “Where was she taken from?”

“It was behind a home goods store. The brownie saw Kaida dragged into the store. We weren’t able to access the back of the place, but we spoke to the clerk inside who was mundie. Spells were woven over the backdoor. We plan on going back to do a thorough scan of the store after we scry for Kaida.”

Sullivan’s anger practically burned through the phone. “Owen and I will clear the store. He needs to do something before his wolf loses his shit.”

I met Stella’s wide eyes. She lifted a shoulder. “That would be helpful for us. However, you need to be aware that we encountered wards so intricate that any attempt to break them would have blown up the building and maybe even the entire block.”

“That’s not going to stop her father and me. We will let you know what we encounter,” Sullivan said.

“You should know another child was kidnapped in Kansas. This one was a warlock and he was taken the day before yesterday. Mohan is investigating that one. Oh, and he is looking into another lead for me. I picked up a magical signature that shouldn’t have been in the alley. I verified a few minutes ago that Zaleria is still in the Underworld being tortured by fire demons.”

“Good,” Sullivan growled. “I will let her parents know that you will be using your magic to look for her while we do the physical search.”

My gut twisted into a knot as I struggled with going to the *Library* before scrying. It felt like I should admit that to him, but it would just piss him off. Selene was right that I needed to clear one thing off my plate or my attention would continue to be fractured. “Let me know what you find and we will update you as soon as we have something.”

Nina, Charley, and Reece came bounding into the kitchen with an empty pizza box. “Did Grim pops and Flowergram leave?”

I waved to the back door. “They sure did. Stella and I are going to visit a mystical library. Can you help Selene look for information on anything related to Zaleria. I want to see if there is anything on the internet about Objects of Power she might have created. Hopefully she or her daughter bragged and there will be something to compare to what Mohan hopefully comes back with.” Most OOPs were created by gods and goddesses, but witches could make them as well. They just weren’t as powerful.

Charley bounced on her feet and her blonde ponytail bounced. “Can we help too? We’ve never been able to work the cases.”

Stella gave her daughters a stern look. “You aren’t getting paid for it if

that's what you're hoping for."

Charley gave her mom a thoughtful look. "Since when did you start supporting slave labor? I remember you lobbying for the rights of children all over the world."

Reece snorted and rolled her eyes. "That's not going to work. Mom's smarter than that."

"It might have if you hadn't said anything," Charley complained.

Nina laughed and nudged Charley's shoulder. "My mom will pay us."

Nana nodded her head. "She pays well too. I make more from her than I did when I worked at the post office years ago."

"That's because you retired from there in the late eighties. Minimum wage is now three times what it used to be," I said as I finished sending a text to Fiona asking for the way to get to the *Library*.

"Can I go with you?" Mom asked as my phone pinged with a message. "This is about me and I want to be there."

Binx jumped onto the counter and glared at Mom. "*I'm not sure this is a good idea. You're struggling with your control.*"

Mom stroked the top of her familiar's head. "I allowed my emotions to impact me. You have helped me gain control over those. I need to be involved in solving this. It will give me back some of the power she stole."

My eyes widened as I was momentarily stunned by her request. "Of course." I should have thought to ask her to join us. I was treating her worse than Persephone had. "I didn't mean to leave you out. I guess I got used to you being holed up in your room. That reminds me." I looked around for my familiar. "Can you come with us, Tarja? Binx? You will likely be an asset in our search, Tarja."

"No, familiars can't go there. And I wish you wouldn't go either," Tarja said. "*Familiars cannot travel to the pocket realm with their witch, which leaves them unprotected. You didn't need to ask Fiona. I could have told you what you needed to do.*"

I narrowed my eyes on my familiar. "How do we get there?"

Tarja leapt onto the island and sat next to Binx with her gaze trained on me. "*There are several steps. The first is that you need to make a potion that you drink. Cognition elixir is a powerful potion that unlocks the secrets of the Library and allows the drinker to travel there.*"

I pointed to Nina and Stella's girls. "Can you go down to the Sanctum and get the cauldron?" I refocused on Tarja when the girls took off. "What

herbs do we need?"

"I will let the girls know which ones to collect. The blend of rare herbs and spices in the recipe is guarded closely by those who possess it, so I will share that with Mollie when the time comes. You're lucky that Hattie collected these herbs or you wouldn't be able to make it without visiting a magical market."

I put my hand on Tarja's back knowing her curt tone was due to her concern. "I know you aren't happy about us going. We will be careful."

Tarja dipped her regal head. *"I know you will. I worry for your safety. It's my job. You must go with something that contains knowledge. They prefer it in the form of a rare book, manuscript, or similar artifact. This tribute will be added to the Library's collection, so the knowledge contained within it will be shared with future visitors."*

I'd known about that because Fiona told me they'd taken something collected from Hades's library. "Fiona used a book that Thanos took from your father's library," I told Aidon

That made him laugh. "I think I have something for you. I'll be right back." He pressed his lips to mine and darted out the door.

"Next there are tests that are designed to get at your wisdom. Don't get complacent with that. The challenges have cost previous Pleiades limbs. They've also removed the ability to cast protection spells. Most return battered and bruised and in need of healing as they are often physically demanding."

I cringed and rubbed a hand over my stomach. My mom shook her head as Nina and the others returned with the ingredients. "We don't have to go, Phoebe."

I pointed to the large pot the girls put on the stove. "We are going. You make the potion so it's ready when we are. And Nina, call Clio and make sure she is here when we return." With our luck we would need healing.

"If you're sure," Mom replied.

"I'm sure. But you don't have to go, Stella."

Stella's gaze drifted to her two girls. "Of course, I'm going. Our juju is better together. We can't separate on something so important. Can we get an idea of what we might face so we can study up?"

Tarja shook her head from side to side. *"The librarians decide on the test and the tribute and it is not something to be taken lightly. One thing to keep in mind is that they are not omniscient beings. They have no central database*

where the information is stored. And that makes it hard to search for something. You could spend years looking for an answer you may never receive.”

Mom stiffened as she added herbs to the pot and stirred the mixture. “That’s not ominous at all.”

“*Maybe now you understand why I don’t want you to go,*” Tarja said.

“We have to try.” We didn’t have years to search. I hoped the librarians would have something to share with us.

Aidon returned carrying a large book covered in leather. I approached him and took the thing. The title was written in worn gold on the cover. I had no idea what it said because it was in a foreign language. “What is it?”

“It’s ‘Shadows of the Underworld’. A tome that delves into the hidden aspects of the Underworld. This holds a collection of stories, myths and historical accounts. Each one reveals secrets, legends and profound experiences of creatures in my father’s realm.”

My heart skipped a beat. This was a book of secrets from Hades’s world. “He isn’t going to like that this was given away.”

Aidon pulled me into his arms, the book pressing into my stomach. “There are two copies. If he finds out, I will let him know it was necessary to save his grandchildren. Don’t worry about taking it.” I accepted the gift. I had far more to worry about in going to the *Library*.

Mom lifted a ladle. “The potion is ready.”

“*Do not challenge the knowlharvesters. They are the Librarians there. You do not want to be banned like Luciana, Fiona, Violet, and Aislinn. Be respectful and treat the books with care.*” Tarja’s words echoed in my head.

Stowing the book in my crossbody bag, I accepted the cup of potion from Mom and lifted it in the air before I drank it. I shuddered, barely keeping myself from throwing up. “That’s nasty.” It tasted like I had just thrown back water from a pot that had boiled old books. The potion smelled as musty as it tasted.

Nina leaned over the cauldron. “It smells like dust, leather, and parchment.”

“Tastes like it too,” Mom said.

I reached out for Stella and Mom. Electricity sizzled out of me when I grabbed Stella and Mom’s hands. No one said anything about chanting a spell, but I focused on traveling to Omniscientia anyway. Between one second and the next it felt like I was being ripped apart. I wanted to take my

hands away from Mom and Stella to cover my babies, but I didn't. Doing so could leave them floating in the ether. Being torn between the safety of my unborn babies and two women I loved ripped me in two.

As I debated how to protect everyone, I struggled to catch my breath as a magical wind picked up around us, stealing the oxygen from the air. I regretted the big meal I'd just eaten. Fiona had told me travel there had ripped her apart, so I braced myself, asking the powers that be to keep my babies safe. That's all that mattered to me as I kept a hold of Mom and Stella.

My heart pounded a million miles a second when I lost my hold on Mom and Stella. A warmth encompassed me and purple light filled my vision. I was floating for several seconds as I wondered if I was going to remain suspended in this liminal space between realms for long.

As suddenly as it had started the sensation of traveling through space and time vanished. As was par for the course lately, my stomach revolted. The book hit my hip as I bent over and battled nausea as if my life depended on it. There was no way I could throw up in a place that held valuable books. Swallowing convulsively, I ran a hand over my stomach. There was a flutter beneath my palm that pulled my focus away from the nausea and replaced it with awe. It was far too early for the movement to be my babies, but I was going to believe it was.

With that in mind, I stood up and looked around Omniscientia. The first thing that hit me was how vast and sprawling the *Library of All Knowledge* actually was. The glow of ancient lamps cast a warm, golden light on the shelves and the books. It was what you'd expect with seemingly endless shelves filled with books, manuscripts, scrolls, and other ancient artifacts.

The scent of old parchment and the faint aroma of ancient incense surrounded me. I craned my neck in amazement, taking in the huge room. When I saw the archways, with a topic engraved above each, I realized *The Library* housed many rooms.

Mom moved closer to me, running a hand over one of the wood shelves that was polished to a high shine. "I've never seen anything more beautiful."

I nodded in agreement. "It's stunning."

"This place is a work of art," Stella said reverentially. "I wonder where the knowlharvesters are. I thought they would be here with their test."

I shuddered as I took in the wondrous architecture. The towering stacks of books were only the tip of the iceberg. There were also elaborate murals. I had no idea what they depicted. There were battles, celebrations, coronations,

and more.

Stella walked over and touched a finger to the wall where there were carvings. There were dragons, unicorns, and pixies. “This was done by hand. I can’t imagine how long it took.”

My skin prickled as a breeze blew through the area. My gaze followed the magic to my left. My jaw dropped as I got my first sight of a knowlharvester. It gave off a powerful aura that screamed ancient wisdom.

I dipped my head when I met its glowing eyes. The golden light matched the light cast by the ancient lamps. Was it a sign of their connection to the *Library*. “Hello. My name is Phoebe and this is my mother, Mollie, and my best friend Stella.”

The knowlharvester was joined by several more that looked like him. All had the glowing eyes and bald heads that were covered in intricate patterns and symbols. The mystical tattoos traveled down the sides of their necks too. They stared at us without saying anything.

Stella leaned over to me and pressed her mouth to my ear. “We need to get a mystical tattoo to mark our power. I’ve always wanted a best friend I could get one with since I don’t have any sisters.”

I nodded then nudged her with my shoulder and remained focused on the knowlharvesters. “Do they speak?” Mom asked.

I held my hands out in front of me. “We are here seeking information on experiments conducted on magical beings. My mother was a victim of a Dark witch who altered her genetic makeup to include characteristics of a witch, vampire, and shifter. We need to know what that means for her.”

The knowlharvesters looked human. The biggest difference was their elongated limbs and fingers. I almost laughed as I pictured it reaching for something from several feet away. It would look like vines that had come alive. To keep from chuckling, I focused on the deep, rich color of their skin. It reminded me of something I couldn’t place. When my eyes landed on a book behind them, it hit me. It was the shade of the pages of an old book.

A voice popped into my head telling me they wouldn’t respond until they were addressed properly. It sounded a little like Hattie. Trusting that, I removed the book from my bag and repeated the words as they were told to me. “Greetings, noble Knowlharvester, keeper of the keys to the fount of knowledge. We seek your wisdom and guidance in our quest for understanding. May the light of your knowledge guide us through the shadows of ignorance and illuminate the path to enlightenment.”

That got through to them. The knowlharvester in the front extended a hand, making the sleeve of his cream-colored robe slip back. His arms were covered in more patterns and symbols. They felt powerful and made me agree with Stella. We needed to get mystical tattoos. Matching ones.

The knowlharvester gestured down his torso. “The insignia represent the knowledge I have accumulated.” Its voice was deep and resonant. “What have you brought for the *Library*?”

I extended the book Aidon had given me. “It’s one of two copies containing myths, and historical accounts, of the secrets and legends of the Underworld. We are also prepared to face your trials.” I smiled. “Forgive me if I seem pushy, but time is of the essence for us. It is imperative that we find information to help Mom so we can return quickly. We need to find a shifter child that was kidnapped by an invisible witch.”

The rustle of the cloaks swished as the knowlharvester turned and had a silent conversation with his colleagues. I reached for Mom and Stella and clutched their hands. I couldn’t afford to lose an appendage or power in my condition, but I would face what I needed to in order to help Mom.

The head knowlharvester turned around a few seconds later. “You present a new situation for us, Pleiades. You are pregnant with gods yet you put yourself on the line for others. The reverence you have for the knowledge you seek comes through clearly as does your deep love and devotion for those in your life. Because of your unborn children, your mother’s unique situation, and the missing girl, we will waive the trials this time. We have questions that will determine if there is anything here that can help.”

The wind in the room picked up and blew my hair into my eyes. I pushed it out and watched as dozens more knowlharvesters filed in behind the others. I spun around when I heard a noise behind us. They filled the aisles all around us. My heart started racing as I prayed that his words weren’t the start of the test and they were going to attack. I didn’t want to get blood on anything or damage irreplicable books.

The head knowlharvester shifted his gaze to Mom. “Mollie Dieudonne. We need to understand what you are experiencing. Tell us what you are going through.”

Mom stepped forward. “It has been awful. Initially nothing I did was under my control. I ripped out a woman’s throat when instructed to by the witch that experimented on me. There was only a soul deep hunger and pain while I was in her clutches. And ever since my daughter rescued me, I have

been unstable. My mind is a violent mess. I constantly hear growling. I crave blood and my magic sparks in my chest like a flare.”

They had their silent conversation again and a few minutes later the head guy gave Mom a solemn look. “I sense your desire to have this undone. What we know is that this magic cannot be undone, and we have no knowledge here about your condition. Do not despair. We can find the magic necessary to blend your three parts into one whole. That will remove the strife you are experiencing.”

“Can you tell us who is behind the experiments and disappearances?” Stella asked.

“We will not know who did this, or the motivations, until they are caught and we are informed. We get information as it occurs from the connections we have developed in your world.” Tarja mentioned they weren’t omniscient.

“Why would you help find information for Mom?” That same instinct that guided me earlier was telling me that was not how this typically worked.

The knowlharvester’s eyes glowed with what seemed like excitement. “She is something that has never happened before and can provide us with a wealth of new knowledge. We have a request in exchange.”

“What do you want?” I asked and held my breath.

“We would like to form a connection to you, Mollie, so that we can document your journey.”

Mom nodded as tears glistened in her eyes. “I’ll do it. It can’t be as painful as what I’ve already gone through.”

My heart went out to Mom as she walked forward. I wanted to do this for her. She’d been through enough already. I admired her courage as she stood fast. The knowlharvesters around us extended their hands, palms facing outward. They created a web of shimmering energy threads. All but the head knowlharvester closed their eyes.

The head guy placed his hands on Mom’s head. “This will not hurt. I promise you that.” Mom nodded in acknowledgement and the head guy said a spell of sorts.

“Enigma of mysteries, veiled and profound.

Be present with us, let your essence surround.

We gather as knowlharvesters, seeking connection true.

Weave the threads of knowledge, between us and you.

Grant us clarity, as minds align.

In this communion, secrets entwine.

With trust and consent, our intentions pure,
Guide us with wisdom where respect does endure.
To the powers that be, thank you for your enigmatic grace.
In this sacred ritual, we seek knowledge's embrace.
As we partake in this profound ritual's trance,
May wisdom flow, as we engage in this dance.”

Golden light filtered throughout the knowlharvesters and extended to Mom. It pulsed with power and felt as if it came from one being. It would have been nice to have answers, but I would take Mom being able to integrate her disparate parts. She would be able to help the others, as well. That would give her another purpose and keep her from retreating from everyone again.

CHAPTER 9



“*T*hat was fast. Were you denied entrance?” Nana asked as we reappeared in the kitchen. I ran to the sink, unwilling to battle the nausea this time around. Stella went into the bathroom while Mom seemed unaffected.

“I don’t see any blood. Is anyone hurt?” Clio asked.

Mom ran a soothing hand down my back while the spicy pasta and fish made a return trip up my gullet. “We are all fine except the nausea from teleporting. The knowlharvesters are going to look for information on how I can integrate the parts of me that are all vying for dominance.”

“Why would they do that?” Aidon asked as Stella came out of the bathroom and hugged her daughters.

“*That’s incredibly unusual for the knowlharvesters. They’ve never done anything like it before that I know of.*” I wondered if Tarja was in the room or just listening in from another room.

I held up a hand as I washed my mouth out and splashed water on my face. “I want to know what Luciana and Fiona think about what happened. I have a theory about why the knowlharvesters made the offer and connected to Mom.” I took a second to make sure my stomach wasn’t going to rebel again. It was a relief when my legs weren’t Jell-O anymore. I noted that Layla, Murtagh, and Tsekani were all standing by the archway into the dining room with Tarja perched in front of them. I crossed the room to grab my phone and tablet.

“I texted Fiona and Luci and asked if they were up for a call,” Nina said with a smile as she lifted my phone.

I pressed a kiss to her cheek. “You’re the best. Have you heard from the

sisters about the old van?” I didn’t want to forget about her birthday amidst all of this.

Clio pressed a hand to my wrist and held her other hand over my stomach. “Just checking how the babies handled the travel. They’re thriving.”

A smile broke out over Nina’s face as she watched the healer. “Dani found one. It’ll cost a couple thousand to get it here. We can talk about if that’s too much later. Do your call.”

My daughter was a smart kid. She’d no doubt seen the way my eyes widened over the cost of buying a car to convert into a bookcase for her. Now wasn’t the time for me to get sidetracked by how ridiculous the idea was.

My phone pinged with a response from Fiona, who had said she was up for a chat. Luci replied right as I hit call, so when Fiona’s smiling face appeared on the screen, I held up a hand. “Hello, Fi. Give me a second to add Luciana.” I pressed the other Pleiades’ contact.

Two rings later, Luci appeared on the screen. “Hello ladies. Is there another crisis you need help with?” Tarja jumped up next to me and was searching the screen for her boyfriend, no doubt. As if he sensed her presence, Zephyrus leaped into Luci’s lap.

I explained our visit to *The Library* including their offer to Mom. Fiona’s shock was written all over her face. “Why would they do that? They wouldn’t help us with anything. And I can’t believe they didn’t test you.”

Lifting a shoulder, I gathered my thoughts. “I have a theory about that and wanted to run it by everyone at once. And since you guys have been there and interacted with the knowlharvesters you might have some insight. I want to make sure Mom isn’t treated like a test subject or something.”

Mom quirked a brow as she looked at me. “I don’t see them as malicious beings.”

One corner of my mouth lifted. “I agree. They didn’t test us because they want to form that connection with Mom to advance their knowledge. They mentioned my babies and Kaida. They clearly care about the welfare of others. As for agreeing to look for information to help Mom. I think they’re excited about having a new species to document and gather data about.”

“And they offered to help as a way to get Mom to agree to the connection,” Stella interjected from behind me.

I turned my head and smiled at my best friend. That’s why we worked so well together. We thought alike on many things. “Precisely. They knew we would be less likely to deny them direct access to information collection if

they gave us something.”

Mom ran a hand over her upper arm as she leaned against the counter. "I can see that. Does that fit with your experience of the knowlharvesters?" She asked Luci and Fiona as Binx moved closer to the screen.

Fiona was nodding as she looked at something over her phone. "Their only concern when we were there was preserving knowledge, so I could see them being excited over something new."

"I would agree. They are getting far more from Mollie than they are giving. The place is vast. While they know the information inside their books, it could take some time to look through spells and potions for something to help. There are dozens of them and they know where to focus. I recall my Nonni telling me stories about how witches have been vital to the survival of many species. There has to be something somewhere." Luci stroked Zeph's head as she spoke.

A notice came up on my screen that Sullivan was calling. I lifted the phone and waved it in front of my tablet. "Hey guys. I have to go and get this. The alpha was investigating a location I couldn't get into. I'm hoping he found our missing girl. We will talk soon."

I hung up as Fiona opened her mouth then slid the green bar across the screen and put Sullivan on speaker. "Hey, Sully. Did you get into the store?"

"We did. When we initially looked in the alley, I lost her scent outside. It helped to know where she was taken. The invisibility spell on the witch covered Kaida's scent too. I picked up remnants of the spell on the backdoor but was able to force my way through without any problems. Kaida had to get free of the witch's hold at some point because I picked up her scent on one end of the room and lost it near the middle."

The corners of my mouth turned down as I considered this information. "You didn't feel the layered spell on the backdoor?"

"Nope. There were remnants of a spell there but nothing that stopped us."

Aidon leaned over my shoulder. "Was there evidence of a hidden door?"

I frowned at my mate. "Are you thinking she is being held somewhere in the store?"

Aidon lifted a shoulder. "That or perhaps an escape hatch."

My mind started running through countless scenarios, all of them revolving around a witch shoving Kaida down a set of stairs then dragging her through the sewer system.

"That was my first thought when I lost her scent," Sullivan said. "Owen

and I searched every inch of that place top to bottom. He even went through the crawl space above the ceiling tiles. There was nothing like that anywhere.”

My head dropped at the same time my heart did. I was hoping for some answers. “Thanks for the update. We will be scrying for her shortly. We will keep you posted about what we find. We have Kaida’s hair which will hopefully help us. But I have to warn you that we might not be able to see anything. This witch is incredibly powerful and might be able to hide from me.”

Selene tapped the tablet. “We have a list of Objects of Power the witch may be using, so we will try and account for that when we scry,” she added.

Sullivan blew out a breath. “I’m glad we have you on with us. It’s not easy to admit, but I’m unable to solve this one without your powers.”

This was how it should be. The various magical species working together. “There is no shame in that. We each have powers and abilities that we bring to the table that make us stronger together. I will give you a call after we scry.”

“I know you must be exhausted after such a long day. We appreciate you not stopping your search.” There was deep gratitude in the alpha’s voice.

“We are prepared to do whatever it takes to find Kaida. You have my promise,” I replied.

Aidon started growling and glaring at me. Nina’s hand snapped out like a cobra striking and hung up the call. I sent her a grateful smile as I ran a hand over Aidon’s chest. “Relax, please. I will do everything in my power to minimize the risk to us. We know a powerful witch is involved and aren’t going in blindly.”

Aidon looked me over and clenched his jaw. “You can’t ask me not to worry just like I can’t ask you not to try and save the child.”

I went on my tiptoes and pressed my lips to Aidon’s. There was nothing more to be said about that. We trusted one another. The kiss was supposed to be brief, but my hormones made my desire spike. I was about to go deep when Aidon pulled away and turned to Selene and Nina. “You have the list you need to show your mother, Starshine?” That sobered me right away and made me look at her sideways in question.

Nina was all smiles as she pulled up something on the tablet. “Aidon came up with a nickname for me and I like it.”

I tilted my head from one shoulder to the other. “Sounds good to me.

What was stolen?” My heart swelled at how hard Aidon was working to establish a closer relationship with my kids. He was spending more time with Nina and calling Jean-Marc a couple times a week, teaching them more about the paranormal world and their magic. It made me fall even more in love with him. Without having to be told, he knew the kids would be impacted by the babies when they were born and he was trying to make sure they knew they were loved.

“Mohan gave us a list of over a dozen items and we’ve been looking into them,” Charley said.

Selene scrolled down the screen. “The list is long and they are still going through the inventory. It’s not easy to find what’s missing when they’ve confiscated an entire house worth of items.”

“When I was searching the internet for possible OOPs Zaleria had made, I discovered that she dated a witch named Lyra,” Nina said as I focused on the list.

I scrolled up to the beginning. “That gives us a name for one possible suspect. Was there anything about her daughter Elrina?” I looked up at my daughter.

Nina lifted a shoulder. “Zaleria wasn’t very active on social media. I didn’t come across any mention of her.”

Reece held up a hand. “We could look up both Lyra and Elrina.”

I smiled at Stella’s youngest. “That would be great. Thanks.” I dropped my gaze and focused on the tablet. There was a list of items with names and information about the power they held.

1. The Cursed Mirror: Made from an older artifact. It possesses the ability to show the true nature of any individual who gazes into its reflective surface. It’s also possible it casts a curse on the individual based on their greatest fears.
2. The Staff of Enchantment: A seven-foot magical staff made of alder wood. It allows its wielder to cast powerful enchantments on anyone or anything they desire.
3. The Sword of Might: It is speculated that the sword possesses the power to vanquish any foe. The magic wielders were able to cut down dummies made of every material with it.
4. The Tome of Forbidden Knowledge: A leather bound book that contains dark and forbidden knowledge that was never meant to be

known by mortal beings.

5. **The Ring of Elemental Control:** An enchanted silver ring that gives its wearer the ability to control the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water. It's also possible the wielder could summon powerful elemental beings.
6. **The Medallion of Shapeshifting:** A gold medallion with a wolf on one side with runes and a dragon on the other with similar markings. The witches shifted into animals when they tried to access the power it held.
7. **Crystal Eye of Clairvoyance:** A shimmering crystal sphere imbued with the power to grant visions and insights.
8. **Amulet of Shielding:** A protective amulet adorned with intricate symbols and enchantments that blocks magic.
9. **Grimoire of Zaleria's Wisdom:** Believed to be her family book of bound spells. It was written in a language understood only by the witch.
10. **Crystal Orb of Divination:** A smooth, translucent orb imbued with mystical energies. The witch assessing this noted she got glimpses of the future because she was featured in something that had not yet happened. Gain insight into the mysteries of the present?
11. **Enchanted Quill:** A feather quill with a jeweled tip and a magically replenishing inkwell. The witch sensed power in the quill and when she wrote with it the doodles lifted off the page and drifted through the room. Unsure if it can cast anything written.
12. **The Somnus Stone:** A small, smooth black stone with a polished surface that appears to shimmer in the light. The witch recognized the markings carved into the surface and identified it as a known Object of Power. It can render a person unconscious with a single touch. When activated, the stone releases a powerful magical energy that causes the target to fall into a deep and peaceful sleep. The duration of the sleep can be controlled by the wielder of the stone, ranging from a few minutes to several hours.
13. **Cauldron of Transformation:** A large cauldron made of enchanted metal or ceramic and decorated with mystical symbols. The water the witch put in transformed into a grey sludge that didn't do anything. A wooden spoon became a small spear.
14. **Ring of Telepathy:** A delicate ring with intricate engravings and a

gemstone centerpiece that allowed the witch to hear what others were thinking.

15. Timekeeper Hourglass: A beautifully crafted hourglass with golden or silver sand and intricate time-related symbols. It stopped time in the room when the witch turned it over. Not much more is known about it.
16. The Etherbane Gauntlet: It's an armband designed after the ancient artifact that dampens and nullifies magical energies. It is made from an alloy of rare metals and infused with ancient enchantments. The surface is etched with intricate runes and symbols that resonate with anti-magical properties. It can be used on non-organic objects too.
17. Locket of Unknown Power: A small locket with intricate patterns and a gemstone embedded on its surface. The witch senses layered magic. She stopped trying to evaluate it when a cut on her finger healed
18. Cloak of Invisibility: A flowing cloak made of enchanted fabric or feathers, colored in shades of deep black or dark blue that rendered the wearer invisible.

“Woah, that’s quite the list,” I said when I was done reading through it. “Do we know the witch that studied these artifacts?”

Aidon gave me a look I couldn’t interpret. As I tried to decipher it, he said, “You’re wondering if she could be involved in the theft. She would know how valuable they were. Perhaps she’s selling them on the black market.”

I perked up when he gave voice to some of the many thoughts running through my head. “It’s a logical place to look.”

Nina shook her head. “Mohan already looked into everyone that was involved in cataloguing these items. He doesn’t suspect any of them. He said they weren’t done looking these over and the examination was done in a warded room that contained any magic they may have activated.”

“They weren’t done when the items were stolen,” Charley interjected. “They had more work to do to fully understand them.”

Stella pointed to the last item on the list. “I’d bet money the witch was using the cloak to make her invisible. It would save her from having to use her power.”

“We’ve already theorized that. And how she could have used the Somnus

Stone to put Kaida to sleep. It's probably why the mundie clerk never heard the child," Aidon said.

I went to the fridge and got a can of ginger ale to help the nausea. "Did they make up these names? I can't see Zaleria naming a rock she spelled to knock people out, something as tame as Somnus Stone."

Nina chuckled. "That's because she didn't name it. As it says in the notes from Mohan, the witch identified the symbols and what it meant about the palm-sized rock. I looked up the Somnus Stone and found some interesting information."

Nina had minimized the list and pulled up a site. I leaned close and read what it said. "The Somnus Stone was created by an ancient civilization of powerful mages who used it to incapacitate their enemies without causing harm. It was eventually lost to the sands of time and forgotten until it was rediscovered by a group of archaeologists on a dig in the Middle East. The stone was then sold at an auction to a collector who recognized its true value and has kept it hidden away in a secure location. Witches have replicated the stone using pictures and their power, although they are always a weak facsimile that'll make you take a nap rather than knock you out cold for days."

My mind worked through things in pieces and rarely ever stopped churning. My head swiveled to Mom as something occurred to me. "If they used this on Kaida, perhaps they used it on you, Mom. Do you remember seeing anything like that?"

Mom paused in washing out the cauldron to look at me. "I don't remember if there was a stone. I was loading groceries into the car and everything went black. There was no blow to my head and I can't recall hearing anyone chanting a spell."

"Okay. We should start looking for these artifacts along with Lyra and Elrina. Right now though, let's scry for Kaida."

Charley chewed on her lower lip as she looked at me. I smiled and waved my arm toward my body. "Ask whatever is on your mind." I had a feeling I knew, but wanted to empower her to be able to voice her questions. It was something women didn't get taught enough as we grew up.

Charley sucked in a deep breath and asked, "Can we participate in the ritual? We have never done real magic and want to use the power we have burning inside."

Clapping her on the shoulder, I turned her to face the stairs leading to the

Sanctum. “I think every person with magical power in this house should be involved. We are dealing with powerful witches and could use all the help we can get.”

“I’d like to be part of it too,” Clio chimed in. The healer had remained in the house, watching everything go down. “Anything to help locate a missing child. Plus, I find it fascinating to see you all work on a case. I usually only see the results.”

Aidon snorted as he took the cauldron from Mom. Nana waved a hand as she got off her stool and headed down before the rest of us. “Having so many should also confuse the witch if she tries to lock onto us as we are searching.” Nana’s mind was still sharp as a tack.

“I hadn’t considered that,” I admitted. “We don’t want her trying to injure one of us through the link we are sending out. I’ll set our magic up like a flickering movie reel set on high speed.”

Aidon put the cauldron on its stand, Nana grabbed the jug of scrying water we kept ready, and Nina picked up the silver scrying bowl and set it in the middle of the table. Stella had Kaida’s brush and I got the three black candles placed around the bowl.

Stella and Nana lit incense as we all gathered close and clasped hands. One of my arms was stretched to the limit over the expanse of the table so I could grab Selene’s. Aidon handed me a piece of paper on which he’d written our request. Stella held Kaida’s brush while I lit the paper on fire as we all chanted the spell.

I focused everything I had in me on Kaida as we did the spell a second time. I felt Aidon’s power join in as he put his hand on my back. We recited the spell a third time and watched the water for any sign.

A few seconds later, the water turned white as if infused with a magical mist. It acted like a television screen and images started flickering. It stopped on one of a field. I memorized every detail I could about the place. Unfortunately, there was nothing to give away the precise location. It was something you could find anywhere in Maine with trees and other foliage.

That disappeared and I was about to turn away when another image appeared. This one of a house. It was a blue Cape Cod. I caught sight of the numbers three-oh-six on the house. That stayed there for a bit, then the water turned clear.

Stella started for the stairs. “I can do a search in the MLS database. I can find that house.”

Nana was right behind her as she climbed the stairs. “That witch should have hidden herself better. She’s about to get a smack down.”

I chuckled as we got to the kitchen. I went to the fridge and grabbed a snack now that my stomach was settled. While Stella was searching, a woman that looked a lot like my mate stuck her face to the back door and knocked.

Aidon frowned as he opened it. “What are you doing here, Melinoe?”

“Mom and Dad told me about what you were doing and I wanted to help.”

“I’m not sure what you can do,” I told her. “We are looking for a house we saw when we were scrying.”

“And I have found it,” Stella announced. “Well, I have two possibilities. Without having a street name, I came up with two locations that could be the house we saw. I stuck with Camden, assuming they kept Kaida close, and got one on the outskirts of town.”

Layla stepped forward. She and Tseki and Murtagh had been silent. Now Layla scanned the screen on the computer Stella was using. “I’ll go look at the first house.”

Melinoe put a hand on Layla’s shoulder. “I will go with her.”

“Thank you. Should we focus on the field?” I asked. There was something about it that struck me and I had no idea why.

Mom shook her head. “There was nothing there. I didn’t note any indication there was an underground lair. This witch wouldn’t keep her out in the open where her pack could pick up her scent. My guess is that they moved through the area with Kaida.”

Melinoe nodded her head. “I would agree with that. The risk would be too high.”

Stella clapped her hands together. “We have the second house to look at, then. We have a lead. We’re going to rescue Kaida and kick that witch’s ass.”

Nina and Stella’s girls started clapping. The others joined with them in celebrating the break in our case. I never thought of myself as a glass half empty kind of person, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was missing something. This was way too easy. I’d tried and tried for hours when we were looking for Mom and never found anything. It was clear the cases were connected, so it should have been harder. We shouldn’t have been given anything.

This felt like a trap. How could I let anyone walk into one of these

locations knowing someone I loved was going to be put in danger? How could I not go and investigate? Sending the wolves would just result in more suffering. You had to fight magic with magic and that meant me and mine had to do this.

CHAPTER 10



Aidon put a jar of marshmallow crème and pickle spears in front of me while Stella typed away on her computer. “This is not even food. You need fruits and veggies.”

I snorted as I dipped the pickle in the sweet, white cream. The moan that left me as I took a bite made Aidon’s gaze darken. I made a show of licking the marshmallow from my lower lip. “I don’t care if it’s food or not and neither do your babies. They’re the ones to blame for my cravings.”

Aidon’s gaze softened as if shifted to my abdomen. “I hope this isn’t a sign that they take after my dad. You know how insane he is.” His words would have worried me if they held any heat.

“This concoction seems to be one of your consistent cravings,” Stella said as she continued looking something up. “It’s better than the rare steaks. It was difficult to watch you eat it when I could imagine it walking around moments before.”

That particular desire was one of the reasons I was worried about that witch having done something to me when we’d fought. I’d tried to reason through it and explain it as something else and my mind had been working through that in the background for days. My nursing education popped into my mind then. “That’s because I could be low in iron, right Clio? Women carrying twins are often low in various vitamins and minerals which is why they take more of them.”

Melinoe crossed her arms over her chest. “You shouldn’t be so cavalier about your health.”

I refrained from rolling my eyes. “I’m not. Clio checks me frequently and I do what I need to take care of myself. Thank you for your concern.” I told

myself her comment came from her worry for the babies.

Clio held up her hands. “There is nothing to be concerned with. I will bring a hemoglobin meter next time and check your iron. Phoebe is doing wonderful and the babies are thriving. As for cravings, that goes with the territory. While I’ve never seen the combination of pickles and marshmallow cream, I can’t say it’s all that bad. I had an expectant mom once that craved dirt. It was a challenge to keep her from adding it to meals.”

Stella shuddered then shifted her focus and pointed to Layla. “The house you are searching is empty and on the market, so you’re good to go.” Layla inclined her head then grabbed Melinoe’s arm on her way to the side door.

“What about the second one?” Aidon asked.

Stella pursed her lips. “It’s owned by mundies but they aren’t home. They’re in Europe right now.”

Nana scowled at the computer screen. “How much do computers know about people?”

Stella chuckled as she shook her head. “I discovered it because the owners used a colleague’s company to check on their house while they’re gone.”

I popped the last of the second pickle in my mouth and wiped my fingers with a towel. “Let’s hit it. We have a few hours before sunrise. I don’t want to be seen by their neighbors.”

Aidon straightened and made a move to follow but I put a hand on his chest. “We are going to check out an empty house. Would you do me a favor and stay here and look for that field? I know it’s a long shot, but I want to cover all of our bases.”

Aidon searched my face for several seconds then nodded. “Call if you need me. And be careful, Queenie.”

I pressed my lips to his. “Always am.” Stella and I headed out and jumped in my SUV.

“Has the school shared anything helpful with Todd?” I asked as I drove to the outskirts of town.

“They haven’t been much more helpful. And he didn’t get the same information out of the Whitmans that we did. They had Xander under control and silent during the interview. He would normally be frustrated and pissed, with nothing to go on. But he knows we are on the case.”

I nodded. “Is he having a difficult time keeping the questions from colleagues at bay?”

“Not really. They worked late looking for leads, but they stopped hours ago. I’m hoping that we find her in this house and bring her home, by the time they return to the office.”

“From your lips to the gods’ ears,” I said. “What do you think about the VW to shelving unit idea?”

Stella turned in the passenger seat to look at me. “I think it’s brilliant. Yeah, the cost seems high, but this is something that would sit rusting in a junkyard for years to come. Using it for something else saves the planet just a little bit. And every small thing adds up to make a difference. Of course, you will be left with three-quarters of a bus.”

“The Twisted Sisters had ideas with what to do with the rest of it. They mentioned making a lawn sculpture, more shelves, or a fish tank.”

Stella clapped her hands together. “Your backyard isn’t really vintage chic, but you could add shelves to the rest and use it in the lower part of the boat house. Or you could call those guys and have them make a fish tank for the office. It would be badass.”

I pulled over and parked a few houses down. “I’m leaning toward the fish tank idea, too. Do you see anything?” I focused on the house in front of us. The windows were all dark and there was no vehicle in the driveway.

“I feel like a burglar, dressed in black like this,” Stella said as we approached the house.

I’d insisted she change out of her dress clothes and heels this time. It was too conspicuous. We didn’t need any of the mundies to notice what we were doing. There had to be at least one neighbor keeping an eye on the place.

I stiffened when I caught sight of the black rectangle next to the door. “We need to go around the back. They have a Ring doorbell.”

Stella pulled the beanie lower over her blonde hair as we walked past the front and went down the side of the house. My heart started hammering as we remained in the shadows. I sent out my magical sensors to feel for wards or spells. It made me feel like a criminal to be sneaking like this. I’d committed more than one crime in pursuing our cases but it never seemed as if I was doing something wrong. Breaking into someone’s house went against my morals. But it was necessary to find Kaida.

I moved to the side of the house to look inside as we searched for a side or back door. There was something magical nearby but without focusing my search, I didn’t have any more details.

Stella suddenly yelped, then dropped to the floor of the port cochere when

headlights moved over the house as a car turned down the street. I looked down at her. “What are you doing?” My voice was barely above a whisper.

Stella grabbed the leg of my pants. “Get down.”

I waved to the tail lights. “They’re moving away from us. Let’s go.” I extended my hand to Stella and helped her to her feet.

We continued down the side of the house to a door with a window, in the middle of the carport. It led into the side of the house. I looked through the window as we stood there then opened my magical feelers and looked for any wards or sign of magic. There was a magical block on the door. This time it wasn’t as intricate as before. There were definitely supernaturals of some kind inside this house.

“Several someones are here,” Stella confirmed.

“There’s a ward here that will alert the witch. I’m going to circumvent her tripwire to give us time to enter. Can you unlock the door while I do this? We won’t have long and I want to surprise her.”

Stella nodded and held her hand out a few feet away from the handle while I located the corners of the ward. Once I’d identified the boundaries, I probed for the sensors in the spell, then rerouted them along the outside of the ward. When I saw the ward pulse purple and form a rectangle around the opening, I was certain I’d managed it.

Stella shot me a smile. “We ready?”

I nodded and she twisted the knob. The door opened to a silent house. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. The kitchen was empty as was the living room next to it. We walked as silently as possible down the hall to the front of the house. There was something here, but we weren’t finding anything. We cleared every room on the first floor then went upstairs.

My heart started hammering when I caught the scent of blood. There was no mistaking that coppery scent. My footsteps picked up as I climbed the stairs with Stella at my side. We went right for a bedroom across the landing, with its doors wide open. My jaw dropped and my heart skipped a beat when we reached the threshold.

On the wall above a large king-sized bed were the words *Try Again* written in blood. “It was a set up,” I growled.

Stella looked around. “You don’t think Kaida’s dead, do you?”

My heart squeezed painfully. “Gods, I hope not. I don’t even want to think about that and I’m glad that my nose isn’t sensitive enough to know. It would wreck me if we found out all this blood was hers. I am, however,

wondering where the enemy is. Why hasn't she had anything attack us?"

Stella gave me her you-did-not-just-say-that look. "Way to curse us."

I winced as I hurried back to the stairs. "We need to get the hell out of here. We can come back when the others are with us and look for more clues."

"Sounds good to me," Stella agreed.

I jumped when a branch scratched the window as we passed the office. My hand to my heart, I continued at a rapid clip then bounced off a hard body. Stella caught me and kept me from falling on my ass. I stared in horror at the creature standing in the dark hall that ran from the front to the back of the house. The beast had raven-black feathers covering his body, sharp talons, and piercing red eyes. He was known for his ability to make deals and bargains, often at a high cost.

"What is that?" Stella whispered in my ear.

"It's a malphas demon," I said making the one in front of me hiss. Aidon had been teaching me the types of the demons so I could identify them and know their weaknesses.

"How do we beat them?"

"You don't, little witch," the demon said in a voice that was high pitched and whiny.

"Bind the assholes." I snarled, then ducked when some claws swiped in my direction. I conjured a ball of energy and pushed it into the creature's chest. It shrieked, leaped backward, and cleared the hall as it landed in the great room with two of his friends. One launched itself toward us making me throw myself to the side. I landed on the carpet and had one of the demons on me.

I kicked as it lifted a fist and slammed it into my side. A protection spell exploded out of me courtesy of my babies, keeping the claws from slicing me open. That was a plus, however there was a drawback when I felt a couple of my ribs crack from the pressure being pounded into me.

I tried to focus on binding the demon. It was tough to concentrate when the pain in my chest was so severe. I rolled under the table in the small breakfast nook, getting away from the creature and had to bite back the scream of pain on my lips. It escaped when I saw a demon stab its claws into Stella's side. "No!"

My hands were up and I was tossing a magical bomb at the demon before Stella realized what had happened. The malphas exploded in a shower of

blood and guts all over her.

“You will regret killing my brother,” the malphas attacking me said as he flipped the table over. There was a split second of blinding fear as the monster hovered over me. It was a primal response to seeing something so terrifying bearing down on me. I shook myself and a second later I spat a binding spell at the demon. He stiffened and fell onto his back.

I got up and rushed for Stella, conjuring a magical spear and throwing it at the remaining malphas that were going after my best friend. The weapon pierced his shoulder and the power behind it died, leaving a gaping wound and an arm that no longer worked. Stella slammed a magical spell of her own into the other shoulder, causing that one to go limp.

I started casting the binding spell when I was hit from behind. I stumbled forward and into the wall, head first. My skull bounced off and I heard Stella shouting from somewhere behind me. My head swam for a bit, making me nauseous. There was a good chance I had a concussion. That wasn't going to stop me from getting rid of the damn demon.

The first demon had Stella in a headlock, but the protection charm we'd created not long ago had activated and I could see the shimmer of the barrier. Mine wouldn't work which made no sense. Then I saw Stella's flicker as they wrestled with one another. There had to be wards cast in the house to dampen magic.

I pushed the demon with injured arms into the one going after Stella from the side. I used all the force I could and added air for an extra push, so both demons flew into the back of the couch and tumbled over it. I followed that up with a magical bomb that I felt losing steam as it traveled through the air. I ran around the furniture and slammed the bomb into the mass of demon bodies. I didn't back up fast enough and got a face full of gore.

I clutched my arm close to my body and tried to breathe through the ache in my chest. “That witch is playing games with us and I don't like it.”

Stella scowled at the demon carcasses as she held a kitchen towel to the gash in her side. “She's going to pay for this. Aidon is gonna be pissed you got hurt and go medieval on her ass.”

I chuckled then winced at the pain. We took one step forward and two steps back. My worry for Kaida was the only thing keeping me going at this point. There was no way I could sleep while a little girl was in the hands of a vicious witch.

CHAPTER 11



“*H*ow the fuck are they still bringing demons over?” Tsekani barked as we pulled up to my house. He, Murtagh, and Aidon had arrived shortly after we’d called for cleanup.

Anger was sparking from Aidon, like a firework on the Fourth of July as we got out of the car. “The Hellmouths aren’t fail proof and not having more around the globe leaves thinner sections of the barrier. I look forward to teaching them why it’s a lethal idea to mess with my family.”

Tseki played crutch for Stella as she got out of the car. “Some lessons are meant to hurt.”

Stella’s pale face went the way of parchment paper as she climbed the stairs to the house. “On a positive note, that blood wasn’t Kaida’s. And Clio is already here.” The healer hadn’t left since she arrived a couple of hours ago.

Laughter bubbled out of me as my best friend pointed out the positives. Mom was standing at the stove, while Clio talked to her, as Tarja and Binx watched them from the island. I’d bet Nana, Nina, and Stella’s girls had gone to bed. My mind screeched to a halt when my parenting of the year moment hit me like a two by four to the skull.

I’d been so caught up in the need to find Kaida that I hadn’t stopped to consider it was a school night and I had not only allowed them to stay up and help but had asked them. Add that to the list of mistakes I’d made with my kids. I took a moment to consider what I would do differently in the future then set those thoughts aside. They did me no good and I wasn’t into battering myself.

When I shook myself into focus, I noted that Clio was healing Stella. The

healer grabbed the rag from Mom. “No major organs were punctured, although your ureter was nicked so it's a good thing you had me here to fix it and clean your abdomen out.” The healer turned to me. “Let me check you now.”

She looked like she'd gone a round in the ring with Mike Tyson. The dark purple beneath her eyes was worse than I'd ever seen it. I shook my head. “Absolutely not. You are exhausted and it's the middle of the night. You need rest before you do any more.”

Mom nodded in agreement. “She worked on me while you were gone and it really took it out of her. I was just making her some coffee since she refused to sleep until she saw...” Mom got the thousand-yard stare and her jaw went slack. Binx jumped into action

I yelped and rushed to her side, sucking in a painful breath as I went. Sudden movement didn't go well with broken ribs. None of that mattered. Mom had gone catatonic. Something was wrong with her. I grabbed her shoulders and shook her gently. “Mom! Can you hear me?”

Clio's hands were beside her head. I could feel the heat coming off of the healer. Dots of sweat beaded on her forehead.

“*Someone has entered her mind. I can feel their magic,*” Binx said. His voice was high pitched and almost hurt when he spoke into my head.

“What?!” My heart started racing. “Was that blood sample we brought back a trap? Is it the same witch behind all of this? Should I cast them out?”

“*It is not a Dark energy,*” Tarja interjected to reassure me.

Binx nodded in agreement. “*And it is not taking anything from her. There is a distinct feel to the power. Given what happened earlier, I believe this might be the knowlharvesters.*”

I held my breath, clutching Aidon's hand for several long seconds, until Mom blinked before sagging against the counter behind her. “That was intense.”

“What happened? Was it the knowlharvesters?” The words tumbled from my mouth as if they were dominoes that had been tipped.

Mom picked up a mug next to her and took a deep drink. “Yes, it was. They didn't find anything specific to my situation but they had some suggestions based on their research.”

“Is your life always like this? One adrenaline rush after another?” Clio asked.

I shared a look with Stella, then Aidon and laughed. “It's like riding down

a winding mountain road in a sports car with a blind person driving.”

Clio shook her head. “It’s a wonder your heart is as healthy as it is. If you guys are alright here, I will get that rest. I have underestimated the danger you face on a daily basis. It’s best if I don’t allow myself to get too drained. There are enough issues with being a middle-aged woman as it is.”

“Tell me about it,” I said. “Why don’t you go upstairs? You and Stella both. She can show you where there are some free rooms.”

Clio reached out and placed her hands over my ribcage. “I will do that after I ensure you aren’t at risk of puncturing a lung or something.”

Her warmth seeped into me before I could open my mouth. A sigh was the only thing that escaped a second later when the pain diminished enough that breathing was no longer a chore. My back straightened and I thanked Clio before Stella took her to get some sleep.

“Let’s get you to sleep too.” Aidon had gone caveman on me as he tried to push me out of the kitchen. I was surprised he didn’t pick me up.

I smiled up at him and shook my head. “I want to talk to Mom and find out more about her conversation with the knowlharvesters.” Being able to help her even a little would lift some major worry off of me and that would do more than sleep. There was enough going on that my mind wasn’t getting off Space Mountain anytime.

Aidon’s expression looked like he’d gone a couple rounds with Godzilla. I cupped his cheeks knowing I needed to reassure him. “I am alright. The babies are alright. The house is quiet which will make it easier for us to work this out. And you can be there to catch me if I fall.” I smiled up at him.

His scowl deepened. “Not funny.”

The corners of Mom’s lips turned up. “Let’s work in the Sanctum. Aidon can relax in the recliner while we look through the grimoire.”

Nodding, I grabbed a ginger ale from the fridge as Aidon snagged the pickles and marshmallow. “I figure you’ll want a snack.”

This man was a keeper. “Grab one of those lemon curd tarts too.”

Mom handed Aidon a tray. By the time he finished putting food on it, the thing had more snacks than a convenience store. Tarja and Binx lead the way to the Sanctum. Aidon set the tray on the table. My eyes traveled over the marks and scars on the wood. It told the story of centuries of magic users. My contributions were the silver filling the gouges left behind when I played my hand at being a sculptor and made the seal for the Hellmouth.

“Okay,” I said popping the tab on the soda. “What did the

knowlharvesters tell you, Mom?”

Mom grabbed a pickle and munched on it as she retrieved the family grimoire that we kept in a cabinet secured by our magic. “They told me any potion designed to bring two halves together will work in conjunction with a spoken spell. They found several accounts of Pleiades performing the ritual centuries ago.”

Aidon grabbed an apple and took it to the chair. “Did they give you a recipe and incantation?”

Tarja wound around my legs like a snake. *“I recall something about a ritual to bring two halves together. I should have thought of it sooner. The birth and caring for the kittens took a lot of my attention. I am sorry for failing you, Mollie.”*

“As your familiar I should have known,” Binx insisted.

Mom scratched beneath Binx’s chin. “Are you omniscient now? Don’t beat yourself up. None of you. We were all thrown for a loop when this happened. Now we have a chance to fix it.”

Looking over Mom’s shoulder, I read the grimoire as she began flipping through it. “What are the herbs needed to bond parts?”

“We want to soothe and settle the parts of Mollie so they stop fighting for dominance,” Binx interjected.

One of my eyebrows quirked as I looked at the young familiar. He was learning fast. “Good point. Okay, so what are the herbs we would need?”

Mom’s gaze turned to the shelving unit where we held the herbs we used. “Valerian root, lavender, chamomile, damiana...”

“Do we really need to look for a recipe?” I asked, cutting her off. “You’re a kitchen witch. I bet you could create a new potion that will be more effective than anything else.” I reached for the pickles and marshmallow as Mom gaped at me.

It didn’t take long before she was shaking her head vehemently. “There is no way I can do that.”

“Of course, you can,” Binx said.

“Binx is right. You have the knowledge and instinct needed to create any kind of potion imaginable. Don’t look surprised. Where did you think the recipes came from?”

“I never thought about it. I assumed they were always just there,” Mom said.

Tarja shook her head. *“Most came from kitchen witches. Others have*

taken something created by one and changed it slightly to suit their individual needs.”

I clapped a hand on Mom’s shoulder. “You can do this. Just think it through and I will take notes when you’re ready.”

Mom’s expression morphed and she looked like she was preparing to go in for a bikini wax. “I’ll do it.” She moved to the end where the cauldron stood on its stand above the burner. I ate my pickle while she grabbed countless jars from the shelves. When I reached for a second pickle, I noted Aidon’s eyes were closed. I loved watching him sleep. The tension left his features making him go from an avenging angel to one of peace and joy.

Taking my snack back to Mom, I watched her line up the herbs on the table while muttering to herself. Binx watched her closely and I could feel Tarja’s focus on me.

“She seems much better. Am I imagining it?” I sent the thoughts to my familiar hoping she would weigh in.

Tarja inclined her head. *“Having hope was key for her. She’s going to be alright. There will be some bumpy roads ahead, but she and Binx will manage.”*

Mom pointed to the grimoire. “I have Harmony’s Elixir figured out. I will need you to come up with the spell to boost things but I have the potion.”

I snatched a pen and the grimoire. “I love the name. I’m ready when you are.” I wrote the title on the first blank page.

Mom cleared her throat and picked up the first vial. “I will read them off along with the portion to add so you can write them down. “Two parts of valerian root harvested in the astral plane, one part of lavender, one part of sage.”

I shook myself and started scribbling them down. I had been transfixed by the sight of her using her hand to measure like she did when cooking. I had no idea how she did that. I had to use measuring spoons or cups.

Mom continued with the ingredients. “One part of lemon balm harvested at the height of a full moon, one part of chamomile, one part of St. John’s Wort, one part of passionflower harvested in the astral plane, one part of damiana harvested with a silver knife, one part of catnip.” My head shot up at that. Why would she add something that made cats go crazy?

“And one part of rose petals,” Mom finished. She gathered all the herbs and ground them into a fine powder using a mortar and pestle. Next, she placed the powdered herbs into a large glass jar. “I need some vodka or

tequila.”

My eyes widened. “You want alcohol for this?”

Mom grabbed a big jar as she lifted a shoulder. “It’s to lower the natural defenses. It’s the best way to stop the fighting so they can meld together. That’s where you will come in.”

Intoxication lowered inhibitions better than anything else. It was a good plan. I nodded and ran up the stairs while thinking of a spell. I knew what I wanted for her, so my intent would be clear, I just needed the incantation to go with it.

I was back with the Grey Goose and handed it to Mom. She added some to the jar with the herbs. Thankfully, we’d gone to the astral plane with Nina and Nana not long ago to harvest, so we have the ingredients she needed. My mind churned over the right words as Mom shook the jar vigorously for several seconds.

“I think I have the words for a Trinity Fusion Spell. How long do we have to wait for this to work?” I asked.

Mom bent and looked at the liquid then started shaking it again. “When the herbs have mixed together and the mixture stops foaming. I knew you’d come through with a spell for me.”

Warmth spread through my chest as I turned to Tarja. “Do I need to say the spell in Latin? Or can I say it in English? It will take me a bit to translate so I keep the same meaning.”

“You can cast many simple spells without having to say the words now, so I have faith you can use English. Latin gives the words some power for a witch to build upon.”

Mom shook the potion then poured the contents of the jar into the cauldron and lit the fire. She grabbed a wooden spoon and chanted the spell for harmony. “When this becomes iridescent, I will strain it through a cheesecloth.”

I wrote the spell into the grimoire before peering into the cauldron. I watched her stir the liquid as it bubbled. It took several minutes before Mom was straining it. She brought the jar to her nose and sniffed. “Woah. I think I need to drink this in some tea.”

“Tea will make the mixture more palatable without altering the magical effects,” Binx said as he looked to his mother. Tarja nodded her head in agreement.

I grabbed a bottle of tea from the small refrigerator that we kept down

here. Mom poured some of it out in the sink, replacing it with the potion. Mom held it up. “Cast while I am drinking.”

I turned to check on Aidon before I began speaking. I didn’t begrudge him some rest, but his touch would help give me confidence. No matter, I could rely on myself. “Elements of self, dispersed and apart, in this moment, merge and restart. Body, mind, and spirit, become as one. Aligned and united, the journey begun.”

“By the power of unity, I now proclaim,
bring together the fragments, without the blame.
Let harmony reign, let discord cease,
fuse these parts with tranquility and peace.
Through the merging of body, mind, and soul,
Integration complete, the fragments made whole.
No longer divided, but united as kin.
A harmonious self, let the transformation begin.
With this spell, I call upon the cosmic flow,
to unify and balance, let the energy bestow.
As I will, so mote it be. A blended essence, in perfect harmony.”

I held my breath as I watched Mom throw back the potion like a shot of Patron, rather than drinking it slowly to allow the magic to work. She even hissed as if it burned. Her gaze lifted to mine and the corners of her lips lifted. Binx jumped on the table and reached for Mom right as her brown eyes rolled back in her head and her knees crumpled.

CHAPTER 12



*M*y heart was in my throat as I lunged to catch Mom. I wasn't quite fast enough and I went down with her. The extra cushion in my hips kept her from cracking her skull on the concrete floor. My wrist played savior and took the brunt of the impact. I was frozen until Binx jumped on Mom.

"How is she?" I asked him. "Is she going to be okay?"

"Check her vitals. I can hear her heartbeat, but I have no idea what is normal. Until I learn her normal rhythms it would be unwise for me to advise you on her current status or offer a prognosis." Binx was sounding more and more like he knew what he was doing.

I turned to lay her down on the rug beneath the worktable in the Sanctum, trying to regulate my breathing as my brain rebooted. For a split, terrifying second everything I knew from my nursing days had taken a vacay. Tears filled my eyes as I pressed my finger to the inside of her wrist.

The steady thump-thump against my fingertip made me choke out a sob. Aidon leapt from the chair and into a fighting stance. "What is it?"

Sniffling, the tears fell down my cheeks. "Mom took the potion and passed out." I sucked in a breath as her heartbeat sped up until it was verging on hyper speed. I had no idea what was normal for a vampire or shifter. I thought back to Layla and how slow and steady her heart rate always was. I prayed that this was the vampire part and not her organ getting ready to give out. It would be all kinds of messed up for us to come this far only to lose each other now.

Aidon came over and crouched next to me. "Do you want me to carry her upstairs? Neither of you look comfortable and you've been up for over

twenty-four hours.”

Nodding, I pressed a quick kiss to his lips and got up off the ground. At the same time, he lifted her as if she weighed nothing. Binx followed at their side, ascending the stairs, with Tarja and I bringing up the rear. I paused to grab the dirty cauldron, mortar and pestle along with the wooden spoon and took them to the kitchen.

I dropped the accoutrements into the sink and started scrubbing while Aidon continued to the living room. I needed to clear my head and stop the tears that refused to stop flowing. Seriously, it made me want to give those three fateful goddesses a smack down for even deigning to put Mom through this.

My gaze snapped up and out the window above the sink. I searched for any sign that three pissed off beings were coming down from the sky, or out of the sea to make me regret ever silently cussing them out. There was no movement in the backyard. It seemed silly to worry about until I realized they were responsible for so much in life.

I finished scrubbing the cauldron, put it in the drying rack, then cleaned the rest of the dirtied items. My thoughts were racing around the track in my mind as I tried to push away all the worry and curses away and focus on manifesting what we wanted to happen. Mom was going to become a kickass heroine that the next generations all looked up to. I repeated that mantra in my head until I lost track of everything around me.

I sighed when familiar hands landed on my shoulders. Aidon’s arms came around me when I turned in his embrace. I let his warmth seep into me and soothe all the cold corners. I’d known all my life that I would lose Mom and Nana someday, but I wasn’t ready for that day to come. And, yeah, I know that no one is ever prepared for that to happen. I was selfish enough to pray to the gods & goddesses to keep them with me for a while longer.

The way I figured it, they’d given me this magical power in the first place knowing I had to have Mom and Nana with me so I didn’t mess things up completely. I’d become proficient with my abilities over the last year. However, there was still a good chance I would blow something important up and cause the end of the world. It was terrifying to know I had the power to do just that.

“She’s going to be alright, Queenie. Your mom is one tough cookie. I know this because she raised you. You cannot lose hope now. Look at what the two of you accomplished with minor input from the knowlharvesters. The

creation of a potion and spell that intricate and delicate is almost unheard of. I've been around for longer than I can remember and I have never witnessed anything quite so astonishing."

I snorted and pushed out of his hold. "You don't have to blow smoke up my ass. I know we're good, but not that good."

Aidon's hand flew to his chest and he gasped in mock offense. "I would never do anything of the sort to you." His smile vanished and his intense sapphire eyes held mine. "Seriously, I would never lie to you. Your mom is definitely processing the serum. I am beginning to pick up changes in her body. Unless that witch planted a sleeper in what she did, this is a direct result of what the two of you did together."

I smiled at the man I loved as the sky started to lighten behind him. "That was pretty impressive. This magic stuff is starting to be second nature."

Aidon smiled and nodded then picked up my hand. Someone cleared their throat behind me. I swiveled around and smiled at Selene. "You're up early."

Selene lifted a shoulder. "I couldn't sleep. I keep thinking about that witch sending you into that trap. I have an idea on how to look for Kaida and I wanted to try it." She gestured to the living room. "But I can see that we missed something. What happened? It doesn't feel like she is just tired."

I couldn't read Selene's tone to tell if she was pissed about being left out of the process or not. "Mom had an idea for a way to meld the parts of herself together. And she wanted to try it while everyone was asleep. She was worried she would fail and didn't want anyone watching."

Selene's eyes widened as her gaze drifted back to the couch where Mom was laying. "Did it work?"

I pointed to Aidon. "He thinks it did. We have to wait and see."

Tarja jumped onto the island. "*Aidon is right. Mollie's potion is powerful and effective.*"

"*And she is going through another change,*" Binx confirmed. "*It can't get any worse for her.*"

"I could use something to distract myself until she wakes up. You said you had an idea," I prompted.

Selene nodded and hid a yawn behind her hand which set me to doing the same. Mythia opened the back door and looked at the three of us standing there. "You guys look exhausted. Why are you up so early?"

We updated her on what happened with Mom and the potion. Selene gestured to me and the stairs leading to the Sanctum. "I want to try and scry

again just the two of us. But we will be linking our powers to the others before we start and having Aidon mask our energy signature.”

Aidon's eyes widened and his mouth formed an o. “You want me to make it so no one can see you. I would never have been able to do that with so many witches working together, but I might with the two of you channeling everyone else.”

That sounded promising to me. If we could catch her off-guard then we might actually be able to catch her. “I’m game. How do we go about this?”

“It will be best if Phoebe inserts a hook into the others that helped earlier, including you, Selene. As the Pleiades, she’s uniquely suited to establishing a connection where witches can use her power without others being aware and vice versa. Then, if Aidon is able to block your energy completely you can scry,” Tarja explained.

Mythia buzzed toward the stairs going down. “I’ll grab the scrying bowl and water.”

I thanked the pixie then focused on establishing a connection to everyone. It was easy enough given that we already had a bond. I winced and looked to my familiar. “Do I have to insert a hook into them? It sounds unpleasant.”

“That’s the only way this will work. Aidon can absorb your signature into himself given your mating bond. No one can breach his personal wards. Think of it like a straw. Your collective energy is what’s going to make it possible to unravel her barriers without setting her alarms off.”

I nodded and closed my eyes to do as she instructed. Connecting to Nina and Nana was easy enough. Mom took a couple more seconds. Stella was harder while her girls were easy. Selene was ready and waiting when I got to her. My eyes flipped open and Mythia, Tarja, Binx, Selene, and Aidon were all peering at me. I nodded at Aidon. A second later, my skin started tingling as his warmth spread throughout me.

Selene had everything set up and ready for me. The candles were lit and the circle set. I clasped her hand, wanting the physical contact too. I took Kaida’s brush from Mythia and chanted the spell. My magic unfurled slowly with thin streams from each of my loved ones joining in the process.

I stood before the small basin filled with crystal-clear water, ready for answers. I hadn’t turned the lights on earlier, so the only light in the room aside from the candles, was the light above the stovetop. The flames flickered in the background and cast dancing shadows across the walls. I took a deep breath, focusing my gaze on the tranquil surface of the water.

As my eyes locked onto the liquid, ripples began to form, spreading from the center outwards. The water turned hazy, like a mist slowly descending upon a meadow. My heart quickened with anticipation, knowing that images were about to unfold.

The mist cleared, revealing vibrant flowers. Butterflies flitted gracefully from one blossom to another, their delicate wings casting gentle shadows on the petals. The air was thick with the scent of blooming flora, a sweet fragrance that enveloped the scene. The image panned out and a vast field came into view. It was the same one I'd seen before. What the hell was it about that area?

The field seemed to stretch endlessly, bathed in warm sunlight that caressed the landscape. I could almost feel the soft breeze brushing against my skin, carrying whispers of secrets yet to be unveiled. When I tried to grasp hold of it, it slipped right through my fingers.

And as quickly as the image appeared, it began to shift and transform. The vibrant colors faded away, giving way to a somber and muted palette. The once lush meadow dissolved into a suburban street. My brows furrowed in confusion and concern as I watched the transformation unfold.

I couldn't tear my gaze away, knowing that hidden within these shifting images lay the answers I sought. My fingers trembled slightly, but I steadied myself, determined not to miss anything.

Within the image, an imposing gray house materialized. Its architecture was old, with a grand archway at its entrance. The house exuded an aura of mystery, foreboding, and mold. It stood as a decaying sentinel on a street that was otherwise unremarkable. Its secrets were waiting to be unraveled.

I leaned in closer, trying to discern any details or clues within the shifting images. As I focused my gaze the archway came to life, drawing my attention. It seemed to pulse with an ethereal light, as if beckoning me to enter its enigmatic depths.

With a surge of curiosity and bravery I reached out, my hand hovering above the water's surface. As my fingertips skimmed the water, I caught sight of the numbers five-seven-nine on the side of the house.

"That has to be it," I said excited.

Selene nodded. "It felt evil enough."

"We need to find where it's located." I snatched my phone from the charger and shot a message off to Stella telling her what the house looked like and the numbers we'd seen on the side of it. This had to work. Binx had

assured us that he couldn't detect my magical signature.

My leg bounced as I waited for Stella to get back to me. And now I win the best friend of the year award for sending her a text at the butt crack of dawn. I was being ridiculous staring at my phone as if it held the secrets of the universe. To be fair Google could tell me anything I wanted to know.

"Unh. What happened?"

My head snapped around and I fell to the ground in front of the couch where Mom was lying. Tears filled my eyes again as I smiled at her. "You passed out. How are you feeling?"

Mom pushed herself to vertical as her forehead creased with more wrinkles than a pug. "I'm fine. I haven't had any blood since I killed that woman. I'm too afraid. I guess you guys are right. We need to build an impenetrable vault where I can go to drink."

Aidon frowned at Mom while my gut twisted into a knot. Aidon handed Mom a glass of coffee that Mythia had flown into the room. "What do you remember from earlier?"

Mom accepted the go-go juice and took a sip. "Clio went upstairs after healing Stella...then we went down." Mom's eyes went wide. "We made the Harmony Elixir. How long was I out?"

I grabbed Mom's hand and pressed my finger to the inside of her wrist and measured her heart rate. Her pulse was steady and strong. I kept my finger there. "You were out for a couple hours. How do you feel?"

Mom looked from me to Aidon. "I feel the same. I should feel different, shouldn't I? It didn't work." The despair in her voice broke my heart. This wasn't the only answer to her problem. I understood why she was upset, but it was our first try.

Aidon sat next to her and put his hand on her shoulder. "I'm shocked you feel the same because I sense that you are changing. It's a subtle vibration that tells me there is a flurry of activity happening in your cells." It was what he'd told me earlier. The fact that he still felt it was the best sign of the night.

"I want to believe you. More than anything." Mom chewed on the corner of her mouth.

"Intent is key to any successful spell. You can't give up now, Mollie. Keep sending what you want to happen to your magic. It's still working," Binx told Mom.

It was the right thing to tell her. "Then I'm about to be the most balanced bitch on the planet."

CHAPTER 13



A laugh burst free from me when Mom said that. “You got that right. You need to get a new kickass wardrobe to match.”

Tsekani and Murtagh walked through the back door as Mythia flew over to Mom and said, “Oooh yeah. White leather would look great on you. It would match the light shining from you.”

Tseki's eyes brightened with interest. “Who's getting white leather? Phoebe looks much better in red, but the inner light part I agree with. I know someone who could enchant it to grow as your tummy does.”

Mythia pointed to Mom. “Mollie.”

Tseki rushed over to Mom and held her shoulders while he turned her this way and that. “Definitely. She has a cool skin tone which work well with classically, bright white. You'd have to go with silver accessories though. Gold wouldn't look as good if you're in white. Why are we getting Mollie white leather?”

“Because she's found her inner badass and needs the world to know,” I replied.

Mom spluttered and shook her head. She finally found her voice. “Definitely not. I like my slacks and blouses made from cotton. It can be a blend but this body is not made for leather.”

Tseki released her with a dramatic roll of his eyes. “Oh, honey. If you're not into fabulous fashion advice, I won't force it. But trust me, dragons know style. Embrace the beige if it makes you happy. At least I can see where Phoebe gets her resistance and why she insists on sticking to timeless mom jeans and sensible cardigans. I'll still be here, strutting my fabulous self.”

Stella walked in yawning and stretching. “Have the clothing discussions

started already? It's too damn early for that. Although, Tseki does have the best fashion sense of anyone I know."

We all laughed and Mom told her how we were trying to get her into leather as she and Mythia went into the kitchen to make breakfast for everyone. My heart skipped a beat and my breath caught as I watched the two women work seamlessly together. Mythia shot me a gaze filled with tears which I returned.

As much as we needed to focus on finding Kaida, I was grateful the conversation remained light-hearted. Mom finally capitulated and agreed to try leather while I was somehow roped into a maternity wardrobe Tseki was already picking out online. Unable to look at another piece of clothing, I went to the Nespresso machine. It was one Fiona recommended after Luciana's visit to Pymm's Pond. It had fast become my new favorite item in the house because it made the best lattes and mochas. And it was easy to use. Before I knew it, I'd made a drink for everyone.

Nina and Stella's girls came downstairs not nearly looking as rough as I felt. Teenagers were lucky like that. And their timing was perfectly clocked to when Mom pulled fresh blueberry scones from the oven. Mythia got out the lemon curd and raspberries. Nina went up to Mom and kissed her cheek. "You look amazing, Gammy. Did you get some good sleep?"

Mom beamed at Nina and nodded. "I got enough. You three eat your breakfasts so you aren't late for school."

Nana and Layla entered at the same time. Nana's eyebrow lifted to her hairline as she looked from Mom to me in question. Figuring it was best to fill everyone in now that more were up, I told them about the potion and spell while Selene told them about what we'd seen in the scrying bowl.

Charley stuffed a piece of scone in her mouth. "That has to mean Kaida's still alive, right? I mean the witch is taking her to these different places. Do you think she would do that if Kaida wasn't alive anymore?"

The hope in her voice was nearly heartbreaking because it was entirely possible the witch would do exactly that. Stella gave her daughter a side-armed hug and tugged her close. "Phoebe and I will go out to the house as soon as you get off to school. And yes, I will keep you posted. Don't get caught with your phone in chemistry again, though."

Charley gave her mom a sheepish smile. "I won't."

Nina waved her blueberry scone at me. "You need to let me know what happens too. I don't see Charley until after school and I have an Algebra II

test today.”

I promised Nina that I would send her a message and the girls left as Stella started looking for the house. Aidon washed the dishes then pulled me into a hug. “Is there any chance I can talk you into taking a nap before you go to this house?”

I wanted to give him the answer he wanted. “I can’t promise that. If Stella finds the place, we need to take a look. I don’t need to remind you why.”

Aidon shook his head. “No, you don’t. And because of that, I’m heading to my house to talk with my father about the demons you keep encountering. He can send out a warning then return to the Underworld to recharge. It will make any demons in the area scatter and will buy you a day or two before their summoners are able to reclaim control.”

I pressed my lips to his in gratitude then got caught up in the kiss for several seconds too long. “Thank you. That eases some of the worry about walking into a situation blind again.”

“Get some rest after you check the house out, please,” he said.

“You can come back and make sure I do,” I offered with an eye waggle.

Aidon’s eyes darkened with desire as Nana said, “I am well-versed in the invitation for sleep and other activities. In fact, I have quite the collection of memories to prove it. Now, if you’ll excuse me I’ll go take my ‘beauty rest’ without any further assistance.”

“Nana!” I choked out as my face flamed all shades of red.

“Daily orgasms are important.” Layla clearly wasn’t bothered by Nana’s comment.

Tsekani gave Murtagh a heated look. “No better way to start the day.”

Mom laughed along with Stella and Aidon. Selene gaped at Nana as she walked out of the room. Mom shook her head and started washing up dishes. “She’s going to get cleaned up and dressed for the day. That’s all.” She was firmly in the ‘if I don’t think about it, it isn’t true’ camp.

“You sure about that, Mollie? Nana is a virile woman,” Stella quipped.

“And that’s my cue to leave,” Aidon said as he pressed a kiss to the top of my head.

I watched him go then went around the large island to help with the clean-up. Selene was helping and looking in the direction Nana had gone. I nudged her shoulder. “It’s safer not to think about it. You don’t want to be so obsessed with it that you accidentally ask Nana about it. You’ll need therapy if she answers you.”

Selene shuddered and took a bowl from me to dry. “You’re right. So how are we doing this visit to the house?”

Layla pinned me with a look. “We’re all going to check it out.”

“Murtagh and I are going to search that second location again,” Tsekani interjected. I want to go in now that it’s aired out completely.”

“Perfect. Keep in touch,” I instructed before they walked out the door.

Stella stopped scrolling and glanced up from the computer. “I think I found something.”

I walked around the island for the second time and looked over her shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

Stella pointed to a house at the bottom of the monitor. “The house has been vacant for almost a decade.”

I leaned closer and squinted to see the image clearer. “Although, now I can see that gray wasn’t its original color.”

Stella shook her head as she typed the address into her map app. “It started as white before the dawn of time. You guys ready to go?”

Layla clapped her hands. “No, I was thinking of getting my legs waxed first.”

I chuckled as I looked down at myself. “Let me do a quick wardrobe change. And you might want to put those boots back on Stella. Four-inch spikes aren’t the best choice of footwear.”

Stella lifted one foot and shrugged. “Demon guts are hard to get out.”

I smacked her arm as we headed to the stairs. “We won’t face demons this time.”

“If that works, we might need to have Hades follow us during every case and work his juju,” Stella said.

Layla grabbed my arm before we could go upstairs. “Selene and I will be waiting for you out front.”

Nodding, Stella and I hurried to the second floor. She went into the room she’d used the night before and I went into my closet. I shucked the dirty clothes and grabbed a pair of my designer leggings. They were the one luxury I allowed myself lately. Stella was right about Tsekani. He’d given me a pair that cost enough to feed a college student for a month and I had fallen in love with them. I owned them in every color now.

I paired a loose black sweater with the neon purple leggings and added my soft, black leather boots. In less than five minutes, I was back downstairs and we were on our way. Everyone was silent as Layla drove across town.

The yards were unkempt and there was no one out when she pulled onto the street where the latest house was located.

She parked a couple of houses away. I opened my magical senses the second we got out of the car. There was a hint of magic nearby but it was muted. “She was here. I can’t tell if she is anymore or not.”

Layla flared her nostrils. “I don’t smell anything.”

Stella and Selene both cocked their heads to the side. “There is nothing there. It’s like a magical black hole,” Selene observed.

Stella nodded. “That’s a good way to put it.”

I kept my senses opened as we walked down the sidewalk. Selene’s magic flowed around me and I looked over at her. “I’m hiding us from everyone but us.”

I was off my game today. It was the fatigue. My brain wasn’t firing as fast as normal. “You’re a life saver. Thanks.”

We went silent and walked right up the cracked and buckled cement walkway. Layla was through the door first with me right behind her. I stepped into the decrepit house, my nose wrinkling at the musty stench of neglect. Seriously, who picks a haunted house as their hideout? The creaking floorboards beneath my boots added a charming touch to the ambiance. Not exactly a five-star hotel, but I wasn't there for a relaxing vacation anyway.

Beside me Stella’s face was a picture of determination. Her eyes shimmered with her power. She was ready to unleash a magical storm on these wannabe witches. I shot her a sidelong glance, ready to kick some supernatural ass together.

As we ventured deeper into the dimly lit house, shadows danced along the walls performing their own macabre ballet. It was like walking into a horror movie, and I half-expected the walls to start bleeding. It was creepy as hell and honestly, exactly where I pictured an evil witch would hide out.

Between one step and the next tribred witches materialized before us, their vampire-shifter and magical powers combining. I cursed as I was taken off-guard. They hissed, revealing their sharp fangs as if to impress us. Yeah. Nice try, ladies. I've seen better dental hygiene in a vampire toothpaste commercial.

I tripped over a loose floorboard and would have face-planted. If the tribred hadn’t grabbed hold of my arm. Her claws started digging in painfully. My abdomen started vibrating and I glanced down in time to see a bolt of electricity shoot out of my stomach. The witch fell in a heap with

smoke coming out of her eyes and ears. Well, that wasn't terrifying at all.

A second later my hands ignited with flickering teal flames, a fiery manifestation of my determination, when two more headed for me. Take that, Twilight wannabes. Selene had her magical mojo in full swing and summoned the elements like a boss. Wind swirled around us, as if even the atmosphere couldn't resist joining our epic showdown.

Layla shifted as she launched herself at one of the unfortunate victims. These witches hadn't chosen this transformation. Mom could have been among those fighting us. That made it difficult for me to fight back. Selene and Stella didn't have a problem and unleashed their magical fury upon the enemy witches, showing them what a real witchy duo was capable of.

I launched my flames. My fire engulfed one of them, roasting her like a witchy s'more. Selene's elemental assault came next, sending another witch flying into a wall like a ragdoll. It was like a supernatural version of Whack-a-Mole as Stella used a magical hammer to knock one of them out.

Layla was a whirlwind. Her claws sliced through the air like a furry ninja. She sank her teeth into one of the witches, who let out a bloodcurdling scream. If I were into heavy metal and ear-piercing shrieks, the sound would have been music to my ears. When someone was trying to kill you, it was easy to overlook that they hadn't chosen this.

These witches were no pushovers. One of them, her eyes glowing like a malfunctioning disco ball lunged at me with claws outstretched. Oh honey, please. I'd faced worse before breakfast. I danced away, taunting her with a smirk. "Nice mani, but I prefer my nails intact, thanks."

As the battle raged on, we didn't let up. Stella conjured roots from the rotting floorboards, wrapping them around another witch like a floral straitjacket. "Don't worry, honey," I called out. "The latest trend in fashion is being rooted to the spot. You're just ahead of the game!"

How the hell many tribred were there in this place? I was determined to reclaim this creepy house as our territory. Our collective magic crackled in the air, an electrifying display of supernatural supremacy. We cornered the last of them, their faces contorting with frustration, desperation, and fear. The latter broke my heart.

I opened my mouth to ask if they wanted help. The property I'd purchased was big enough to take them in, too. No words got out as they unleashed a last-ditch effort, their powers surging with reckless abandon. I rolled my eyes. "Really? I was going to offer to help you?"

Stella and I exchanged a determined look, our friendship stronger than ever. We were going to end this witchy soap opera and find Kaida. After all, we were the queens of sass and spells.

“Are we going non-lethal now?” I nodded my head. With a final surge of magical energy, we unleashed a torrent of power that engulfed the tribreds. Sparks flew and the air crackled with our combined might. Their cries of defeat filled the room, drowning out the creaks and groans of the haunted house.

As the dust settled, we were staring at three women who were sobbing and thanking us for breaking through whatever spell was controlling them. Vomit was not the new black. My stomach churned ominously as guilt tried to drown out everything else. We’d killed several before getting through to them.

I pointed at the three tribred huddled together. “Layla, can you call Tsekani to pick them up and take them to the new house while we look around?”

Selene, Stella, and I cleared the house. There was no one else there. I was headed for the front door, to head home and get some rest when Stella called out, “I think I might have found something. There’s a spell on a door in the corner of the kitchen that I can’t get past.”

I spun around and hurried for the kitchen. Stopping, I joined Stella and stared at the door leading to the basement, my brows furrowed in frustration. The spell woven around it was no ordinary lock; it was a clever concoction of enchantments designed to keep unwanted intruders at bay. And boy, did it seem determined to give us a hard time.

Selene, ever the observant one; traced her finger along the intricate runes carved into the doorframe. “This spell is layered, Phoebe. It’s going to take some serious magical firepower to break through.”

Layla’s wolf-shifter instincts sharp as ever, paced restlessly nearby. She growled softly, her eyes trained on the sealed entrance. “I can feel the dark energy pulsating from behind that door. Whatever they’re hiding, it’s powerful.”

I nodded, my mind racing with possibilities. We needed a plan, and we needed it fast. “Alright, ladies, let’s put our heads together. How do we unravel this enchanted mess?”

Stella’s eyes lit up with an idea. “Given what we know about this witch, I bet this is fueled by blood magic. If we can counteract it with a purifying

spell, we might be able to weaken its hold."

I grinned, impressed as always by Stella's brilliant mind. "Purifying spell it is, then."

The three of us formed a tight circle, our hands interlocking, drawing upon our collective magic. The air crackled with energy as we channeled our combined strength into a single purpose. The room grew warmer, as if the very walls could feel our determination.

With a surge of power, we chanted the purifying spell, unleashing it upon the door. The runes shimmered and faded under our onslaught. But the spell fought back, a formidable opponent unwilling to be defeated so easily. It resisted, pushing against our magic with a tenacity that was almost infuriating.

Fortunately, we were stubborn and I had enough power to fuel a small city. I poured more energy into the spell, my determination unwavering. The door trembled, its resistance weakening with every passing second. Finally, with a resounding crack, the enchantments shattered and granted us access to the locked basement.

Layla snarled as she came racing into the room. "There's blood down there."

My heart was in my throat as we cautiously descended the stairs, our eyes scanning the dimly lit space. It felt heavy with ancient secrets and untold mysteries. As we reached the bottom, my breath caught in my throat. The walls were adorned with chilling symbols, a twisted tapestry of dark magic. This is how she kept the tribred hidden from us.

Pulling out my phone, I snapped pictures to show Tarja. Amidst the darkness and camera flashes, I spotted it. Written in crimson, as if freshly painted, were the words "Better luck next time." The metallic scent of blood lingered in the air, a grim reminder that our enemy was always one step ahead.

Layla snarled from right behind me. "That's wolf's blood."

My heart clenched and skipped a beat. "It is Kaida?"

One corner of Layla's lip lifted. "I can't tell. There's too much magic surrounding it."

Stella's eyes blazed with a mix of anger and defiance. "We won't rest until we unravel their schemes and put an end to their wicked plans."

As we stood there, staring at the ominous message on the wall a silent promise passed between us. We would face whatever challenges lay ahead,

united and stronger than ever. I moved to look through the basement as my anger built.

With a shared nod, Layla and I took a step forward, our footsteps echoing in the eerie silence of the basement. The scent of ancient magic hung in the air, urging me to press on, to uncover the secrets that lay within these walls. Selene and Stella finally joined us from where they'd been on the bottom stair.

Together we moved as one, navigating the labyrinthine corridors of the surprisingly large basement. Each turn brought us closer to the heart of the mystery, closer to the answers we sought. I could feel the weight of Kaida's parents' grief and loss resting upon my shoulders, urging me to succeed in finding her.

Finally, we reached a chamber bathed in an ethereal glow. Symbols danced upon the walls, pulsating with a primal energy. In the center of the room stood a mystical artifact, radiating power that threatened to overwhelm our senses. It was a precious stone, a tiger's eye if I wasn't mistaken. It was the size of a baby's fist.

I exchanged determined glances with my friends. "Do you think this is a trap?"

Stella grimaced. "Given this witch's flair for the dramatic, I'd say yes."

Taking a deep breath, I raised my hand, channeling the energy within me and sent it out to feel for a trigger. The artifact responded, its magic intertwining with mine, creating a surge of power that reverberated through the chamber and made us all jump back.

"Tarja," I called out mentally. "*Are you sensing this? What should I do with it?*"

"*It is an Object of Power. One stolen many eons ago. The All-Seeing Eye. It cannot be twisted to do her dirty work. But I don't get why she would leave it there like that. That's suspect. Do not enter the room. The real trap is the symbols that are no doubt hidden around the Eye. Having the magic feel safe is meant to lull you into a false sense of security.*"

An idea came to me. "I'm going to use a telekinesis spell to lift it." I said that aloud and sent it to Tarja.

"*Channel the energy from your babies. They aren't likely to set off the wards.*"

Doing as instructed, I pulled their distinct power close to my core and chanted. The tiger's eye lifted a second later. It seemed as if it were moving

through mud to get to me. It never reached me as visions flashed in the air before us. They were fragments of the past. Events we'd been part of and those we hadn't. And then we got a glimpse of the future. Kaida bleeding out on a wooden floor.

Nausea churned in my stomach, sending bile surging up my throat like a geyser. Between one blink and the next, the artifact disappeared with a flash and the symbols in the room activated. I pushed Layla at the same time Selene pushed Stella.

"Get out!" I made it to the bottom step as electricity traveled throughout the entire basement, frying everything in its path.

Rage boiled in my stomach when I thought of this little girl being used like a puppet. It was my job to stop this evil witch. "This bitch is sending us on a wild fucking goose chase and I'm tired of it." We reached the kitchen and I headed for the door closest to us. I needed fresh air.

"It's like she keeps handing us a map adorned with intricate trails and cryptic symbols, promising a treasure at the end. In this instance the treasure is Kaida," Stella said as we looked out at a barren backyard.

That was very true and as we followed the turns, our steps guided by hope and anticipation, we seemed to be endlessly chasing elusive geese that darted and scattered in all directions. Our pursuit had become a maze of frustration and futility. It felt as if the true destination would remain forever out of reach, like a mirage shimmering on the distant horizon.

Each detour and false lead had become a twist of the knife, teasing us with the illusion of progress while the true purpose of the chase slipped further away. It's a journey that took us across the country, through tangled thickets and treacherous terrain. Only to leave us empty-handed, our efforts expended in pursuit of a phantom prize. The wild goose chase became a metaphorical vortex, swirling with misplaced hopes and wasted energy; a never-ending quest that led only to a trail of feathers and echoing laughter in the wind.

Anger scoured me from the inside when I thought of everything that had happened. My body began to shake, as if an earthquake were rocking everything, like I was standing on a balance table at the gym. I never was very good at mastering that damn thing. Deep breath in and out. The calming method wasn't doing shit so I turned and stormed out the back door of the house.

"Where the hell are you going?" Stella called out.

I held up a hand and sent a blast of warning to stop my friends from following me. I couldn't look back as my rage detonated. I glanced back right before I reached the middle of the yard. I'd barely turned away from my friends when my magic exploded out of me. The force of it actually shook the ground, blew out the windows of the houses all around us, and caused one roof to cave in. And the only thought running through my head at the moment was I wished the bitch was nearby so she was crushed.

CHAPTER 14



“*I* want to scry for Kaida again.”

Mom’s jaw dropped, the tips of her fangs showing as she stared at me like I’d gone off the deep end. The expression took me back to when I was a teenager and had told her I wanted a tattoo. The look deterred me entirely. The memory of the past vanished as I glanced at her fangs. So, the potion didn’t work. I tried to see if she still had the fur on her body without being obvious. My gaze skittered away when I felt like I was failing miserably.

And what do you know, my peepers landed on Nana who historically supported me. To Mom’s surprise, Nana dipped her head. “That’s smart. The witch will expect you to give up after being set up so many times.”

“I agree. And even if she doesn’t, when I force my way past her magic, she won’t be prepared to stop me.” I turned my head to check Mom’s reaction but couldn’t see her without going full Linda Blair.

Selene clapped me on the arm. “It’s worth a try. We can’t allow that vision to come true.”

Stella wiped a tear from her eye. “No freaking way.”

Mom scrubbed the counter with vigor. “I also want to create another potion. Can we do that after you do your scrying? With more tribred witches at the house, we need a way to help them. The first worked wonders. I have made peace with my wolf.” Mom pulled the sleeve of her top up to show her fur was now gone. “The growling has stopped. But the fangs refuse to abate as does the craving for blood.”

Mom never ceased to amaze me. She’d had a rough time right after she was changed but she’d rallied and improved beyond anything I imagined.

“You want to give your vamp side another nudge.”

She nodded and pushed the family grimoire to me. “The vampire is strong. I think the second potion will force the vampire to bend but it might be needed on an on-going basis.”

I read the page in front of me. Mom called the potion Sanguis Supremus. The ingredients and steps were the most intricate I’d ever seen. I was in awe over what Mom had created. I’d heard Tarja tell her she was a talented kitchen witch many times, but I never realized the depth of what that meant. Seeing something I’d only ever read in a book highlighted precisely where her talents were. Without a doubt, she was going to turn the world of potions on its head.

I smiled at her with all the love and pride I felt for her front and center. “Your kitchen witchery skills are growing. This is amazing. We will make this after we have some lunch and scry again for Kaida. We can’t stop looking for her. Time is running out.”

“Very impressive work, Mollie. Binx consulted with me and we have some minor additions that will increase the strength. We will discuss that when they are done scrying again.”

Mollie scratched behind Binx’s ears. “Thank you, Tarja. I have a feeling I know what you’re talking about. I have the scrying bowl over here and Nana finished making more scrying water an hour ago.”

Nana got off her stool and picked up the glass jug of water. “Let’s do this in the living room. It’s bigger and more comfortable now.”

One of my eyebrows lifted as I grabbed the candles from the desk. “Did you tell Hades that?”

Nana snorted as she set the jug on the coffee table. “That man’s ego is big enough.”

Selene came in with the bowl right as Nina came in the side door. “Are we scrying again?”

I explained the situation to her and she immediately called Charley and Reece. Their bond has grown strong, much stronger than any friendships Nina had ever had.

Selene set the circle and lit the candles while Mom brought Kaida’s brush in from the kitchen. I knelt at the end of the coffee table while everyone gathered around. I was ready to scry when Stella’s girls arrived. They silently joined us as I leaned over the scrying bowl, my eyes fixed on the swirling depths of the water. Beside me were Stella and Selene, whose faces reflected

both determination and concern.

Looking away, I focused my energy and intent. "Let's see how you like the game turned on you," I muttered as I fed my spell energy that I drew from Aidon.

The images within the bowl finally shifted and transformed, like a kaleidoscope of possibilities. First came the field of vibrant flowers that danced before my eyes, each petal a brushstroke of color. It was almost mesmerizing, if it weren't for the urgency of our task, I would get lost in it.

"Great," I muttered, my voice laced with a hint of sarcasm. "Another scenic tour of Mother Nature's finest. Just what we needed."

Stella shot me a sideways glance, a flicker of amusement in her eyes. "Oh, come on, Phoebe. Can't you appreciate the beauty of nature once in a while?"

I shrugged, a smirk playing at the corner of my lips. "Sure, but right now, I'd prefer a GPS coordinates overlay to Kaida's location on top of those flowers. You know, something more practical."

Selene, always the calm and composed one interjected, her voice carrying a soothing tone. "You need to trust your plan Phoebe."

I sighed and refocused my attention on the scrying bowl. The images continued to shift and suddenly, the flowers gave way to a series of houses. Some were quaint and charming, while others were a little more shall we say, eccentric.

"Well, well," I muttered under my breath, a mischievous glint in my eyes. "Looks like we're getting a real estate tour now. Wonder if any of these houses come with a free spirit haunting."

Stella chuckled softly, her gaze fixed on the rotating images. "Hey, you never know. A haunted house might actually be our ticket to finding the missing child. Stranger things have happened."

I shot her a teasing smile. "Oh, absolutely. Who needs good old-fashioned detective work when we can just ask a ghost for directions?"

As the images continued to shift, I could sense a subtle resistance, a magical barrier trying to keep us from the true location. But I wasn't one to back down easily. With a determined glint in my eyes I channeled my energy, pushing against the invisible force like a battering ram.

I managed to find a hole in the force and wormed my way inside. Suddenly, a new image appeared before us—a restaurant. The sign outside read "Seaside Munchies." I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the name. I

hadn't seen it since returning home a year ago.

"Well, looks like our little tour led us straight to a fine dining establishment," I quipped, my tone dripping with playful sarcasm. "Who knew the missing child would have a sudden craving for seafood?"

Selene chuckled softly and her voice was tinged with a hint of amusement. "Life just keeps throwing us curveballs and we have to roll with it."

I grinned. My determination renewed. "Rolling, floating, teleporting...you name it. Let's find that missing child and put a stop to this mystical mystery dinner."

Mom gestured to the water that was now clear. "That restaurant has been closed since the Pandemic."

"Well, that fits right in with this witch's bullshit," I said as I rubbed my eyes and yawned.

Nina bent over and blew out the candles. "You need some rest, Mom. You've been awake for two days."

We hadn't found Kaida. I opened my mouth and closed it when my body felt like it was falling. A quick check confirmed I wasn't actually moving. Getting vertical was suddenly impossible. I shuffled the three feet to the couch. "You have a point. I'm just going to close my eyes for a few minutes then we will be ready to make Mom's potion then go out for some lobster rolls."

Nina helped me onto the sofa. I sighed as my head hit the pillow and my eyes slipped closed. The last thing I recall was someone putting a blanket over me.

It felt like I hadn't been out for more than a few minutes when my bladder woke me. I shot up and off the couch like a rocket then raced for the bathroom. I lifted a hand to my family. It took a bit for my mind to reboot. I was peeing when I realized everyone was in the kitchen and it was dark outside. Not that the latter meant much. At this time of year, the sun disappeared early in the day.

I splashed water on my face after I washed my hands. "Thanks for letting me get some rest. Should we cook dinner before we get started on the potion?" I gestured to the stairs that went down to the Sanctum.

Mom cocked her head to the side. "Dinner was hours ago. It's nearly midnight and time is of the essence."

My eyes popped open. "What? Why did you let me sleep so long? We

have to get cracking so we can go check out the restaurant.” I was tempted to skip the potion, but I'd promised myself and my family I would prioritize them more. And Mom needed to meld the new parts of herself.

“We need to go outside so Nina can harvest the mint and basil at the right time. I told her you would walk her through how to do that, Phoebe.”

My gaze sought out my familiar when I heard her comment in my head. “Absolutely. Can you fill me in on what the plan is as we go out to the greenhouse?”

Mom picked up a basket with a smile on her face. “I debated picking the citrus for the potion on the astral plane and the mint and basil under the full moon. My confidence isn't where I want it to be and I needed Tarja and Binx to confirm I was on the right track.”

“Like I told you, Mollie. It's because you don't know the properties of everything or how different collection methods impact things. As you learn, you won't question your instinct so much,” Binx told Mom.

Everything around me felt faraway and surreal as I processed that information and we walked the short distance to the greenhouse. Astral fruit collection after midnight herb collection. That was all I really needed to know. Mom would take care of the rest.

Dammit. My mind refused to stop spinning with possibilities. The astral plane held a myriad of wonders and dangers, but being on my heavily warded property we would be fine. Having worked that out, my mind settled.

Nina's eyes sparkled with anticipation as she held the ceremonial athame. Charley nudged her shoulder. “Can I hold it? Does it have a lot of energy?”

Nina turned the hilt to her friend with a nod. “It's got some serious power.”

The three teenagers talked about the feel of the dagger as we made our way to the herbs. Mom and Nana pushed the windows out so the moon bathed the plants. Tarja jumped up onto the ledge, as did Binx.

Stopping next to them, I glanced at my daughter and her friends. “First focus your intention on the herbs before you girls. Feel their energy, their life force as if they're communicating with you. Connect with their essence. It's how you will ensure you are harnessing their true power.”

As I spoke, Nina closed her eyes, her fingers touching the basil and mint. I could sense the energy shifting in the room, a subtle hum filling the air. The full moon's energy seeped into the greenhouse, infusing it with a potent magic that danced among the leaves.

“Now, repeat after me as we beseech the moon to impart her power.” I waited until Nina opened her eyes and was ready to continue. “*Luna, domina noctis et magicae potentiae, Tuam vigorem herbis impertire precor.*” Every witch in the place chanted with Nina, filling the glass enclosed building with enough power that it made my body hum along with the energy already singing around us.

A smile spread over my mouth as I luxuriated in the feel of that energy. “Now you bring the athame to the herbs. You only cut their leaves. With each slice, visualize the energy of the moon fusing inside the plants. Picture the herbs growing stronger as they are imbued with the essence of the full moon.”

Nina's movements were deliberate and her hand steady as she performed each stroke. The silver blade of the athame glimmered under the moonlight, as if drawing the energy from the celestial sphere itself. The basil and mint seemed to respond, their leaves shimmering with a newfound radiance.

“You're doing brilliantly, Nina. Keep channeling that moon's energy into the herbs, allowing their potency to intensify. Feel the magic flowing through you, an extension of your own power.”

As the ritual continued, a sense of harmony enveloped the room. The energy crackled and swirled around us, intertwining with the sweet scent of basil and mint. Nina's connection with the herbs grew stronger with each passing moment, her confidence radiating from her.

With one final stroke of the athame, Nina withdrew it from the herbs. The air around us tingled with potent magic. The basket of herbs seemed to glow with an ethereal light, a testament to the successful infusion of lunar energy.

Nina opened her eyes, her gaze meeting mine with a mixture of awe and accomplishment. “Mom, I could feel the power build as the spell took effect and brought the moon's energy into the plants.” My eyes teared up from how her voice was filled with wonder.

Charley looked to Stella. “I want to learn how to do this too. I know my magic isn't much, but I love learning this stuff.”

“*Your power is just as important as Phoebe's or your mom's,*” Tarja said. “*Never underestimate how important you are. Your uniqueness is what makes you vital.*”

Charley beamed at my familiar. “Can I go to the astral plane too?”

Stella's eyes bugged out. I placed a hand on her arm. “You can follow the steps with us, but leave the harvesting to us. It's going to be a challenge and

you will need more practice before you can master an advanced skill like that. Nina and Reece, that goes for you, too.”

All three girls nodded their heads as we moved to a sitting area just outside of the greenhouse. We all took our seats while Layla remained on her feet, standing guard over us. I took a deep breath, my eyes sweeping across the room to meet the expectant gazes around me.

It was time to embark on a journey to the astral plane, a realm where possibilities were endless and the mundane laws of reality held no sway. The task at hand was simple, yet required finesse and control.

“Alright,” I began, my voice carrying a confident tone. “Do we know how many oranges, limes, and lemons we need to collect from the astral plane?”

Mom chewed on her lower lip. “I’d like to collect a dozen of each, if possible. I want to have some potion on hand to share with the others.”

I inclined my head. “Sounds good. Now, this task will require us to tap into our magical abilities and navigate through the ethereal realm.”

Stella nodded in agreement. “Lead the way, Phoebe. We’re ready.”

My stomach chose that moment to rumble loudly. Ignoring my hunger or its message, I said, “We use the astral projection spell. Once we are in our spirit forms, we need to go out to the grove of fruit trees on the property.”

Stella pointed at me across the table. “You know if I hadn’t gotten magic, I’d have never figured this out. It’s next to impossible to grow citrus here. Having pixies and brownies living here are serious perks.”

“This is a serious task. Remember, some malevolent spirits haunt the spiritual plane searching for a witch to latch onto. And while there is no safer place than Nimaha to practice on the astral plane, there is still a risk.”

Tarja’s reminder sobered everyone. I shifted my position making the others follow suit as we formed a circle. We joined our hands and chanted the incantation, *“proiectura astral.”* The words flowing effortlessly from our lips. As the incantation reached its crescendo, a surge of energy pulsed through our joined hands.

My stomach dropped to my feet as my soul was sucked from my body. The black hole we traveled through lasted no more than a second. It always left me sick to my stomach. It was worse this time. Lights flashed like a strobe light, making me gag and dry heave with the others in the same boat. Being in this state was incredibly disconcerting and it took a minute to adjust. The astral plane greeted us with a kaleidoscope of vibrant colors and swirling

energy, a surreal landscape that defied logic.

"Whoa. Why is this basket the only thing here that's glowing that color?" Charley asked.

Stella chuckled and picked it up. "It's what transfers the herbs or fruit in this case, to the physical realm after being gathered here." She held it out and Charley took it with a huge smile.

Reece trailed her hand over a belladonna plant as we walked out and headed to the fruit trees. "What the?" She yanked her hand back. "That plant feels like a prickling, coolness but it's faint."

Stella pointed at a jalapeno pepper bush. "That one feels like touching the end of a thumbtack. Each plant has a unique texture to it here."

The girls touched everything as we walked to the fruit trees. Stella, Selene, Mom, and I made quick work of gathering the fruit and before I knew it, we were returning to our bodies.

Layla shoved a sandwich into my hand the second I was back in the real world. "Your stomach keeps growling. You need to feed those damn babies."

I took a huge bite and chewed as we got up and returned to the house. "Thank you, Layla. I didn't want to waste more time when I found out how late it was. Has Aidon returned?" I took another big bite of the delicious turkey and avocado sandwich.

She shook her head. "He's still taking care of his father. He said he would be back as soon as he could."

My heart thumped as I ached from missing him. It was silly. We hadn't been away from each other for long. I nodded to Layla and grabbed a ginger ale from the fridge as the others went to the Sanctum. I snagged chips before I joined them.

I watched as Mom meticulously laid out the ingredients on the table, her hands steady and sure. The air in the room crackled with a mix of anticipation and apprehension.

Carefully measuring the ingredients, Mom began the process. Her movements fluid and precise. She added dried vervain leaves, a symbol of protection and purification to the mix, their earthy aroma filling the air. Next, she sprinkled in crushed moonstone, its ethereal glow shimmering like distant starlight.

As the ingredients blended together, Mom recited an incantation. Her voice carrying a mix of determination and vulnerability. The words resonated deep within the core of her being. It was a plea to the forces of nature, a plea

for balance and harmony.

The mixture simmered in the cauldron as I ate my chips. Wisps of steam rose and swirled in an intricate dance. Mom's gaze remained fixed on the potion, her eyes reflecting a mix of hope and resolve. She knew that this brew held the key to taming the hunger that coursed through her veins.

After what seemed like an eternity, Mom carefully strained the mixture then returned it to the pot and added the last ingredients. Once it was mixed thoroughly, she poured it into a crystal vial. The liquid pulsed with a subdued energy. She held it up to the light. The completed tincture was a symbol of her journey, a testament to her strength and resilience.

With a deep breath Mom turned to me, her eyes filled with a mix of determination and vulnerability. "Tell me this is going to work."

I nodded, my own emotions running high. This was a pivotal moment, not just for Mom but for our entire family. I stood beside her, offering my unwavering support. "It's going to work like a charm."

Mom held the vial to her lips and drank the potion in one swift motion. Her expression flickered with a mix of trepidation and hope as she set the empty vial down.

Nina gestured to her mouth. "Well, how do you feel? Do you still crave blood?"

Mom cocked her head to the side. "I think it's gone. I don't feel my fangs. I've been shoving the cravings into a box so long that I'm not sure if they're gone but I think so."

A smile broke out over my face. "I told you it was going to work. You did it, Mom. You've saved numerous lives with what you've accomplished. And made history!"

Tears filled Mom's eyes as she wrapped her arms around me. Her hold was much stronger than it used to be as she held me close. Her energy was still different, but she no longer felt like she was spinning out in all directions.

"I lov...ow," I blurted as I felt two sharp needles stab into my shoulder. Recognition dawned immediately. Mom had just sunk her fangs into my flesh. She was drinking my blood.

CHAPTER 15



“*A* hhhhh!” The scream left my mouth before I was able to bite it back because realization had dawned on Mom and she’d ripped herself away from me. My hand flew to the bleeding wound with Nina’s following a second later.

Nana handed me a kitchen towel while Stella ran from the room. Charley and Reece stood with wide eyes while Mom stood with her hands over her mouth. “I’m so sorry.” Her tears flowed down her cheeks and her face crinkled with her despair.

Nana reached for Mom. “We know you didn’t mean to harm Phoebe and you stopped before you really hurt her.”

The corner of Reece’s lips wobbled as she lifted them. “I bet that was your vampire fighting against the spell before the potion got hold of it.”

Mom shook her head from side to side. “I can’t.” Faster than I could track, Mom raced out of the kitchen.

Taking the towel from Nina, I ran after her. When I caught her before she hit the stairs, I hoped that meant she wanted to be stopped. Her fear, guilt, and sadness were like a third person in the entry with us. “Mom wait. You aren’t going back to your room to sulk for another month. We are going to work this through. Reece might be right. You’ve hugged me before and never done that.”

Mom’s shoulder sagged as she sobbed. “I’m always going to be a monster. I’m not safe.”

The others joined us and Layla wrapped an arm around Mom. “We’re going to work this out as a family. We aren’t afraid of you.”

Charley held out a mug of tea out to Mom. “I’ll admit that scared me until

I saw your fear. I'm sorry you don't know where you fit in. There's nothing worse. Seeing you like that reminded me of the time I tried out for cheerleading. I wanted to be accepted into their group." I thought of my teenage years and the turmoil of trying out different hats to fit in somewhere. Yeah, Charley was right about her assessment. Mom was going through a similar journey to rediscover who she was and where she fit.

Stella handed me some gauze and I replaced the towel. Next, Reece handed me a vial of healing potion. With a nod of thanks, I drank the potion while keeping pressure on the wound. It had an angry heartbeat that burned with every pulse. The grunt of pain that left me when I tipped my head back echoed throughout the kitchen and set me on edge.

Nina distracted Mom from going down the rabbit hole while I composed myself and let the healing potion start to work. "You said you felt better right after you drank the potion." Nina went right to the heart of the issue. "When did that change?"

Mom sniffled as she took the mug from Charley. "That's the thing. I still feel better. The bloodlust isn't gone entirely. It's in the background. Like when you're starting to get hungry. It's this low-level hum that hasn't left, but it isn't driving me."

That sounded like she had indeed subdued her vampire which left me confused about the bite. It was clear to me she didn't know it was going to happen. Her surprise was as profound as mine. "What were you thinking when you bit me?" I dropped my hand and was happy to note the bleeding had stopped

Mom's gaze went right to the wound on my neck. "It was like a snake inside me that lifted its head and struck before I knew what was happening." It was a relief to see her concern rather than the desire to continue feeding from me. It helped that her tears had dried up as well.

"That fits with Reece's theory," Stella pointed out. "Do you sense that snake now?"

A smile broke over Mom's face. "Not at all. The wolf and vampire are there along with my magic, but they aren't fighting each other anymore. My mind is no longer filled with snarling and anger."

My body stiffened when I saw my mate crossing the backyard. He was going to be concerned about what had happened. Aidon's eyes went right to my neck the second he walked in the backdoor. "Did Mollie bite you?" His tone was curious rather than the anger I expected. It hit me as I stood there,

tensed that my anticipation was based on past experiences that had nothing to do with how Aidon treated me or my family.

As my shoulders relaxed, I probed the skin gently, careful not to tear the parts that were sealing together. "She needed another potion to get her vampire under control and it didn't like that very much."

Mom's lower lip trembled. "I couldn't control it at the time. I would never hurt Phoebe or the babies on purpose."

Aidon crossed to Mom and wrapped his arms around her. "I see where Phoebe gets her strength from. You would die to protect them just like me. Aside from Mollie mastering her beasts, what have you guys discovered? How did the visit to the house go?"

Stella and I filled Aidon in on the latest, including the restaurant we were going to visit. "I know you have responsibilities here, so you don't have to go with us. We can fill you in later."

Aidon's intense gaze held me captive as he scanned me and settled on my neck. "I'd like to go with you this time. It's not far, so I can get to my father quickly if need be."

Layla snagged her car keys from the cabinet by the desk. "You should change out of that shirt unless you want to play the part of murder victim to frighten the mundies. Halloween is months away."

Nana chuckled. "Phoebe pulls off bloody-chic very well. There are some tops in the laundry on the folding table. I haven't taken them up yet."

Pressing a kiss to Nana's cheek, I said, "I pull off white after Labor Day too. Love you."

Nana smirked at me as she turned to Mom and the girls. "You need to make more healing potion, before Phoebe uses up what we've got."

Mom's reply was music to my ears, "Definitely, and I've been working out a couple others - an anti-nausea one that's safe during pregnancy and an energy potion that won't affect the babies."

I thought about how much I loved them as I tore off my shirt and grabbed a purple one from the top of the pile. Then I grabbed the charcoal grey one instead. I didn't want to mortify Tseki with something that clashed with my neon purple leggings.

I should have changed my bra but the blood was minimal on the strap. With a new shirt on, I hurried to the side door, grabbing my crossbody bag on the way. The tinkle of glass reminded me I still had a few potions in my arsenal. I'd have to keep that in mind. We'd been working on offensive tonics

that could help, given how wonky my magic was getting. It seemed stable right now, but it's nice to have back-up.

Aidon was waiting for me with the back door open. I jumped in and scooted over, when he went to sit next to me. Layla took off and Stella handed me a burrito over her seat. "I grabbed a burrito from Mythia since you didn't eat much. Between the babies and blood loss, I figured you could use it."

The smell of peanut sauce intrigued me as I grabbed it from my best friend. "You're the best. It seems as if I am always hungry these days. Did you grab your dagger?" Fiona's mate Sebastian was the best weapons master in the world and created a pair for each of us. Fiona had enchanted them to return to our homes if they were ever lost, which was pretty damn handy considering I lost mine routinely during battles.

Stella grimaced and shook her head. "I haven't been home to get it. I should have told the girls to bring it when they came to help with the potion."

I pulled mine out and handed it to her. "Take these. I have some Crippling Shadows, Thunderous Havoc, and the Pyroclasmic Inferno."

The latter was a potion that ignited the very air around any foe. The flames danced and twisted at our command, engulfing adversaries in a searing blaze. Selene and Mom created that potion for us because fire was often our best weapon. This tonic was something that extinguished quickly so the risk of the fire spreading was minimal. Our witch fire wasn't always a good choice because it would burn out of control if we got distracted.

The Crippling Shadows conjured a dense shroud of suffocating darkness around the target. The shadows wrapped tightly around the enemy, impeding their movement and rendering them temporarily paralyzed. And the Thunderous Havoc unleashed a powerful burst of deafening energy. The downfall of that spell is that we couldn't effectively direct the shockwave that rippled through the air, causing intense vibrations and disorienting our opponents and any allies in the vicinity. So, we only used that when we were sure there were no friendlies nearby—or in desperation.

Stella glanced down at herself. "The dagger will be enough. I don't want to put one of these in my bra and have them accidentally break."

I winced at Stella's comment as Layla pulled into the parking lot. The vehicle bumped over cracked and buckled pavement that looked like it had been hit with a Thunderous Havoc a time or ten.

As the night enveloped the desolate streets, our small band of warriors

found ourselves standing before the dilapidated shell of an abandoned restaurant. The air hung heavy with an eerie stillness, as if the very atmosphere sensed the impending clash between good and evil.

With determination etched on our faces, we stepped through the shattered entrance, our weapons at the ready. The once-vibrant eatery now lay in ruins, its walls stained with the remnants of forgotten meals and faded memories. Broken chairs and overturned tables littered the floor, casting eerie shadows in the dim light.

The scent of decay mixed with a hint of malevolence hung in the air, fueling our resolve to find the witch that had set us on this wild goose chase. What did she have in store for us this time? Aidon, Stella, Layla, and I made our way through the depressing interior searching for any sign of Kaida and the witch who kidnapped her.

With a shared nod, we advanced into the heart of the restaurant. The creaking floorboards beneath our feet added an ominous soundtrack to our mission, each step a reminder of the treacherous ground we tread upon. Shadows danced on the walls, casting fleeting illusions that threatened to distract us from our purpose.

As we neared the center of the room, a sudden surge of malevolent energy crackled through the air. As Stella reached the broken double doors leading to the kitchen, she screeched and jumped backward. A demon that was a cross between a dragon and a giant bat pushed the sagging panels open, making them hit the wall with enough force to embed them in the drywall. Behind him stood many more like it. Aidon had also mentioned the skallax was incredibly intelligent and able to work together with other monsters.

The demons' leathery wings beat silently as they bared sharp teeth and claws. We all pulled a duck and cover when they emitted a disorienting high-pitched screech. I recalled Aidon telling me that noise was designed to make prey lose their balance. Aidon's eyes gleamed with the intensity inherited from his godly lineage as he chanted in a foreign language. It wasn't ancient Greek. It was harsh and guttural, and based on the widening of his eyes, wasn't having the impact he expected.

"Can't you make them back down?" I asked.

Aidon's lips pursed and he slanted his head once to the side. "They aren't responding and I can't grab hold of them, either."

Layla gaped at him. "Aren't you their god?"

Aidon raced to Stella as she tried to back away from the horde. "Yes, but

I'm not all-powerful." His wings shot from his back, making several of the demons skitter backward.

I felt a surge in power as the demons got back into action. I locked onto the signature. "The witch is controlling them." I wanted to follow her but the skallax were attacking. "How the hell did she get this many through the Hellmouth without us knowing?"

Aidon didn't respond as he conjured a sword and sliced through the horde. Bat wings dropped along with arms and skulls. Stella clutched the daggers I lent her and stabbed at those closest to her. Layla's wolf instincts were on high alert as she prowled beside me. Her keen senses scanning for any movement.

From the shadows emerged more skallax demons, their monstrous forms leaping forward with an unearthly agility. Their eyes glowed with a sickly green hue, promising untold horrors in their wake.

Battle cries mingled with the clash of steel as we engaged the demons in combat. Aidon's sword gleamed as he deftly parried and struck with deadly precision, his movements a testament to his divine heritage. My hand dove into my bag. As I felt the rough texture of crystals on the bottom, instinct told me to wrap my fingers around them and pull them out. When I did, they unleashed cascades of sparkling energy, disorienting the demons and leaving them vulnerable to Layla's swift attacks.

I ducked to get to Stella, while Layla took care of those closest to us, and got caught in the midst of the chaos. Out of crystals, I fought with all my might, the adrenaline pumping through my veins. But in a moment of misstep, my ankle twisted under me, sending a searing pain through my leg. I gritted my teeth, refusing to let the injury hinder me, even as I stumbled.

Aidon's gaze met mine, concern etched into his features. "Queenie, are you alright?" he called out, his voice laced with worry.

I pushed through the pain, determination fueling my every move. "I'm fine, just a little twist." With renewed determination, I channeled my magic, conjuring witch fire that danced along my outstretched palms. I unleashed the fiery inferno upon the demons, their screams of agony filling the air.

I considered using the Pyroclasmic Inferno instead, so I didn't have to worry about my flames spreading out of control. I opted for remaining focused on my witch fire. It took my mind off my ankle. Together we fought relentlessly, our unity and unwavering resolve a force to be reckoned with. My babies protected me more than once against the demonic forces. I refused

to let my pain hinder me, unleashing my power alongside my comrades.

Finally, the last of the skallax demons fell, their malevolence dissipating into the ether. We stood amidst the wreckage, panting heavily; victorious, yet weary. Aidon rushed to my side with concern etched into his features. "Let me tend to your ankle," he murmured, his touch gentle as he assessed the damage. As the adrenaline subsided, the pain surged through me, reminding me of my injury. I winced, leaning on Aidon for support, grateful for his presence.

We had emerged triumphant, but not unscathed. The abandoned restaurant bore the marks of our battle. Its walls scorched and its floor littered with the remnants of our clash with the skallax demons.

Stella wiped blood and guts from her forehead. "Do you have any healing potions?"

I shook my head. "Not on me. Let's look for a message. That witch had to have left another one."

Aidon wrapped an arm around my waist as I limped through the building. The hall where the bathroom was located smelled like a century old outhouse and had bile surging like a geyser in the back of my throat. A scan of both bathrooms and an office resulted in nothing. We didn't come across anything. Layla and Stella came out of the kitchen shaking their heads.

Several curses floated through my head. "I need to summon my psychic detective powers so we locate this witch in the blink of an eye. We need to find Kaida. Unfortunately, it's like finding a unicorn in a crowded shopping mall. But hey, who doesn't love a good challenge?"

Stella's snort died as words began to appear on the far wall amidst the grease. I approached and felt the malevolent energy behind the spell powering it. "*Failed once more. World's worst overachievers.*"

My anger spiked fast and hard and some of my magic blasted out of me and into the cement flooring. The entire building shook, tables toppled, and glass shattered. Aidon picked me up and carried me swiftly out the door. Layla grabbed Stella and we were all at the car before part of the ceiling fell in. The smoke cloud was thick and sent dust flying through the air at us.

A moment later we were on our way, with Layla speeding through the worst of it. I looked across at Aidon. "We need to talk to your father about how these demons keep coming here in droves. Is there some way Zaleria bribed one of her jailors? Could he be passing something from Zaleria to this bitch?"

Aidon lifted a shoulder and pulled out his cell phone. “Ordinarily, I would say no, but shit has been happening that no one can explain. One of her captors might be under this witch’s control.” He pressed a contact and brought the phone to his ear. “Hey, Mel. Is dad back? We need to talk to him.” He nodded his head and said, “Ask him to meet us at Phoebe’s house. We need to talk to him about recent demonic activity.”

Stella turned and laid her arm across the back of the front seat. The sleeve of her jacket lifted and I winced when I saw blood from her cuts seeping through the material. “Why didn’t you tell me you were hurt?” I demanded, while searching for something to wrap around her wounds.

Stella glanced down and cocked her head to the side. “Huh. They don’t hurt all that bad.”

“That’s because you have adrenaline coursing through your system,” I told her.

Stella tugged her sleeve down then wrapped a hand around her forearm. “I’ll drink a potion when we get to your house. How is your dad, Aidon? You said his use of his power like that would drain him. Is he recovered?”

My concern bounced from my friend to my father-in-law. “Yeah, the last thing I would want is for the demons to see him as weak and try to take him out. I can’t imagine he would fare very well if enough of them staged an uprising.”

“He wouldn’t have returned if he was still weakened,” Aidon promised as we pulled up to the house.

He helped me up the stairs and into the house. I kicked off one boot and he helped me take off the other. It hurt like a bitch and I was sweating by the time he got it, and my sock off. My ankle was a dark purple balloon. Aidon picked me up again and carried me into the kitchen.

Clio stood there with her hands on her hips. “What did you do now?”

I cringed at the exasperation in her tone. “It’s just a twisted ankle. Stella’s cut up. Help her first.” We continued to the living room.

Hades walked in as Clio started looking over Stella. “What can I do for you, son?”

Aidon propped my foot up on some pillows. “We encountered skallax demons tonight. More and more are coming through. Have you sensed a significant increase in the use of Blood magic lately?” It was the only explanation. The problem was, none of us had sensed it.

Hades sat on the coffee table and laid a hand on my stomach. I froze, my

wide eyes shooting to Aidon who was poised to rip his father from me.

“Someone had to have created a Shadow Key.”

The unusual touch forgotten as I replayed his words in my mind as if that would clarify what he’d said. “Excuse me, what the hell is a Shadow Key?”

A smile broke out over Hades’s face as he gazed at my belly. “It’s an artifact made from a black gemstone that absorbs and stores energy from the surrounding darkness, and is imbued with ancient spells that allow it to open portals to other dimensions.”

Aidon’s jaw clenched tight enough I heard something crack. “And we’re certain Zaleria isn’t involved? To use the Shadow Key to teleport demons through the Hellmouth undetected, the talisman must be activated by a powerful Lord of the Underworld.”

Hades’s anger made his skin scald me through my clothing. I yelped and tried to back away from him. Aidon smacked his father’s arm, sending him ass over tea kettle to the floor. “You ever hurt my mate again and I will rip you to pieces and throw them into Tartarus.”

Hades wasn’t looking at his son. He was staring at me as Clio lifted my shirt to reveal burn marks on my stomach right over my babies. “I would never harm her or my grandchildren. The question of Zaleria is getting old. I’m going to kill her when I return home next. As much as I wanted to make her suffer for centuries, I cannot stand the animosity she breeds.”

Clio’s healing warmth made the pain worse before it got better. The healer eyed Hades warily as she moved from the burn to my ankle. I cleared my throat and asked, “How could a Lord of the Underworld make something that would get him past our gate?”

Hades moved closer then stopped. His gaze remained rooted to my stomach as he explained more to us. “They must channel their energy through the Shadow Key, using it to open a portal to the other side of the Hellmouth. The demon and the witch must be working together. Only then can they control the portal's destination, allowing the demons to be teleported directly to their intended target, without being detected by any guardians or magical wards that may be in place.”

“Once the portal has been opened, the Shadow Key must be carefully deactivated to prevent any unwanted entities from slipping through. The talisman must be cleansed of any residual energy and stored in a secure location to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands. It’s an object anyone in the Underworld would kill to get their hands on.”

“I can imagine. Any way to get out,” I said.

Aidon’s hand landed on top of mine. “Not just for that reason. A Shadow Key is a powerful object that grants its owner the ability to enter any door or gate, no matter how secure. Creating a Shadow Key is considered extremely difficult and requires a great sacrifice.”

Hades nodded and knelt next to me. “May I? I promise not to hurt you. I want to apologize to the babes.”

I nodded and moved my hand and Aidon’s. “What kind of ingredients are we talking about? And who procures them?”

Hades laid his hand down and a powerful vibration moved through me. “To create a ShadowKey, one must first gather rare materials such as the bones of a phoenix and the hair of a unicorn. The witch or the lord can gather them. The witch places the materials in a special cauldron and melts them down into a liquid form. Next, the creator must find a powerful sorcerer who is willing to sacrifice a part of their soul. This sacrifice is essential for the sShadow Key to work, as it requires a piece of the sorcerer's soul to imbue the key with power.”

“The sorcerer must then recite a complex incantation while the liquid materials are poured into a mold of the key's shape. Once the incantation is complete, the mold is left to cool and harden. After the key has solidified, it is bathed in the blood of a demon to activate its power. This final step seals the key's connection to the Underworld, allowing it to unlock any door or gate that leads to the demon realm.”

Aidon pinched the bridge of his nose. “I never imagined a lord would be this stupid. Creating a Shadow Key is a dangerous process that requires the use of dark magic, rare materials, and a great sacrifice. As such, it is not a task to be taken lightly, and those who attempt it must be prepared to face the consequences of their actions.”

I should have known better than to think the Hellmouth was foolproof. Of course, there was a workaround. There usually was. I’d stupidly assumed it was one-hundred-proof here in Camden and let my guard down. Aidon was aware, yet he’d been joining me far too often and not doing his job in our town. And that gave the witch the chance to build her own little demonic army.

Was I happy that the demon problems on Earth had been cut in half with just the two Hellmouth? Absolutely. However, that number was growing once again thanks to the evil witches working against me and anyone else

hell bent on amassing their own power, at the expense of everyone else. Lesson learned. Aidon would be staying home far more often when I had to travel for cases. Tainted witches beware. Neither one of us will be happy about that. I was an unhappy middle-aged pregnant lady...that bitch had better watch out.

CHAPTER 16



I looked into Hades's eyes. "I am going to say something that will upset you. Please don't hurt my babies again, but what are the chances of a demon being able to meet an evil witch and develop enough of a friendship to agree to such a plan. I have to guess you'd skin them repeatedly for centuries for going against you."

Hades inclined his head, but his touch didn't burn me this time. The ringing of the doorbell interrupted our conversation. Mythia came in carrying the tablet showing the visitors on my porch. "I assume you knew they were coming?"

"Yes. I arranged their transportation while Mom was sleeping. I forgot to tell you." Nina raced to the door.

Everyone watched as six women walked into the house followed by Adele. Tarja and Binx went right for the cat as Dre and Lia stopped short of the archway leading to the living room. Dre's gaze remained rooted to the devil touching my stomach. "We came at a bad time. We will go."

Dani shook her head from the back of the group. "Not before we get a look at the spaces we will be working with. I can't make the final plans without seeing it. We can't check into our Air BNB until later, anyway."

Lia turned and glared at her sister. "It's not a good time."

Hades stood up, making the Twisted Sisters go silent. "Who do we have here?" Dani went pale and clamped her mouth shut. I sat up and introduced everyone.

Lia extended her hand first. "We never asked Athena how to address gods or goddesses. It's a pleasure."

Hades's eyebrows lifted in his hairline. "Ah. That's right. You're the new

talk of Olympus. First, it was Fiona and her friends.” His eyes flicked my way and turned calculating. “I suppose I have a middle-aged witch of my own, as well. And the most powerful of the group, no less.”

I rolled my eyes. “I am not your anything. And you guys are going to stay here with us. There’s no need for you to go to anywhere else.”

Aidon’s irritation flowed through me. “Don’t even think of using my mate to one up your fucking sisters. I will never let you see your grandchildren if you do.”

There were six gasps at that announcement. I winced and looked over to see the Twisted Sisters looking at me. I nodded in acknowledgement. They all spoke their congratulations over one another. “I hope we can prove our skill to you to return and do your baby shower,” Dani added after everyone had said their peace.

“I’ve seen the reels on your page. I’d love that. We have months to plan it. Right now, we need to find a missing little girl. She’s been gone for over a day and I have a Dark witch messing with me.”

“What happened?” Kota asked.

“And how can we help?” Lia said a second later.

“*You should scry with the sisters.*” Tarja suggested.

Mom held up her hand. “They can do that after a snack. I know the jet has food, but you’ve been traveling all day.”

Kota moved to join Mom. “I could use something to drink.”

“Is this your first time to Maine?” Nana asked the sisters.

When they all responded in the affirmative, Nana shot me a smile. “You know what they need to try, don’t you?”

Nina wrinkled her nose. “You’re talking about that soda, aren’t you?”

Dani cocked her head to the side. “What soda?” I could hear the disbelief in her tone. Like many people, she didn’t see why Nana would mention them trying a particular soda. It was unusual for sure. Many places had a food unique to them.

I smiled and got up to follow them to the kitchen. “It’s called Moxie soda and is a rite of passage for anyone visiting Maine. It’s considered America’s oldest bottled soda. In fact, it was among the first sodas in the US. It’s similar to root beer. Although, the aftertaste is a touch more bitter. And it was declared a Maine state beverage in 2005.”

Hades scowled at Nana. “And you have never offered this to me and Persephone?”

Nana waved a hand dismissing my father-in-law. “Oh, I apologize, Lord of the Underworld for not catering to your divine palate with our specialty soda. I must have overlooked the part where ruling over the realms of the dead entitled you to the exclusive beverages. My sincerest apologies for the grave oversight.”

Hades gaped at Nana as she and Mom bustled to fill cups with ice while Mythia retrieved the orange labeled bottles from the pantry. Lia picked one up and twisted it around. “That’s not creepy at all.” She was referring to the outline of a guy above the name.

I chuckled, having grown up with the beverage. “You get used to it.”

Hades made sure to get a glass as cups were handed out. He choked as he took a sip. “Moxie soda. Sweet treat? Or does it taste like feet?”

Lia chuckled and held her glass up. “My vote is firmly in the feet column.”

Kota took a second sip. “It’s not that bad.”

Dre nodded in agreement. “It’s not kombucha.”

Dea set her glass down. “I can feel your urgency. How can we help you find this child?”

My gut clenched. I forgot Deandra was an empath. There was no use denying it. “Honestly, I’d love your involvement in scrying for her location.”

Nina groaned. “Again? You just got back from fighting a horde of skallax demons. All you’re going to get is another location filled with monsters trying to kill you.”

I wrapped an arm around my daughter. “I can’t explain it, but we need to keep scrying for her. We don’t have any other leads.”

Mom pursed her lips as she put the dirty dishes in the sink. “There’s that store downtown where you encountered the wards you couldn’t cross.”

“True. And we would have searched the place if Sullivan hadn’t been able to get inside to do a search of his own. Sully scented Kaida but found no sign she was being held there. He was able to search every inch of the place,” I said.

Nana wagged a finger at me. “And here I thought you were the smart one. The witch could have created a hidden room in the place where she is keeping her.”

I smiled sweetly at Nana. “You’re absolutely right. But I am telling you that scrying is the answer. I can’t explain why other than to say I’m compelled to continue using this particular search strategy.”

Aidon's face was full of concern as he spun me around. "Has this witch gotten into your head?"

My heart started racing as I considered that option. "It's highly possible, but we can't stop now. We know she's playing a sick, twisted game here. That gives us an advantage. She hasn't beaten us yet and she isn't going to. By continuing, we will catch her off-guard and beat her. I have you at my back and all of these powerful witches to help me look."

Hades's gaze was focused off in the distance as he said, "Phoebe is right. She's on the right path. It's dark and twisted, but it is the only way that will eventually lead to the child."

"You've been holding out on us, Big Guy. What else do you know?" Nana demanded.

Hades shook his head and focused on Nana. "I don't know anything else. I am not a seer, but I often get a sense of things." He lifted his shoulder.

I dipped my head. "Let's use that blood sample we gathered, along with the brush, this time."

Nina grabbed the brush while Stella retrieved the blood in the plastic bag from a cabinet above the desk. "You have a spirit living here. Did you know that?" Dea said as I lead them down to the Sanctum.

I glanced around. "Are you talking about Evanora? She's been here since before I started working for Hattie."

"And she's pretty nice. She's part of our group. She's helped us a few times," Nina added.

The sisters asked how things worked with us and the cases we handle. We all shared our perspectives as we set up for the ritual. The candles, scrying bowl, water, and salt were out and we were ready within a few minutes.

The bodies around the worktable in the Sanctum made the massive room feel small. The sheer amount of power had the hair on my arms standing on end. Aidon's hands on my shoulders grounded me. We'd decided to use the same method, so the witch didn't get any new targets.

The power built quickly and released like a rocket when we chanted. Merely directing the energy to slide past the witch's ward was enough to have images scrolling through the water. We got the same image of the field. This time I wasn't entirely sure it was the same one because I didn't see flowers in the narrow view. It changed rapidly and ended on a store with a sign that said Whimsy Wood Handcrafted Furnishings. It stood as a whimsical sanctuary nestled amidst a vibrant tapestry of nature. The exterior

of the store embodied a harmonious blend of rustic charm and artistic craftsmanship, drawing the eye.

The storefront was adorned with a glistening array of hand-carved wooden ornaments that made me think of the skill and dedication that had to go into every piece created within its walls. The intricate patterns of leaves, flowers, and mystical creatures danced across some wooden panels. It seemed as if they were alive with a touch of magic.

“Is that place owned and run by a Fae?” Selene asked. “There’s a magical quality to the place.”

“Could that be from your Dark witch?” Phi’s question was on everyone’s mind.

“*Connect to the image and get a feel for yourself,*” Adele encouraged one of her witches. “*All you need to do is focus on one of the items in the window and look for its core.*”

“I’m not getting anything,” Lia said.

I shook my head. “I’m not either. I’ve sensed her power more times than I can count and it hasn’t gotten me anywhere. And right now, I’m beginning to wonder if I’m losing my mind looking for her everywhere.”

“*You’ve been focused on her for so long, it’s understandable. You need to set her and Kaida aside to focus on the scene before you. You said you had a leg up on the witch, now prove it. You need to get a better sense of what you will be walking into when you pay this place a visit,*” Tarja said.

My heart was racing at the same time it ached for the pain Kaida and her parents were going through. How the hell did I set that aside? They were counting on me to solve this mystery and find Kaida. It didn’t help that I continued worrying about what the witch could be doing to the innocent young wolf. Was she being tortured and experimented on?

“*Stop spiraling down a slippery slope. You will find Kaida, but not by obsessing about the unknown. Get your head in the game.*” Tarja’s reprimand was a shock to my system.

Kota gasped first and nodded her head as she looked at Adele. “The panels are filled with light and a deep love for woodworking. However, there is something dark and sinister threatening to overtake the positive energy.”

Aidon’s hands tightened on my shoulders as I wondered what we would face this time. We should stop with the scrying but my gut was telling me the answer was there. The instinct was so strong that I couldn’t ignore it. I knew I would encounter more demons, yet I also knew I would do this again and

again, until I found Kaida. I would be bringing that child back to her parents. I just hoped we reached her in time.

CHAPTER 17



I came out of the bathroom ready to go get Kaida and found an empty kitchen. “Where is everyone?” I took an energy potion to rejuvenate myself before we headed to the newest place we saw in the scrying bowl.

Kota waved a pair of tongs through the air. “Layla took them to pick up flowers for Nina’s party.” They weren’t going with us, but I hadn’t expected them to be gone, either.

“They’re picking up flowers right now?” I gaped at Kota as she and Mom made breakfast.

The only thing that should be open before the sun came up was the coffee houses. Everyone should be sleeping right now. Except us. We hadn’t been to bed yet. We were too busy researching everything we could about the Whimsy Wood before we headed there to look for Kaida.

Kota popped a grape in her mouth and lifted a shoulder. “One of Dani’s superpowers is finding the flower markets wherever we are.”

Mom continued rolling out the fresh tortillas as she looked over her shoulder at Kota. “I don’t believe there is a flower market in Camden.”

Kota chuckled. “That doesn’t stop her. She’s picked flowers up at airports before. Fresh flowers elevate a party and are affordable, beautiful decorations. There’s nothing that can replace what they add to an event.”

I jumped when Lia came out of the living room. I thought they’d all gone with Dani. “She’s right. And I believe Dani had your pilot pick up her order. I heard her talking to him about it when we were deplaning,” Lia explained.

The back door opened and Dre and Dea walked in. “The boathouse is perfect for flower central,” Dea said.

“I thought it would be when Dani started talking about what you guys had

to put together,” Mom replied.

I ran a hand through my dirty hair. I tuned them out at some point because I was worried about walking into another of the witch's traps. I shared a smile with Selene who was sitting next to Nana's empty stool. Nana had gone up to bed when Nina did and Stella had taken her girls home.

“Do you guys need anything before Selene, Stella, and I go check out Whimsy Wood?” I eyed the Nespresso machine with longing. Having too much caffeine wasn't good for the babies, which was why I'd taken the potion.

Mom dropped the tortilla into the frying pan. “You need to eat something before you go, Phoebe. I'm making breakfast tacos.”

That made me forget about needing caffeine. “Migas?” I'd fallen in love with the stuff when we had visited Texas three decades ago. She'd been making it for me ever since.

“Of course,” she said with a smile that brightened her face.

Kota pointed to the corn tortillas strips that were sitting in a basket. “She is a whizz in the kitchen. I've never been able to get the corn tortillas as thin without a press.”

Lia walked over and looked at the ingredients lined up in front of Mom and Kota. “What goes into these breakfast tacos?”

Mom switched the tortillas out. “It's really easy. The main ingredient is eggs. I add onion, jalapeño and garlic to them then when it's almost done you add corn tortilla chips, salsa, and queso. You can use any cheese, but Phoebe likes the queso best. And on the top, we add chopped fresh cilantro, diced red onion, sliced avocado, and diced tomato.”

“I can see why you like it, Phoebe,” Lia said. “It sounds delicious. Do you want us to go with you to the store?”

I considered Lia's offer as Mom and Kota made breakfast. “Honestly, I don't want to take away from Nina's party. My magical life consumes enough as it is. I promised her a party she would never forget.”

Kota snorted at the stove. “Girl, she'd better be wowed by it all. You bought a freaking car to turn it into a bookshelf for her. I've never heard of such a thing. Dani gets some wild ideas and they don't always take into account cost or feasibility. They're always cute as hell and make the event top level but they aren't practical.”

“Like the London telephone booth that she's making for Geneveve's baby shower. That's going to be badass. At least the Eiffel Tower was easy thanks

to the laser,” Lia added.

“I admit my first thought about using a VW to make some shelves was along the same lines. My imagination is as barren as a desert devoid of color, so for those reasons, I love what you all do. My kids have always had cookie cutter birthdays where I purchased the table cloths, plates, cups, and all the other accessories that match the theme from the party store.” It was what made me want to have these talented women come and give Nina something special. “And I want to put you on notice now that I will want you to do Jean-Marc's graduation party when the time comes.”

Lia snagged a fried strip of corn tortilla. “We’d be happy to do that. And if you change your mind about needing us, we can have Layla take us to help you. Flowers take a lot of time, but they’re easy enough to stop and pick back up.”

“I will definitely call if we need you. Thanks for being willing to help.”

“*They’re more than capable,*” Adele added. “*They’ve won against many enemies.*”

“*And they have saved you from having to deal with anything in New Orleans, Phoebe. Hattie tried countless times to put Marie Laveau in her place while never making any real change. She wasn’t aware of the extent of the problem. I didn’t understand it until Adele filled me in. Part of the problem was not having a powerful presence there full time.*”

I recalled the problem I had with Marie when I was in New Orleans. “I am eternally grateful you guys are there and have handled things. I worried about Marie for weeks until we talked about the changes you guys have instituted. I’m actually going to be recommending they create a council in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, and Dallas to handle problems that arise.” Only the larger areas would have enough of a population to create a similar group to govern and monitor behavior.

Mom talked about the feasibility and who would oversee these councils so they didn’t become overlords as she cooked. Kota pointed out that with powerful personalities in the mix no one would ever be able to overstep and the group wouldn’t become complacent with forcing citizens to do what they wanted.

I set those considerations aside and accepted the plate Mom offered when the food was done. Stella arrived to join us and took her tacos with her as we left right away. I limited myself to one given the unknown, but I made Mom promise she would save some for me when we returned.

We were gone before Layla returned with the other sisters and flowers. My neck hurt from how stiff I was behind the wheel. Whimsy Wood Handcrafted Furnishings was a charming boutique nestled right outside of town. The exterior was adorned with a rustic wooden façade. I imagined this was to showcase the natural beauty of the materials. A quaint sign hung above the entrance. It was hand-painted with intricate patterns and vibrant colors that instantly drew my eye.

We paused outside while I opened my magical senses. There was a ward on the door and remnants of malevolent energy somewhere on the property. I patted my crossbody bag, ensuring I had the offensive potions. “I doubt Kaida is in here. But grab your butts and hold on tight. This is going to be like the other times, so brace yourselves and cast the strongest protection spells you can.”

Stella zipped up her leather jacket. “I covered myself in Teflon when we left your house. Let’s go look for the next clue.” I cast my protections using the same imagery Stella described.

Selene nodded and unlocked the front door using magic. As we stepped inside, a warm and inviting atmosphere enveloped us. The interior was a haven of creativity and craftsmanship, with polished wooden floors that had a comforting, earthy scent. The walls were adorned with handcrafted wooden shelves, displaying an array of meticulously crafted furniture pieces and decor items.

The space was thoughtfully arranged, with each piece placed to capture attention and ignite the imagination. Tables crafted from rich, reclaimed wood stood proudly, showcasing their unique grains and patterns. Chairs with intricate carvings beckoned me to take a seat and experience their comfort firsthand. Cabinets with ornate handles and intricate detailing exuded a sense of timeless elegance. And all of this was going to be ruined soon. That’s what happened when we fought demons and tribreds.

I had to look away when the sunlight filtered through the large windows, casting a warm glow on the handcrafted furniture pieces, further highlighting their craftsmanship and beauty. The inevitable destruction was yet another offense to lay at the witch’s feet. I inhaled deeply as we continued through the store. It was impossible to miss how the air was filled with the scent of fresh cut wood and natural finishes.

We stumbled across a cozy seating area that no doubt invited visitors to relax and appreciate the craftsmanship that went into every piece. The walls

were adorned with photographs and stories, showcasing the artisans behind the furniture and their dedication to their craft. It wasn't made for a Xerxes demon to sit waiting for us to walk in.

The demon had purple skin, large bat-like wings, and glowing red eyes. He was a master of curses and hexes. And I had no doubt he used one of them to kill the man lying in a pool of blood in the corner. My heart hurt while my anger burned through me. The demon wouldn't get to use his powers to cause chaos and destruction in this store for long.

The monster leapt to his feet. "I've been waiting for you." The voice was like gravel and hurt my ears. He said something and slapped a bloody palm to the wall. A bright purple light made me throw my arm up to protect my eyes from being scalded. When my arm dropped, my stomach went with it. Five more Xerxes demons stood there clamoring to reach us.

With a swift nod to Selene and Stella, we were ready to attack first. I grabbed a vial of Pyroclasmic Inferno and threw it at the demon that had been sitting there waiting for us. He caught on fire and bumped into another of his kind. When they stumbled, I noted the word *Try* written in messy print on the floor where the first had been. I couldn't focus on that as I had more demons coming after me. I shivered when I saw their eyes gleaming with malice.

The rest lunged towards us, their claws slashing through the air. I summoned my inner strength, wishing I could defend this sanctuary of craftsmanship from their vile intrusion. Instead, I used the surrounding handcrafted furniture to my advantage. I danced between intricately carved tables and gracefully dodged behind elegantly crafted cabinets. The back of my shirt was shredded by claws, but it didn't get through my protection to my skin.

I tripped over a stool and landed hard on something that dug into my stomach. I immediately curled into a ball as my hand went to my babies. My mind whirled over everything that could have happened in that fall as well as how vulnerable I was lying there. Before moving, I needed to make sure nothing like placental abruption occurred. Stella picked up my distress immediately and moved to stand between me and the demons. Her agile movements and precision strikes with her dagger sent the demons reeling. Selene's ethereal magic crackled and shimmered as she threw an invisible bomb at them.

I focused my energy, channeling the power within me to my babies and womb to ensure everything was intact and healthy. Once I was sure they were

safe, I stood up and winced at the pain in my side. With a whispered incantation, a wave of shimmering blue energy surged from my outstretched hand, colliding with the approaching horde. Thank the gods the misfire was something that helped and the force sent the demons stumbling backward and momentarily disoriented.

But in the midst of our counterattack, one of the Xerxes demons launched a surprise assault on Selene. Its wicked talons tore through her defenses, leaving her vulnerable and gasping in pain. My heart clenched as I witnessed her being thrown aside, her body crashing against a delicate display of handcrafted mirrors.

Time seemed to slow as Stella and I rushed to Selene's side. Blood trickled from her wounds, staining her green top. I could see the flicker of pain in her eyes, but her determination remained unyielding. The problem was that she was bleeding pretty badly. Gathering my energy while Stella tossed miniature explosions at the demons, I placed my hands on Selene's trembling form, channeling my magic into her. It was clear that her injuries were more severe than initially apparent and I twisted my magic into a barrier that sealed over her wounds like superglue, keeping her from losing more blood. We needed to get her out of harm's way and seek further help.

With a shared understanding, Stella and I lifted Selene gently, supporting her weight as we navigated through the chaos. The once elegant store now bore the scars of our fight, but we pressed forward, determined to find safety for our injured companion. Outside the store, we set her behind some bushes and waited for the demons to follow.

When they didn't, Stella and I went back inside. We didn't have much time before the sun was going to be up and the mundies would be racing to their jobs. The store didn't open for hours which would give us time to do something about this mess. I grabbed another inferno potion and tossed it at the three remaining demons. It missed and caught one of the tables on fire. Cursing, I shifted gears and conjured a magical bomb in my palm.

Throwing what I had ready, I ducked beneath claws and grabbed hold of Stella's arm, pulling her with me. The blast from my magic made the demons stumble, but Stella and I were close enough that I almost fell as well. Stella slashed with her dagger and managed to cut a hand off one of the demons. It fell to the floor with black blood spurting everywhere.

Needing to end this, I tossed my witch flames at the injured demon. It writhed and stumbled into the furniture. I made sure it didn't damage

anything wooden while I made the teal flames jump to another demon. It was impossible to keep hold of them, so I had to put them out. Stella ran up to the only demon that wasn't hurt and smashed a vial on its chest then ducked under its arms. I gaped when I saw the demon go up in flames. The monster was gone before I blinked.

Using a broken chair, I twisted around and shoved it through the wing and back of the worst burned of the demons. Stella and I danced around the second one for several seconds until I cast another magical bomb and took it out.

“C'mon, we need to get Selene back home.”

Stella nodded as we raced outside just as the sun was rising. “I'm going to call Clio then Mohan to have him come clean this place up.”

As was characteristic of late, my anger coursed through me hot and fast as we picked Selene up and carried her to the car. This witch was fucking with the wrong woman. Not only was I a powerful enemy to have. I was also a middle-aged pregnant lady. Not someone to be trifled with. “I am going to enjoy finding this bitch and making her pay.”

CHAPTER 18



“*D*id you learn anything useful at Whimsy Wood before things went tits up?” Nana asked while Clio worked on Selene.

I shook my head as I kept my gaze focused on Selene. “Nope. But I have an even better feel for the magic she uses. I know I can lock onto the bitch.”

Kota lifted an eyebrow. “No offense, but we tried that. What’s different now except Selene got her ass kicked?”

Mom nodded. “There is a point when you need to know when to walk away.”

I inhaled, taking in the flowery perfume that clung to the sisters and Nina after working on the floral arrangements for so long. “You’re right and I know how insane I sound right now. I just enjoy beating my head against a wall. Seriously though, I am convinced the key is that fucking field. I want to punch through and astral project there while the rest of you do the scrying.”

There were exclamations followed by sudden silence when Tarja spoke up. “*That’s not impossible. However, it is incredibly dangerous, Phoebe. You could get lost in the ether while trying to reach your destination. You’ve never been there, which means you don’t have anything to lock onto. That is key when going into the astral plane. It helps if you’ve been there. If not, having something else to lock onto will suffice.*”

Adele jumped up next to her mother and sat like a statue with her gaze trained on me. “*With the help of my witches, we can minimize the danger to Phoebe. My witches are strong enough to scry while your family casts a containment spell around you. It will keep your spirit from wandering off.*”

I smiled at the Twisted Sisters’ familiar. “What about keeping us hidden from the witch? We’ve been using Aidon for that. I can get him from his

house before we begin.”

“There is no point. If you are right, the second you land in the field you will alert her of your presence,” Tarja said.

“Okay, so I need to move fast. Is there a way for me to track while in my astral form?” I’d learned a lot over the past year, but there was still a lot I didn’t know.

“Magic use in your astral form is tricky. It’s more powerful and harder to control. You can only direct it to a certain degree. There is a risk of it getting away from you and draining you. You have the babies to think about.”

“I won’t do anything to put them in danger. Shall we go down to the Sanctum?”

Nina wound her arm through mine as she tugged me to the stairs. “Phi and I have been searching for Lyra and Elrina. We found mention of Lyra in New York but that was it.”

“Do you think they’re still there?.” I was glad it wasn’t me tackling the digital realm, a.k.a. the never-ending abyss of useless information. I rarely got anywhere when I did anything beyond a simple search for where to buy these soft as hell leggings. We talked about how unlikely it was that Lyra was in New York while we went down followed by everyone else.

Once in the Sanctum, Nina and Mom started getting supplies together. We left Selene upstairs with Clio. She needed rest more than we needed her help. She’d lost a lot of blood.

“Should we form a circle around you guys?” Dreya asked. “We need to have the water in the middle, but if you are outside the circle that we cast then won’t it be harder to project into the image?”

“Very good instincts, Dre,” Adele told her witch. *“Yes, you will want to cast the circle around Phoebe, Nana, Nina, Mollie, and the bowl. You will want to pull on energy from the Earth this time as well. Since you six have a varied nature, you can access the elements. That will help give a more accurate landing zone for Phoebe. It will make it tangible and less likely for her to get lost.”*

I stood while they shoved the large worktable aside and made room for us. The sisters worked seamlessly together as they set up and scried for Kaida. I felt the layered power the sisters called upon as they cast the circle. Stella, Nana, Mom, and Nina cast their spell next. Before I knew it, they were chanting the spell and looking for Kaida. Fatigue dragged at me along with nausea as the sisters worked.

They attempted one scrying session after another, adjusting their focus, squinting their eyes and trying to conjure some magical clarity that would lead to the missing child. Unfortunately, the images remained as elusive as ever. It was like trying to catch a slippery fish with greased hands.

Growing more frustrated with each failed attempt, I needed a breather. My head was spinning and my stomach was churning. Bile threatened and I had to hold up a hand. “Stop. I’m going to be sick.”

Lia’s hands flew out. “Don’t cross the circle. Maybe we can help from here.”

Dreya moved over and opened the window on the side of the room. The breeze helped settle my stomach some. Kota chewed on her lower lip as she watched me. “Would you like to try a smoothie I used to make to help my morning sickness? It’s got mango and ginger in it.”

I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand. “Sure. Sounds delicious.”

Kota and Lia went up to the kitchen while Dani moved a fan and turned it on. The sisters’ power didn’t wane as the ritual was paused. I was impressed and tried to focus on the feel of it. Without me doing a thing, my magic extended from me and connected to theirs.

Kota and Lia returned with the smoothie concoction. She chanted a bridge then extended her hand. I took it and sniffed it. It was a revoltingly healthy potion. I took a sip reluctantly, feeling like I was being punished for some unknown sin only to realize it was delicious.

“Okay. I was not expecting that. Ginger and mango together didn’t sound good to me, but I am pleasantly surprised. Thank you.”

Kota chuckled. “I know what you mean. The first time it was offered to me, I almost didn’t try it but was glad I had it for all four pregnancies.”

Nana pursed her lips as I drank the smoothie. “Because we’ve already cast the containment around you, I think the four of us can help the sisters so we are able to get the images we need.”

“You can do that as long as the power being funneled to the containment doesn’t waver.”

Nana inclined her head to Tarja before turning to face the sisters. The magic coming from both sides of the circle made the salt and herbs glow bright purple. The power they were wielding hummed and made my entire body feel like I was taking a swim in a pool of champagne. I watched in awe as colorful ribbons of power floated around like the Aurora Borealis.

The room crackled with magic and anticipation. They were ready to

resume the scrying session when several people trampled down the stairs. I watched with an open mouth as Aidon and his family decided to grace us with their presence. How lucky we were to have divine spectators for this magical circus. Blurry images changed in the water like a strobe light. Hades, Persephone, Melinoe, and Aidon walked in and observed our feeble attempts with barely concealed amusement. On Hades's part anyway.

With a burst of divine power, the scrying images finally started to slow down. Hallelujah! But of course, it couldn't be that easy. We had to wait for them to settle, like a game of cosmic roulette. And when they finally did, we were rewarded with a thrilling view of precisely what I wanted. That damn field with flowers.

I focused on the image and pulled my power to my core. I thought of Kaida and the flowers and trees. I was about to cast my astral self to the field when Persephone pointed out a rare flower called the Lady's Slipper. The pink flower stood tall on a slender stem, rising above a sea of vibrant green foliage. Its petals, curved and sensuous, formed a pouch-like structure resembling a dainty slipper. Well, thank the gods for small favors. That crucial detail would lead me straight to my target. Just like a daisy chain leads to a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

Using the Lady Slipper as my focal point, so I didn't get lost in the ether, was like trying to solve a puzzle with half the pieces missing and a blindfold on. And yet, I was going to jump in with both feet. Before anyone could talk me out of it, I chanted the spell and felt my spirit leave my body. Nana stopped Aidon from breaking the circle as I collapsed. Mom's new super-strength came in handy as she caught me before I hit the ground.

The next thing I knew, I stood in the midst of a sun-kissed field surrounded by a kaleidoscope of vibrant flowers stretching for several hundred feet. I couldn't help but feel a mix of awe and frustration. There was nowhere a child could possibly be hiding. This was the location I had seen in the scrying water several times. This was the place where my magic had led me. Yet, it seemed that even the flowers were mocking me with their delicate beauty.

With a sigh I extended my hands, ready to channel my magic and call upon the forces that bound the universe. But as I attempted to tap into that wellspring of power, it felt as if the energy was slipping through my fingertips like elusive sand. My magic, usually so responsive, seemed determined to play a game of hide-and-seek at the most inopportune times.

An exasperated groan escaped my lips. "Oh, come on! Can't you cooperate for once?" I could feel a well-spring of power at my grasp, but it refused to cooperate with me. I sent a nicer silent plea to my babies to help me out here.

I scanned the tree line surrounding me and had a renewed sense that this was where Kaida was located. I could hear the ocean in the distance and smell the salt water. There was nothing else to tell me where this was, aside from the pink Lady Slipper.

There was no way I was going to fail Kaida. With renewed determination, I took a deep breath and steadied my resolve. I couldn't let frustration hinder my progress. I shifted my approach, redirecting the unruly currents of magic within me. Like a sculptor molding clay, I shaped and channeled the energy, coaxing it to align with my intentions. To find Kaida.

The air around me crackled with an unheard-of intensity, as if the very elements were heeding my call. The flowers swayed gently in response, their petals brushing against my fingertips as if lending their support. It was as if the whole world held its breath, waiting for me to work my magic.

And then, in a dazzling display of power the fabric of reality shimmered before me. Like an ethereal curtain pulled aside I saw a young girl with a dirty, tear-stained face huddled in a hollow tree trunk. I followed the trail through the blossoms and towering trees and found the opening in an evergreen. I crouched and looked into Kaida's wide eyes filled with innocence and fear. We had finally found the missing child we had tirelessly searched for.

Relief washed over me at the same time I noted she seemed to look right through me. A surge of determination fueled me as I extended my hands, my heart pounding with a mix of joy and concern. I wanted to envelope her in a protective embrace and assure her that she was now safe. But I was in my spirit form, and I had no idea if she could see me.

"You're going to be alright," I whispered, my voice filled with a motherly tenderness. "I'm here to bring you back home."

At first, there was no indication Kaida heard me. Then her eyes met mine, and I saw a glimmer of recognition and trust in her gaze. In that moment, all the fights and injuries we had endured were insignificant. The magic that had played tricks on me was now a force to be reckoned with. It refused to allow my presence. It was pushing me out.

I tried to remain where I was but couldn't stop the energy pulling at me.

Kaida's lower lip trembled as watery eyes looked at me. "Don't leave me. Please. I want to go home to my mommy and daddy."

"I promise you that I will be back soon. Only my spirit is here, but when I get back to my body, I am going to bring a god with me to help you. Can you tell me where you are?"

"I saw a sign with the letters M and T before she pulled my hood down. Lyra's a bad witch. Please take me home."

My heart broke when I heard her plea. "I will be back before you know i..." My words were swallowed as I was sucked out of the field and into starry blackness.

My legs were tingling when I landed back inside my body. Urgency had me lurching to my feet. Aidon launched himself across the circle and grabbed me from behind before I could fall. "We need to get going. I know where Kaida is hidden inside that field. We need to get there before Lyra. She's the one behind this."

CHAPTER 19



Aidon helped me straighten and stand tall. Then he held me by my shoulders and looked me in the eyes. “I want to hunt down Lyra while the rest of you go rescue Kaida.”

“No!” I blurted at the same time his father, Hades did.

Aidon looked over my shoulder and glared at his dad. “I am not planning on going alone. Tsekani and Murtagh will go with me. You said it yourself. She will be coming to the field. I want to head her off.”

Once my initial fear for Aidon’s safety passed, I was able to see how useful that plan would be. “Alright, but I am casting a spell around you four to ensure she can’t poison you like Zaleria did.”

Mom cleared her throat. “Actually, I have developed a potion that creates a thin bubble of protection.”

“*It’s rather brilliant,*” Binx said. It was clear he was boasting about his witch. “*It allows for the person’s powers to strengthen it. With Aidon’s powers it will be practically impenetrable.*”

Lia smiled at Mom. “That’s what you were working on earlier, isn’t it? I wondered why you asked Tseki for some blood.”

Dreya whistled appreciatively. “We could use some of that. It would be nice not to have to worry about holding a protective shield while fighting.”

Mom’s cheeks pinkened. “It’s not perfect. It can be breached.”

Persephone shook her head as she put her hand on Mom’s shoulder. “All spells can be breached with the right focus and power. Don’t underestimate the magnitude of what you’ve created.”

Melinoe nodded in agreement. “Mom is right. In a battle it can make the difference between survival and death.”

Pride shone in Nana's eyes as she listened. "Are we calling it Shieldbane Elixir?"

Mom lifted a shoulder. "Yeah, it's the perfect name. I have a batch but it's only enough for five."

I headed for the stairs. "Then Aidon, Tseki, and Murtagh will get it. Lyra is the bigger danger here."

Hades stepped in my path. "I will do my best to remove any demons that might be in your way. I cannot do what I did last time. It takes too much power from me which weakens the veil between realms."

It took effort to hide my shock at Hades's offer of help. One of the first things I learned was that few gods or goddesses actually did anything to help. It was something about an agreement to avoid fighting with each other. As one of the beings that would suffer if they continued bickering, I couldn't complain. They couldn't help us with most of our cases anyway. They weren't omniscient and their powers weren't unlimited.

Layla and Selene met me near the back door. Selene twirled keys on her finger. "I will drive the suburban. And before you ask, I'm good to go."

I grabbed my dagger, and the remaining healing potions, from the cupboard above the desk in the kitchen. I handed out the potions, then gave Dreyra, Lia, and Delphine a vial of the Pyroclasmic Inferno and explained how to use it.

Within no time we were in the car, headed to Mt. Batia. That was where Persephone said we could find the flower she'd identified. Selene was in her car with most of the Twisted Sisters while Stella and I were with Dre and Dani in mine. Our search was going to encompass a huge area so I prepped myself to cast my search spell in a wide net. I couldn't do a deep dive and look for specific energy signatures. The acreage I needed to scan was too big. Keeping my eyes closed, I focused on what I could feel in the world around us.

"No, go right here. She mentioned hearing the ocean. My bet is that field will be down this road," Stella said. Her voice brought me out of my trance. I had to shut out the conversation around me and focus on the energy surrounding us in Mt. Batia.

There were several dwarfs, pixies, and other Fae living in the wilderness of the mountain. We were going too fast for me to pick up anything of note. I thought I felt several shifters that were prowling around. I even thought I felt Sullivan. He felt like the beacon in a lighthouse to me.

My body slid into the door as Layla turned. When I went back in the other direction, I assumed she was going back the way we had been traveling. The longer we drove around, the less hope I had that we were in the right place.

I lost track of everything except the energy around us. "Slow down," I called out when something caught my attention. I growled when it turned out to be nothing. It was one giant blank spot. "Wait!" I cried out as my eyes flew open. "It's out there. It has to be. There's a significant area that has no energy signature at all. That would only happen if it was spelled that way."

"That's as good a place as any to start." Layla pulled over and maneuvered the SUV between the trees. Selene did the same.

I grabbed my crossbody bag and climbed out. We all headed out through the trees. My gaze went left then right. "Look for the blank space. There are many paranormals out here. And I think there are shifters out here, likely searching for Kaida. Her energy signature will be smaller than theirs."

As we trudged through the dense forests of Mt. Batia in our search for the elusive field of flowers, my frustration skyrocketed to new heights. It's not like we're searching for a needle in a haystack or anything. Oh no, we're just looking for a whole field, completely devoid of any magical trace. The slower pace of walking should make that easy. It would just take longer because we were moving slower.

Selene huffed beside me, her boots sinking into the muddy ground with each step. "This is ridiculous," she grumbled, her frustration with the terrain evident. "Why would she leave a little girl out in the elements like this?"

I raised an eyebrow, my lips curling into a sardonic smile. "Well, clearly someone thought it would be a fun game of hide and seek. Let's just hope Lyra didn't forget to leave us a treasure map too."

Stella, always the optimist, chimed in. "Come on, guys, we've faced worse challenges than this. We'll figure it out." Her determination was the kick in the ass I needed. The stakes were just as high in this case as it was when we ventured into Tartarus to help Aidon.

We continued our trek, pushing through the thick underbrush, branches cracking and leaves rustling under our feet. After what seemed like hours, my patience snapped. "Oh look, another stunning view of trees and rocks. Just what we needed to find a field of flowers."

Kota snorted and waved an arm. "I do not have the physique of a hiker. I would conjure a scooter if it would run on this terrain." She waved her arms

to encompass the woods.

“We’re doing this to find a missing child,” Dre reminded Kota.

Kota huffed and nodded as we continued. “I wish we would stumble across the field already.”

I blinked in surprise when we stumbled upon a clearing less than a minute later. Did Kota have the power to make her wishes come true? My weary eyes caught a glimpse of vibrant colors among the sea of green. I threw a fist in the air when I confirmed it was the field of flowers from the scrying bowl that stretched out before us. It was a magnificent sight to behold. And there was no energy signature which confirmed my suspicions. Unfortunately, nothing opened up to us as we entered the clearing and became a part of it. Because, you know, we wouldn't want to make things too easy.

Kota let out an exasperated sigh. “I suppose it’s too much to ask that the flowers start glowing.”

I smirked. “Well, according to my expert knowledge of magical botany, all we need to do is sing a lullaby to the flowers and they'll reveal their secrets to us. It's foolproof, really.”

Stella chuckled, her eyes glinting with mischief. “Or we could try something crazy, like using our own magical abilities to sense any hidden enchantments. Just a thought.”

I rolled my eyes dramatically but deep down, I was laughing with her. “Oh alright. Let’s do it your way. Together. We’re stronger that way.” We all clasped hands, focused our energy, and extended our senses beyond the ordinary.

“There’s an enchantment blocking the magic here,” Lia murmured.

I turned to the spot where the absence was heaviest then walked over. Bending, I examined a stone that was etched with a symbol. I recoiled when the negative energy hit my palm. “Look around the area and make sure there are no more of these while I destroy this one.”

The sisters and Selene dispersed while Layla and Stella remained by my side. Stella crouched next to me. “What are you going to use? Thunderous Havoc?”

I opened my bag, searching through what I had with me. “I have one. If one of us could float it over and smash it from afar that would be a good idea. Using it too close will hurt us.”

“That’s where I can help,” Dreya called out. “I’m telekinetic. I can move shit with precision.”

“Fate.” The word left me the second it entered my head as if my filter were gone. I had to explain so the people staring at me would understand me getting my foot stuck in my mouth. “You guys are here because the Fates engineered it. And thank the gods they did.”

As we met in the middle of the field, Kota took the potion and held it on her open palm. The oldest of the Twisted Sisters lifted her pointer finger and the vial lifted with it. The potion hovered briefly before it flew through the air with a flick of her finger. She sliced the digit down so fast that I sucked in a breath expecting the potion to break on the wrong rock. I shouldn’t have worried. It hit the spelled stone, shattered it and sent the pieces flying with the winds it created.

Between one blink and the next, the field of flowers came alive with a faint magical pulse. It was subtle, but unmistakable. The sisters grinned triumphantly. I couldn’t help but feel a surge of pride for my powerful friends. We had found our needle in the haystack.

“Call Sullivan. Tell him we found Kaida,” I called out as I ran across the field to the tree containing the strongest energy signature.

My hands were feeling for the hollow that faced to the side before I stopped moving. My legs carried me past and I stumbled then backtracked. Dropping to my knees, I smiled into the darkness. “Kaida? It’s Phoebe. I saw you in a vision not long ago. I’m here to take you home to your parents.”

Squinting, I leaned closer and peered inside the hollowed-out trunk. I could smell Kaida’s fear but didn’t see the child. Closing my eyes, I searched for her energy signature but didn’t find her. “Shit. Don’t call yet. She’s not here.”

Stella squeezed my shoulder. “I already called him. They’re on their way.”

“Shit, we have to find her. She’s got to be nearby. That witch didn’t have time to grab her and get very far.” I was on my feet, searching the treetops and trunks, before I even finished my response.

Tribred mystics came flooding in from across the field. The Twisted Sisters reacted first. Witch fire and magical bombs were flying around, sending trees toppling and colorful petals flying. Layla shifted into her wolf form and was launching herself at tribreds before Stella and I reached the group. Stella had her dagger out, which prompted me to do the same. I found it difficult to use lethal means on these women. They were victims like Mom had been. They could still be saved like Mom and the others.

I slashed at a tribred with dirty blonde hair who was trying to claw me to death. “Stop. You don’t want to do this. My mom was a victim just like you. She created magic that will blend your different parts into a harmonious whole. You don’t have to live like this.”

Several of the tribred stopped fighting and looked over at me. The one I was facing wasn’t fazed and I had to stab her in the stomach to avoid getting a new necklace. With my back to the others because I had to remain focused on the tribred in front of me. Her claws sliced through my shoulder but didn’t go deep when electricity sizzled from me, frying her where she stood. I gaped as I watched her drop to the ground.

“You’re becoming a major pain in my ass,” a feminine voice hissed.

I swiveled around and saw a woman around five-feet ten-inches tall with long red hair, brown eyes, and freckles walking toward me. It was Lyra. I’d seen her in pictures on her social media pages. Her bigger hips swayed as she moved. I scowled at her, conjuring witch fire balls. “You’ve messed with the wrong people, Lyra. I’m going to find Kaida and return her to her parents. And I will free the rest of these tribreds that you tortured.”

She threw back her head and laughed. “You have this all wrong. It’s you who is going to pay for killing my wife.”

“Zaleria isn’t dead. Yet. She’s the guest of Hades. He has his favorite minions teaching her why it was a bad idea to try and kill his son. I can take you to her.”

Lyra eyes narrowed on me as she threw a spell at me. Ducking, I felt the heat of the enchantment burn as it traveled over my head. I threw my fire at her then added a magical bomb. We exchanged blows. I trusted my friends were holding their own as I kept tossing everything I could at the witch. When one of her spells missed my attempt to deflect it, it hit my stomach making me slide backward several feet and land on my ass while it flew back to the witch. I lost track of her as I scrambled to get up. Her shriek was cut off and when I stood up, I couldn’t see her.

Spinning in a circle, I found Layla munching on a tribred’s throat. “Find Kaida’s scent. She’s nearby. That’s why Lyra was still here.”

Aidon, Tsekani, and Murtagh came running into the field and stopped in their tracks. Aidon met my gaze. “Lyra was here. We followed her trail from the house she’s been renting. She got sloppy when you breached the field in the astral plane.”

“Help them,” I gestured to the fight still happening. “And try not to kill

them all. They can be helped. Lyra was here. She vanished but we can't worry about that. We need to find Kaida. She's here somewhere." There was a sense of urgency riding me that twisted my gut into a knot. Kaida was running out of time.

Aidon and I joined the search as the sisters and Stella corralled the tribreds, immobilizing them. Stella explained about the house we'd set up for their kind and the potions Mom had created. I tuned it out, knowing she would handle them as we scoured the forest.

I was focused on the treetops as Aidon was scanning the trunks, which is why I missed the spout sticking up out of the ground until I tripped over it. "What the hell is that?"

Aidon dropped next to me but not to help me. He started digging at the dirt. "It's an air vent."

As it dawned on me what it was for, horror got me moving with him. Tsekani and Murtagh joined in and we had a white rectangle revealed within seconds. There was a powerful ward on the freezer. Holding up my hand, I stopped Aidon from reaching in. "There's a spell on this." I searched for the edge of the enchantment, my haste making me sloppy. It slipped through my hands several times.

Closing my eyes, I took several deep breaths to calm myself. I would do Kaida no good if I didn't get past this. When I opened my eyes, my heartbeat hadn't slowed but my hands were shaking a little less. It took a few seconds and a spell to find the end of her ward. The amount of energy I had to pour into unraveling the ward made me woozy. Aidon supported me from behind as I continued working. When I finally got through it, I flipped the lid open and cried out as I grabbed the little girl from inside.

Kaida's limp body was unresponsive. Laying her on the ground, I checked her pulse and didn't find it. Wasting no time, I started chest compressions and mouth to mouth. Sweat dotted my brow as my heart raced in my chest. I felt dozens of eyes on me but couldn't stop. This child was not going to die.

Adding a trickle of magic, I continued trying to resuscitate her. It took several minutes before Kaida's gold eyes flew open and she gasped. Her lower lip trembled with her fear.

Holding my hands up, I tried to smile at her. "It's me, Phoebe. I came to see you in my spirit form."

"You promised to come back for me," Kaida replied.

Nodding, I extended my hand to her. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head and her eyes filled with tears. "She put me in the dark. I couldn't breathe.

I got to my feet and remained in a crouch. "You're safe now. She can't get to you again."

I helped Kaida up and we walked through the clearing. Aidon stayed a few feet behind us along with everyone else. As we made our way back through the field, my hormones got the best of me. I kept the tears in check, but I swear the flowers seemed to dance with joy, their petals swaying in celebration of our triumph. The trees stood tall, their ancient wisdom whispering words of encouragement. It was as if nature itself acknowledged the triumph over evil.

With Kaida's small hand clutching mine, I felt a profound sense of purpose when I saw her parents in the distance. We had finally found their little girl. As Kaida let go of me and ran to the safety and warmth of her parents, my heart swelled with gratitude that we were able to be part of saving a child and her family. It made the effort and sacrifice worth it.

"The pack owes you," Sullivan said as we reached him.

Shaking my head, I smiled as I watched the little girl cling to her father. "This is payment enough for me. Although, there might be a time I need your help on a case."

Sullivan pressed a palm over his heart. "I will be there anytime you need my assistance."

Dani looked at me sideways. "Collecting more family is the best part of this job. Having Kaveh help us during the hurricane is the only reason we were able to stop Baron Samedi and a mundie serial killer."

"You're right about that. We've had some outstanding people help us along the way. Having help is often the thing that is the difference between success and failure. Let's hope Aidon, Tseki, and Murtagh found Lyra and took care of her." Yeah, I know. That last part was a long shot. If she was smart, she took off the second she felt us break through her seal on that freezer.

CHAPTER 20



"*I* can't believe we're in Maine right now," Violet said as she walked into the kitchen. "And attending a Twisted Sisters party."

"Where my very practical friend spent thousands to turn an old car into a bookcase for her daughter," Fiona added.

After saving Kaida, I'd had the urge to bring everyone I loved close. Nina's party was the excuse. It helped that the Backside of Forty needed to find Nylah to give her an artifact. In addition to Fiona, Violet, and Aislinn, Jean-Marc and Fiona's children were there to celebrate Nina. My house and the boat house were at capacity. All the kids had taken over the boat house. I don't think they'd slept a wink in almost two days.

The VW bus shell arrived two days earlier and Aidon had helped Dani and Nina transform the thing. As expensive as it was, it was badass. The main color was a Baltimore Orioles orange and as a surprise, Dani had done a feature wall of geometric design in Nina's room to compliment the bookcase.

I chuckled and nudged Fiona's shoulder. "You have the Twisted Sisters throw a party for you and tell me you could deny a vital part of their vision. I admit, when Dani mentioned it, my gut reaction was hell no. Then I paused and thought if I can save a hunk of metal from rusting and polluting the planet while making my daughter happy, then why not."

Before Fiona could respond a smile spread over her face as her oldest, Emmie came running toward us. Fiona wrapped her arms around her daughter as Emmie twisted to face me. "Aunt Phoebe, do you have plans for the back section of the VW? I would love a bookshelf like Nina's."

I smirked at Fiona who just shook her head at me. Nodding, I gestured to Aidon. "Go ask your Uncle Aidon to help you finish it while you're here."

That way you can pick the colors.” Emmie raced over to Aidon and started bouncing on her toes.

My mate shot me a *help* look that I ignored with smiles. He might not know Emmie well but he wouldn’t deny her. Fiona smacked my shoulder. “You can’t indulge her like that.”

My expression sobered as I took a seat at one of the tables in my backyard. “And why not? It still leaves me the middle to deal with, but it isn’t costing me anything more. I was going to integrate it into the boat house somehow.” I winked at Dani who was sitting at the other table with her sisters.

Stella and Lia carried trays of drinks across the dance floor, where disco balls reflected light everywhere. I took in the scene as the sun began to set, casting a warm golden glow over the beautifully decorated backyard. No detail had been missed. The Six Twisted Sisters had outdone themselves in throwing this birthday party for Nina. The scene before me was nothing short of enchanting.

And as I watched my daughter and Stella’s girls talk to the kids from the coven, I noted how the air crackled with excitement and anticipation. These groups were anxious to get to know one another. And I couldn’t help but think that the colorful ribbons, balloons, and flowers adorning the space created the perfect backdrop for them to begin building a foundation of trust with one another. At least I hoped so.

Fairy lights twinkled from the branches of the surrounding trees, casting a soft, magical glow that wove its way through the laughter and conversation. Aidon was showing Emmie something using Nina’s bookcase as an example. Nana was talking to Persephone while Mom and Mythia were making sure the food was perfect. It struck me in that moment how blessed I was in this second act of my life.

As I surveyed the scene, I couldn’t help but be captivated by the energy in the air. Charley and Reece danced around the wood floor, their laughter and squeals of delight filling the air. They were joined by Nina. All their faces beamed with excitement as they celebrated. Jean-Marc and his girlfriend were at a table with Fiona’s son, Greyson.

The witch kids from the coven were beginning to venture to the food table and dance floor, their magical auras blending seamlessly with the lively ambiance. Pixies flitted about, their mischievous giggles adding an air of whimsy, while brownies peeked out from the shrubbery, their eyes

glimmering with curiosity.

Nina had intentionally chosen to keep the mundies away from the party. I was worried about her isolating herself from them at first. She claimed she wanted a space where everyone could freely embrace their supernatural selves. Watching this, I knew she had been right. It allowed everyone to let loose and revel in their magical abilities without the need for concealment. This was my daughter's life and she needed to embrace it and make friends along the way. She was going to need them one day.

Glancing away, my gaze landed on the enchanting bee tattoo on Dani. Looking around the table, I noted that all six of them had matching ink and it was on full display. The sight made me raise an intrigued eyebrow at Stella, who was sitting beside me.

"You know," she said, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, "we should get matching tattoos too. Just to keep up with the trend."

Fiona leaned forward and looked across me at Stella while the sisters tuned into the conversation. "I've been thinking the same thing. We should all get the same thing, considering we are all members of the Backside of Forty."

I couldn't help but chuckle, considering her proposition. "Matching tattoos, huh? What the hell? I've always wanted to be part of the cool kids."

Lia looked at her sisters. "What do you think, bitches? You guys want to get in on this?"

Dani choked on the sip of her daiquiri. "I don't think so. We already have tattoos."

"You don't have to do anything. Besides. We're just thinking right now." I turned my attention back to Stella and Fiona, contemplating the idea of matching tattoos. "How about a small cluster of stars? Something to represent our connection and the magic that binds us."

Stella's eyes lit up with excitement, her smile widening. "I love that idea! The Pleiades, right? A cluster of seven stars, symbolizing our unique bond."

The midlife witches around me chimed in, their voices blending in a chorus of suggestions. A tree of life, a crescent moon, or even a feather. The possibilities were endless, each suggestion carrying its own symbolism and significance. I was torn and decided to leave the conversation for another time. It wasn't as if I had to make the decision right now. We weren't going to leave the party.

I grabbed a ginger ale from the tray and cheered the Twisted Sisters. My

stomach rumbled so I got up and filled a plate with desserts. Mom thrust her hands on her hips and glared at me. “Cookies, marshmallow treats, and cake pops do not make up a meal, Phoebe. You're eating for three now.”

Mom’s chastisement took me back to my childhood and I gave her a sheepish smile. “I’m having a backwards night, Mom.”

Her stern expression lasted a few seconds before it cracked. “As long as you eat some protein and veggies after.”

As the evening progressed, laughter and music filled the air. It created an atmosphere of pure joy and celebration. Stella, her husband and their children added their own spark of magic to the festivities. Their presence reminding us of the beauty of family and the power of love. Todd was a mundie cop yet straddled both worlds daily.

In the midst of the celebration, I couldn't help but feel a profound sense of gratitude. My family and I were surrounded by individuals who accepted us for who we were, embracing our unique quirks and powers. Together, we formed a vibrant tapestry of magical beings, united by a common thread of friendship and camaraderie.

As the night deepened, the sky adorned itself with a canopy of stars, their twinkling lights casting a spell of enchantment over the gathering. Then the gods and goddesses decided to bless us with their presence. They came in laden with presents that they added to the table. The coven kids watched in awe as Hades, Persephone, and Melinoe greeted Nina with hugs and birthday wishes.

It was an important reminder for those outside my group of friends that I had powerful family. I didn’t grow up in the magical world and in their eyes, that made me an easy target. It’s what threw me into the deep end and pulled those in my orbit in with me. Lyra was merely the latest in the long line of Tainted and Dark witches out to get me. I would find her and reunite her with her wife like I offered. In the meantime, I was going to dance with my mate.

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EXCERPT FROM ENCHANTED
TATTOOS & LOST FOOLS BOOK #13



“Are you ready to try and get a look at these babies?” My heart swelled and tears came to my eyes when Clio asked Aidon and I that question.

Hades snapped his fingers, black flames igniting on the tip as electricity crackled over that. “We have been waiting for months. Let’s get this show on the road.”

Persephone put a hand on Hades’s arm and smiled indulgently up at her mate. “Patience, love. We have been waiting for the day we became grandparents for millennia but these mortals are not in the same position as us. It has only been a few months since I fed Phoebe the seeds and even less time since we discovered they worked.”

Hades blew his breath out in a loud sigh and his fingers stopped burning and crackling. “This woman is asking as if we haven’t been anxious since the day that they delivered these devices. I told her to do it that day but she insisted we had to wait another week. People don’t defy me and live long.”

I winced and shot pleading eyes to Aidon who waved a hand in his father’s direction. “You will watch your tone and comments, Father. Or you and Mother can return home and not be part of this at all. Clio knows what she is doing and your threats aren’t going to get you anywhere.”

Nana snorted from my other side as she, Mom, and Nina stood there waiting for the ultrasound. It was early in my pregnancy and at eleven weeks, it was unlikely we would see much. Hades glared at Nana who lifted one eyebrow at the God of the Underworld. “It’s got to sting hearing you aren’t in charge, but you should listen to your son. Trust me when I say that these children belong to their parents who can, and will, keep you from seeing

them.”

Clio’s hand was shaking as she watched the exchange. I smiled at her. “Ignore them. You can start when you’re ready.”

Bridget was present to interpret the images with Clio. Bridget adjusted the screen so it faced the table I was lying on. We’d converted one of the bedrooms in the house to a clinical room where Bridget and Clio could monitor and treat me during my pregnancy.

Clio inclined her head to the other witch. “Your last bloodwork indicates your HCG levels are higher than we expect for twins at this point. You know this exam is to get a clear view of the babies to ensure there are no obvious problems.”

I nodded my head and reached for Aidon’s hand. He clasped it as his gaze remained riveted to the screen. Clio squirted gel on the end of the wand then moved it over my stomach. I was showing far more than I ever did at this stage. I loved the slight pooch, but it meant I wouldn’t be able to hide the pregnancy much longer. It was going to be obvious pretty soon.

The tears were back as I watched a leg come into view. It was a tiny thing on the black and white screen. “This machine is magical. I can see them before they’re born,” Hades said. A hand landed on my leg, making me jump. I glanced down to see who it was. Hades was holding onto me as he leaned toward the screen. Behind him Persephone had her hands over her mouth with tears filling her eyes.

I no longer held what they did against them. They might have forced this pregnancy on us, but I was genuinely excited about having Aidon’s babies. And it was clear Hades and Persephone were as happy as we were. It wouldn’t hurt to have two powerful gods protecting my kids. And that included Nina and Jean-Marc whom those same gods had welcomed into their hearts.

Aidon squeezed my hand, bringing me back to the moment. A spine curved on the screen followed by a skull. There was another leg and a foot as Clio continued to move the wand. Bridget reached out and put her hand over Clio’s. “Wait. Go back for a second.”

I lifted my head and squinted at the screen. “What is it? What do you see? Are they okay?”

Bridget was silent as she moved the device along with Clio. Both women were focused entirely on the screen. I saw a skull and an arm behind it. Nothing seemed malformed. I wasn’t an expert on ultrasounds and didn’t

know everything to look for, so I had no idea what caught Bridget's eye. Aidon's hold on me tightened as we waited to hear from them.

"Is that?" Clio asked.

Bridget's head moved up and down as a frown formed on her face. "I think so. It's hiding...right there." Tilting the tip of the wand and moving it a bit and I got a view of the other baby's skull.

"Oh!" My mind struggled to process what they'd discovered. How in the hell were we going to handle this? The thought of two was overwhelming, but this? It melted my brain.

"What is it?" Aidon and Hades asked at the same time.

Bridget smiled at me and I nodded. She could tell them. Taking a deep breath, the doctor pointed to the screen. "Phoebe isn't having twins. She's having triplets. The one in the front is baby A, the arm there belongs to baby B, and that tiny face belongs to baby C."

Hades was practically laying on me. His big body draped across mine. "Are you sure it's only three. There seem to be a lot of limbs in there."

My eyes widened at the mere thought of more and immediately went back to the screen to check if Bridget was wrong about the number. My gaze scanned the arm and noted that the angle of the bend couldn't possibly belong to one of the other bodies. The torso at the front was blocking a lot, but the face at the bottom was clear. Bridget moved the wand and tried to get a better view.

"I'm only seeing three. They're small enough that it's easier to distinguish them," Bridget replied.

My gaze traveled over the images as they shifted. "Is there only one sac?" I didn't see three separate ones which meant they were likely identical.

Clio and Bridget shared a look and Clio finally nodded. "There is only one sac and one placenta which is why it wasn't immediately obvious there were three."

Mom rubbed my shoulder. "They're going to be identical."

Hades laid his hand on the side of my stomach. On the screen, the babies moved toward his energy. Aidon let go of me and added his palm beside his father's. Persephone and Melinoe wanted to get in on the touchy-touchy, too. One by one, the fetuses twisted and turned until they were right below someone's hand. It was the first time I'd felt them move with any force. The bright flare on the ultrasound warmed me like I was lying under one of those heat lamps at McDonalds.

When I looked down, I noticed there was a colorful glow surrounding my abdomen. When each of the gods moved their hands, the colors followed. I felt a rolling within me, and a check of the screen confirmed the babies were moving. The power that engulfed my abdomen barely registered as I noted the singular placenta. Even with proof that it was impossible, I had the sense we were having at least one of each sex.

Aidon looked down at me. "Are you okay? This is a lot to take in."

Setting my thoughts and worries aside, I let the joy fill my smile. "Never better. It's going to be a lot to handle but we have a village."

Bridget removed the wand and wiped my stomach. "I will be here to help in any way I can."

The ringing of the doorbell was followed by Stella's voice calling out. "Hello! I'm here. Did I miss the show?"

Nana went to the door and stuck her head out. "You missed everything. Get up here before they pack up."

The sound of heels clacking on the stairs were followed by Stella running into the room like she was on Wall Street and trying to reach the big board to make a trade. "Is it too late for me to see them?"

Clio typed something and the ultrasound filled the screen. She identified the babies for Stella who gaped at me. "You know what this means, don't you?"

Shaking my head, I tugged my shirt down and sat up. "No, what?"

Stella grabbed my hand and pulled me off the table. "It's time to get our tattoos. I've got the parlor picked out. It's owned by a couple of witches who specialize in inking paranormals."

Nina bounced over to join us as I started for the door. "I want to go. I could get one with you guys if you say it's okay, Mom. It'll be so much fun."

Nana put her hand on Nina's shoulder. "Cool your jets, little miss. Your mother waited over forty years to get her first tattoo. You can wait another year until you're an adult."

I appreciated Nana's support. It wasn't that I was against tattoos, I just wanted Nina to be older. I wrapped an arm around Nina. "Nana is right. I would like you to wait a little bit. It's permanent and should be thought out." As I turned down the hallway, I saw Hades and Persephone were talking to Clio and Bridget from the corner of my eye.

"Charley wanted to get one too," Stella added. "I told her she could come watch but this time it's just going to be your mom and me."

Nina shook her head with a frown. “I don’t want to go and watch if I can’t get one.” With that, she broke away and went down the wing to her room.

Stella watched her go with a grimace. “That’s what Charley said too.”

Mom lifted a shoulder. “Teenagers are moody. What I want to know is how you discovered a paranormally run tattoo parlor. I wanted to find a Fae restaurant after Fiona’s description of food in their realm but have no idea how to locate one.”

Stella looked over her shoulder as we descended the main staircase. “I asked one of my clients who had tattoos. She recommended Inkspirits.”

“You will have to ask the other tribred mystics, Mom. I bet one of them might be able to help you,” I said, grabbing a ginger ale from the fridge as we passed through the kitchen.

Nana made a noise as she climbed onto her stool. “Why do you want to eat what sounded like awful food? A salad that tasted like flowers? I’d rather eat *my* cooking.”

I laughed as I shook my head from side to side. “Love you guys. We will be back soon.”

I grabbed my bag then jumped in Stella’s car. She talked a million miles a minute as she drove, vacillating between a tribal tree and the stars we had previously settled on. Before long she pulled up in front of a gorgeous Victorian that was, for some reason different from most. I just couldn’t place why from the street.

I grabbed Stella’s hand. “We’re doing the stars. At least for now. We can revisit the tree another time.”

Stella’s smile was so wide I could see her molars. “Agreed.” She climbed out and I followed suit. “We’re doing black, right?”

I nodded in agreement as Stella practically floated into the tattoo parlor. I followed, with a smile on my lips, as I tried not to think about how much this was probably going to hurt. Ever since our conversation at Nina’s birthday party last month, I had been looking up information about getting inked. And found disparaging feedback about what it was like.

Inkspirits was nestled within an old Victorian-era building, its exterior is adorned with intricate and ornate gothic designs, reminiscent of ancient mystical symbols and ethereal creatures. Not at all like the ones owned by mundies.

As we stepped inside, I was immediately enveloped in an enchanting

atmosphere. The air was infused with a subtle, sweet incense that tickled my senses. Dimly lit, the parlor was illuminated by a soft, ambient glow. The space was filled with an eclectic mix of artifacts and curiosities, showcasing the diverse interests and talents of the artists. Shelves displayed ancient spell books, vials of colorful ink, and peculiar talismans, while artistic renditions of mythical creatures adorned the walls.

The tattoo stations themselves were works of art. Each was customized to reflect the unique style and preferences of the resident paranormal artist. Two tall women came out from around a tranquil corner at the back of the shop. They were both witches. I could feel their magic. My vision swam as nausea overwhelmed me, making it impossible to say anything. All I could do was stand there swallowing my saliva and pray I didn't start hurling. Morning sickness was the worst part of this pregnancy.

I was saved from words by the black-haired witch. "Hello, can we help you?" The woman was stunning with her olive skin tone and short hair. She wore tight black pants and a crop top that displayed the tattoos covering her arms and chest.

Stella nodded. "I made an appointment for my friend and I." As my nausea abated a little, I tried to place them. Stella said they were coven members but I didn't recognize either of them.

The blonde-haired witch gasped and a smile spread across her face. It was almost predatory which was an odd thing to think. "You're the Pleaides and her best friend. It's an honor to have you come to us."

The witch with black hair and ink covering her arms and chest smiled at us as she snapped on some latex gloves. "Since we have a celebrity in our midst today, we're going to do the two of you together."

Her partner, a woman with a blonde bob, picked up a chair and brought it over to the area where the implements were being set up. "When we heard the Pleaides and her best friend were coming in, we had to do something special."

Stella wiggled in her seat. "That's so nice of you, but we don't need anything special. Just the stars."

The witch with black hair waved her hand as she continued to get stuff out and set them up. "It's literally the least we could do. It's not every day you get to give the Pleaides an enchanted tattoo."

I smiled at her in appreciation while watching the needle she was inserting in a black object connected to a wire. My right shoulder blade

twitched as if it was already being tortured. “How much will this hurt? I’ve heard it’s like being cut with a razor.”

Stella pshawed me. “It’s more like being stung by a bee repeatedly. Some also say it feels like being snapped by a rubber band repeatedly. It’ll be fine.”

The two witches laughed and shook their heads at us. “What?” I asked as Stella removed her suit jacket. She’d worn a camisole underneath that left her shoulder bare. I had on two layers with the bottom one being a tank top. I wasn’t taking anything off until they were ready.

The blonde witch lifted a bottle of black ink and shook it. “The descriptions that everyone has are amusing. I once had this troll that cried the entire time, I was putting a happy face on his ass cheek.”

She talked about the blubbering but I was transfixed by the iridescent swirl in the bottle. It was a beautiful streak inside the dark liquid. It made me wonder if that was going to be visible on our skin. I hoped so because it was a stunning addition to the black. My mind went over the individuals I’d seen with tattoos and I’d never seen anything like this.

I reached for the bottle. “Will that shimmer be in our stars? Is that the special thing you’ve planned for us?”

The blonde pulled the plastic back to her chest and looked at me. “What are you talking about?” She looked down at what was in her hand. The iridescence was gone.

I cocked my head to the side. “Hmmm. I thought I saw a shimmer in the ink.”

The black-haired witch chuckled as she squirted some gel out of a tube. “You caught us. We heard you liked sparkly things and thought we would do something special.”

I forced my smile to remain in place. It was a nice thought but they had it all wrong. I didn’t like sparkles. That was Stella. She was bubbly and bright and loved anything that was shiny. As was evidenced by her pink witch fire. Stella was thanking them, and peering at the vial, as I looked around the rest of the shop.

My stomach was in a knot and the nausea I’d been battling for nearly three months reared its ugly head again. I walked over to the front door before my breakfast evacuated all over the pristine set up they had worked so hard to maintain. It wasn’t until I reached the middle of the space that my head cleared a little. There’d been a lot of magic in the back. I imagined the witches warded their personal booths to keep others out when they weren’t

there.

“You’re not running away on us are you, Pleaides?” The blonde asked with a playful tone. Her humor reminded me of Lilith’s and that had me wondering if these women were very involved in the coven. I hadn’t spent enough time to say for sure.

Chuckling, I shook my head. “Not at all. I just needed some air before I got sick.”

Both witches cocked their heads to the side and the black-haired gestured to the chair. “It’s the nervousness. Speaking of. You ready?”

My feet hesitated as I walked back. When I reached Stella, I returned her smile and took off the sweater I was wearing along with the top beneath it. I’d transitioned to the maternity bras a few days ago, so I had a big, white contraption holding my boobs up.

Stella turned in a circle. “Can we watch in the mirror while you work?” She gestured to the looking glass behind us.

The black-haired woman shrugged and swiveled the chair around while the blonde took care of the other one. Clutching my tops in one arm, I sat down. Stella did the same and reached for me. Holding Stella’s hand, I watched in the mirror as the women dipped the needles into the ink and brought the tattoo guns to our backs. It buzzed to life, its distinctive sound filling the air with an electric hum. It was a unique melody, a symphony of metal and machinery merging with our anticipation and excitement. We were really doing this. I sent a silent message to my kids that I wanted the pain that was inevitably going to follow. I didn’t want them reacting and putting out a ward around me.

I sucked in a breath as the needle sliced across my shoulder. The sharp, rhythmic staccato of the needle puncturing the skin echoed like a metronome and was a match for the wave of adrenaline that started coursing through my veins. It heightened my senses and I noticed the smirk on both witches’ face as they went back for more ink and chanted a spell. My gaze flew to Stella’s as the hum turned into daggers and spread from my shoulder. My best friend’s wide eyes matched mine.

I opened my mouth to warn her when everything started to spin around me. The witches were cackling and waved their fingers in front of their faces. “Goodbye, Pleaides. Have fun in Lyra’s lair.”

My heart raced as I clung to Stella, my body feeling like it was being pulled apart. My mind screamed several spells to counter whatever was being

done to us. Black smoke surrounded us, numbing my skin and making it sting at the same time. The chair beneath me disappeared and all I could see was my best friend's terrified face. I had no idea how these bitches pulled it off, but they were actually sending us to Lyra. I braced myself as I lost hold of Stella's hand and knew nothing more.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Reviews are like hugs. Sometimes awkward. Always welcome! It would mean the world to me if you can take five minutes and let others know how much you enjoyed my work.

Don't forget to visit my website: www.brendatrim.com and sign up for my newsletter, which is jam-packed with exciting news and monthly giveaways. Also, be sure to visit and like my Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/AuthorBrendaTrim> to see my daily posts.

Never allow waiting to become a habit. Live your dreams and take risks. Life is happening now.

DREAM BIG!

XOXO,

Brenda

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