



# *Goddess Rising*

GODDESS RISING BOOK ONE

SHARILYN SKYE

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Sharilyn Skye

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*I do not and will not fear tomorrow because I feel as though today has been enough. ~Zach Bryan*

## *Chapter 1*

Some days, it was too much, and I found the weight of the imaginary crown my husband and family placed on my head too heavy. Add to that that The Great Goddess of The Universe and The Maker of All Things demanded more grandkids, more time from me to learn how to do her job, and more of, well, everything. And for those reasons, I stood at the edge of a cliff, looking over the tempestuous Atlantic ocean below.

Wind whipped auburn hair around my face, lashing my cheeks as salt sprayed up the cliffs from where waves crashed below, wetting my skin.

Through the mind of the gull, I flew over the waves, searching for prey. It made me feel stronger. Freer. The binds holding me to this plane were tight, as was intended. Still, once in a while, I chafed at the pressure, grabbing the bit to run from it all.

I hadn't planned on coming to Ireland, but when Aurora and Sephone got into their third fight of the day, I sifted, needing to be away from them because, in my eyes, they were adults, even if Aedan still treated them like children.

This was one of the only topics we fought over. We didn't fight about much, but when we did, it was electric. Literally. I hated fighting with him more than anything, but making up? Well, sometimes, the fights were worth it. Who am I kidding? They were always worth it.

Makeup sex, am I right?

The gull tilted, tucking his wings as he dove beneath the surface and grabbed a fish with his beak. Smiling, I returned my conscience to the still form waiting at the cliff's edge, giving back its life force. As much as I liked to fly, I hated the taste of fish and left the gull to enjoy his meal.

I thought about my life choices.

It's not like I could've changed one of them. I had no choice in being born, and not being born was the only thing that would've led to a different path. And since the path less traveled was mine to walk, I had to do better at stuff like this. Aedan was a much better parent than I. He was calm and cool, always in control long after I lost it, and sparks started flying from my

fingertips.

So when Aurora started slinging spells at Sephone, who had no magic to respond, and Paul Jr cast mooning glances at my daughter, sighing as she caught them and glared back, I left. I'm not proud of it. It wasn't my best life choice; I admit that. But you know what? They were adults. Kind of. According to me, anyway. I didn't think they'd actually kill each other.

Probably not.

Feeling lighter, I walked to the house in Béal a Mhuirthead or, as the locals say, Belmullet. I chuckled, thinking that getting Aedan to call it Belmullet would never happen. He still struggled with contractions, although he remembers them from time to time.

Having a daughter has helped with that. Can you imagine a two-year-old shaking her finger at him and saying, "No, daddy." It was adorable that a toddler brought The Flame Keeper to his knees.

Sephone came eighteen months after our marriage finalized. Let me tell you, when The Great Goddess says you are having children, believe it. I'm not sure who was more shocked, Aedan or I.

Aedan had been a vampire for over two thousand years, and I had put all of my faith in the fact that he'd not fathered genetic children in that time. Go back to the part where the Goddess said it would happen.

But Aedan was more than a vampire, and I was more than Fae. Dani had made sure of that. Dani, otherwise known as the Goddess Danu, otherwise known as The Great Goddess of the Universe and the Maker of All Things, had made sure that I would be strong enough to defeat the former Queen of the Fae, who was also my grandmother. It was complicated. Sometimes, family is.

We all agree that Dani may have overreached when she created me, and now here we are, waiting to see if I would implode or explode. Or not. Or If I would allow myself to be sucked into the fabric of the universe and disperse my power to the stars. Or not. Some days, it was a near thing.

Chuckling, I sifted through the locked stone gates surrounding the place I'd come to see as home. While Pawley's Island, South Carolina, will always be the home of my heart and the home of my childhood. This castle that Aedan called a cottage was my new safe harbor, and I visited almost daily.



I sifted through the barred front door, the wards I'd placed allowing me to enter without incinerating me. I had a key somewhere, but over the last twenty-five years I'd learned to sift, among other things. In the blink of an eye, I could be anywhere I wanted. While most fae had to use the old Ways the Goddess built or the new ones I had, I did not.

I used my two feet to take me to the kitchen. For an old castle, it was remarkably up to date. The open space was filled with state-of-the-art stainless, granite, and tile. It was almost as lovely as the kitchen in the house in Maryland, where currently, three not-children argued, fought, or pined after one another.

I put a K-cup in the Keurig and, with a longing glance at the French press, hit the start button. I could leave them for a little bit, but not for long. Aurora would burn my house down if left unattended, and her parents were enjoying a vacation at the beach house. My beach house.

Life choices.

My best friend Grania and her longtime love Paul deserved a vacation, and I would not begrudge them that. They would enjoy the weathered beauty of the house in Pawley's like all my friends did. I still thought they were jerks for leaving me with three Fae not-children that Aedan still deemed teenagers.

With Aedan, Grania, and Paul out of town and Dani on a walkabout who knew where, that left only me. Sighing, I sipped my coffee. Twenty minutes. I could take twenty damn minutes to get my head together and find the patience somewhere to deal with three twenty-somethings that should've moved out of my house already. That's according to me, not according to Aedan.

They had college degrees.

They had jobs, licenses, and cars.

They had more than enough money.

Why were they still living at home?

I knew that they were fae. Like me, the kids were still growing and wouldn't reach their full power for another fifteen to twenty years. I'd like to think I'd be dead by then, but I was immortal now. Long story short, I'd gone from human to Faerie Healer to Goddess rising within a year. The transition had not been easy, but that's a whole other story or maybe even a series of

them.

My parents are the Queen and Kings of Talamh na Sithe. Yes, kings-plural. They do things differently there. Not better, not worse, just different. The Goddess had somehow bound all five of my parents' magics and genetics when I was made. They are all powerful creatures, and Laith, Lann, Seal, and Saige are all my fathers. Hence, the overreaching bit. I bet my 23 and Me was a mess.

I sipped my coffee and walked the stairs to our bedroom, inhaling the scent of blood, honey, and fall leaves that was all Aedan. It permeated the air like it had sunk into the stones surrounding me. I breathed it in again, smiling. I needed him. Goddess, did I always need him. But I needed him desperately now.

My husband had been away on business for two weeks, and I missed him. I could sift to him, but he'd asked me not to because my growing power was the reason for these meetings. Funny how the fae didn't blink as I grew stronger, but the US government did. They were afraid of me. The sad thing is it wasn't just the US government, it was a host of others too, and his three-day trip had extended to two weeks.

If he wasn't home soon, I was sifting there; agreement be damned.

I'd laughed when I discovered how closely I was being monitored, but Aedan hadn't. He'd used his pull with the American Vampire Association and the fact that he was King of Vampires to get an appointment with those behind the surveillance.

He hoped to assure them that I was harmless, but they had to know I was anything but. What happened in Talamh na Sithe was no secret. Together, we'd staged a coup on a sitting queen. That would not sit well with any government because they wouldn't understand she was a terror that needed to be put down.

I worried they would use Aedan to get to me and hadn't wanted him to go. He'd argued that it had to be done and better him than me. I'd eventually agreed because as I grew stronger, so did he. He met me step for step magically as if the Goddess designed him to ensure I didn't go off the rails and set my mind on world domination. Still, he hadn't managed to sift yet, but he was getting closer.

Freaking Goddesses.

Maybe Dani is the one that should be rethinking her life choices. Aedan was her son. You would think my power would be his, but I could take him in a firefight any day. Now, with swords? That was another story, although I was getting better after twenty-five years of practice.

Finishing my coffee, I took the cup to the kitchen, washed it in the sink, and set it to dry. With an exaggerated sigh and a longing look at the moors beyond the kitchen window, I sifted home.

## Chapter 2

“How can you be mom’s favorite when she isn’t even your mom?” Sephone screamed as I sifted into the grand foyer.

“She is too my mom!” Aurora yelled back, and I heard a dish break.

Maybe raising the girls as sisters wasn’t the best idea. Grania and I, being best friends, thought it had been brilliant at the time, but now? Not so much.

Another dish crashed, and PJ tried lowering his voice and sounding manly, “Ladies,” he said. “Calm down, and let’s talk about it.”

“Did you just tell me to calm down, PJ?” Aurora’s voice rose an octave, and I knew it was time to step in.

Have kids, they said. It will ground you, they said. It will keep you in the present, they said. I stepped into the kitchen, making my presence known.

“Enough. All of you.”

“Mom!” Sephone started.

“Mom!” Aurora interrupted.

“Uuuugh, mom! You always take her side!” Sephone stalked away, stormed down the hall, and slammed a door.

I leaned against the counter, scrubbing my hands down my face. Maybe Aedan had a point. Or maybe we were enabling them, and in the real world, they didn’t act like this. They’d graduated college with honors, after all.

“What’s going on this time, PJ?” I asked, going straight to the one that would tell me the truth. He was the weakest link in their triumvirate of secrets.

“Seph and Rora are crushing on the same dude,” he answered without preamble.

“Bruh,” Aurora growled.

“Don’t bruh your brother,” I answered, leaning against the counter and forcing my face to be blank even though I wanted to laugh. “Sisters before misters, Aurora. You know the rule.”

I felt her magic rise and waited. I could counter her, but I hated pulling rank like that. She lost control when she was emotional and needed to learn to moderate her power to be considered an adult.

“But she kissed him today, and I slept with him last week. That’s disgusting. It’s like incest or something.” Her magic fizzled and sputtered out as the tears started.

She looked so much like her mother at that moment that I smiled. Grania held nothing back, and neither did her daughter. They both wore their emotions for all to see, which could be frightening and beautiful simultaneously.

With white-blond hair and glacier-blue eyes, they could be twins. The only difference was that Aurora had a hint of green in her iris if you looked closely, and she wasn’t quite as tall as her mom. She was still tall but not six feet tall. But, their resemblance was uncanny. With darker blond hair and vibrant green eyes, PJ looked like a fair mix of his parents but not Aurora. She was all Grania.

“It’s okay, sweetie,” I said, pulling her into a hug.

“Gross,” PJ announced, stomping down the hall in Sephone’s direction.

“Shut up, PJ, unless you want to talk about that bitch you dated last month,” Aurora yelled through tears.

“Language, Aurora.”

“Sorry, mom. I just don’t understand why she did that,” she cried, her tears flowing faster.

“You know why,” I whispered, hugging her tighter.

Aurora and PJ were half fae and half human. Honestly, they were half fae-vampire hybrid and half human. Still, both had more magic than Sephone, the daughter of the two most powerful magical creatures alive, the Goddess excepted. Seph’s magic hadn’t developed yet, and she made sure Aurora paid for that.

PJ didn’t have much magic either, but they ignored him as inconsequential anyway. Hence PJ’s angst. He was in love with Sephone, but they’d been raised as siblings, and she didn’t see him as anything other.

Aedan said they were all too young for this shit, but then he was ancient and had grown up differently. The child-adults living in my house were at the perfect age for this shit.

This is why I had been standing on a cliff and thinking about my life choices. Somewhere along the way, I should have zigged instead of zagged

or ducked and weaved.

“Honey, obviously, this boy isn’t worth it. If he is kissing another woman so soon after being with you, then you deserve better. That it was Sephone is just an aside, but I’ll talk to her. You’re on birth control, right?” I asked, watching as she scrunched her nose and looked away.

“Mom,” she tried.

“Don’t mom me,” I answered. Are you on birth control or not?”

Before I met Aedan and my life took a left turn, I had been a long-haul registered nurse. After the spell that kept my magic in check broke, I learned that not only was I fae, but I was a True Healer, and my career choice and many other things made more sense.

Long story short, once a nurse, always a nurse, and I wanted to know whether or not my kid could be pregnant. I’d look into her with my magic if I had to, but I preferred to ask since some people didn’t appreciate me invading their privacy.

Aedan would shit a brick if he knew his darling granddaughter was sexually active, regardless that she was almost twenty-five. When Aedan looked at the girls, he still saw them barefoot with pigtails running through the yard. I didn’t think he would ever see them as women. Sephone might be his biological daughter, but he saw Aurora as his child too. It didn’t bode well for either of them.

Aedan had turned Grania over nine hundred years ago. Although their past had been rocky, she was the daughter of his heart and his favorite vampire child, even if she wasn’t really a vampire anymore. Aedan knowing Aurora had been with a male of any variety, would put said male’s life in danger.

“Don’t tell Grandpa,” she said, wiping her nose on the back of her hand and looking adorable as she did it. Maybe Aedan had a point because she did look like a child, even if an overly large one.

Everyone thought it funny that she called me Mom and Aedan Grandpa. Everyone except Aedan. Too bad for him that no one cared when he complained. “I won’t, sweetie. But you girls need to work this out before he comes home, or he will figure it out on his own, okay? Now answer my question.”

“I get the shot,” she said, looking away.

“What about Seph?” I asked, hoping she would be mad enough to rat her sister out.

Arching a perfectly shaped eyebrow at me, she answered, “Ask her yourself.”

Right.

They might be angry at each other but held the line on loyalty. I’d have done the same thing in Aurora’s position.

“You girls have been doing this for years. You need to leave these human boys alone. They don’t understand girls like you.

“He’s a Were,” she sniffled. “He’s looking for his mate.”

“Well, that will never be one of two fae princesses. Right?” I sighed, shaking my head. Vampires and fae commonly mixed, but the Weres did not. “So you’re giving yourself to a man who will never be serious about you. Don’t waste your time, sweetie. Think of your body as a house, and don’t invite just anyone into it. You don’t want to be, like, a crack house, you know?” I groaned inwardly. Where was Grania? She would handle this so much better.

I’d had a carefully tended crack house myself at one time, though the girls would never know that. It felt a little like the pot calling the kettle black. Goddess, I sucked at this.

Aurora rolled her eyes dramatically. “Mom, that’s crazy and old-fashioned.”

Right. Crazy and old-fashioned.

“Listen to your mothers. We know a thing or two whether you agree or not. I’m just saying, Aurora. Don’t waste time on males to whom you won’t mean anything in the end.

“But shifter cock is supposed to be the best,” she wailed.

Unable to take anymore, I got up and searched for Sephone. Aurora liked to push my buttons and knew where to find them. Remember again: Ireland, cliff, ocean, bird, and life choices.

I found Seph in her room, lounging across the soft lavender bedspread as she typed on her phone. Long, wavy, near black hair draped over her shoulders and down her back. Sun coming into her room's window glinted off

the auburn highlights that reminded me so much of Aedan. Bright green multifaceted eyes mirroring my own looked up at me, and my heart exploded with love. I slid onto the bed beside her.

“I would never choose anyone over you, and you know that, Seph,” I said, rubbing a slow circle on her back. “That doesn’t mean it’s right for you to go after boys that you know Aurora is interested in. Cradle to grave, you girls need to stick together. And that this is over a shifter who will never, ever, pick one of you in the end is ridiculous. You are so smart, funny, beautiful, and amazing that any boy would be lucky to have you. Don’t sell yourself short.”

“I don’t have any magic, mom. I might as well be a human,” she said, getting right to what I knew was the heart of the issue.

“Sephone, you are twenty-three.”

“Almost twenty-four.”

“Regardless, you are fae, and your magic may not present for years. You know that,” I said.

Aedan and I did not doubt that our daughter would be powerful. Indeed, the later in life magic awoke, the more powerful the fae tended to be. As the granddaughter of The Great Goddess and the Queen of all fae, there was no doubt Seph would have magic. We just hoped that we were strong enough to contain it. Dani said that Seph’s magic would never reach our level, and we hoped she was right, but with the powerhouse of genetics behind her, she would still be very strong.

“People say I’m not even fae or that I’m adopted. I hear it all the time.”

I smiled, unable to stop myself. “I promise you are not adopted. Look in the mirror, Sephone. No one else could be your parents. We certainly bred true.”

“That’s gross, Mom,” she said, sighing, rolling over onto her back, and looking at me from under long, dark lashes.

“Those people are just jealous. No one could ever doubt you’re fae. You’re talented, wealthy, and desirable; anyone who talks shit about you is just being petty. You could always go and stay with Grandma Ari. She’d love to have you, and so would your grandfathers.” I picked up a length of her hair and wound my fingers around it.



“You could stay in the castle or at the Inn. You could swim in the lake and visit that cute son of Ravena’s. Or Teagan’s; that one’s a prince, after all.” I didn’t want her visiting any boys, but life is life, and she should love it. Moderately. Safely.

Seph shrugged her shoulders noncommittally. “They all have magic. It’d be weird. Plus, the guys look at me funny sometimes.”

“That’s because you are the most beautiful thing they’ve ever seen,” I said, knowing it was true. It also didn’t hurt that she was, indeed, an actual Faerie Princess.

“Mom,” she huffed, rolling to her side and curling into me like she did when she was little. “Sometimes it’s weird.”

I knew what she meant. In Talamh na Sithe, Sephone would be courted by groups of males bound by friendship or blood. Although monogamous relationships happened occasionally since my mother became Queen, it was the norm for one female to mate with three or four males as Fae can form mate bonds with those they choose instead of being fated like the Weres.

Once upon a time, Faerie was a wild, untamed place where the males outnumbered the females by the hundreds. When my mother was born, there were only eight females in her generation.

There had been a baby boom in recent years, and the numbers were better, but there were still many more males than females. Add in that Talamh na Sithe was still a wild place with growing magic and dangerous creatures roaming about, and the males tended to band together to care for and protect one female and any offspring that may come.

Some days, I thought they had the right idea; others, I imagined having three more husbands and wanted to kill all of them.

“I get that it’s different, but your grandfathers and grandma Ari will look after you. They love you. Maybe being in Talamh na Sithe and surrounded by magic will help yours bloom. And maybe some time away from Aurora will be good for you; think about it. I love you.” I wrapped my arm around her and inhaled her sweet scent.

She always smelled like sugar cookies. Not like my mother’s scent of vanilla and sugar, no. Sephone smelled like butter, sugar, flour, and vanilla, all the things that go into sugar cookies. It was layered and complicated but

so much a part of Sephone that it infused every corner of her room.

I love you too, Mommy,” she said into my side, and maybe there was peace in the chaos of this house after all.

PJ and Aurora seldom walked across the field to where their parents lived, choosing instead to stay in the massive house that Aedan built after his had burned down a quarter of a century ago. Funny how time flies when you might live forever. The jury was still out on that last part, thankfully. But in moments like these, I found true peace.

“I love you, baby girl. I bet Cook has something in the kitchen for you,” I said as my only child cuddled into me. “There might even be ice cream in the freezer.”

“Okay,” she said.

“First, I have a question, and don’t be mad. It’s relevant to the situation, and if something were to happen, your daddy would be uncontrollable. You know that,” I started, hoping my peaceful moment wasn’t about to be ruined.

“All right,” she said.

“Are you on the pill? It’s way too soon for you to have a baby.”

“Ew, Mom, no. I’m a virgin,” she squealed, pulling away from me and hopping to her feet. “Do you think we have chocolate ice cream?” she asked, looking down at me as I slowly rose.

“I bet we do,” I answered, smiling inwardly. I was mother to a twenty-three-year-old virgin. Who’d have thought? After the life I’d led, I’d have sworn it impossible. Maybe I was doing something right after all.

Aedan would find out about Seph and Aurora’s fight; he had a way of knowing things. Hopefully, their deeper secrets would stay hidden since not everything was his business, regardless of what he thought. They were adults. Kinda. According to me, anyway.

We snacked on a buffet made by a brownie who called himself Cook while talking about work but nothing important. Cook kept us fed and made sure the house ran like a clock.

Brownies are considered a lesser fae, though there is nothing lesser about them. Their magic requires them to keep a house or lose their minds, but they can be taken advantage of because of that. Cook had adopted me first and then Aedan because the larger the household, the happier he was. Lately,

we'd caught sight of a lady brownie and wondered if Cook had mated. That, or he had been deposed. I'd heard they could be vicious when searching for a family to care for, and ours would be quite the coup as our house was always full.

Brownies were reclusive and didn't like to be caught doing their work. We were never sure how he managed to keep us fed, the kitchens stocked, and the house spotless, but he did. Or she did. Or they did. Anyway, we ate lasagna, chicken parm, meatballs, and salad. It was Olive Garden night in the Hennessey household, but it was handmade, and all the better for it.

Aedan had gone by one name for so long that he took mine when we married. It was an old fae custom that he didn't mind adhering to. You always knew who your mother was; it's your father that can be a mystery, especially in Talamh na Sithe, so he'd taken my surname, and I'd loved that he did.

Despite being filled with protective alpha males, Fae society was matriarchal in that the women held most of the power, with only a few exceptions. This custom had strengthened under my mother's rule, and Talamh na Sithe was better for it. Maybe don't mention that to Coimeadai Lasair.

Watching Sephone eat chocolate ice cream buried in Hershey's syrup, I knew she'd never doubt her parentage. She was too perfect a mix of Coi and me and certainly the best of us in one soul. We chatted as we ate, stuffing ourselves with food and companionship.

With kids her age, you never knew which side of them you might get, but I was taking all the love she had, and I soaked it up while it lasted. Tomorrow might bring the feral side of her, and while I loved it too, I enjoyed her sweetness more.

After ice cream, Aurora appeared. She and Seph huddled on the couch, talking while I cleared some of our collective mess. Cook would do it, but I hated to leave a tornado if I could whittle it to a rainstorm.

When I finished, I found them lying together and watching Netflix while PJ sat alone, sighing as he watched Sephone watch whatever series they binged on. Not long ago, they'd have been piled like puppies on the couch, but Seph had enough presence of mind to know that ship had sailed. I joined

them briefly before giving up trying to make sense of the show. I hadn't heard from Aedan all day. I sent him another text and then went to the bedroom alone.

## Chapter 3

### Aedan

I heard the notification on my phone, wishing I could pull it out and answer my wife. This trip was not going well, and I'd rather hear her voice than theirs on any day.

I had come for senate hearings on one thing and ended up in closed-door meetings over something else entirely.

Initially, they worried about the current power held by the American Vampire Association, or so they said. They worried about the Fae coalition, too, I am sure. More specifically, they worried that Lara would attempt a government coup and viewed what happened in Talamh na Sithe twenty-five years ago as proof. How it waited this long to come to a head, I did not know.

The funny thing about politics is that The War was seen as a good move then, but now, under the newly seated current administration, it was not. In defense of the government, details about the events surrounding the deposal of the former Queen of Talamh na Sithe were slow to filter to the New World, and time passed differently there. Not twenty-five years differently, but differently all the same.

I sat in a private meeting room in the White House. Not the one they use for television appearances or photo opportunities. No, I sat in the room used for the down-and-dirty business of politics, trying to keep my wife's life as simple as possible. America's leadership wanted assurances, but how do you assure them they were safe from a Goddess? You can not. They do not want to hear it. Excuse me; they *don't* want to hear it.

Goddess forbid Sephone hear me not using modern speech. My daughter is offended on a fundamental level by such things, deeming me old and out of touch. I am trying on all levels to be hip. I even opened a Twitter account. Or was it an X? Or simply a bird? Truth be told, I paid a Gen Z kid to run it and did not know.

I listened to the man across from me drone on when I only wanted to go home and hold my wife. Assurances be damned. She could light the entirety of the world on fire, and as long as she left our little corner in peace, I would

not care. They were actually talking to the wrong Hennessey. Lara would've promised them the world to get out of being in the room with them and would never maliciously lift a finger against her country. I, on the other hand?

"Mr. Aedan, what do you say to the proposal?" someone asked.

Oh, dear mother.

"Give me time to review it," I said, rising. It was an old business strategy that irrefutably worked. No one can argue with someone wanting time to dissect whatever tripe they penned.

"And your Fae Queen?" someone asked. I tilted my head in their direction a bit too slowly, imagining I looked very much like a snake sighting its prey.

"The Fae Queen is safely ensconced in Talamh na Sithe, and I doubt she wants much to do with the Americas. Not yet, anyway," I answered, deflecting them. Airmed did not want anything to do with the New World but let them think otherwise if it took some of the pressure off of her daughter.

"You know what I mean," he said. "I'm talking about your wife."

"The only thing my wife is Queen of is our home, Sir. And some might disagree with that statement and challenge her for the title if they heard me use it. She is truly harmless. Powerful, yes," I said, as there was no point in denying it. Lara was the most powerful being next to The Great Goddess, and everyone knew it. But she kept to herself, using her magic in small amounts and only if needed.

Our life had been peaceful since the Fae war ended, and I planned on keeping it that way. "But if it is too worrisome to have us here, we can relocate. We have landholdings in many hospitable places," I added, knowing the reaction to the statement would be immediate.

"Now, Mr. Aedan."

"Hennessey," I said, hating the sound of my old name. I'd wanted to return to my birth name, but if you think changing your name at the DMV is complicated, try changing two thousand years of history.

"Mr. Hennessey, I apologize. We adore having your family in the US and wouldn't dream of." Losing your money to another country, I finished in my head because it was the truth, after all.

"Asking you to go," he said. "We're just looking for assurances that there

is a safety net if the American Fae queen goes off the rails.”

“We want to be part of the solution should there be a problem,” the president interrupted.

I hated this woman with a passion. The current US president was the third female to hold the position, and where her predecessors had been excellent, she failed to live up to the standard they set. And while it was true that Lara was considered the Queen of the American Fae, it was not an official title nor one she recognized. Still, Fae living here came to her in droves, seeking mediation, retribution, or remuneration, and it did make her their Queen.

Lara saw these people daily, holding court in our living room, the barn, the grocery store, the post office, and the driveway. She didn't realize what that meant for her status, though everyone else involved did.

Lara was most definitely the Queen of the Fae living in the New World, and if her mother ever retired, she'd be Queen of Talamh na Sithe as well. And if my mother retired? Goddess, save us because only my wife could take her place. As levied by responsibility as she was, Lara would not go off the rails now, nor likely ever. Not if I had anything to do with it.

They were looking to weaponize her, plain and simple.

The president, who affected the easy charm Lara wore naturally, also worried that should Lara get into politics, it would be all over but the fat lady singing. Was that the right saying? Was that hip enough? I would have to ask Sephone when I got home. *I'd* have to ask. Great Goddess, it was harder to use the contraction than it was to not. They make little sense.

“We are finished here.” I rose to leave, quirking my eyebrow at the room. I was done.

“Let's not be hasty, Governor,” the Secretary of State said from the fringes of the group.

I bristled at the old title. The US government was out of touch and not hip at all, and I needed to get more vampires into it to make that correction. I made a mental note to do so.

Where once I was the Governor of the Eastern Region of Vampires, now, I was the President. One of my former allies had attempted a coup of her own, and I'd united the country's vampires under my banner, hoping to

ensure that type of behavior didn't recur.

For a reason, we kept the intricacies of vampire politics from human eyes, so I kept my mouth shut. My son, Gregory, would make an excellent Senator and an even better president. I would speak with him about it later.

But the fact remained that whether I was the Governor, the President, or the court jester mattered not. The people in this room would hate it if the House of Aedan and the Hennessey family pulled up stakes and left the country. No pun intended. The loss of taxes alone would hurt the national budget. Add in the potential instability in the supernatural community, and the US government would have a problem.

Not to mention our numerous businesses, homes, employees, and bank accounts. It would be the equivalent of a major city uprooting its entire population and operations and taking them elsewhere. Bottom line? It would hurt.

"Mr. Secretary, Mr. Speaker, Madam President," I started. "If Lara wants to go off the rails, as you say, there will be no stopping her, but she is a loving wife, mother, and healthcare healer. Her behavior is predicated on all three principles; therefore, my wife is unlikely to go off of anything. However, she is rather fond of me, and I need to get back to her. If I do not get home soon, all bets are off on whether or not she will tear The District apart looking for me. Have a pleasant evening." I left, leaving them sitting silently with their mouths open. What more could I say? I doubt they'd ever been walked out on in that manner, but there was nothing more to do, and I wanted to go home.

Perhaps I should have given them platitudes or false assurances, but that would be unwise. Making any deal with the US government would be akin to making one with a powerful Fae. Maybe more so. There are twists and turns that even I might not foresee, and I am a master at the long game and would avoid it at all costs.

On the streets, I headed toward my car. Someone always offered to drive me, but I had taken to driving myself. I could have walked one of Lara's Ways, as she had made many, but Westminster wasn't far from The District, and I enjoyed the drive. I'd chosen a silver 1963 Corvette Stingray for the visit and did not regret it.



The car was nearing a hundred years old and still all original. I had owned it since it came off the assembly line and cared for it meticulously. I slid onto the hot leather seats, enjoying the engine's growl as it fired.

The drive home was uneventful, and I was grateful for the time to decompress before walking into our home and hearing the howl of children and the breaking of glass. With a sigh, I placed my briefcase on the couch as Sephone and Aurora raced around the corner, screaming at one another.

“Girls,” I said, not raising my voice.

“Daddy!” Sephone said, running toward me and pulling me into a hug.

“What are you fighting about now?” I asked, watching as they cast sidelong glances at one another.

“Nothing,” Aurora chimed in, joining her sister in the hug.

“Nothing, Daddy. Just playing,” Seph added, and I smelled both girls’ lies. Like her mother, Sephone could do that. However, I wasn’t born yesterday and could easily spot them. Sometimes, I let the lies go; sometimes, I did not. Aurora could not lie and seemed to forget that, especially around her siblings.

“Sephone,” I said, pulling away and narrowing my eyes.

Lara insisted they were adults capable of caring for themselves, but I disagreed. They acted very much like unruly teens, and I couldn’t imagine them living alone for many years to come.

I sighed. I had wanted a few hours alone with my wife and was beginning to think that perhaps she had a point. Maybe these woman-children could survive in the wilds on their own.

“What are you arguing about?” I tried again.

“Girl stuff.”

“Nothing,” they said in unison.

“Right, well. Does this girl stuff involve boys?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“No,” they shouted.

“Of course.” I tried to leave the ‘girl stuff’ to Lara as she had more expertise in the matter. My job was to step in and suck dry the males who attempted to charm them over the firm lines I set. “Does your mother know about this?”

Silence.

My question was met with silence.

I narrowed my eyes further, and some of the story began frantically spilling out. I appreciated their effort, but it changed nothing.

There was something about a boy and a kiss and then stealing said boy and another kiss. I felt myself still at the thought of any kisses and smelled the small lies they told. I would wager it was more than kisses, and someone was about to lose the totality of their blood volume.

“Where is your mother?” I asked, needing to find her before I tracked this man-child down and ended him.

“Upstairs?”

“I don’t know?” they said again.

Lara said raising them as sisters might be a mistake, but we had done it anyway. I was beginning to think she was a much more intelligent creature than I, but she was undoubtedly the better parent.

“She came back from Ireland a few hours ago and then disappeared again,” Sephone added, looking up the stairs longingly in hopes of escaping me.

“I just bet she did.” If Lara had been to the cliffs of Ireland, the day had been worse than I imagined. Grania, Paul, and I had left her alone to deal with the three youngsters, and I cringed now at the unfairness of that decision.

She was ready for an empty nest, whereas my mother insisted there were more children to come. Fae can conceive as long as the Goddess wills it, and Lara is very young on the Fae scale. I know she tried birth control, but after my mother laughed in her face, she quit taking it.

“You are dismissed,” I said, watching the girls eye one another skeptically. They likely knew that the end of this discussion was nowhere near.

Subdued, they walked away, watching me with worried eyes. I did nothing to assuage their fears, as it would be a lie because if I found the truth unacceptable, heads would roll. When they were out of sight, I focused on my bond with Lara, following it to the master suite and into the bath.

There lay my personal goddess, shrouded in thick white bubbles.

Something cloying and floral hid her natural scent of salt, sun, and sea. Her head rested against the curved porcelain of the tub, and her emerald eyes were closed. Long, auburn hair with bright red highlights spilled over the back in pooled waves where it touched the tile. Even after twenty-five years, I was made speechless by her beauty. Lara is and always will be the most beautiful creature I have ever seen.

She cracked an eye and glanced my way before closing it again, sighing heavily. Reaching up, I loosened my tie and pulled it off. She took one hand from the water, reaching toward me as suds dripped downward and into the water. I took her hand, holding it tightly.

“Thank God you’re home,” she said, sounding cross though her eyes remained closed and her face relaxed.

I quirked an eyebrow as I unbuttoned my shirt, dropping it to the floor before removing my belt with exaggerated slowness so that the leather made a soft snick as it released. Her lips curved in a smile, but her eyes did not open. I wanted nothing more than to see those multifaceted emerald-green depths, but I supposed this was her punishment for my leaving.

Moving behind her, I dropped to my knees, cradling her upturned face. I ran my hands through her scalp, massaging it lightly. “I missed you,” I said, ghosting my lips across the smooth skin of her eyelids and forehead.

“Hmmm,” she hummed skeptically. Her mouth turned down, and lines appeared on her forehead, letting me know she was unhappy with me. My lips dipped as I watched her expression. Twenty-five years is barely a wrinkle in time, but it is long enough to learn my wife’s moods.

I bit her earlobe, breathing softly across her neck, and she groaned. “I see I have some penance to perform,” I said, smiling broadly now. I would spend as many days as necessary earning my wife’s forgiveness.

My hands found her throat, and I squeezed it hard enough to elicit a groan. Finally, her eyes popped open, meeting mine. She stunned me with their beauty, and my breath hitched as I met her stare, letting the feelings between us equalize and the pressure of our separation ease.

With the balance restored, I continued my perusal of her neck and face with my hands and lips, making her groan and reach her wet arms around my neck. Her body arched out of the water, her hard pink nipples catching my

attention. I pulled her to me, ignoring the water and suds that dripped down my chest, soaking my bespoke pants.

“Mavis,” I said, waking our AI assistant. “Lights to forty percent and window tint to medium.” Instantly, the room darkened.

While the soundproofing I installed was excellent, we’d learned the hard way that from certain angles, our bedroom could be viewed clearly through the floor-to-ceiling windows surrounding two sides of it. Thank the Goddess for technology.

I spread Lara on the bed before me, taking a moment to rake my gaze over her body. Her legs were spread, baring her core to me, and moisture that was not water beaded on her trimmed auburn curls, making my mouth water to taste it. My fangs descended, and I was unable to stop them. Lara Hennessey made me a teenage vampire again.

I hardened immediately, unable to stop that either. We rarely went more than a day without making love, and these last two weeks had also been hard on me. I could have driven home, but the meetings bled together and often went late into the night.

Lara had a busy schedule, and I hated to disturb her rest. I’d wrongly thought I’d finish if I worked one more day. I imagined one more meeting would lead to some understanding. It was only at the end that I accepted there would never be enough meetings.

I stood over my wife, glorying in the sight of her hair spread across our bed and her lithe, lean body offered to me for worship, as it should be. I took it all in, cataloging it in the file of memories I kept of her, knowing I deserved none of them.

Unable to wait, I knelt at the side of the bed, pulling her hips to me. Her hands fell to my hair, and a long groan escaped her as my tongue found her core, working it in the way only twenty-five years of marriage allows.

Lara’s breathing became ragged, and her fingernails dug pleurably into my scalp. “Fuck,” she said, her hips bucking against my tongue.

“After you come, mo chroi,” I chastised, loving her whimper when I pulled away. I sat back on my heels, watching her pleasure weep from her. But I am a selfish creature. Unable to let the quilt have her sweetness, I attacked her core again, loving her scream and the sound of my name on her

lips as she fell apart for me, calling me my given name, not my taken one, and I loved that too.

“Coi. Fuck,” she said again, her words coming like a sob.

I let a wicked smile crease my face as her orgasm ebbed, and then I bit into the crease of her groin, making her come hard enough to see stars a second time. She couldn't cry out, only grunt as the pleasure overwhelmed her. I didn't need to drink her blood. It'd been a long time, though, and I wanted to, so I did. Selfish creature, indeed.

Her body went limp as I drank my fill, making pleasure cascade through her. Her eyes closed, and her face went slack. When I'd satisfied that part of myself that demanded I take from her, I stood, stripping out of my damp clothing, unable to take my eyes from her shimmering skin.

“I can't,” she whispered. “You broke me.”

“You will,” I said. “You will take me, my wife,” I disagreed lovingly.

Dragging her limp body to the head of the bed, I rested my weight on one elbow, holding her chin and taking her mouth aggressively. She tasted like everything I ever needed and never thought to dream of, and I took my time enjoying her. Eventually, she kissed me back, a small smile forming on her lips as her hands found my head again.

I have had long hair, short hair, no hair, and medium amounts of hair over the course of our marriage. Lately, I had settled on keeping it short on the sides and long enough on the top so she could grip it when she wanted. She did so now, her nails scraping my scalp so that an electric current shot straight to my balls. This woman. She has always been my undoing.

Her kisses became more demanding, and I slipped between her thighs, lining myself up with her before pushing through her wet heat in one hard thrust. She cried out, arching into me and shuddering as her body acclimated to mine after my absence. Her breaths came hard, but I didn't give her long to recover. It was always like this between us. Our need for one another had done nothing but grow over the years.

Funny how when I met Lara, she had jumped from man to man and bed to bed. I could have had her immediately, but I knew that would be a mistake.

Sometimes, waiting is worth it, which is always the case with her. Her love was hard-earned but a fierce, white-hot thing that I knew burned for the

long term. I never doubted her fidelity, just as she'd never doubt mine. And is it not better to be the last lover, not the first? In the back of my mind, I believe my mother created us for one another, regardless of her adamant denials.

Her emerald eyes snapped to mine, and I hit her cervix hard, making her groan. Her tongue traced the shell of my ear. "Goddess, how I've missed you," she said. I set a vicious pace, needing all of her immediately because I had missed her too, and I was a fool for allowing politics to part us. Fuck them; let them burn. Or let them come for us. Either way, the result would be the same.

She sank her teeth into my neck, forcing a roar from me. She had once used her tongue or a fingernail to open my skin, but after discovering that she could infuse her teeth with the same magic, she always used them. My blood hit her tongue, and her body spasmed around me, clamping down with a tightness I couldn't deny. Her teeth in my most vulnerable skin on the underside of my neck sent me over the edge, and we both came entirely too soon.

I put my forehead on hers, breathing hard the scent of sun, sand, and sea mixed with sex. "I love you," she said, closing her eyes against the intensity of it.

"And I, you," I answered, nuzzling her neck.

I slipped from her, letting the rush of our fluids soak the bed before pulling the entire sticky mess of her into my arms. "I hate leaving you."

"I hate it too. I'm not meant to be a single parent to adult children," she laughed, bringing up our oldest argument.

"Hmmm. I am going to find this boy and drain him dry for this supposed kiss," I growled.

She laughed against my chest, slapping me lightly. "No, you're not. The problem has sorted itself. And it's I'm, not I am. Don't let Seph hear you slip like that."

"Is that so?" I flipped her on her back, unable to stop myself. Two weeks is too long, and I hadn't sated my need for her, not that I ever could.

I made love to her the second time, making her moan my name until she was a limp, lifeless thing under my hips. Then I let myself go deep inside, her

name on my lips and her soul entrenched in my heart. She was already gone when I pulled her to me, and I could finally do the one thing I hadn't since I left her. Sleep.

## *Chapter 4*

Aedan slept next to me, the dim sunlight flooding the planes of his face, making him look like an angel. Oh, I knew he was no angel. He is many things, but angel is not one of them. His beauty took my breath, and as he rarely slept, I took advantage of the moment by tracing the lines of his face with my eyes. And yes, had he a pair of feathery, black wings, he would look like one of the fallen.

To be asleep, though, he must be exhausted.

As angry as I'd been at his absence, I was made angrier by the lines of exhaustion still riding his face despite a full night in bed. Aedan was a machine, and that he looked so drawn let me know how badly his weeks away had gone.

He thinks I don't know why he was there and what the meetings were about, but I do. I hear whispers from everywhere, and The District is no exception.

I have friends, employees, and business associates who, even if they don't have a lot of influence in the town, have big ears and have kept me apprised of the growing concern over my future.

After the Fae War and the power I displayed, there had been many attempts on my life. I'd been shot at, poisoned, knifed on a crowded street, and stalked on the trails of Carroll County as I rode my horse. I'd been intentionally crashed into while driving and walking. For a while, it had gotten to the point of ridiculousness. But then things calmed down as people forgot.

Once Sephone was born, there was a brief stint of attempted kidnappings because some vampires wanted genetic children and thought taking me was the way to get them. I'd given a two-thousand-year-old vampire a genetic child, and many believed I could do the same for them.

My magic had evolved, so I didn't have to worry much about these attacks, but that didn't mean I ignored what went on around me or the whispers in the dark that would lead to danger for my family.

The deaths of those involved helped stop future attacks, and our lives had



been mostly peaceful for two decades. But still, the government worried about me. Why now?

Weighing the desire to touch the angles of his face against the need to let him sleep, I ran a finger over Aedan's chiseled features, loving how his full lips tipped up and his heartbeat increased to double digits against my chest, where I held him tight.

Aedan liked the political bullshit and was good at it, but I couldn't care less about any of it and only wanted to be left alone. So I let him finagle and manipulate his chess pieces around the board while I pretended to be oblivious to the gambits because it didn't matter. Coi was the master of the long game, not I. None of it mattered to me, anyway.

What mattered was him and our family. What mattered was Seph, Aurora, and PJ. Paul and Grania. My parents. Dani. As big as our world was, it was relatively small, and I challenged a single soul to come after it.

A couple once tried to take Sephone at a park where she played with friends, and they learned a new definition of mama bear before they died painfully because fuck that.

No, I didn't enjoy killing people. In fact, it went against everything I believed, but I'd learned the hard way that sometimes it was necessary. Back when I thought I was only a Faerie Healer, people had gotten hurt because of that particular moral conflict, but never again. I'd learned that being conflicted and indecisive caused those I loved pain, and that was not happening.

Using a bit of Aedan's coopted magic, I'd burned the couple to dust. Seph was mine, and no one went after her after that. Nothing inspires wariness like violent death by fire. Security cameras caught the entire thing, and the videos were played repeatedly on national news.

Then, the pundits weighed in.

The sight of Sephone's arm pulled so violently it dislocated still filled me with rage, but my response was deemed justified, if not a little harsh, by the police. Afterward, no one was brave enough to come at us from the front again, not that people didn't try to gnaw at us from the sides or rear, but there had been mostly peace after that.

Aedan sighed, drawing my attention. I'd get lost in my thoughts without

him, I knew that. He anchored me in a way nothing ever had. He rubbed his cheek across my bare skin, marking me like a cat while he slept, a Cheshire smile on his face.

I should have hunted him down in the city, and it's good he came back when he did, or I would have. I sighed, smiling as I watched his eyes move beneath their lids as he dreamed. But when his diamond-cut whiskey eyes opened and stared into mine? Oh, I loved that more.

Giving a smile that might have been a little frightening, I eased over his body and took pleasure from it until he shouted my name and shuddered uncontrollably under me.

That'll teach him. Life Choices. He should've chosen to come home sooner, but maybe my choice of punishment wasn't as much of a deterrent as I hoped.

He brought me coffee in the shower, his sated smile matching mine. Then he left me to get dressed and ready for the day. It was early, but we'd gotten used to keeping human hours when the kids were small and pretty much stuck to that schedule.

The Fae Queen had left multiple messages over the last few days, asking me to come and see her and my dads. I'd also had requests from several local fae, Noah, the shifter representative on the Supernatural Council, and various members of the US Fae Council. Then there was Sephone and Aurora.

My decision to send Seph to Talamh na Sithe had firmed overnight. She needed space to grow, and, as large as our house was, she needed a different kind of space. Maybe away from the shadow of her parents and sister, she would bloom. Her grandparents would kill for her, so I knew she'd be safe.

Getting Coi to agree would be the hard part.

Maybe harder than getting Seph to agree.

With a sigh, I dressed in jeans and a soft cotton shirt. I pulled the mass of my hair into a messy bun and dabbed on some makeup before searching for my family.

Downstairs, Aedan had the girls pinned with a glare, and I knew he knew about their fight. Like me, Sephone could lie, but Aurora couldn't. That part of her was all fae, and while she tried to stand against Aedan's dark stare, he had far more practice than she did.

“Coi,” I said, using his name as I went to the coffee pot to refresh my drink. “Leave it alone.”

“But,” he tried.

“I know. Leave it. They’re adults,” I faced him, catching his death glare and soaking it in. He didn’t scare me. Not anymore, if ever.

“They are not adults!” he shouted, setting glasses in the cabinet rattling against each other.

“They are,” I said calmly, ignoring his outburst.

“I will kill him,” he growled.

“It’s ‘I’ll,’ Daddy,” Seph piped in helpfully.

“You will not,” I answered, crossing my arms and giving Sephone a warning glance. She dropped her eyes.

“This must be answered for!” he shouted again, and I laughed at the thought that he was the one who was supposed to ground me and not the other way around.

“I’ll talk to Noah, but that is as far as it goes.” I let my magic build in response to his, letting him know he could calm down or we could throw down for real. He could fight me and fight me hard, but he couldn’t win.

“It is a shifter?” he said, his voice taking on a deadly calm.

“Thanks, Mom,” Aurora quipped, glaring at me.

“Do not speak to your mother that way, and wipe that look off your face,” Aedan glared harder, rounding on her.

“Go to your room, Aurora,” I said, pinning her eyes above Aedan’s shoulders.

“Fine,” she said, stomping to the front door and slamming it behind her.

I let her go. She was old enough to walk to her own house or drive into town, but she needed to take a walk before Aedan killed someone.

“We are enabling them to act like toddlers, Coi.” I brought my eyes back to his, pulling his attention from Sephone. “This is our fault.”

He sighed, carding his fingers through the mop of dark hair on the crown of his head.

I caught Sephone’s wide eyes, nodding my head toward her room. She left, watching her dad warily as she went because she rarely saw him out of control. I sat beside Coi, sipping my coffee as I waited him out.

“They’re having sex,” he sighed.

“Not, Sephone,” I sighed. “But they are adults, Aedan. By New World standards, Rora has been over the age of consent for seven years.”

“That is ludicrous.” He didn’t meet my eyes as he stared at the granite-like it held the answers.

“Be that as it may, would you feel better if she was thirty?” I asked, rubbing a circle on his bent back as he responded with a growl. “Forty?” I asked.

“I wanted her to be married,” he admitted. “And maybe seventy,” he said.

“That’s unfair. Marriage should be forever, and a woman needs to know that she is sexually compatible with her mate before bonding like that.” I smiled inwardly because Aedan wasn’t raised to act this way. This was him being a father talking.

“We need to give them a little freedom, Coi,” I said, nuzzling his neck. “They’ll have it eventually, and if it comes all at once, they’ll go wild with it. That’s when the trouble will happen. They have to grow up, and we have to let them.”

He sighed, his shoulders slumping. “You are very good at this.”

“At what?” I asked with a smile.

“Parenting. Soothing the savagery in me,” he said, finally meeting my eyes. “Thank you.”

“No thanks are necessary, and you are the much better parent.”

“Hardly.” He smiled into my eyes, taking the worry from his face. “So what now?” he asked.

“I think Seph needs some time away. Between the magic and the, uh, other things, I think she needs space to grow. I want her to spend some time with her grandparents and outside Aurora’s shadow. It will be good for both of them.” I held Aedan’s stare, knowing he wouldn’t like the idea.

“There are gangs of men in Faerie searching for a mate,” he growled.

“And her grandfathers will kill them for trying anything, Aedan. Do you not think men are hunting her here? She’s the richest and most eligible bachelorette in the land. The men in Talamh na Sithe are more old-fashioned; they won’t push like the ones here. Seph knows how to say no.”

He dropped his head between his arms, nodding slowly. “Not yet, though. I have been gone, and it is winter there. Let us wait a few weeks or months. Maybe a year or so.”

“Coi,” I sighed.

“I know. I know. Contractions.” He laughed, and all was right with the world when he put his arm around me, pulling me to his side.

“Yes, love, contractions. It’ll be okay. We’ll visit, and if you think my fathers won’t be all over her, you’re wrong.” I laid my head on his shoulder with a sigh.

“A few weeks,” he said.

“A few weeks,” I agreed.

## *Chapter 5*

Aedan and I ate breakfast and drank coffee in relative peace as we talked about meetings, schedules, and appointments. I wanted nothing but to retire from it all and be the introvert I was born to be, but I understood why we couldn't do that.

Sometime later in the morning, Aurora texted, asking if the coast was clear to come home, and I suggested she water her parents' plants and check things at their house to give us more time. Cutting the cord is a process, and it would take a while, but it needed doing for all of our sakes.

As much as I wanted a break, I had a busy schedule, too, and Aedan needed to see to his businesses instead of trying to deal with mine. We planned to handle our meetings early, then meet for lunch and a quick trip to my mother's.

After breakfast, I changed into something more businessy and piled my hair into a complicated twist before sifting into Baltimore, leaving Aedan to make his own way.

"The Speaker of the House reached out," Taliah said before I could get in the door.

"Aedan just left there; what do they want now?"

"Assurances. Apparently, Aedan left them hanging," she answered.

Taliah was my right-hand woman, personal assistant, and another member of the US Fae Council, as she was of mixed heritage. She kept up with everything I couldn't and was damn good at it. If not for her, I'd be in much worse shape.

"Refer them back to Mr. Hennessey," I said, sighing as I sat at the conference table. "He spent two weeks in DC handling it; they are trying to do an end-run around him." I pinched the bridge of my nose as I wondered what the fuck.

The government had left me alone until lately, causing me to circle back to what the fuck.

"Done," Taliah said. "Noah wants a meeting with you regarding new legislation concerning the weres."

“Why me? That’s Aedan’s thing. Right?” I asked, looking over at her because I literally sucked at this. “Right?” I asked again.

“Uh, usually. But you’ve helped before, so it isn’t unheard of,” she returned.

“Hmmm. Okay, make an appointment for later this week. I need to talk to him anyway about a shifter boy messing with Aurora before Aedan drains him of his plasma.”

“Oh no,” Taliah groaned.

“Oh, yes. It was a nightmare. I thought Aedan was going to go supernova.” I chuckled, pulling a stack of files to me.

“And the powers that be worry about you,” she scoffed.

“Exactly.”

We spent a few hours arranging meetings and going over Council business before I rose to leave, sifting to Aedan’s office, where I stunned his secretary into silence. You’d think he would be used to it by now, but he yelped every time I materialized, and I couldn’t understand why.

Aedan’s raised voice interrupted my train of thought, and I turned to Santos, raising a brow.

“I transferred a call to him from the Speaker about five minutes ago. Mr. Hennessey has been growling at him ever since,” the younger vampire said, his South American accent so thick that I could barely understand him.

“Hmmm,” I said, winking at Santos before opening the door and sneaking into the room. Aedan stood with his back to me, staring into the street below as he held the phone to his ear, listening to the Speaker rant about something.

Plucking the phone from Aedan’s hand, I purred, “Mr. Speaker, I need a moment with my husband so that I don’t get hysterical and possibly hormonal or maybe even pre-menstrual and detonate like a lit stick of dynamite. Mm-kay?” I finished before hanging up the phone.

Goddess knows that as a woman, all you had to do to make a man uncomfortable was threaten to get your uterus involved in a conversation. To his credit, Coi took the phone back, slid it into his suit pocket, and tilted his head back to laugh wildly at the ceiling.

“Excellent move, Anamcara.” He pulled me to him, resting his nose in

my hair with a sigh. “How did you know I needed you?”

“You always need me,” I laughed.

“That I do. Lunch?” His accent thickened, causing me to smile into the expensive cloth of his jacket.

I tilted my head, baring my neck to him. He stiffened in his tailored pants immediately, and I wondered if this was what forever looked like for us.

“Lunch all you want, big boy.”

He nuzzled into my neck, tracing the vein with his nose before biting gently into it and taking a sip of blood. I felt him sigh as he swallowed before he pulled his two-inch fangs from my skin and licked the wound closed.

“You are too good to me,” he said, holding me for a moment longer.

“I know. Let’s eat, and I’ll consider getting lost in the ways with you long enough for a quick blow job. I missed you,” I added before pulling away and straightening my hair.

After The War, I made a point of making new Ways so that Aedan’s favorite points in the New World connected easily with those in Talamh na Sithe. The Great Goddess was the only other creature capable of making travelways, but Aedan insisted I could make them, and I had. I hadn’t always been able to sift and wanted to stay close to my family and friends in Faerie, so it had been a win-win for me, too.

We had an Inn and other businesses there, so traveling back and forth was necessary. Parts of Talamh na Sithe were hot tourist destinations for humans and supernaturals alike, and they used the Ways I’d built to get there. I could’ve made a mint if I had charged, but I didn’t need the money.

Then I learned to sift, and it was a nonissue. I couldn’t wait for Aedan to learn so we could do it together because he hated the feeling of me sifting him. He said it felt like his molecules weren’t lining up right when I did it, and he laughed as he accused me of rearranging the parts of him I didn’t like. I thought that was hilarious because there was no part of him that I didn’t like. Not one.

“I missed you too. I am never leaving for that long again.”

“Good. Don’t. I might go all haywire.” I winked at him and waggled my eyebrows while he groaned.

“You hear too much. I do not want you to worry.” He brushed a stray



lock of hair behind my ear and leaned to kiss my forehead.

“Don’t,” I said.

He pulled away, furrowing his brow at me. “Do not what?” he asked.

“You DON’T want me to worry,” I laughed.

“Et Tu Brute?” he sniffed, shaking his head with a smile.

“Seph isn’t wrong. You sound like an Elizabethian courtier.” I pulled Seph’s favorite complaint out and threw it at him. Aedan would hate it because he believed the entirety of Ireland should be independent of England, which chapped his ass that it wasn’t.

“Never say that to me again,” he turned his back with a deep chuckle, shutting the blinds to his office before leading me out.

“Where do you want to eat?” I asked, snuggling into his side. “Athens? Beirut? Marrakesh?” I smiled, knowing his upturned lips had drifted down.

After all these years together, we know each other. We didn’t know everything, and there was something to learn every day, but I knew for a fact that he was frowning.

“Marrakesh?” he asked. “I suppose I do love fish balls,” he chuckled.

“I love your balls,” I deadpanned.

He sighed. “You are very much a teenage boy today.” I heard the smile without looking at him.

“Hmmm, maybe.”

I’d woken up in a good mood. Coi was home, the kids were out, the house was silent, and I’d been able to enjoy my coffee in the courtyard wrapped in silence as I watched our fat fish swim lazily in their pond.

Let us,” Aedan stopped to clear his throat, slanting his eyes away in concentration. “Let’s save Marrakesh for another day. I called The Charleston and arranged lunch. That way, we can hit the Way in the lobby and still have time to get lost for a bit before we meet with your parents.” He winked, and my panties melted off.

“The Charleston doesn’t serve lunch,” I replied, falling into step beside as we descended in the elevator.

He scoffed, smirking at me until I remembered who I was talking to. Of course, The Charleston would serve lunch for us. We were the power couple of power couples.

The sun was warm, and we took to the awnings to keep it from our faces so that we could talk back and forth without the sun in our eyes.

Lunch was incredible. The Charleston was silent, and we had the grand dining room to ourselves. The waiter tended to our needs but was so unintrusive that I couldn't recall or describe a thing about him, and as we talked, Aedan rubbed the diamond so rare and red that it sat like a perfect drop of blood upon my finger. The matching earrings and necklace had been his first gift to me, and they were still my favorites.

Not hurrying but not dallying either, we finished, paid the tab, and left. My mom and dad were expecting us, and with the added discussion about Sephone, we would be there long into the evening if we didn't get there soon.

We stepped into the daylight from the restaurant's dark interior when I felt the bullet strike center mass, and my body dissolved into space. I sighed in irritation, thinking, here we go again.

## *Chapter 6*

### *Aedan*

I saw the reflection from the sniper rifle's scope a second too late. By the time I heard the crack of the shot, Lara was gone, and all I saw was red. One single drop of my wife's blood had fallen to the ground, staining the sidewalk, and that's all it took for me to lose my mind. People stopped, unsure what they'd heard, but as there were no screams and no visible carnage, they moved on, mistaking the shot for a vehicle backfiring.

The smell of the gunman lingered in the air. He had handled the bullet as they loaded it, and the hint of his scent followed when he pulled the trigger on my queen. I would pause long enough to make him pay. My head reticulated, eyeing the building he had perched atop and sensing danger, people poured around me, avoiding and never looking at it head-on.

Using every bit of extra speed gifted to me from that one sip of my wife's blood, I caught the man by the throat as he exited through the doors of the adjacent skyscraper.

A professional, then.

I gave him a smile no one would confuse as friendly and dropped his drained husk to the ground before he could finish saying, 'Don't.' The entire event happened in less than ten seconds.

Don't, indeed.

Don't fuck with my wife.

I should have told him that before he died, but I imagine he got the message as he knew who had him in their arms. He tasted like rats and government lies.

This was not our first foray into death, not even close. Lara was pregnant with Sephone the first time someone took a long-range shot at her. Imagine my terror, my pain, and my fury when I heard that shot, and she simply disappeared.

We learned later that when threatened with death, her body sifted to a place of ultimate safety. When she woke up whole and unharmed in the clinic I built for her under the old house she once called home, I was relieved by her

call. The only damage that remained was blood splatter across her chest and a hole in her shirt.

I killed that man, too.

I had killed dozens of assassins in our years together and would likely kill many more. I did not lose sleep over it and never would. Lara might be the ultimate weapon some wanted to control, but I had been forged to protect her and would at any cost. My power was no small thing.

My mother thought Lara was immortal in the way only Gods can be, but I hate taking chances. She has never lost her head, but she has been stabbed, shot, hit by a car, and poisoned so far. Still, she always sifted to her old basement and woke up whole, but I did not want to trust my mother's word on this matter.

I despised every second of the pain they caused her.

How dare they.

After everything we had done for the New World, how dare they? I would see it burn before I saw a hair on her head so much as trimmed by their murderous intentions.

This attempt had the US government written all over it. Their intel should have told them that a simple bullet would not be enough to end her. I am sure their file on Lara was decently accurate in that regard.

This was a warning shot. A shot over the bow, as it were, or an attempt to force me to cooperate with them to ensure her safety.

I tilted my head back, laughing at the sky in a way that made people stop in the street and stare. They knew me. Knew my face. Then the screaming started as they saw the desiccated body of the dead hitman lying at my feet, and I laughed and laughed.

I will not negotiate with terrorists.

Needing my wife. Feeling her in the marrow of my bones and desperately needing to see that she was all right, I finally learned to sift, leaving the people of Baltimore in fear and with nothing but the echo of sick laughter to tell them my plan.

## *Chapter 7*

I liked this shirt. It had been one of my favorites, I lamented when I came to in the cold darkness of my clinic.

I needed to start leaving the lights on so that when I died and sifted here, I'd wake up feeling comforted, although I could see perfectly well in the dark, and the safety of soft white lights was an illusion.

I wondered who I pissed off now. Maybe my cellphone bill was late, or I didn't respond to that call about my car warranty.

Aedan materialized out of thin air before me, dropping to his knees to grip my face.

"You sifted!" I said, hugging him to my ruined shirt.

His eyebrows lowered, narrowing until they were one thing. If I'd known that getting shot again would help him learn to sift, I would've done it sooner. The expression on his face said he knew that. I hadn't been shot in a few years and was getting complacent.

"I do not think that is the point, Anamcara," he growled.

"Don't," I sighed.

"Do not what?" he asked, picking up my hands and holding them carefully as he searched my eyes.

"Don't say do not," I added, smiling sweetly at him when he sighed and stared at the ceiling like it held the answer to his prayers. The Goddess might hold the answers to his prayers, but the ceiling certainly did not. Didn't.

Whatever. Maybe I saw his point about contractions being hard sometimes.

"Lara," he growled.

Oh, now I was in trouble; he used my name.

"Aedan," I answered, and his eyes turned to slits. He'd never admit it, but he wanted me to call him his birth name, Coimeadai Lasair, The Flame Keeper, but also known as The Devil, Duine go Milleann, The Destroyer, during his darkest times.

My husband was known by many names, but he preferred I call him Coi. Blood rushed to his cute little tippy ears when I did, and he thought I didn't

notice. My ears weren't tippy, and I was kind of jealous. Mom and dads had no answer as to why not. I was all fae, and they should have been delicately curved and tipped like all of theirs. Even Sephone had tipped ears. I was thinking about getting plastic surgery. I supposed I could just glamour them, but that made me feel like a fraud.

How had I missed that delicate curve signaling that Aedan was something other when I met him? I was clueless then. Still pretty much was.

"You are not taking this seriously." He dropped his head into my lap, and I carded my fingers through his hair, soothing him.

"Yes, I am, dear."

"Do not patronize me," he sighed.

"Don't," I said, forcing the laughter from my voice.

"Do not what?" he asked, his voice naked and earnest. Then he growled, long and low before tackling me to the cot and tickling me until I cried.

We didn't walk the underground passage between my old house and my new one until hours later.

When we entered the kitchen, I found my parents at the giant table beside it. Somehow, they knew. They always knew when I got murdered and sifted to my place of safety. I don't know how, but they did. Every. Single. Time.

No matter how old I was, they would always be my parents. It didn't matter that I was technically almost seventy years old; I was still their little girl.

I kinda got how Sephone and Aurora felt.

I sighed when I saw them.

Laith stood when the door opened, his eyes immediately finding the hole in my shirt.

"I will kill them all," my mother said in a rage. Her little hands slammed on the table, and her wild red curls flew like leaves in a hurricane.

"No need," Aedan calmed. "We are leaving. I am pulling our finances and support; let them think about what they have done. I told them as much during our meetings, but they must have thought I was bluffing. I have not now, nor ever, bluffed. If you will excuse me." Aedan stalked away, looking every bit the dangerous predator he was. Tailored suits and thousand-dollar shoes couldn't make him look any less deadly.

He pulled his phone from his pocket. “Jeremy,” he said, his voice dangerously calm, and I’m sure the other man heard it too. “Amexit,” he said before hanging up.

Aedan went to the Bunn coffee maker, ground beans, and filled the filter with them. I turned my eyes from his stiff frame, knowing he needed a minute.

Poor Jeremy.

Our once wild, accident-prone godchild was in charge of our finances in the US and abroad. It was a big job, but the wild young man was a genius whose Rainman skills were money and planning. A type of hereditary vampire, his parents had killed Jeremy at the ripe old age of twenty-four, and there he would remain.

He was Harvard educated and had multiple master's degrees. We relied heavily on the young man who almost died in my arms at age eight. Jeremy had taught me a lot about myself and my magic, and I paid him back by making him balance my checkbook. I hated that, but I loved Jeremy like a son.

Maybe he counts as one of the kids The Goddess thinks I’ll have. Aurora and PJ, too. See? Done.

“We will set up our home base in Béal an Mhuirthead .”

“Belmullet,” I interrupted, causing the room to go silent as everyone looked at me. “Sorry,” I said, looking at the table like a chastised child.

“We will move our home base,” Aedan sighed, but some tension left his shoulders. “There is a plan in place. It is time, and I have meant to talk it over as a family, but familiarity breeds contempt, and America is far too familiar with us.” Aedan placed fresh cups of coffee in front of everyone before joining us at the table.

“We still need to talk about that. We have a lot of ties here that I’m not sure we can break,” I snapped at Aedan. “But we’ve been meaning to talk to you about Sephone anyway,” I added, looking over at my parents and taking Aedan’s hand in mine to tell him I wasn’t angry. Instead, I wanted to ensure we had a proper plan for our US interests. I didn’t disagree with him; I just thought he was being slightly rash. Just because someone, probably the US government, tried to kill me didn’t mean I agreed we should run. Right?

He would run roughshod over us if I let him; he was wired that way. But I had the council, my employees, and a few friends lingering in the woodwork that I didn't feel I could leave behind. The man in question glared at me from behind my fathers, whose glare matched his.

“What about Sephone?” my mother asked, raising one perfectly shaped red eyebrow. Her emerald green eyes, so like my own, stared back at me, showing a bit of concern underneath the irritation over my recent not-death.

Like I said, they knew every single time. I'm not sure who that was less fair to.

“I think Sephone should come and stay with you for a while. She needs time away to help her grow into her own person.”

“I disagree,” Aedan clapped back.

“You usually do when it comes to our adult children,” I parried.

“They are not adults,” he argued.

“Aren't,” I sighed.

“Are not what?” he asked, and I was forced to turn away to hide my smile. Sometimes, it was just too irresistible not to fuck with him.

“I am going to strangle you,” he growled.

“No, you aren't,” my fathers said as one unit, and I finally let loose the laugh that threatened to spill over whether I allowed it or not.

“They have college degrees, Coi. Jobs. Bank accounts. Credit scores. They are adults.” I shrugged one shoulder, engaging him in a years-long argument. “Anyway, Mom, I think Sephone would benefit from being in Talamh na Sithe and immersed in magic and her culture. It would help her grow into her magic and find some separation between her and her siblings that is much needed.”

Aedan growled in a way that could only be taken as aggressive.

Seal laughed in a way that could only be a challenge, raising his eyebrow at my husband. They weren't afraid of him and, as a group, thought they could take him if need be.

I wasn't convinced but kept my mouth shut so as not to have to weigh in on the age-old debate between fathers and the men who took their not-little girls away from them. It's just how it was.

“It's not a bad idea,” my mother said, quirking her head to the side in a



decidedly queenly fashion and ignoring the lot of them. It was an ingrained survival mechanism stemming from having four alpha assholes as husbands, I had no doubt. I had one alpha asshole spouse and felt that technique to my bones. “She’d be protected while still having room to spread her wings, safely, of course.”

“Of course,” I replied, sipping my coffee and ignoring the posturing of the males around me.

“She’s not much younger than I was when I met your fathers,” she added, letting a smile ghost her lips.

“Absolutely not!” Aedan bellowed, and I chuckled, winking at my mother. She liked riling up the old not-vampire, and hey, he started it.

“So that’s settled.” I straightened to my full height, finally looking at the men. Seal and Lann flanked my mother protectively, not out of necessity but habit. Laith and Saige affected a relaxed lounge, belying the fact that they were always ready to strike.

They had been through a lot. My grandmother once ruled Talamh na Sithe with bloodshed and fear, and my parents spent most of their early years running from her. Aramea was a conniving, rotten, shady bitch, and I couldn’t be happier that she was dead.

“She could also spend more time with Crew,” I said, thinking of my little brother, who grew from Lann’s seed without a doubt, as his dark skin and eyes could come from nowhere else.

Crew was a beautiful young Fae who loved his American cousins dearly and would enjoy having Sephone there to fawn over. They had spent a lot of time together when they were small, and he’d no doubt be overjoyed.

Unlike my three not-teenagers, Crew had embraced the act of growing up and was learning to forge weapons like our father, Laith. It didn’t matter who created Crew; he, like me, had four over-protective fathers watching his every move. That’s how the world worked in Talamh na Sithe. Sephone couldn’t be safer if I bubble wrapped her and locked her in a vault.

If there was hurt and jealousy, I never saw it. Even among my aunts and countless honorary uncles, I never witnessed an iota of that useless emotion. All of the children of Talamh na Sithe were loved, cherished, and parented like no other.

Aedan stood with his arms crossed. His face a dark fury of anger mixed with a hint of violence, but I ignored him, smiling at my mother as I took a page from her book.

“Crew will love that,” she said. “I’ll have a room readied immediately. Now, what about this latest attempt on your life?”

Aedan snarled while I sighed at the question. “Calm down, Coi,” I urged, patting his hand. I understood. I did, but his angst wasn’t helping at this point. I watched him visibly calm before filling my parents in on what had happened during his talks with the major players in The District.

He explained that they wanted assurances that I wasn’t a security threat to the country, and by assurances, they meant my promise to fight against all enemies foreign and domestic, using creation magic if necessary. That was a promise I’d never make. I loved my country, and no one was more patriotic than I, but to level a weapon such as myself at the rest of the world, or possibly my own people, would be tantamount to nuclear war, and I wouldn’t agree to it.

I would never agree to grant a third party control of my actions, thoughts, or plans. They wanted me to come into the fold as a weapon, which wasn’t happening. My guess is that they knew the bullet they fired today wouldn’t kill me, but instead, they played chicken with a master and were about to find out the hard way that there was no one better at the long game than Aedan, except maybe his mother.

My parents listened as he laid it out, finally agreeing with his plan to leave, and I did, too, eventually. He was right. We’d put the administration in timeout while continuing to support a minimum of assets stateside and become ex-pats like many others before us.

Our departure would go down as one of the biggest failures of the current president, and political campaigns for years afterward would use getting the Hennessey’s back as a cornerstone to election. I’m sure Aedan would also use that platform to get one of his children into the Oval Office. That seemed like a perfect game for him to play.

Now though? Now, we hashed out who would maintain control of the Fae Council, the Interspecies Collaborative, and the American Vampire Association. We finally decided to use the Ways and sifting to handle those

things personally as they were far too important to pass the baton. If Jeremy weren't so busy running Aedan's 'Hennessey Inc.' and all the many varied entities there, he'd have been a shoo-in, but we couldn't spare him.

We planned for hours, nailing down ideas and solidifying plans. Amexit would be fast and furious, leaving little behind, including our people. We Zoomed Grania and Paul in, leaving the decision up to them. There was enough separation between the families that they opted to keep Aurora in the States to continue her job managing Fangs, Grania's vampire bar downtown.

Grania would help keep the peace among the US vampires using her position as Aedan's Second, but their family would join ours in Ireland if any warnings were shot their way. Then the powers that be would see just how much Aedan Hennessey kept the US vampire community in check. But I hope that bloody day never came and the threat of his return would keep them honest.

Aurora and Sephone were fighting as they scrambled through the door hours later, not expecting to see us. Our original plan had been to have dinner at the Inn and stay in Talamh na Sithe, and they thought the house would be empty as they crashed through the door, snarling at one another. PJ ran into Seph's back, where she stood frozen as the last little fireball Aurora lobbed at her faded to nothing.

I wish I'd had my phone out and had taken a picture of their terrified faces. As strong as they might be someday, they'd probably never eclipse the seven older Fae staring at them expectantly. I heard a pin drop for dramatic effect in some far corner of the house.

"Sephone!" my mother exclaimed, rising to her full height of less than five feet and walking to where the three young adults waited. "I'm so glad you're here. I was talking to your mother about Crew and how much he misses you. Come stay with us." It wasn't so much of an invitation as a demand.

"Grandma, I don't know," she tried, fighting against the current that would carry her to Talamh na Sithe whether she liked it or not. "My job and stuff," she finished.

"Your mother tells me that much of what you do can be done remotely." I hadn't told her that and had no idea how she knew.

“Some of it,” Sephone wavered, shooting me a serious side glare. “Not all.”

Seph had a joint MBA/MPP from Harvard and was working her way to being one of the best policymakers the world has ever seen. I did not doubt that she would control Hennessey Inc or something larger one day. Even though she was standing there looking like I betrayed her, she was a shark and so not a teenager anymore.

She was the definition of an adult in my book.

Not Aedan’s.

Probably not my parents, either.

“Mom,” she whined, making my point for me.

She needed to get away from us. We enabled dependence instead of independence.

“Your mother thinks it’s a good idea,” her Grandmother said, cutting her eyes my way.

“I do,” I answered.

“And there is no reason you can’t do your job from Talamh na Sithe. We’ve recently upgraded the power lines and have Wi-Fi access in the palace, and you’ll be able to walk the Ways if needed.”

“With a bodyguard,” Seal interrupted.

“With a bodyguard,” my mother continued.

When Airmed, Ari to her friends, took over Queenship of Talamh na Sithe, she’d taken on the project of updating the infrastructure to near modern work levels. Although not all areas had electricity, most did.

She’d worked hard to keep the old-world ambiance and mixed it with technology seamlessly. She once told me her only goal as Queen was to make sure her people had hot showers and all the beef they could eat, but those desires broadened, and Faerie is a semi-modern marvel that also managed to keep its historical charm intact.

There was no such thing as immigration, but that wasn’t because she was an asshole; it was because she’d learned that people would take bits of the things they love most and destroy them, and that would not be Talamh na Sithe.

To own a business there, you had to be Fae or mostly Fae, although one

or two vampire hybrids had snuck in under the radar. I glanced at Aedan with a smile, wondering if he had 23 and Me done what it would show.

But tourists were welcomed by the thousands, and there, people could learn about their past in almost real-time. It was a remarkable dichotomy that my parents fought hard to maintain. Minus the cars. If you wanted to get around in Talamh na Sithe, you'd better be a good person and know how to whistle for one of their magic horses or you were walking. Lots and lots of walking.

"What's happened," my astute daughter asked, dropping the air of childhood like a cloak and showing the shrewd nature of her inner shark.

"Nothing that you need to worry about," Aedan started to say, but my dad interrupted him.

"Aedan believes the Government took a shot at your mother today," Saige said, daring Aedan to challenge him with a look. "They need to know, son," he said, effectively shutting Aedan up. "The kids can't be kept in the dark forever," he added, and he was right. It was just funny that he called the older hybrid son, but I kept a smile from my face.

Sephone's eyes took in my pale face and the bloodied hole in the shirt I hadn't changed.

"Mom, Jesus, are you okay?" she asked, putting her arms around me.

"I'm fine, sweetie. Just a day in the life," I added, hugging her back. "It's been a while, that's all. But your dad is right, it's time to go. Not for forever, but for a bit. I don't want to underestimate how far they'd go to control any of us."

"No, you're right, Mom. You're right," she said, proving again that her immaturity was feigned."

"It will be much easier to work from Talamh na Sithe than Belmullet," I added. "We made it more difficult to access on purpose, and while assassins travel everywhere, either place will be hard. You'll be safer and still able to do your job," I said as Aedan sighed behind me, placing his hands on my shoulders in a show of unity.

"We will see you all the time," he added. "We had planned to spend more time at the Inn anyway.

"We'd," Sephone said, her voice serious.

“We had what?” he asked, grasping her hand.

I palmed my face, looking at the floor.

Airmed chuckled, and my fathers looked away. Aedan fell for it every time. Every. Single. Time.

“I am going to strangle you,” he growled when he got it.

I shook my head, smiling.

“What about me?” Aurora asked, her voice a shade above snotty.

“Your mother is moving you and your brother into private apartments at Fangs. Your job requires you to be in town, and so does PJs. You’ll have round-the-clock security, but Fangs is a fortress. It’s Lara they want; the risk to you is low,” Coi added.

“They are playing a game they think they can win by threatening us. Though most know of your connection to us, they do not realize just how much of a daughter you are to her and would not think to threaten you,” he said, and he was right.

As close as we were behind closed doors, after the first attempt on my life, we’d been careful. To the world, Aurora and PJ were the children of one of Aedan’s employees.

“Won’t,” Sephone corrected.

“Maybe now isn’t the time, sweetie,” her grandmother said.

“Okay Mom, Grandpa,” Aurora sighed, “I guess you’re right. It’s not like we can’t visit,” she said, adding to Aedan’s frustration. I smiled a little behind my hand.

The man in question sighed, looking at the ceiling as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“When are you leaving,” PJ asked, stepping back from the situation like the grown man he was.

“Tonight,” Aedan answered. “We’re going to Béal an Mhuirthead for a while, then possibly to Talamh na Sithe later.” He rose from the table, shaking my fathers’ hands as he passed.

Sephone started to correct him for using Belmullet’s old name, but I shut her down with a look. Maybe Aedan was right; only a babe would poke the old vampire as hard as she’d been poking him and not expect a clap back. Aedan was patient, but his patience wasn’t limitless, and he’d been pushed

hard today. Continuing to push him was a sign of their emotional immaturity, but there was only one way to grow, and that was on their own.

“Pack a few things for tonight, Seph. Your Grandmother can sift you tomorrow to get the rest,” I said, rising to my feet. I was dirty and tired and wanted nothing more than to go to bed, but Aedan thought they might make another run at us sooner rather than later, and I didn’t think he was wrong. What better way to keep us off balance than to escalate the threat?

“PJ, Rora, your parents are coming home tonight and want you there before dark. Take the tunnel, and keep your visits to the main house to a minimum. The brownies can manage without us; lock up before you leave,” I said, reaching to hug Sephone first and then Aurora. I hugged PJ last, pulling him to me. “We’ll see you soon,” I said. “I’ll check in with everyone tomorrow.”

“Mom,” I started, pulling her tiny frame to me and squashing her in a hug. “Thanks. We’ll sift over for lunch or dinner after we get settled.” I went round to my fathers, giving them each a big hug. There was something about being surrounded by their strong arms that settled me. It’s inborn, this thing between fathers and daughters. I’d unintentionally searched for them my whole life and was so glad to have found them again.

“Sift?” my mother said, arching her brow and looking at Aedan.

“He learned today,” I said, smiling over my shoulder at them.

“Better late than never, I guess,” Laith quipped, not sparing the older fae in question a glance. “I mean, maybe our little girl would be safer if you’d picked it up sooner,” he added, causing Aedan to slouch like a punished schoolboy.

“Dad,” I whined. “Leave him alone; he’s having a bad day.”

“So he was the one who got shot? And died? Even if for just a second?” Seal asked, cutting his eyes to Aedan. “I would think you were the one having a bad day, Princess.”

And just like that, we were all reduced to emotionally immature not-children.

They love him, I promise. But in their minds, not even The Great Goddess’s own son was good enough for their little girl. “Daddy,” I chastised, not meaning it.

“We’re going,” the Queen of the Fae said, cutting Aedan at the knees with a glance.

I mean, he knew. Like, when he married me, he knew I had four Alpha fathers and an Alpha Queen for a mother. It’s not like I catfished him. There was no bait and switch or anything. I mean, maybe he didn’t know in the very beginning, but by the time we were married, he did.

It didn’t matter that we’d been married for a quarter of a century; they were still waiting for him to screw up so that they could bury him like every well-intentioned parent ever. I felt kinda sorry for him. Kinda.

But not really.

My parents waited for Sephone to pack and sifted away with her without a backward glance. Aedan and I packed quickly after that, watching the approaching sunset warily. Not even the US government would come at us from the front. No, they’d use deception, lies, and cowardice to try and force our hands.

Sensing something in the air, PJ and Aurora packed without a fight, hastily grabbing their bags and slipping into the underground tunnel that didn’t appear on filed house plans.

I set the wards, keeping our land and home safe just minutes before the first Spike Missile hit the shield, blowing itself into nothing. They were serious this time, the government, that is. They had never tried missiles before. Seriously, missiles? But my magic was stronger than their ammunition, which was why they wanted to control me in the first place. Still, I’d been left in relative peace for years, making me wonder once again, what the fuck and why now?

Aedan and I sifted out, leaving the house well protected if empty of everyone but maybe a pair of Brownies that would show up in Ireland within the hour.



## Chapter 8

They beat us there.

The brownies, not the government.

Breakfast awaited me on the counter, and the French press was full and steaming by our plates. We'd left Maryland around two a.m., so it was breakfast time in Ireland when I sifted into the otherwise empty kitchen.

Worried, I looked around for Aedan, but he wasn't there. "Babe?" I asked, knowing he loved that particular pet name. "Babe?" I said louder, walking into the great room of the castle he called a cottage.

"I am no babe," he growled, descending the stairs. "Somehow, I ended up at our home in Scotland. Then I went to the South Carolina beach house," he sighed, scrubbing his hands over his face. "Finally, I am here."

I chuckled inwardly, not letting the sound out. I was a better sifter than Aedan, and I loved it. There aren't many things I do better, though he would disagree.

"In a few hours, our bank accounts in America will be empty, and those funds split between Lloyds, Allied Irish, and Suisse Bank. Shame, that. But it can not be helped.

"Can't," I smirked, turning away.

"Can not what?" he asked, tilting his head like an adorable puppy when puzzled.

"I can't understand why they would do it," I backtracked. He was upset, and it was hard for him to think about contractions when he was worried about his almost-dead wife and nearly blown-up house. The house would be fine. My shields weren't breakable, and when they realized we were gone, the attacks would stop.

"Ah, well," he said, narrowing his eyes in suspicion. "They are idiots, and now they will see that I do not bluff."

"Of course," I smiled, pouring coffee for us.

The castle was always ready when we came. It wasn't like we had to call ahead, but the brownies had opened windows and placed fresh flowers in vases. The salty-sweet smell of Ireland's coast wafted on the cool morning

air. It mixed with Aedan's blood, honey, and fall leaves scent, making a miasma so homey I slumped in my skin.

This is what I wanted. If I was honest, and I'd stopped lying to myself long ago, I'd wanted to be here with him all along. Sans the children. Or not-children, as it were.

Some couples wait years to have children, but in her infinite wisdom, Dani decided we needed a child right away. And I loved that child with every fiber of my being, but I loved Aedan too. I was ready for some 'us' time.

"What are your plans for the day?" I asked, digging into my honest to Goddess Irish oatmeal. Instead of brown sugar, a pitcher of cream and a pat of butter sat beside the bowl. I stirred them in, waiting for his answer.

"You have had a long day and will nap," he said, tucking a strand of hair behind my ears. "While you sleep, I will make final arrangements in town and let them know we are here for the long term."

"Cook can manage the house," I said, not wanting a human staff around all day. Cook is the name our brownie called himself, though he would argue that we were his Fae and that he was not our brownie.

"Are you sure this is Cook?" Aedan asked, narrowing his eyes as he looked around.

"Pretty. Tastes like his coffee," I said, toasting Aedan with my cup. "He hears everything, and he'd have known we were leaving."

"Hmm," Aedan said. "Eat, then bed, and once you are asleep, I will go. Afterward, perhaps we should check on Sephone and make sure she is all right."

I smiled at the two-thousand-year-old helicopter parent as I shook my head. But dinner at the Inn sounded nice, and what would an empty nest mean if not travel? "Sounds perfect," I said before finishing breakfast and putting my dishes in the dishwasher.

I took the longest shower ever. You'd think this ancient castle wouldn't have modern amenities like endless hot water and multi-head showers, but you'd be wrong. With the water on sear your top layer of fat hot, I took advantage of those heads and let them pound away my worry.

Yes, I knew we needed to go. I understood, but I'd been an American my whole life, and now I felt like something else.

They'd shot me.

They'd almost landed a missile on my front lawn.

Years ago, Aedan was abducted, and his house burned to ash by his enemies. Five of his people died in the fire, vampire, and human alike. It had been a humbling experience. But those attacks came from known enemies, and having your country come at you was worse in some ways, though no one died.

But from the ashes of Aedan's house rose another, bigger and even grander, something ours and not just his or mine. The Government had taken a shot at that to try and convince me to give them assurances I couldn't, and for that reason, I was angry. I understood their side, don't get me wrong. Their means, though? My children lived in that house and were not nearly as immortal as I. So while I understood, I hope they lost all their bullshit political clout in our absence. That's all those kinds of people care about, anyway. I couldn't allow myself to be weaponized.

Ireland though? Ireland would flourish with our money and not repeat the US president's mistakes. Ireland was used to Aedan, the supernatural, and magic; both had been part of its history for a long time.

Relaxed from the water and the heat, I curled into bed next to Aedan, who wrapped his arms around me and tucked my head under his chin. With a kiss on my hair, he murmured, "sleep."

And so I did.

## *Chapter 9*

### *Aedan*

American banks were waking up to a problem. The stock market, an even bigger one. And the Government? They were scrambling, all of which made me chuckle. They'd gone after the wrong wife, and I cared not for their bullshit.

My phone rang for the sixth time, and I sent it to voicemail without thought. The only person I cared to speak to was sound asleep in our Irish cottage, the white duvet framing the porcelain beauty of her skin and the Auburn flame of her hair.

I would be conscientious of our American exit for her, but only because it was her first time jumping countries. I moved more times than I could count and learned that you could always return. A strong spine and the passage of time make miracles.

As a revenant vampire, I had torn apart much of Europe, including Ireland, and still, they loved me. Lara would learn this. But she would also learn that no means no, and our enemies must be crushed and not just bent, or they would continue to come at us until there was bloodshed.

"Mr. Hennissey?" The banker across from me cocked his head, probably wondering where my mind had been.

"Apologies," I dipped my head in acknowledgment. "My wife was particularly beautiful when last I saw her, and I cannot get the vision out of my head," I answered honestly.

"Of course, Sire. These arrangements?"

"Are correct," I answered.

America is the wealthiest country globally, and I would miss most the unflinching way in which its banks deal with large sums of money. I had to move those accounts to three banks in three countries to make it work, and this poor local man was wavering under its weight. He would rally, though; his grandfather before him had done the same.

He looked at the papers, shuffled them, looked up at me, and then back to the papers. The interest his bank would earn on this one account would fund it for decades. "Yes, of course. If you'll sign here," he added, his Irish burr

thick as its fogs.

I signed my name, Coimeadai Hennessey because I was officially done being Aedan.

Aedan was the Welsh name I took hundreds of years ago because of its nod to my heritage. After all, it meant Flame Keeper, and I'd tried to keep that part of myself true. The funny thing is that my birth name means to safeguard in modern Irish, and I am also that. A safeguard. No longer wild and untamed, I would safeguard my family, my friends, and my people.

"Mr. Hessessey?" the banker said again, sweat beading his forehead. Poor lad.

"Apologies," I said, scrawling my last name across the page. He knew with whom he dealt, this banker, regardless of the name I signed.

I slid the papers across the desk, and he handed me a heavy manila folder containing the information on our new accounts and several bank cards. Rising to my feet, he reached his hand to mine. "A pleasure," he said.

"As always," I answered, shaking it.

I stepped into the muted Irish sun as my phone rang again. This time, I answered it with a smile that showed a hint of fangs. "Hennessey," I said, loving how it rolled off my tongue. I would never tire of bearing my wife's name.

"Mr. Hennessey."

I smiled wider, frightening people into taking a wider berth as they walked around me. "Madame President," I purred, stepping onto the busy street as the smell of heather soothed my soul.

It was good to be home. I would never tell Lara, but I stayed in the States far longer than planned. I had wanted to exit before I met her but stayed to win her to my side.

As the smell of the sea collided with the heather and bathed me in peace and Ireland, I thought I might just let it go that the US threatened my wife. Indeed, losing us was punishment enough, but then I remembered the bloodied shirt in our trash and changed my mind.

"I feel there have been some misunderstandings," she started. "I would like to correct them."

"There is no misunderstanding the bloodied hole in my wife's shirt," I

interrupted. “And I feel certain we did not misunderstand the missile strike, however impotent it was, against our home. The Irish people have welcomed us far better than that, Madame President.” I waved a taxi down, heading to my next stop.

After three attempts, I’d sifted into town when the banks opened. The first attempt took me to the Palace in Talamh na Sithe, and let me tell you, the surprise on the face of the Queen when I interrupted her morning lovemaking with her husbands was priceless. My brain needed bleached from the memory. She is my wife’s mother, after all.

The second attempt took me to Scotland again, making me wonder if I should spend some time there. The third trip took me back to Lara, nestled sweetly in our bed. So, four attempts, then. Bah.

“Mr. Hennessey,” the president said, forcing my attention back to her.

“Green Loop Garage,” I told the cab driver as I settled into the seat.

“Mr. Hennessey, we’re taking this attack very seriously,” she tried again. “Your family is safe here; you need to return.”

I laughed so loudly that the driver tapped the brakes.

“Do not patronize me,” I warned. “You made your wishes known, and we rejected them. You attacked us, and we left. It is done. Lara has citizenship in the same countries as I, and all of them will welcome us as residents before she returns to the States. Perhaps we will live on US soil again in a few hundred years. Think about that the next time you think of putting a bullet into her chest. Have a nice day.” The last words came out with a growl, and I hung up, blocking the president’s personal number from my phone.

The pale-faced cabbie left me without a backward glance at the garage, where I went inside to speak with the manager. While most of my cars were at the Maryland house awaiting transport to Ireland, I’d left a few for an occasion such as this. As much as I loved sifting, and I am not sure I did, I love driving, and having cars on hand would make running out for milk and bread easier. Not that I did those things, but lunch. Yes, lunch. I would enjoy taking Lara to lunch on the sound. “Mr. Dreyton, please,” I asked when I entered.

“Ah, Aedan,” the man himself said when he came around the corner.

“Geoffrey,” I smiled, shaking the man’s hand.

“I’d heard rumors yee were back,” he answered, shaking my hand.

“And they are true, but I’m going to go by my birth name, so Coimeadai it is, then,” I said, slipping into the local vernacular.

“Perfect,” the ancient mechanic said in the old tongue. “Which of your babies will you be taking?” he asked, narrowing his eyes at me like the thought was offensive.

“The 1965 DB5, and have the others delivered. My wife and I will be staying awhile, and I look forward to getting reacquainted with them.” I took note of the way his face fell. He loved those cars as much as I did, which showed in how he cared for them. “You can keep the Silver Wraith,” I added. Speaking of the Rolls Royce, I thought a bit too pretentious, even for me. “I’ll sign the title over immediately.”

“Sire,” he started.

“I insist. Loyalty should be rewarded.”

The old car was a beauty, but Lara and I didn’t need it per se, and it would go a long way to keeping goodwill with the old mechanic. When push came to shove, actions such as this could save a life, maybe his, maybe mine, maybe Lara’s. You never can tell.

I paid my bill, taking the keys to the Aston Martin before arranging to have the other cars delivered. I would keep Mr. Dreyton on to maintain the old and newer classics once they arrived.

The sun had burned off some of the mist when I stepped outside, ducking into the side garage that stored the older cars I’d left behind, searching until my eyes landed on the white convertible. Aston Martin only made one hundred twenty-three of them, and a mere nineteen were left-hand drive. The little five-speed sat at the ready with nary a mark to mar her surface, and she purred to life when I turned the key, letting it warm.

After I put it down, Mr. Dreyton rushed forward and helped secure the top. “Don’t let her sit in fourth gear too long before you give her her head,” he cautioned, making me smile.

“Of course,” I replied seriously.

Part of his job was to keep them running, which meant he was familiar with driving them all. Classic cars that sat idle wouldn’t run for long. Taking

them out was part of maintaining them, and I had no doubt he knew their ins and outs better than I ever would.

“I have twenty-six more coming from the Americas, Mr. Dreyton, and I would be honored if you reserved a few days a week to care for them and a few more days to teach your sons to do the same,” I said. “I adore my wife, but she is rather hard on them.” I chuckled, thinking of her red-lining the McLaren F1 I’d bought her so many times I thought she might blow the engine. Lara was an incredible driver with the instinct and skill needed to drive very fast and very well. I cringed a little when I thought about it.

She called me an old man when I got behind the wheel of anything sporty, saying I did not deserve to own it because I drove like a grandfather.

Mr. Dreyton would have his work cut out for him.

“I will, of course, increase your salary commiserate to the number of vehicles and the fact that my wife is involved,” I added, trailing off as I remembered the time she jumped her redline Camaro over the railroad tracks like she was in an episode of the Dukes of Hazzard. “On second thought, name your price,” I finished, looking away.

A worried look crossed his face, as well it should, and I knew the number he would eventually give me still would not be high enough and that I would double it to ensure his continued employment.

“I’ll get back to yee,” he muttered, wondering, no doubt, how bad Lara could be.

Bad. She was bad. She had gotten pulled over for doing one-forty-five on Baltimore’s outer loop. The funny thing is that the police laser could not read it accurately, and she was doing closer to two-fifty in the Bugatti Chiron Super Sport 300 I had given her for our twentieth anniversary. Had she wanted to evade the ticket, she could have pushed the Bugatti Beast to three hundred and sailed away from the officer. But as there was only one of those cars in Maryland and three in the entire country, she slowed down and pulled over.

Perhaps this was my fault.

But Lara loved those fast cars, and I loved Lara, so I would keep buying them. I tried jewelry, but her smiles did not come close to the ones I received when I gave her a new sports car, making me wonder when the new Bugatti



was coming out.

I slowly took the winding seaside road to our cottage, enjoying the pale Irish sun on my face and taking it grandpa slow as I got used to driving on the left. I pulled through the gate and watched it close behind me before parking the car in the stables converted into a garage years ago.

I'd owned the old cottage for many centuries, and sometimes, the changes still took me by surprise. Instead of horses, the stables would hold horsepower and a lot of it. Most of our collection would fit, and what didn't fit could be parked in the building I added a few meters beyond. Look at me, I smiled, already thinking like a European. Still, if that didn't work, we could build a grand garage with room for more.

I crossed the courtyard and entered the kitchen through the back door, finding my wife at the island happily munching on bacon and clutching hot coffee in her hand. "Morning, Love," I said, placing a kiss on the side of her face and smiling at her low growl. Lara Hennessey is not a morning person, and the change in time zones would only worsen that. "Yes, yes, good morning to me as well, you say." Chuckling, I took a cup, pouring coffee from the French press.

Her growl deepened, and she cut her eyes to me, telling me with a glance that she had only just gotten up. We would sleep early tonight and adjust to the time difference over the next few days. Not that I needed to adjust. Lara did. Lara definitely did. "What do you want to do today?" I asked.

"Sleep," she sighed.

"Hmmm," I countered. "Let us go into town and gather supplies, then go to dinner at the Inn and see Sephone."

"And my parents," she growled.

"Of course. We'll see Sephone and your lovely parents, then fall asleep in a few hours to help acclimate to Ireland time. Tomorrow is a new day."

"I can't believe the government blew me up," she snarled under her breath, and were I not paranormal, I'd have missed it.

"Get dressed, Anamcara; I will bring the car around," I said, not bothering to correct her as the government did not, in fact, blow her up. It may have tried, so I let her comment stand.

"I'll," she growled, snapping her teeth.

“You will what?” I offered, running my hand over her tangled hair.

“Nothing,” she sighed. “Stop patronizing me.” She stomped away, acting not unlike our teenage daughter and making me smile. In many ways, Lara was not fully grown herself.

## *Chapter 10*

Aedan said nothing as we drove the cliffs to town, but his smile said more than words, anyway. He was happy, and I could feel his peace through our bond, making me feel bad about keeping him away from his home for so long.

He would say home is where the heart is, but I'd felt his growing discomfort over the last few years and ignored it because I'm an ass. He wasn't wrong; this move would be good for us.

I tilted my head back, letting soft sunlight burn through the last of my weariness and lousy mood. Aedan was driving a sweet little Aston Martin like a grandfather, not letting the engine purr, let alone roar like it could. He drove so slow that I could hear the ocean over the engine, which says a lot.

We turned inland and, in a few minutes, were at the heart of Belmullet, not the cliffs where the castle lay. He pulled off the street, parking underneath the awning of a hotel, before using vampire speed to open the door for me.

"Where are we headed, Captain?" I asked, saluting him smartly.

He glared, pursing his lips at me before putting his hand on the small of my back and escorting me forward. "To the Lobster Pot," he said.

"You know I don't like lobster," I said, wondering if he'd lost his mind, but the thought of those little cuties boiling alive grossed me out, and I knew he knew that.

"They do not serve lobster," he answered, gliding through the crowds and ignoring the looks we got.

"Then. What?" I asked, confused now. "Why?"

"You will see," he said with a soft smile.

We stepped into the cool darkness of the ancient pub, the smell of old beer and fresh peat in the air. Despite the warmish day, a fire burned in the fireplace, and Aedan was hailed immediately when he ducked through the door.

"Aedan, lad!" the bartender said, making me smile. Anyone who called Aedan a lad was fine by me.

"I have returned to using my birth name, Paddy," he answered. "I go by

Coi now,” he responded, shaking the man’s hand.

“Right, right, then. Coi it is,” he said, reminding me to stop calling Aedan Aedan, even if I mostly did so in my head. I’d only known him as Aedan, and after twenty-five years, it was hard to adjust to his birth name. Maybe I should cut him some slack on the contractions.

Nah.

“This is my wife, Lara Hennessey,” he said, taking a seat after I did. “We have moved home for the time,” he added, and his thickened brogue and speech patterns made me smile. Being home was definitely good for him.

“Never was there a more beautiful lass,” Paddy laughed, kissing my hand and making Aedan growl.

“Thank you,” I said, watching the gray-haired man’s face light up. It was a roadmap of wrinkles, and I could imagine the stories he’d tell loaded up on Guinness or mead.

“An American, are ye?”

“Not anymore,” I tried, saying it aloud for the first time.

“Oh. Oh!” he shouted, his eyes going wide and bouncing between Aedan and me as he clapped like a gleeful child. “I heard about this on the tele. The Americans are losing their bloody shite.”

I laughed, throwing my head back and enjoying the feel of it. “They tried to blow me up,” I said, wiping a tear from my eye when the hilarity of the moment passed.

“Arseholes,” he chuckled. “Well. You’re home now, lass. They’ll be no troubles. What can I get ye?”

“I’ll have an Irish Shot with a Guinness back,” I ordered, making the bartender whistle.

“Jamesons?”

“Perfect,” I said.

“I will have the same,” Aedan said, turning his stool around to check out the pub.

People came and went, speaking to Aedan like a king holding court, and maybe he was. He laughed and smiled more than I’d seen in years, reinforcing that we should’ve left the US long ago and that I was an ass.

I sipped my beer, letting the shot and the company warm me from the

inside out. I was introduced and fawned over, but if these people knew who and what I was, they didn't let on, making me like them more. And that's when I figured out why it was called the Lobster Pot because once you were in, you couldn't get out.

As the afternoon started into evening, we said our goodbyes, promising to return. Despite the new chill in the air, we drove home with the top of the convertible still down. I was tired, but an afternoon without meetings, responsibilities, and stress had done more than a twelve-hour nap would've.

Aedan parked the car and shut the barn door behind us. "How about you take the lead," he asked, quirking his head and giving me his hand.

"You don't want to end up in Scotland?" I teased.

"Again? No." He huffed, looking away.

With his hand in mine, I sifted to our Inn in Talamh na Sithe.

We arrived in our suite and took a minute to change clothes before dinner. My mother liked us to dress like locals, so I picked a flowing green dress with an empire waist that matched my eyes. I pulled my hair into a twist, refreshed my makeup, and called it done.

"You look lovely," Aedan said, his eyes bleeding yellow as he looked me over.

And I loved that after twenty-five years, I could still bring the vampire out of the hybrid or whatever he was. No one really knew.

"You look amazing yourself," I chuckled, letting my voice dip low in appreciation of the tights he wore, covered by a tunic that showcased his molasses hair and whiskey eyes. His smell ripened as he looked me over, and I knew that if we didn't leave the room soon, we wouldn't.

Faerie was cold this time of year, and the fire in the brazier only set his hair alight with its flames. He was stunning and would always be the most beautiful creature I'd seen. "We could skip dinner." I stepped to him, running my nose up his chest and breathing in his unique scent.

"Your fathers are already looking for a reason to smite me," he whispered into the shell of my ear. "They do not believe me good enough."

"They know you're good enough, Coi. They are fathers, that's all. Same as you." I stepped back, loving how my heart faltered and flipped as I looked at him.

His eyes narrowed because he knew I had him. No one would ever be good enough for Seph, and any boy she dated would suffer terribly.

Pursing his lips, he extended his elbow, and I took it. We left, shutting the door behind us.

The Flame Keeper Inn sat on a beautiful piece of land cursed by Aedan, whose blood once soaked it. My Grandmother punished him for taking a lover and wanting her only, which was in direct opposition to what she'd planned for him. She'd killed his mate and their unborn child, dumping their bodies at his feet before visiting every imaginable torture upon him. The walls of the old Fae Hall had seen it all, and he'd burned it to the ground with magic a quarter century ago.

According to him, the Hall never recovered from the black deeds done and couldn't be allowed to stand.

Well before he'd redeemed the land with fire, Aramea had forced an elixir down his throat, creating the first vampire hybrid who went on to create a few more like himself. The world had never seen anything more powerful or dangerous, and he'd wreaked unchecked havoc for a very long time.

He hated everything Fae and was partly responsible for their near extinction.

Until me.

Bygones and all that.

The Inn, designed in the old southern style, would have easily fit on Battery Row in Charleston, and a night didn't pass when it wasn't fully booked.

A limited number of tourists were allowed into Talamh na Sithe daily, and the waiting list for an extended stay in Faerie was long. You could come for a meal and shopping, then leave by the New Ways I'd made for Aedan and my mother, but you needed a special passport that proved you'd met rigorous requirements that did not consider wealth. In fact, wealth might get you on the other list with folks who weren't allowed access to the Old World.

The Queen swore only to help Talamh na Sithe, knowing some would try to tear it down in the name of progress, and since Faerie was not a democracy, her rule was law. Limited trade agreements and bartering were allowed between the New World and the Old, but she and my fathers

struggled to keep things simple on their plane.

We went through the crowd of foreigners and a few locals enjoying dinner at the Inn's five-star restaurant. Heads turned, and mouths dropped as Aedan and I headed to the family table, which is always reserved in the back of the room.

Wait until the Queen showed up with her four kings. I might be a Faerie Princess and Aedan the vampire king, but they were actual royalty. By design, cell phones didn't work, but their cameras did, and pictures would end up plastered on social media as soon as people got service. But that was part of the deal we'd all made; my mother wanted us to be visible to her people so they would always have faith in their leadership.

We sat, and our usual drinks appeared at our elbows, which we sipped while waiting. Then my mother arrived, all under five feet of her, preceded and trailed by her mates and their scowls. She also wore a deep green gown, and it looked like we'd called each other and planned it.

"Mommy!" Sephone said, running around them and rushing to hug me, making me shake my head because she was back in child mode. Maybe there was something to the Fae not letting their children fly the coop until their thirties, but that didn't work for me. She was grown; she proved that daily.

"How was your day, sweetie?" I asked as I rose to greet the Queen with a subtle bow for public formality.

"It was great!" she said. "I met Auntie Teagan's sons, and they're smokeshows. Auntie Ravena's too!"

Aedan's glass cracked, and the drink he sipped poured onto the table. "Sephone," he tried.

"Now, now, son," one of my dads chuckled. "She's an adult, and this is good for her." I looked at them, and all four wore giant smiles, but I knew they were fucking with Aedan, and nothing boy-wise would happen with Sephone any time soon.

Aedan's growl echoed through the restaurant, causing conversations to stop.

"No growling at the table, dear." My mother chastised because she enjoyed fucking with him, too, and he knew it; he stopped his growl, scowling at his daughter instead.

“Calm down, Daddy. Your eyes are yellow,” she scolded like she hadn’t known what trouble her original comment would cause.

Aedan pinched the bridge of his nose, staring at the ceiling like he’d find the answers in the vaulted wooden planks. “Has anyone heard from my mother?” he asked, probably planning on sending her a plea.

“No,” Airmed answered. “This isn’t like her.”

Aedan’s mother was The Great Goddess of the Universe and the Maker of All Things, and Airmed was right. It was weird that she hadn’t been around because she almost always was these days.

“I’ll check her lake later and let you know,” Saige offered.

Dani had once been so intent on the purple mountains and how they reflected on the water that she’d lost herself for a month. Another time, she’d shifted into her Scarlet Heron form and flew with a flock of birds for weeks, so it wasn’t unheard of, but it’d been six weeks since I’d seen her. That was a long time for Dani to leave her son and grandchildren, not to mention me. She’d been working on teaching me to take her place, and even though I fought it, I participated, if only a little.

I wasn’t ready to fill her shoes, and if she didn’t show up, I’d get a crash course in all things Goddessy.

The savvy staff replaced Aedan’s drink, and our meals were ordered. “Your American President contacted us asking for an emergency travel visa,” Ari said, glancing around the room as always. Despite having four large warrior husbands at her side, she was also a warrior who never let her guard down.

“I’m officially an ex-pat,” I responded, waving my fingers for another Grey Goose. They kept a full bar of liquor from every plane they could access.

“We denied her request,” Laith said.

“Perfect,” I answered.

“We also added top-level government officials to the no-travel list,” my mom added, drinking her bubbling purple beverage. I didn’t want to know what it was. Did not because it was probably some type of aphrodisiac. I had to bleach my beach house every time they visited because they were worse than rabbits.



My beach house, I sighed. I would miss it. But I'd built a Way to the kitchen that only we could travel, so maybe I could still go there.

"We can visit," Aedan said, taking my hand and sensing my thoughts.

"I know." I sighed, accepting my drink and taking a sip.

"Where's Crew?" I asked, wondering about my little brother.

"With Teagan's sons," Sephone sighed, making Aedan growl again.

"They are staying here?" he asked, setting his drink down before he could crush it.

"They're," Seph corrected.

"They are what?" Aedan interrupted, making everyone laugh but him. He smacked his hands, almost breaking the table. "We are taking you to Ireland," he said, sitting down like the decision was final.

"Now, Flame Keeper," the Queen started. "Sephone is in Talamh na Sithe to be immersed in magic. Was it not your hope that being here would trigger her power?" she reasoned. "And do you not trust your in-laws to protect her? Was that not also a reason for sending her?" she challenged in the way only she could, her smile sharp and deadly as her sword.

Aedan sighed, looking away. He could take them. He could crush them like bugs if he wanted, but he wouldn't. He reverted to being a chastised child when they schooled him, making me wonder if a very extended childhood was a Fae thing, except I'd never seen my mother act like a teenager. Not once. And considering she was much younger than Coi, their dynamic never made sense except that she was a mother to him now, and he responded to that.

Well, there was the one time I walked in on...I stopped, letting a shiver run through me. There are some things a daughter shouldn't see, regardless of age, and I'm not sure teenagers would've thought of that anyway.

"Are you cold, sweetie?" Seal asked, his deep brown eyes looking worried.

"Nope. I'm just fine," I stuttered, feeling flames heat my cheeks. Maybe I could use my magic to heal my brain from the memories of that day.

Sephone snickered, and I cut my eyes at her in a death glare.

Our meals arrived, and we enjoyed Fae delicacies fresh from the best chefs money afforded. "Are you concerned about retaliation?" Lann asked,

leaning into his chair like the king he was.

“What are they going to do?” I asked. “Bomb Ireland? That would be a little much, even for them.”

“I wouldn’t put it past them,” my mom said, casting her brilliant eyes my way. “Maybe you should move into the castle for a while.”

Aedan growled, the sound a habit in the presence of his in-laws. “I am perfectly capable of keeping Lara safe,” he said, letting the noise fade when Ari arched a sculpted brow at him. The sounds of the restaurant quieted as eyes turned our way once again. Word of this dinner would get back to the President; I did not doubt that. It would probably be splashed across every rag mag in the New World.

‘Royal Family Argues Over Broasted Seamonster!’ the headlines would claim, regardless of whether I was eating beef.

“She got shot,” Mom said.

‘Fae Queen Shuts Down Vampire King! Film at eleven,’ channel five would report.

“And had a missile lobbed at her,” Saige helpfully added, his gray eyes glinting like light on a steel knife as they turned to me.

“I don’t think it was lobbed at me, per se,” I argued, fiddling with the skirts on my dress while Seph snickered again. “I swear to the Goddess, I will beat you,” I whisper-yelled at her.

‘Faerie Healer and Goddess In Training Spanks Faerie Princess!’ Maybe that one was a bit winded, but Child Protective Services might investigate. Oh, wait. Not a child.

“You would be safer here,” my mom repeated, ignoring my threat to her granddaughter. “You too, Coi. I suppose anyway,” she sighed, looking away like he was the biggest inconvenience when I knew she adored him.

The dynamic of this family was so weird.

“We are still working on getting the rest of our people out of the States,” Aedan replied, sipping his whiskey. “The Cliffs are safe enough, and Lara can put a protective spell up if you are worried. I suppose retaliation is not inconceivable,” he conceded. “Our funds are secured and cannot be frozen,” he started.

“Can’t,” Sephone interrupted, and I kicked her under the table, making

her yelp.

“Cannot what, little one?” Aedan asked, casting his eyes her way, making me groan and slump in my chair like an emo preteen.

I can’t believe Aedan. No, Coi, didn’t light this place on fire with his magic.

Again.

“I can’t eat another bite,” Sephone corrected, sitting deep in her chair and cradling her food baby.

“So no dessert then?” Coi asked, and I smiled because he was an excellent father, if not a blind one. But most fathers were blind to their daughters’ faults, so I supposed it was okay.

“I’ll weave protections around the castle when we get home,” I started to say.

“Cottage,” Aedan corrected. “It is a cottage. No, *it’s* a cottage.” He sounded so proud that he remembered.

I groaned long enough to earn a glare from my mother and a kick under the table for my trouble. “Be nice,” she scolded.

“Me?!?” I clapped back because I’d listened to her condescending to him for the last hour.

“Lara Liann,” Laith growled.

I threw my hands up, downing my vodka and signaling for another. “Sorry, Dad.” Not sorry.

‘Faerie Healer and Goddess Rising Gets Turned Over Knee of Overly Large Fae Father,’ story at six.

I couldn’t.

I caught the eye of our waiter and put two fingers up, hoping he understood I meant two vodkas.

Aedan narrowed his eyes at me.

“As I was saying,” I tried. “I’ll weave protections around the *castle* in *Belmullet*. The place is isolated; it won’t hurt. I think they’ll leave the rest of Ireland alone, but they could attack from the ocean.” My drinks arrived, and I downed the first one with a sigh, setting the other down to sip as needed, like an anti-anxiety pill.

“Perhaps,” said my mom. “I still think you should consider staying for a

while.”

“And I will,” I answered, patting Coi on the knee before he could snark back to her.

I’d enough family time for the night anyway.

“It’s been a long day, and I was promised an early night,” I said, standing to leave. “This was super fun.” Lie. “Let’s do it again in a few days once our people have relocated.” Truth.

We said our goodnights, hugging and kissing our way around the table before I grabbed Aedan’s arm without asking and sifted to our new Irish home.

I sighed in relief as the scent of salt and the sea hit my brain, and every muscle in my body relaxed. I loved my family. After thinking they’d been dead since I was a kid, I was beyond grateful to have them in my life. Still, I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it a thousand more times: families are complicated.

Waves crashed against the cliffs below, and the sliver of pale moon highlighted the stark landscape’s beauty. Time passes differently in Talamh na Sithe, and we arrived home not long after sunset despite being gone for many hours. The moon’s light rippled on waves cresting on the horizon, and I wondered if it would storm.

We’d only been gone from the US for twelve hours.

Twelve.

Weariness so deep set into my bones, and I wondered about the point of it all. White water rushed up the cliff wall as waves crashed and receded. Crashed and receded, like life, always ebbing and flowing. In the distance, gulls cried, mourning the sun so recently set. I wanted to fly with them but was too tired for even that.

Coi ran his hand over my hair, sensing my mood through our bond, saying, “Mo Chroi.”

My heart.

He worried. I knew that.

“I’m tired; that’s all,” I replied, leaning into him because he worried so much. And there was a lot to worry about at the moment, so I didn’t want to add my sanity to his list. “Put coffee in the French press?” I asked.

“Of course,” he sighed, leaving me alone for the minute I needed. The day’d been overwhelming, and though lack of sleep was a part of that, it wasn’t the whole.

Closing my eyes, I pulled strands from the universe, using my magic to weave them into an impenetrable wall, a separate space that would keep the unfriendlies out and allow the rest through. Our castle would be on its own plane, accessible only to those who belonged and didn’t intend to harm. The strands came easily, despite not using this magic often because this was creation magic.

Worlds were built and destroyed using less, which is why the United States Government wanted to control me and also the reason I couldn’t allow that. I could create other planes and all the creatures that might live there, and what a boon to any government would that be? Earth was failing and would someday die. Make Lara create another Earth, regardless of the consequences.

And there would be consequences.

I’d not learned a lot from Dani yet, but I’d learned that everything created was something destroyed. The universe always found its balance; there were millions and millions of worlds, and making one real jackalope or snipe for whimsey might mean the end of some other thing somewhere.

No, it would mean the end.

That is Goddesshood and the reason I did not want it.

Didn’t

Whatever.

I could heal anyone I wanted, create protection spells to my heart’s content, and even expand some space here and there using magic, but the minute I indeed *Created*, things would change, better or worse. Who was I to decide?

Despite what Dani claimed, I was not a god.

No thanks.

Just because you can do a thing doesn’t mean you should.

Stopping all other thoughts, I pulled more strands, weaving and dancing with them under the Irish night sky until the spell was done, and no one, and I meant no one, could break it.

## Chapter 11

### Aedan

Goddess, she was incredible. I watched as Lara danced, her arms moving like a ballerina as she twirled under the rising moon. She had not changed, and her emerald green dress moved and flowed of its own volition from a breeze created by magic. Stars smiled upon her, twinkling their joy into the universe, and I knew. I *knew* the other Gods watched.

I felt their heavy stares upon my mate as she made something so substantial it would never fall. The earth itself could end, and this one section of cliffside would remain untouched forever.

That is her power.

She stunned me every time she used it.

She did not need to dance, but when she played with the threads of creation, she always did, and the universe loved it, as did I. Lost in the moment, it was as if joy, hope, and life came to be a creature and joined the dance with her. It was all life taking a breath, pausing, and taking another.

The spell sparked over our corner of paradise, and I watched it flicker like fairylights before settling into the unseen. And then she drooped like a wilted flower, exhausted from our harried day and weary to the bone, so much so that I felt it through our bond.

Sometimes, I felt her desire to join the stars and finish with it all. But tonight, she simply felt tired.

I poured a cup of hot coffee from the French press, meeting her at the door. “Beautiful work, Anamcara,” I greeted, kissing her cheek. “I will run you a bath and tuck you into bed before I finalize the rest of our Houses’ arrivals. Take a sip,” I told her, guiding her toward the stairs.

“I’d sift there, but I’m exhausted. I’d let you sift me there, but don’t want to end up in Scotland. No offense,” she whined, making me smile because her whine was adorable.

“I am not in the mood for Scotland either. Hold your cup.”

“What?” she asked, bringing her multifaceted emerald eyes to mine.

“Two hands, Liomsa.” She gripped her cup, and I swept her into my

arms, not spilling a drop of her precious coffee as I carried her up the stairs and into our room so quickly it was like we sifted.

I sat her beside the tub, where she slouched, irritable, and overtired, sipping coffee that would do nothing to keep her awake. Hot water flowed immediately from the faucet, and she stripped, stepping in with a sigh.

“I can do it,” she growled with the ferocity of a kitten as she set her cup down.

“Quiet. Close your eyes. A husband should be good for something,” I soothed, smiling at her behavior.

“You’re good for a lot of things,” she yawned, covering her mouth, tipping her head back, and falling asleep.

I washed her quickly before bundling her into a towel and ignoring her growls as I forced her arms through the openings of a sleeping tee shirt she loved, a fifth reincarnation of the original Count Chocula tee she’d worn when we met. Then I tucked her under the covers, lighting a fire in the massive fireplace to chase away the damp Irish chill before getting on my laptop and firing messages to our people still in the States.

I made and accepted calls, arranging the last details of our American exit. It was not late in Ireland and afternoon in the US, so the markets, banks, and businesses remained open.

And I heard from them. Oh, I heard from them all.

I was glad Lara slept through it. I did not need to sleep, but she did, and the last many hours had been difficult. Someday, she would sleep less, but she still relied on the comfort of sleep and let it reset her brain instead of using her magic to do that, which was good. Keeping Lara, well, human was impossible but necessary, and those routines helped and were encouraged.

I heard the first drone hit her barrier near midnight. To my sensitive hearing, it sounded like a bug hitting a bug zapper. I was glad Lara did not share my ability. She heard better than most, like all Fae, but she didn’t hear as vampires do, and when I heard the high-pitched scream of the missile, I was even more grateful she slept. Thankfully, the sea would clean the debris.

I picked up my cell and unblocked the president’s number. “Mr. Hennessey,” she purred like she was expecting my call. I stepped from the bedroom where my exhausted wife slept and into another creature, the thing I

was before I met her. The revenant beast I was all those years ago.

“There has been a miscommunication,” I started, letting her believe what she would.

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” she started. “We can provide safety to your wife and family. We’re here for you; you need to come home,” she finished, sounding self-satisfied as another missile hit Lara’s protection spell and broke apart. The spell would hold, I knew that.

“The miscommunication, Madame President, is on my part, not yours. My apologies. Let me make this clear: I will destroy you. I will tear your country apart if need be to keep my wife safe. Me. Not you. I will rip your throat out in the middle of the night and gorge on your blood. There is no place you can hide from me. Keep it up; I dare you.”

“Are you threatening me, Mr. Hennessey?” she demanded.

“Absolutely. I promise to destroy you and everything you love: husband, children, family tree, country, all of it. Up until this moment, we have not been enemies. Perhaps not friends either, but not enemies. That has changed,” I growled low, letting my ire cross the ocean to her ear.

“I am two thousand years old, you child. My wife is immortal. You are a speck, your country a blip in time, a footnote, and nothing more. You will stop, or you will die. Choose wisely.” I clicked off the call, not bothering to block the number this time because I meant what I said, and she knew that. After a bit more practice sifting, I could appear wherever she was, happy to make good on my promise.

I walked the steps to the lounge, pouring myself a bourbon so old that the bottle was made of pressed glass. Taking a sip, I stared out the windows to the cliffs. I heard the whir of one more drone before the night went silent, as it should be. With a sigh, I walked out the front door, checking for damage and finding none before I retired.

Lara had turned onto her side, curling around herself as the room cooled. I put more logs into the fire before returning to my laptop. Jeremy messaged to say he was the last of our House to leave but that all was well. He was coming to Ireland along with the rest of our core House and would stay in the massive old warehouse I’d renovated into my Irish Headquarters decades ago and then again three years ago.



The renovations included suites, apartments, and townhomes with encompassed offices, food stalls, and shopping. It was a haven for Hennessey House members, whose needs could be met without leaving the all-encompassing structure, though they were free to do so. I employed humans as well, and they mixed at the warehouse, giving it a more natural feel that I hoped they all enjoyed.

I should have warned Lara sooner so that she could prepare mentally. I'd known for years that her country would turn on her. There was backlash after vampires, weres, and the Fae came out publicly. Some countries had it worse than others, and America had been largely peaceful, but it was a powderkeg awaiting a match.

After the Fae War, the people loved us more and the government less. They saw other ways of living that made them question in a world where questioning is unwelcome.

The former Fae Queen was an evil beast and would have defeated the uprising had it not been for my wife's magic, and given the circumstances, any country might try to weaponize her. Cage her. Rule her. Her own grandmother tried to do the same.

Still, she'd been so sure the US would not and had loved our home so much. I had hoped, I suppose. Hoped that my fears were unfounded. But hope is one thing, and complacency another. I had begun making the transition a few years ago and planning Amexit long before even that. Lara had dozens of homes and would come to love them all in her immortal life.

She sighed, her chest rising and falling deeply. I texted Jeremy, letting him know I would see him and our people when he arrived before showering and joining my wife in our bed.

A few hours later, I awoke to find Lara still sleeping. Her color was better, and the rise and fall of her chest not as deep, which meant she was recovering. I got up, finding tea in an old ceramic pot, hot and rich, waiting on a trivet on the granite countertops. I smiled, thinking about Cook or whatever Brownie had come to Ireland with us, well, come with Lara. She'd attracted him to start with, and he stayed as her family grew.

But he made me tea instead of coffee despite my vampiric disability because it was her he cared for.

I imagined it was him, anyway. Now that the Maryland house was empty, they wouldn't stay. I'd book a manager to keep the American homes in working order as this absence would be long.

I sipped my tea, checking on news events from around the world, checking the markets, and so on. Our departure from the US was major news everywhere, which was the only new thing about the process of leaving. My, how the world had changed, getting so small that everyone was a neighbor.

As the sun rose, I heard my wife awaken, and her delicate footsteps cross the stone floor. The shower turned on, and I started coffee in the French press for her. Had I left the kitchen to look at the moors, food would've appeared, but I chose to cook for her myself, making her favorite pound of bacon with a side of French toast.

"Ah, babe. You spoil me," she said, wrapping her arms around me from behind and peeking around my shoulder.

"I am not a babe," I said, not letting her see my smile.

"We've been over this," she chuckled.

I spun to face her using vampire speed and took her mouth in a white-hot kiss. The mintiness on her tongue was sweet against the robust flavor of the tea, mixing perfectly. A low hum escaped my throat at her insouciance. Should she fear me? Of course not. But should she know I might nibble at her a little for calling me a babe? Absolutely.

I nipped at her neck with my fangs, grinning around my teeth as her knees went weak and the smell of her arousal soaked the air. "Must I prove I am no babe?" I asked, knowing what her answer would be.

"Whatever makes you feel like a man, babe," she chuckled, squealing as I tossed her over my shoulder, spanked her rear end, and carried her up the stairs. "My bacon!" she tried, squirming under my hands.

"It will heat."

"It'll," she chuckled, causing me to spank her harder, delivering three quick strikes as I blurred up the stairs.

Most of the time, I loved Lara as a man would, a dextrous, skilled man with the stamina of a vampire, but sometimes, I took her with my enhanced abilities. Sweeping her off my shoulder, I used my speed to strip her clothing before plunging inside her wet heat before she quite grasped what was

happening.

Her body stiffened against the intrusion, scrambling to brace against me. A brazen moan echoed around our bed chambers as I powered into her as fast as possible, the speed replicating a sex toy or power tool on high. She came almost immediately, screaming only seconds after I started.

My fingers would leave bruises where I gripped her hips, angling higher to bring on a second orgasm, this one deeper in her pelvis.

“Coi!” she shouted. “Fuck!” My proper name on her lips almost undid me, but I held fast, powering a third consecutive orgasm from her before she went limp.

“Call me a babe again, Anamcara,” I dared. “I am no babe.”

“Babe,” she groaned, causing me to laugh into the timbered ceiling before spilling myself deep inside her with a howl of my own.

We were downstairs, and she was crunching bacon before it, or her coffee, cooled, the self-satisfied smirk on her face saying it all.

I didn’t mention the attempts to breach her wards or phone calls in the middle of the night. She looked happy and peaceful for the first time in days, and I wanted to foster that. She had a partner for a reason, and it was my job to shoulder some of the worries. More worry would come, as it always did, so for today, she could feel safe and rested.

“What are your plans?” she asked, her bright cheeks and emerald eyes sparkling in the sun.

“I am meeting Jeremy this morning and helping oversee the transfer of our people into Headquarters. You should come and check out the new place; you also have offices there.”

“Perfect. I think someone delivered some cars, and I’ve never driven a Peugeot.” The grin, combined with the cut of her eyes, made me sigh.

“Sounds wonderful,” I groaned. Geoffrey would definitely earn his money.

## *Chapter 12*

Coi gripped the handle of the Peugeot 508 Sport so hard that his knuckles were white. It was ridiculous, really. He was immortal. Maybe. Mostly. Pretty much anyway, and the way he worried about how fast I drove the winding cliff roads to town was hysterical.

The Peugeot was quick and responsive. Maybe it wasn't as flashy or fast as others in our stable, but it held its own and was fun to drive. We screamed through the countryside with the windows down and Aedan's white-knuckled grip making my smile wide.

I slowed as I neared town, chuckling when he let go of the handle and sighed. I mean, his behavior was kind of ridiculous when I thought about it.

Coi directed me to a giant industrial building on the outskirts of Belmullet that bustled with activity. The stately old brick warehouse was beautiful in an industrial way with its twisted wrought iron and patterned brick walls. 'The Warehouse' was beautifully etched in concrete above the front of wide, frosted doors.

Native landscaping dotted freshly mulched beds along crisp sidewalks, and well-placed benches encouraged their enjoyment. The parking lot was freshly paved, the lighting updated, and the individual storefronts brightly painted.

I gave my husband some side eye because this didn't happen overnight, making me wonder how long ago he'd planned this. He was a master at the long game while I was still trying to survive daily, so it shouldn't surprise me.

I parked the car, stepping into the mid-morning Irish gloom, unable to take my eyes off the place. "It is self-contained," he explained, probably noting the awed expression on my face as we stepped inside. "There are grocery stalls, food vendors, clothing vendors, living quarters, and much more. Anything needed is here," he added as I tried to take it all in but couldn't because of the enormity of it.

"Is it open to the public?" I gasped, taking in the three-story mall surrounding an atrium with a waterfall and scattered seating groups. Tables

sat to one side, and a stream filled with Coi fish meandered through the entire area. “What?” I asked, drawing the word into two syllables in true Southern style. “This place is nuts.”

“I am glad you like it.” He smirked, pulling me deeper inside the building. “We have a suite here as well, should we have a late night and not want to drive home. The entirety of our House is contained within these walls. Let me show you.”

He nodded and spoke to those we passed as we toured the building. Aedan and I had offices on the third floor that overlooked the waterfall, and it was prettier than any workspace I’d ever seen, but it definitely had been designed more than a day ago.

“When did you set this up?” I asked as we looked at the winding water below.

“Some years,” I suppose. I had it updated recently,” he answered, hedging his words.

“You always knew,” I responded, frowning a little.

“It is easier to assume the thing will happen and prepare for it than to play defense when it does.” He tucked me into his side as he surveyed his new kingdom, where even the air smelled sweeter.

Large planters filled with local plant life bloomed in an explosion of scents and colors. The place was incredible and unlike any other I’d seen.

Guiding me away, he used his fingerprints to access a nondescript white door that opened to a small antechamber with cushioned benches, coat racks, and a place for shoes. Beyond that was another door; again, Aedan used his fingerprint to gain entry. “Your fingerprints will also work, Anamcara.”

Because, of course, they would; Aedan would take care of everything. He shut the door, nodding at me to try and open it, and I almost missed his wide smile when I swept the door open. My hand flew to cover my gaping mouth. The entire front wall of the condo was glass, looking onto Belmullet Quay. The room was large, open-concept, and done all in white and muted stainless steel. Soft grays accented here and there, but other than that, there was no color. A gas fire crackled in the fireplace, and I fell in love with the peace it offered.

Through the bank of windows, A riot of boats and birds floated on the

water, providing contrast to the muted interior design.

Our home on the cliffs was amazing. It was grand in the way castles are, but it was enormous. As much as I loved it, this place instantly filled the need to have a cozy getaway, not that it was exactly small, but it wasn't huge under anyone's definition.

Opposite the living area, a cook's kitchen gleamed, warm, and inviting, with a giant island begging to be the focal point of a meal. In usual Coi style, the space was breathtaking.

"Sephone has a condo and office here as well; for the day she may work with us."

"Aedan," I said, watching him blink at the name, but I was overwhelmed and falling back on the familiar. "Coi, this is amazing. I am amazed. How?" I wanted to ask how he knew me so well, designed something perfect, and planned all this without me knowing, but I knew the answer.

The long game.

Consideration, intelligence, and the ability to see dozens of moves ahead on the chess board had made this place what it was.

Walking forward, I opened French doors that led to the only enclosed area of the wide open space where a queen bed covered in an explosion of whites, blues, greens, and greys, the only colors occupying the condo, waited. Windows lined that wall, too, and I could look out, watching birds dip and dive into the water below.

Stepping forward, I saw that a long, narrow, wrought iron balcony spanned the distance from bedroom to living room and would be a perfect place for morning coffee and flying in the minds of birds.

"It's perfect," I said as I flew into his arms.

"It is a nice addition," he downplayed as always.

But it really was perfect. It would keep us close to our people and businesses while allowing us to separate from them. I loved it.

"Let's go see to Jeremy," I said, thinking of my first co-opted child.

Coi did not separate his vampires and had many hereditary vamps under his umbrella because of that. After the kidnapping and attempt on his life, Aedan cracked down, narrowing the roles and responsibilities he'd spread to others worldwide. He ran the vamp world for the most part, only delegating

to children he'd made and trusted, who were few. His rule covered North and South America and most of Europe, but he was the defacto king of all of them.

Having his core group of people set up in a place like this would make it easier for him to maintain a watchful eye on vampire activities. He had children in high-ranking positions watching policy and guiding laws; one of his children was setting up for a US presidential run, and having all those buttons within reach would be valuable.

Jeremy had been a daredevil eight-year-old when I met him. He'd almost died in my arms after drowning in a neighbor's pond. Before Jeremy, I'd never attempted a healing so complex. Saving him had changed many things in my life, and I'd grown to think of him as a son. He was all grown up now with a child of his own and a cute, dark-haired human wife, following in his father's footsteps. Sometimes, I wished he'd waited on Seph because he was that good a man.

Still, hereditary vampires had expiration dates, and Seph might not, so it was for the best to save them from that. Jeremy's mother and father had died of old age about ten years ago and only a few months apart, leaving him to live with us as parents for the next one hundred and fifty years or so.

Samuel Alston, one of Aedan's strongest allies and head of the old vampire House in Charleston, South Carolina, had also died, leaving his holdings to twin boys around Jeremy's age. Samuel hadn't lived as long as I'd hoped but outlived many others. We'd been friends, and losing him was difficult, which was the biggest disadvantage to being longlived.

Sighing at the sudden downturn of my thoughts, I followed Coi from our rooms in search of our adopted son.

"Mom!" he yelled, waving to catch my attention, and my heart found happiness again, looking at his angled face three stories below.

People stopped, staring between us as I returned the wave and sifted to where he stood, wrapping my arms around him as he gave a startled yelp.

"I'll never get used to that," he laughed, smiling up at Aedan, who sifted someplace not nearby and possibly in Scotland. "Where'd dad go?" he asked, looking.

"Eh. Who knows. He hasn't quite nailed it yet. How is everything?" I

asked as people moved around us carrying boxes and other items.

“Everything is good! Katie is unpacking while I oversee this stuff.” He waved around the atrium. “The retreat was orderly and problem-free.” Jeremy yelped again when Coi stumbled into him, muttering under his breath and glaring at me while he straightened his suit jacket.

“Everything okay, Jeremy?” he asked as if everything was normal, making our kid wrestle with a smile.

I turned away, covering my grin with a fist as Coi growled something unintelligible.

“Everything’s great, Dad. I love the building, and everyone is saying good things. Only a few didn’t want to come, and I made them sign the waivers and let them stay.”

“Excellent work. How are your quarters?” Coi asked.

“Better than I expected, and I expected a lot,” he laughed, giving me a wink. “Thanks, old man. Katie loves it.”

“You are welcome.” Aedan clapped Jeremy on the back, turning around to speak to another vampire.

“You’re,” Jeremy muttered, making my husband’s head snap around. Jeremy always loved getting in on the game with Seph and Rora, and I loved that they loved picking on their bimillennial old father.

“You’re going where?” I rushed, not really trying to cover for him because I encouraged them to fuck with Coi openly.

If I needed to stay humble, so did he, and nothing keeps you humble like children.

Coi’s glare was epic. Ten of ten on the scale.

“Uh, Lunch?”

“I’ll go with you.”

Jeremy and I left Aedan behind to check in on his people and set his office up to his heart’s content. We discussed the move and his wife before separating so he could get back to work. I took another lap of the building, familiarizing myself with the layout and locations of stores before finding my own office and digging in.

Movers had placed everything from the office in Baltimore into boxes and stacked them against the far wall. A bank of windows overlooked the



atrium and another the Quay. I moved my desk to the middle of the big room, facing the door, and put my back to the view of the water. Then I unboxed files, pens, and the pictures that made my space homey before turning in my chair to look down upon the sea.

I found a gull and let my mind drift. The smell of the water on this side of Belmullet was sharper and more condensed than on our cliff, and it mixed with the smells of the town, creating a miasma worthy of a candle. I enjoyed the short flight of freedom until movers dropped another box on my floor, forcing me to pull my mind back with a sigh because there were so many reasons to want to keep drifting.

Yes, life is about change. I get that, but I was shot, relocated completely, and dealing with angsty not-children. We still hadn't heard from Dani, and I was getting worried because it was not like her. It was especially not like her to not come during these times of crisis. She'd missed Coi's torture all those years ago and blamed herself for being absent in her life. She hadn't missed much since coming back to him.

These were all valid reasons to want to drift away, but if it was this hard to stay in the present at my age, I couldn't imagine being hers. A few times, Coi fought to bring me back from the edge of the stars, and who did Dani have for that if not us?

But then again, Dani had been around since the world formed, so there was that.

Taliah poked her head in the door, saying, "The president is on line one for you." She smirked, knowing what I'd say.

"Forward that to my husband; I think he's taking her calls."

"She says she only wants to talk to you."

"Fine, they probably will shoot me again if I don't answer it." Sighing, I picked up the phone using my best angry nurse voice. And let me tell you, you do not want to hear that. "Hello?" I growled.

"Mrs. Hennessey," she oozed like pine tar in winter. "I've been trying to reach you."

"Oh?" I replied like I hadn't known. I was southern, not stupid, but I could play the game with the best of them. "Bless your heart, Mr. Hennessey has been taking my calls for me," I lied.

“I want to apologize for your recent trouble with some political fringe elements, and I think it’s reflected badly on the overall situation. Your husband and I were nearly in agreement over future dealings when the talks fell apart. We want you both to return to the table so we can work this out.” I heard the rustling of papers and knew she was speaking from a prepared argument.

“I mean,” I started, staring over the Quay and watching birds fly. “You guys shot me. Tried to blow up my house. I don’t see the misunderstanding, but you did me a huge favor. Have you seen Ireland this time of year? Gorgeous.”

“My husband is so happy,” I continued. “He has a spring in his step and all that. I think we’ll stay, seeing as how we’re already settled. I’ll say this, though,” I added, dropping the good-natured tone I’d affected so far. “We aren’t enemies right now, but keep fucking around, and all your fears will be realized.

“You attacked my children’s home. You shot me, and make no mistake, I know who was behind that trigger pull. If you keep fucking around, you’ll find out just how badly this will go. You can’t come at me directly, and if you come after anything that is mine, you will pay. I’ve never harmed a soul that didn’t earn it. I want peace, but I assure you, if you start a war, I will finish it. Have a nice day.”

I hung up the phone, blocking the number as Coi slow-clapped behind me, putting his hands on my shoulders.

“Well done, mo chroi.” He kissed my hair, spun me to face him, and knelt between my legs with a smile. “They will stop. She is trying to save face, that is all.”

I nodded, knowing he was right.

“And your protections will hold if they try to force the issue.” He winked, and my grin changed to a full-blown smile.

“They will,” I said. “What now?”

“Now we finish unpacking and see how it goes.” He kissed my cheek, leaving me to boxes and thoughts of war with my former country.

## *Chapter 13*

We spent the afternoon setting up our workspaces. Once the locals noticed the activity, more and more stopped to check out the space because that's what a community like Belmullet does.

The Prime minister arrived to shake hands and kiss babies, assuring us that there'd be no repeat of the events in America. He didn't ask for assurances or favors, though someday that would come. Aedan said these things had a pattern, and he would know.

And next, it would be Scotland or Finland or France. There would always be a next time, and he was right. The first move was the hardest, but I'd learn the way of it quickly.

My parents came, bringing Sephone, who already looked better for being away from the rest of us. If her head was a little higher and her poise a little more polished, Coi didn't see, but I did. To his credit, he didn't try to baby her. Whether it was having multiple tasks to accomplish or something else, he left her to roam the building and talk to her family.

Once my office almost functioned, I went to the waterfall on the first floor, sifting behind the flow to the alcove behind with a singular intention. Closing my eyes, I focused on the fountain in the middle of Talamh na Sithe and built a Way to another alcove behind a statue of my mother positioned there. Some Ways were intentionally made for the public, but I would not advertise this one, nor would I make it passable by everyone. It would be a quick way for those close to us, like Taliah, to go home and see her parents or for Sephone to come and see us directly.

I wove the strands of creation quickly, making it small and stable but not fancy. It once took me hours to make a Travelway, and the first one took me a day. Now, I accomplished it in a few minutes, the act of creation coming like air into my lungs. I didn't come from behind the statue by the fountain on the other plane, just backtracked and wove the other direction to stabilize both.

When I popped out behind the waterfall, I sifted to Coi's office, hoping

to find him alone.

“You have stars in your eyes, Anamcara, and smell like the universe. What have you gotten up to?” he asked, flattening his lips as he worried.

Smiling, I snatched his hand and sifted behind the falls again, putting my finger to his lips so he wouldn't make a sound. I waved my hand at the back of the alcove, and the Way opened for him to see. “To the Fae square behind that terrible statue of my mother.”

“Perfect,” he said, his eyes crinkling with a smile. “Just like you.” He booped my nose, making me roll my eyes.

I sank to my knees, looking up at him with giant star-filled anime eyes. He blinked, his fangs extending like a teenage vampire as his eyes bled yellow, and I was glad I could still surprise him.

I freed his cock from his pants, taking it to my throat in one rough plunge. He groaned, fisting my hair and tipping his head back.

“Quiet, babe,” I whispered, popping my lips from his tip.

“I am no babe,” he growled quietly. “Open,” he said, his eyes entirely yellow and past the point of return.

Smiling wide, I opened my mouth, accepting him when he drove between my lips because using creation magic got to me like that. He pumped his hips, fucking my face and making me drip onto the floor, but I didn't care. I liked this. I loved unraveling the master vampire and ancient fae. Life was long, and these moments were precious to both our sanities.

Gripping his ass, I dug my nails into his velvety skin to the hard muscle beneath. Feeling him tense and his movements stutter, I hollowed my cheeks and swallowed him as deeply as he could reach. He came hard, spilling his saltiness down my throat with his head thrown back and a stunned, silent exclamation on his lips.

He dropped beside me, breathing hard as he gathered me in his arms. “You wreck me,” he panted. “Perhaps I am a babe.”

“I love you, too.” I tucked into his arms, enjoying the sound of the water that splashed into the small pool before lumbering away in a stream where fat, lazy fish begged for food. “I like it here; we'll be happy.”

“We would be happy anywhere we are together, Anamcara.”

“We're.” I stifled a smile against the velvet iron of his chest.

“Yes, we are.” He sighed contentedly, causing me to do the same.

We sat for a while, listening to the quiet roar of the waterfall and distant stream of voices before I sifted to my office to finish setting up.

I used magic. Not gonna lie. I imagined where I wanted the things in the final boxes, and, after checking for nib-nosers, I magicked them into place. I was tired of unpacking, and, yeah, maybe it was a tiny overuse of magic, but I didn’t care if it meant I was done. The next time, I wouldn’t even pretend to unpack.

My office was incredible, and I loved the open warehouse feel of the place even more once it was set up. I looked out the massive window to where gulls flew over the bay before shutting and locking the door with a press of my mind no key could undo.

Around the upper level, most people were finished or wrapping up. Laughter echoed through the atrium, and something unlocked, settling in my chest. This was a good move despite dying for a few seconds and the stress of the last few days, and I wouldn’t regret it or look back anymore. My family was here, and here was the best place in the world. Wherever here was today, or wherever here was tomorrow, it was these people that mattered.

## *Chapter 14*

It was late when we returned to the castle on the cliff. We'd considered staying at the Hennessey Building, but there was still commotion from latecomers, and we didn't want to harsh their vibe. Had we been there, they'd have worried about being quiet, and the raucous environment would've dimmed. We didn't want that.

We pulled through the iron gates at the base of the drive, winding our way through fields of heather just starting to bud. Soon, the landscape would be covered in a fragrant riot of purple and a scattering of white. Heather was the bane of an Irish farmer's existence, much like Kudzo in the south, but to me, it was gorgeous and my favorite part of the country.

There was an old Way to Talamh na Sithe in the middle of the field behind the house that we'd used to stage the first battle in the war that eventually won my mother her crown and ended my grandmother's tyranny. This place was sentimental to me because of what happened in those days, and for other reasons I didn't understand.

Coi had lived here with his first love, his human love, two millennia ago. He'd built the place for her, but she'd been murdered along with his unborn child before my grandmother changed him into the first Fae-vampire hybrid. And so, this place was also sentimental to him.

The cottage's round turrets rose as we mounted to the last hill, revealing the grand view of the place. I couldn't even complain about Coi's driving when the layers of the castle peeled away slowly, like a tease, until all its beauty was laid bare in the moonlight. I sighed, knowing this place was more a home to me than any other. Like my blood found the marrow from which it came. Anxiety I didn't know I felt fled on the scent of the ocean and sound of the waves, somehow muted at the base of the cliff.

Coi reached for my hand, bringing it to his lips. "Where did you go?" he asked. "You flickered for a moment."

Where my anxiety vanished, his tripled. I know I scared him sometimes. "I was just here, I think. In this moment. I love this place."

“Never leave me.” It was a demand, a plea, an order, but I heard the tinge of fear in his voice, and I hated that.

“You’ll always find me if I try,” I said, meaning it. “You’ll always bring me home.” Because I couldn’t promise not to leave, I was trying. I was trying so hard, but Dani made something even she didn’t understand. I’d trust The Flame Keeper more than myself in this matter. “I love you,” I added, giving him a smile I felt in my eyes.

“And I, you,” he said, reverting to his more formal cadence of speech because he was still worried.

“What the?” I started as we pulled to the old carriage house converted to a garage.

Aedan chuckled, rubbing his hands together in glee. “You will have to get used to the steering wheel being on the wrong side of the car, but it is not hard.” He hopped out after pressing the button on the car to open the bay where this particular car lived.

Rows of cars sat in the fading light of day. My McLaren F1, my P1, My old truck. My Truck! Our cars, all the cars I thought I’d never see again, were lined up, detailed, and sparkling, awaiting a place to call their new home. “Aedan,” I shrieked, running to hug him and then running to hug my truck before jumping into the cab, inhaling the scent of old leather and memories I didn’t even know I had missed. I turned the key, listening to the old diesel grumble to life and failing to hold back a shiver.

Coi watched, smiling like a satisfied cat at my joy. “How?” I asked. “It’s only been hours, literal hours, that we’ve been here.”

“Magic.” He winked, and I wondered if he was teasing or truthful. A skilled driver could get a car through some of the larger ways, but it wasn’t easy as the Ways recognized organic figures, not metal ones. Especially not metal ones. Sighing, I sat deeper into my seat, wondering how many twenty-six-year-old one-ton diesel trucks like mine were driving the Irish roads.

About ten years ago, the world made a final, hard push toward using only all-electric vehicles, but it failed. Companies stopped making anything that ran on fossil fuels, and more power grids crashed due to overuse. The all-electric experiment became untenable for the time. The Chinese government put a chokehold on the rare minerals used in the batteries, and the

environmental damage from those mines became widely known.

The American automobile market was beginning to recover from that experiment, but it had been a long road, pun intended. There was a balance now between all energy types that there hadn't been, and the world was starting to stabilize because of it.

And while gasoline and diesel fuel had been hard to find for a while, it was worth keeping these cars, especially since not every country fell prey to the initial allure of all-electric vehicles nor had the infrastructure to use them. Electric engines don't growl like my truck, don't scream like my F1, or grumble like the Camaro. There's beauty in all things, and it's my job to find it.

"Where are we going to put them?" I asked, scanning the too small carriage house in dismay.

"Most will fit in the carriage house, but we will build a garage for the rest." He assured, smiling at me as I bounced on the seat of the old Chevy like a toddler.

"Let me do it! I don't want them to get wet, salty, sunburned, scratched, or defiled. I can build it." I turned the key off, silencing the diesel's hum.

"Anamcara. No. It is too much." He reached for me, pulling me to him.

"It's," I said, looking early into his face for approval.

"Yes, it is. I agree."

"You agree! Perfect!"

"No, that is not." He sighed, scowling at me. "That's not what I meant," he tried.

He was close. So close.

I didn't correct him. My hair floated in a breeze that wasn't there, sparks erupted from my fingers, and I knew my skin glowed in excitement. Like, glowed like a lightbulb. It had been years since I lost control like this, but it had been a while since I used my magic in a big way. Making Ways, building shields, and unpacking boxes was child's play on my magical spectrum. I felt unused magic boiling under my skin, begging to be loosed.

"I need to, Coi. The well is overflowing. I'll be exhausted for days, and it will be years until it builds up again. The last time was when they needed help with The Inn." I was right; he knew it, I knew it, and we knew it.



When he sighed, I knew I'd won.

"Lara," he tried.

"Busting out my government name now?" I quirked my eyebrow before pecking him on the lips and pulling back. "How do you want it to look?"

He sighed again. "You'll be the death of me."

"Ah, good boy. Good, good, boy."

"I am not a dog."

"Definitely not a dog, babe."

He sighed again so profoundly that I thought he might deflate and puddle to the ground like a day-old balloon.

"It should look like the environment, like the house and the carriage house." He gave in. "You will be down for days, Moi Chroi. Is this the time?"

"It'll be fine. I need to burn some of this off, and it might help me be more present and stop flickering out.

It was a low blow, and I'm not proud. I was using his fears to get my way, but I wasn't wrong either. After helping with the Inn, I'd been stable for a long time.

"Like the Castle. Got it."

"It is a cottage, not a castle," he scoffed. "Your mother lives in a castle."

"My mother lives in a palace, and this is definitely a castle, babe."

He pinched the bridge of his nose, looking at the night sky for answers or his mother, not sure which. Dani wouldn't know what to do with me either, in my defense.

"Where?" I asked, ignoring his heavenly pleas.

The castle and the carriage house sat on a vast open expanse of the moor with flat land all around. The house was fortified with walls, as ancient castles are, but beyond them, the garage could go anywhere.

"Perhaps there." Coi pointed to an area beside the existing cottage house but closer to the house proper, and I saw how it could be connected in my mind's eye.

"Perfect." There was enough room to make it big, but I could also make it bi-level, which I wouldn't tell him beforehand. It would look better and be more functional, but it would take a teensy bit more work. Better to ask for

forgiveness than permission.

The world dropped away, and I let my mind sink into the ground. Using magic, I felt for the natural material deep within the soil. Aedan built this place with his hands and years of effort. He and his crew would've mined the materials like I was, but my way was easier. Faster too.

This wasn't creation magic, though I could've created something magnificent out of thin air had I chosen. But creation magic was tricky, and there were consequences to large scale creation that I couldn't see and didn't intend. This was just old-fashioned earth magic and would take hard work and a lot of sweat to accomplish.

I got lost in the design, lost in the feel of pulling material from the earth around me. Metal ores, rock, and water came to my call. Stones of the right size were smoothed and put into place. Magic went into the bindings, the walls, the floors. The layers.

The wind blew in the face of magic it didn't understand either. Watching. Waiting. Sweat ran down the curve of my spine, soaking the ground I'd rooted into. I was aware but yet not of Coi's presence. Ever present. Present. There. Thoughts were pictures, were sighs, were raindrops in the wind. Breaths were heartbeats, were rocks, were the sky.

Sounds had touch, and touch had scent. I was there and not. In this world and the next. And the next. And the next. All words were spoken and whispered and nothing and silence. Incredible, incredible silence.

I held the picture of what he asked for in my mind, willing the natural world to bend to my paintbrush, a stroke here and a jab there. I pulled marble from somewhere and conduits from somewhere else. Someplace far, far away. Sandstone. Granite. Words left me becoming only needs and thoughts. Desires and Visions.

Earth magic changed to creation magic because, let's face it, that's who I am. I can't help it. Like all Gods, Dani made me in the image of herself. Eldritch. Primordial. Powerful. Too powerful. Too much.

A hard slap to my cheek forced me awake. Then another slap brought me to this world, this cliff and not the one I searched for something else, something more.

"Enough!" Coi demanded.

Opening my eyes, I took in the gorgeous structure that was far more than a place to park cars. Its design blended perfectly with the castle and the carriage house; it molded between the two, with entrances and exits to both. I'd tunneled through the castle's fortifications to make all of them accessible in bad weather. There were windows and turrets and towers. If this place was a cottage before, it was a castle now for sure. Maybe a palace, for surely I saw living areas beyond those walls.

Soft lights glimmered through the windows and bay doors. Wrought iron carriage lamps adorned the front and graced the garage doors. Gargoyles sat on top, adjusting their positions for comfort and watching our drama while my angry husband stared.

I'd called them from somewhere.

My construction was ancient and modern, looking new but as if it had always been. And Aedan looked fucking pissed, but I thought it was pretty cool.

I turned my brilliant smile on him before melting to the ground, feeling the earth sigh beneath me like she, too, was tired.

## *Chapter 15*

### *Aedan*

Lara is a miracle, but she is also a curse. No one should contain so much, and it is a blessing that she is still with me. When the Gargoyles came, I knew she'd gone too far. The stars of creation coalesced around her, and her eyes had gone black with bright points of light. She smelled of ozone, myths, and legends. She smelled like the beginnings of time. And possibly the ending.

I slapped her face hard enough to bruise twice, as she had ignored every and all my other attempts to pull her from her work. I had kissed her, cupped her breast, screamed her name, and shaken her, but nothing. The slap broke my heart but returned her to me. The smile on her face was glorious as if the slaps had not marred it. Goddess, but she is exquisite. And then her lights went out.

Lara crumpled at my feet, me too stunned to break her fall, for I was a failure in all things tonight, being her husband most of all. Still, I stared. How could I not? Even with Lara akimbo at my feet, I could not take my eyes off what she had done. It had taken her an hour. One. Hour. Yet, it was a marvel I knew my mother could not have made in the same timeframe.

The grinding rock of Gargoyle wings settling pulled my eyes to the top of the two-story plus garage where the beasts perched. I wanted to explore and see what she had made, but I would do that with her later. She would want to see, for she will not know.

Getting materials into Talamh na Sithe for The Inn had been problematic, and Lara had helped pull natural materials to the site a time or three. Then, it had taken her hours to gather the materials others would use to construct our high-end hotel, but tonight? I wouldn't have said it was possible, but I never failed to underestimate her. Goddess, what did you make of my wife?

I scooped her into my arms, lamenting that she weighed so little.

Mist fell like rain as it does in Ireland, dotting her skin in wet kisses, and her hair spilled across my arm. Her face, which turned to my chest, was relaxed in sleep as a smile played on her lips, and I had never seen her so peaceful. Never. She looked like a child, with no lines from daily life, just that Mona Lisa smile.

Yet, the red mark on her cheek scarred my soul.

I stormed through the doors, banging them open and kicking them closed. Angry, I took the stairs two at a time, using vampire speed in a fury Lara didn't deserve. The anger was reserved for me.

More furious, I stripped my unconscious wife like a doll, manipulating limbs as uncooperative as a newborn's before using magic to strip myself of the Huntsman bespoke suit I had paid an arm and a leg for, but I did not care.

I cared that I let Lara go too far. Again.

But that look?

That smile?

I sighed.

Because it might be worth it.

If I was honest with myself, she did look better. Her skin was smoother, and her face lighter. We did not understand Lara's power, but maybe she was not wrong in that letting it build was unhealthy for her. I am not sure she was altogether right in using it, though.

But what did I care if she burned the world? She was all that mattered.

And then my mother came.

"What has she done?" The Great Goddess and The Maker of All Things stood watching me shower my wife and demanding answers.

"Get out."

"Coimeadai," she tried, her voice soothing.

"Get out!" I yelled, my voice echoing through the cavernous stone bathroom but not causing the smile on my wife's face to slip or her body to stir.

"I'll wait downstairs." Dani sifted away.

And not to Scotland.

I washed Lara reverently, holding her limp body to mine so we both got clean. I had to sit on the wide bench to clean her hair, resting her against my chest. It took time, but she began to smell less like the universe and more like my one true love. She never moved, never sighed, never groaned. She barely breathed.

By the time I tucked her into our bed, the slap mark on her face had healed, but I could still feel the outline like a punch to my flesh. Flesh of my

flesh, bone of my bone she is. Breath of my breath. I cared not what she did as long as she stayed.

I laid her on her side, tucking the blankets around her and arranging her hands under her cheek as she liked. The smile never fell. After one last look, I went to find my mother.

“Wait.” Her voice was a whisper in my head, if nothing more. When I looked, Lara’s eyes were closed as if she had not spoken. Then, those multifaceted emerald gems opened and met my gaze. “Promise me,” she whispered, her voice in my head and not on her lips.

“Anything.” I knelt before the bed, grasping her hand in mine.

“Promise that if I go too far, you’ll have Dani unmake me,” she demanded. Asking for the one thing I would never give because there is no world worth saving if Lara is not in it. Not to me.

“I promise that if you go too far, I will make S’mores and dance with you on the fires of destruction you leave behind. But never will I ask for your destruction, my love.” I kissed her lips as her eyes drifted closed, then rose to leave in search of the source of this problem. Lara would not have had the strength to open her eyes a year ago after such magic.

“Where have you been?” I demanded, blurring into the kitchen using vampire power and not fae.

“What has she done?” Dani countered.

“What does it matter? You have been missing for months, and she falls further and further away. Where have you been?”

My mother looked away.

Long silver hair fell down her back in a fishtail braid. Her violet eyes met my yellow ones, but my mate was threatened, and my mother had not been there to help as promised. My fangs elongated, and I knew. I knew that I was losing control, but I did not care. I felt like Lara was slipping away, and nothing I did would save her.

“She is too powerful,” I growled.

“Would you have me kill her?” Dani asked as if she desired to know if I wanted cream in my coffee. “There is no other recourse. She is who she is.”

Sighing, I slumped onto a stool at the massive kitchen island. I held my head in my hands, unable to stop pink tears from dripping onto the white

countertop.

Small arms circled my neck, and I smelled my mother's floral and ozone scent that reminded me of being a lad. "Do you remember when you were maybe ten or twelve, and you wanted a sword made of steel instead of wood?"

I was living with who I thought were my parents then, and I remembered the story well. Fae are notoriously allergic to iron, but if appropriately smelted into certain types of steel, the effect is lessened. The Fae have known steel far longer than the New World out of necessity, and although Fae do become somewhat immune to the iron in steel with exposure, no Fae can abide pure iron, and only the strongest can handle steel.

As a boy, I had learned to fight with a wooden sword, trying to work my way to steel. I begged and begged my father for a sword, one that I could grow into and wield like a grown male. How my mother knew this tale, I do not know.

It takes years for adult fae to tolerate steel, let alone a child of barely a decade, but I was insistent, and my father eventually gave in.

"I had that sword made for you, Coi, knowing it would take you years to hold, decades to control, and centuries more to master. I commissioned the finest swordmaker for the finest sword, and Iomprior Eadrom has been yours since because I knew you would succeed."

She stood straighter, still not taller than me while sitting. "Lara is Iomprior Eadrom, my son; you will learn to manage her, and she, herself. Lara is twelve-year-old you, trying to hold a sword made for the strongest Fae ever born. Do you understand?"

"I understand that I lost that sword, Mother. I lost it."

Lara's grandmother, the former Fae Queen, had taken it from me, hung it over where she had chained my body in iron, and tortured me relentlessly for months. I spent centuries tracking down and destroying anything with Fae blood in it. And then I met Lara.

"And I understand that you became something more, took back your sword, and eventually killed everyone that aided and abetted your torture," she whispered in my ear, vengeance in her voice and terror on her breath. "Had you failed, I'd have taken it up and avenged you myself."

“I can not lose her.” The words choked out, my voice breaking in the end.

“You won’t,” she said firmly as if she knew. “Tea?” she asked.

I nodded, unable to look up from the countertop. Sometimes, a boy needs his mother, even if that boy is very old and his mother is a Goddess. “Where have you been?” I asked. “We were worried.” I sat straighter, watching as Dani put a kettle on to boil. She wore a diaphanous gown in teal blue that contrasted wildly with her silver hair and purple eyes. Her figure was a little more rounded, but her face was no more aged than the last time I saw her.

We sat silently, her not answering my question and me not asking again. It felt nice having her, and despite her motherly meddling, I dared say I missed her.

She slid a cup of tea with one lump of sugar on the side and a dash of cream in the cup, just like I favored.

“She brought the marble from Greece and the granite from Ibeza, Coi. I looked. I don’t know what she was after, but it’s beautiful and terrible at the same time. It’s fully wired and plumbed. She pulled the Gargoyles from their realm and me from mine. I don’t,” she stopped. “I don’t know.” She looked away.

“But you tell me not to worry,” I scolded, taking in the details she noted.

“I know you’ll worry. But I also know that it will be okay. She’s an immortal child learning to walk. She will learn. And so will you.”

I sighed. “And so I will.”

She met my eyes, nodding solemnly. Turning away, she said, “I had a baby.”

I spit my tea across the counter.

“Come again?”

“A baby. I had a baby. You asked where I was, well. That’s where I was.” She kept her back to me, her posture stiff as stone.

“Mother,” I cautioned.

“Not a baby like you, Coi. There will never be a child like you or Lara again. I swear it. His father is human,” she added, turning around. A hint of a tear sat in the corner of her eyes, making my brow furrow and my heart angry at the tear.



“There’s something wrong with him. The baby, not the human male,” she whispered.

“I have a brother?” I asked, ignoring her statement and feeling the corners of my mouth tip into a smile.

“His genetics aren’t quite aligned, but he’s beautiful,” she tried again, her brow furrowing.

“Perhaps Lara could heal him for you?” I asked cautiously, knowing a mother may have strong opinions on the matter.

“I could too, I suppose, but he has the sweetest way about him, the wispiest soft hair and the most darling shaped eyes. He’s perfect, but I’m afraid of what others will say. I am...who I am and,” she stopped again.

“There are no mistakes, Mother,” I stood smiling and swept her into my arms.

“There are mistakes, son. I’ve made plenty, but I don’t think he’s one of them.” She craned her neck to meet my eyes, and I smiled at her lovely face.

“I want to meet him.”

“I want the same.” She stepped away, finishing her tea and setting the cup in the sink. “Tomorrow?”

“Yes. Lara will sleep all day. Tomorrow will be perfect. She’ll need something for the magical hangover, but Mother. Please do not be so absent until I can hold the sword on my own.”

“I love you too,” she said before sifting away.

I stared out the windows to the moors, watching the young heather dance in the Gaelic wind. Our house was silent in the way it only was when Lara slept, and I hated it. She brought music to every aspect of my life, and it gathered around her naturally in the sound of her step and the intake of her breaths. After what mother said, I needed to see the garage, and I couldn’t wait because as much as I wanted to share it with Lara the first time, I needed to understand what she’d done.

The dawn hadn’t broken, but the horizon was lightening in a way that meant it was coming. The fat moon hovered low over the cliff, giving the illusion that it sat on the stones by the edge, waiting to be pushed into the sea. Its pale light reflected off the water, making the night brighter. I walked through the living room, looking for the new door that had to be there.

Everything was connected; I just did not know where.

I found it through the butler's pantry, which made sense since that was our rainy day drop zone. A cottage-style door opened into a stone tunnel lit with electric sconces meant to look like gas and approximate fire.

Light flickered across the walls eerily, and I wondered about the inspiration. I had asked for it to look natural, and I suppose it did in a Gothic way. The tunnel led to another door that could be barred from the inside in true castle fashion. My jaw dropped when I lifted the bar and pushed open the door.

The walls were polished stone, and the floors cream marble veined with dark brown. Every car in the drive would fit on the lower level, but she'd made ramps to another, and I walked one of them to see the second floor.

Another twenty cars would fit there, and she'd made a wrap-around viewing deck replete with a waist-high glass wall that allowed a view below. And that's when you saw the beauty of it. Though the walls and lighting looked original, the modern touches of glass and perfectly placed fixtures would showcase anything parked there. It could be a wedding venue or modern hotel lobby if not a garage. It was glorious.

Two wash bays were on the main level and one on the upper. Behind more glass were hydraulic lifts and mechanic's benches. It was a state-of-the-art repair shop or modification bay that Geoffrey and his sons would drool over. They would also wonder where it came from because it wasn't here when they dropped the cars off.

I had never had to explain my wife before, only myself. Her magic would terrify some, horrify others, and ensnare many more. Perhaps I would keep them away for a while.

Glistening surfaces were everywhere, and a seating area overlooking the moors through double doors tucked into a far corner near a bar that appeared stocked forced me to see another ramp because there was more, so much more.

I followed the ramp to the roof, finding a garden utopia with bench seating and fairy lights that reminded me of her mother's bungalow in Talamh na Sithe. It was wild and foreign, and not one plant was natural to the environment. Some overlarge flower bloomed under the moon's light, and

another that I was sure hailed from Elven lands vined over a trellis. She had gotten tired and whimsical at the end, I guessed.

A tinkle of water led me to a saltwater hot tub tucked behind a type of fern. Birds flit from flower to flower, and the grinding of stone alerted me to the movements of a small gargoyle no bigger than a cat.

It was too much to take in.

She'd cast a bubble over the roof to keep out the weather and in the wild creativity of the space.

Her mother was going to kill me.

If she failed, her fathers would take up the sword.

Sighing, I sat on the bench, leaning back to watch the sunrise.

"She will thrive."

Startled, I saw the young Gargoyle sitting near my feet, licking its paw. The older the thing got, the less mobile it would become, but now it was pretty spry for a small stone. Eventually, he'd take up a spot and guard it for eternity. Their magic is a strange thing. Still, they see more than we do and are as strong as any creature I have ever met.

"She is Legion. The Universe. It speaks her name," It growled, the rock grind of its voice hard to understand.

"That is my greatest fear, friend." The first rays came like a beacon on a dark sea, bringing a sense of hope I'd lost hours ago.

"Do not fear."

I sighed, watching as ray after ray slashed through the night, hoping it was right. I knew them to be very rare but very sage. Still, fear is a monster that, once fed, hungers for more and more. I would do my best and hope I was big enough for the task of holding the sword.

## Chapter 16

### Aedan

I heard the sword as it stopped in its arc on descent to my neck. The sound of finely made steel wielded by an expert swordsman is unmistakable. Lara's father, Laith, made the thinnest cut to my neck as I finished my cold tea alone in the kitchen. The cut healed instantly, but that wasn't the point.

"Father," I sighed.

"Don't father me, Boy. Where is our daughter?"

"Asleep," I answered, turning in my chair to face the five creators of my overly powerful wife. I moved slowly enough not to ignite the violence riding the air between us like a dragon of old, flames curling from its nostrils in a desire to lay waste to all it saw.

Airmed stood in the center of men, her hard eyes trained on me detailed her barely restrained desire to nullify my birth certificate, if I had one.

I could wipe them out; they knew it, though I never would. I would take the beating they offered out of respect for my wife.

I sighed.

"You have one job," Seal growled, pushing into my personal space.

"That is to keep our daughter in this plane or ours and not let her disperse into the universe. One. Job."

I met his eyes, letting him know he was close to the line. I let mine bleed a shade yellow to remind them of the Nightmare I was, am, and always will be. I had decimated their population singlehandedly, and I might be their son-in-law, but I was also a legend for a reason. He took a step back.

I understood; I did. But enough was enough. I stood, matching his height. Still, I had worked hard to add muscle over these last years, and I outweighed him, which said much. A tiny hand gripped Seal's elbow, urging restraint.

"She can not keep it in. The power was eating at her like cancer. If she does not use it, it will be worse," I said, keeping my voice even but my tone matter of fact.

"Worse than pulling Gargoyles from their realm?" Airmed asked, putting her hands on her hips.

“Yes. Gargoyles go where they will.”

“You don’t believe that,” Laith said, his sword held at the ready by his side. “If you cannot protect her, we will,” he growled, and Saige and Lann crossed their arms, standing as straight as they could to match the angrier fae in the room.

“Stop,” Lara demanded, stretching her arms over her head and not trying to stifle her yawn.

“I mean it,” she tried, sounding more like a kitten whose growl has not yet grown claws.

I pushed past her parents to pull her into my arms. “Why are you awake, Anamcara? You need rest.” I watched her face for shadows, seeing that she looked better than she had in years. Now that I saw the change, there was no denying the truth of my words to her parents. She needed an outlet.

“I don’t know. I just woke up. What day is it?” she asked, eyeing her parents where they shifted warily. Laith tried to hide the sword so she would not see, but it glinted in the early afternoon sun streaming through the windows.

“You only slept a few hours,” I answered. Shock flew across her face as she realized the implications of that.

“Oh,” she replied, her face creasing with concern.

“Are you hungry?” I asked, pulling back so I could see her response.

“Starved.”

“Very well.” I released her, glaring over her head at her parents, who were still trying to hide the fact that they threatened to take my wife from me not moments before.

I walked around the island and began pulling ingredients from the refrigerator while warming up the industrial coffee maker so I could make her an espresso. I didn’t offer anything to my in-laws because how dare they threaten me under any circumstance?

Lara’s parents had abandoned her as a child, faking their deaths and leaving her in the care of others. Maybe they had Lara’s best interests in mind, maybe not. Lara’s grandmother had been hunting them for years and had narrowed their location to the New World, and they feared what she would do if they found Lara.

After Seph was born, their choices grated more because I could not imagine leaving my child to fend for herself in this cruel world. Things had happened to my wife that she would still not speak of. A parent is meant to protect at all costs, though, in their mind, that is what they did. I liked them but disagreed.

They would take her from me over my dead body.

They settled onto chairs, speaking low, but vampire ears cannot be fooled. Their conversation was riddled with concern for Lara, which I understood, and questions about her safekeeping, which I did not.

I slid the hot drink across the counter to my wife, who accepted it with a soft smile. “Thank you.” She tilted her head to the side, baring her delicate neck without thought, making my pulse pound, for she still did not know what she was doing to me with that gesture.

“Submit to me tonight,” I whispered so only she could hear. “Let me have you. I need it.”

She nodded once, meeting my eyes and sipping hot espresso from a delicate china cup so paradoxical to her that it was striking. They only shared the emerald green of her eyes and the color of the fine detail in the cup.

Satisfied, I turned from her, taking onions, mushrooms, and bacon and sauteing them in butter before making her a three-egg omelet filled with cheese and handing it to her with buttered toast and a refill on her drink.

Her parents had settled around her protectively, making me scowl. She was mine. She’d been mine from the first moment I saw her, and she’d be mine until the light left my eyes. I crossed my arms, watching as they worried over her like hens, the males included.

“Guys, stop,” Lara said, finally having had enough. She had missed them growing up and liked their attention, even after decades of having them back in her life. “I’m fine. Everything is fine. Better even. I feel great.”

“You need to be more careful. You could’ve gotten pulled so deep into creation that you couldn’t break free,” Lann worried, idly braiding and unbraiding her hair from his post behind her seat.

“Coi was there; he wouldn’t let that happen,” she said, smiling at me and missing the glare her father gave.

I smirked, giving her a wink. “Of course not. Your work is beautiful.

Finish eating, and I will show you. Now that your parents know you are well, perhaps they have other business to attend.”

That earned me five glares. Those glares slipped to bland smiles when Lara turned her gaze to them. “Yeah, I’m good, if you guys need to go.”

“There’s no place we’d rather be,” Saige crooned, kissing my wife on her cheek. “Maybe we should stay a few days just to make sure.”

I growled while Airmed smiled sweetly at me from her seat beside Lara.

A hard bump to my shin made me look down, breaking eye contact first. The juvenile Gargoyle looked up at me, making a grinding noise that sounded like a purr.

“And here’s why we worry,” Seal scoffed, leaning over the island to see what had drawn my attention.

“Oh, my god. Is that?” Lara jumped from her seat, rushing to the little statue and scooping him into her arms. “Dude, you’re heavier than you look.” She shuffled him until she had him in a comfortable position. “How’d you get in?” She booped the thing’s nose, and it purred louder, the sound echoing like a rock fall through the relative silence of the room.

“Tuned wards,” the Gargoyle said, shocking Lara into nearly dropping it.

“You called him from his realm, Mo Chroi. His power is attuned to your wards. He can go where you go.”

“Sorry, buddy,” she sang, looking at the stone creature in her arms. “I didn’t mean to drag you here. You can go if you want.”

“Stay. Honored,” it replied, settling deeper into her arms, and she smiled at it beatifically.

“I didn’t know they could speak,” she said, looking up and finally catching the somber mood of the room. “What?” she asked.

As no one in the room had likely seen a baby gargoyle snuggled into the arms of any creature, we just stared in response.

“Now you see the problem, Coimeadai,” my mother-in-law said.

“There is no problem,” I growled, bending to scratch the thing under the chin like a cat.

Lara smiled, turning from me. “Mom, dads, no offense, but Coi and I are still moving into Headquarters and won’t be around much. How about we come to the Inn and stay a few days soon?”

They shuffled, glancing at one another, seemingly unwilling to leave.

“My mother is coming tomorrow; she is going to stay a few days,” I placated, leaving out the part about the baby since that was her business to share. “After, we shall come and stay a while, but think of projects for Lara because her magic needs an outlet,” I finished, my tone brokering no arguments.

The gargoyle in Lara’s arms shifted, drawing the stares of her parents before they glanced at one another, sifting away without a goodbye.

Lara breathed a sigh of relief, her shoulders slumping. “They don’t trust me,” she said.

“No, my love, they do not trust me. Let us see your creation together. I have questions.”

She laughed like I knew she would, struggling to carry the gargoyle to the door. “This way.” I smiled, taking the creature and leading her to the side entrance and away from the smell of despair and worry the fae left behind.



## *Chapter 17*

When the tour of our garage was over, I understood my parents' worry. I'd overdone it. I didn't know how Coi pulled me back from the edge of that, and I didn't ask, mainly because I didn't care; I was just glad he did. I could see their reason for concern, though, even if the hot tub was a nice touch I hoped to exploit at the earliest possible moment.

We took the time to move the cars into the created space, and some of my choices became clearer because my babies looked lovely showcased in marble, wrought iron, and glass.

After taking extra time to move models into locations that made more sense, we sat in the rooftop lounge area, having cocktails and watching the light fade on the moors.

Because life choices.

"Mother had a baby," Coi deadpanned at the quietest possible moment, causing me to spit my vodka across the coffee table.

"Excuse me?" I squeaked, choking on my drink and trying not to drown.

"I have a brother."

"Oh, my," I set my drink down, turning to him as the daylight fled, leaving us in shadows and artificial light.

"She is bringing him tomorrow, but that's where she's been. There were complications."

I took his hand, leaning to rest my head on his shoulder. "Complications like you and I? Or?"

"You are not a complication," he chuckled.

"Tell that to my parents," I sighed, remembering their faces when they saw my new gargoyle friend, who told me his name was Nate, but I'm pretty sure it's way more complicated than that.

"They do not want me to tell them anything," he sniped, reminding me they'd threatened him when I came downstairs. Parents, am I right?

"They worry. You do, too," I added when Coi harumphed. "Well, I'm excited to meet him, and maybe he can take Dani's mind off of grandbabies."

“She will want him to grow up with friends,” he chuckled.

“Then she can make him some.” I smiled, thinking I had plenty of years to have more children if I wanted, but for now, I was happy just being a regularish housewife. Housewife with a twist? Something.

If Dani made a baby as ageless as she is, then I, at sixty-ish, was still a babe myself. I wouldn't tell her that I figured out magical birth control. Nope. Would not. But I had. Figured it out, that is.

I glanced at Aedan, watching as he stared into the darkness. Fairy lights twinkled above us, and strange flowers bloomed as the moon rose opposite the sun in its never-ending chase. I'd made a garden of things, some of which even he had never seen, telling me they came from realms I remember popping through when I was creating this space.

The jacuzzi bubbled merrily behind us, and gargoyles rumbled as those that could moved along the roofline. Coi's knuckles were white where he gripped the Adirondack chair that looked more like a poor man's throne. His scent wafted to me on the air, spicier than usual, like his blood was boiling.

And I remembered.

I sank to my knees in front of him, bowing my head and clasping my hands in my lap as I leaned against my calves and waited. I felt the moment his eyes focused on me like firebrands, marking my flesh. His growl was something I felt, not heard.

Standing, he strode to me, and I stared at his feet in supplication. His hand rested on the top of my head. “You frightened me,” he started.

“I know,” I whispered, still not looking at him. He'd said he needed this, and I understood. Loss of control threatened his stability on many levels, and when he felt he might lose me completely, he thought I needed a reminder of to whom I belonged.

I knew I belonged to him but don't think I didn't enjoy the lesson. Five stars. Recommend. Sometimes, a strong woman wants to cede control, and I looked forward to these moments when I forced him to the precipice.

He gripped my hair, pulling my head back and forcing my face to his. “Look at who owns you, Bandia Beag. Do not forget.

Then he snatched me up, and we were gone.

“Is this?” I stuttered as I took in the white stone walls of our castle in

Scotland. I'd only seen this place briefly, but I knew it for the banners that hung on the walls and the lack of remodeling in the last several hundred years. It screamed feudal lord and medieval times.

"Son of a..." he started, but I sank to my knees in front of him again, catching his attention. "It is well enough," he growled. "To your feet and walk before me," he demanded, nodding to the stairs.

Keeping my head down, I walked the many stairs alongside the great room. I couldn't imagine the things this place had seen. The home in Ireland was large but cozy, meant for a life he never got to live.

This place was built for war, conquest, blood, and death, and it showed in every line of the old castle, which seemed appropriate to the situation. Still, I couldn't wait to explore and see what secrets I could dig up. Behind me, Duine go Milleann growled, for it was The Destroyer and not Coi stalking me up the stairs. I shivered in anticipation of seeing that side of him he kept leashed so tightly it took something monumental to loose that particular beast.

Maybe we both needed to let a little out.

I wondered if I shivered with anticipation whether he'd punish me more or less. Over the years, I'd earned a few of these moments, but the storm brewing in the male behind me reminded me of when I pulled a category five hurricane right to our doorstep, and we almost drowned as a result. I let slip a smile he couldn't see.

Aedan loved me to the depths of his soul, and it wasn't his nature to hurt me, even if I might like it. Even if I definitely liked it. He growled, the sound rattling in his throat, and I put an iron lock on the bond between us so he couldn't feel my glee.

"You will regret these thoughts, cailíní álainn," he snarled, and I couldn't suppress the shiver but hoped he thought it was fear and not anticipation making my legs weak.

At the top of the stairs was a long, stone hall with open doors revealing parlors and smaller chambers meant for meetings or business. This wing was reserved for the Lord of the castle, and there were no smaller bed chambers on our march, not even a ladies' chamber, which told me a lot.

Walking down that cold, stone hallway, I understood what it must've

been like all those years ago if one got on the wrong side of this particular Lord. The hairs on my arms lifted as the beast trailed closer, his fingers skimming my back, and I wondered if his need might be greater than after that hurricane.

Two large, closed wooden doors guarded the room he pushed me toward. Ornate metal decorated them, and they looked like they were made for a man twice Aedan's size. The overall look was intimidating by design. I'd never been this deep into the castle before, as we'd only done a brief tour of all our properties. The smell of old blood thickened, and my heart sank.

"Remember that I am not a good male," he started. "Perhaps I am a better male, but I am still not a good one. This castle saw the height of my depravity during those darkest of times. This room especially. You need a reminder to whom you are mated and who will keep you in this realm at any cost. Strip and kneel," he said, his voice devoid of emotion, and I worried I might be in trouble.

I did as he said, my hair rising as cool night air brushed my skin when I shucked my clothes, tossed them aside, and then dropped to my knees. The Destroyer stalked to the vast hearth, grabbing matches and setting the aged wood alight. While his back was turned, I scanned the room.

A large bed sat in the center, as old beds did. It was a three-sided monstrosity of heavy wood and a pulled, velvet curtain on the only open side. Stairs led into it, and it would be impossible to escape once inside unless allowed. If the Lord of the manor wanted you to stay, you would. It was like a coffin on its side with the door open, and I saw the appeal for a vampire.

Lush, bright woven rugs warmed the stone floor, and tapestries hung on the walls alongside swords, shields, and knives. In the corner stood a large wooden X with chains hanging from it, and I wondered if this space was more than a room for the Lord's sleep. I'd never seen anything like it before. A curtain shielded the part of the X from sight, but I saw pieces and parts of tools hanging there, and the timbre of my shivers changed.

Aedan remained silent as a tightened bowstring while he walked the cavernous space, lighting candles and pulling drapes as his tightened jaw ticked. But the candles weren't for romance, no. There was no electricity in this foreboding place, and I began to think I'd made a mistake.

He walked to the corner, reaching behind the curtain, and then, using vampire speed, he pulled something around my neck, claspng it tightly. I gasped as he jerked me by the collar, straightening my spine and clipping metal clamps dangling from dainty chains to my hardened nipples. The chains hooked to the collar, and if I moved more than an inch, the pull on my nipples was too much.

“Coi,” I stuttered, unsure and a little afraid that he needed a reminder of who he was. He told me once that he got lost in the ages of time and torture, and I hoped being back in his torture palace hadn’t caught him in a flashback.

“Silence, Anamcara,” he soothed, tucking my hair behind my ears. “You need this as much as I. Stand.” He pulled me to my feet, pushing me roughly toward the wooden X face first. “Arms up,” he guided, claspng my wrists and securing them in the chains. “Hold the chains like this, and it will hurt less.”

“Aedan, I don’t like this game,” I muttered.

“It is no game,” he growled, pushing my hair aside and nipping his extended fangs down my neck. I couldn’t turn my head to look at him, or the chains would pull, and the sensation in my nipples was already too much.

He kicked my legs apart, grinding his hard length against my ass and breathing in my scent like a predator scenting prey, and where our Irish home always smelled of blood, honey, and fall leaves, in Scotland, I smelled only blood.

Before I noticed movement, my ankles were secured to the base of the X. Back at my ear, Aedan said, “You may be a goddess, but I am a monster. I was a monster millennia before you were born. Do not forget. You will listen the next time I tell you to cease doing something that might harm you.

“Tonight is your reminder that I am older, bigger, stronger, meaner, and more powerful when it counts, Bandia Beag, and I am most certainly badder.” He sank his fangs into the base of my neck, sending electric shocks down my spine and making my body tingle with need. Then he pulled them out, stepping away. My back felt the chill from his absence.

There was rustling behind me and the soft sound of air displacement, then nothing. “If you let yourself go, I will be forced to live a lifetime of want. Of need,” he whispered, his mouth so near my ear that his heat radiated

into me. “Now that you are mine, there could be no going back to the days without you, Liomsa. I would suffer without hope of relief from the pain. There will be no release into the ether of the universe for me, should you leave me alone on this plane.”

He brought the side of his hand up, rubbing it between my legs and making me groan with need. “You are so wet for me already when you do not know what awaits.” Then he laughed, and I froze.

“I used this cross years before an apostle named Andrew died upon one; it holds the body perfectly, does it not?” I groaned at his words, my legs already getting tired. “Use your arms,” he said, his chuckle not bringing me levity.

“Aedan, I.”

“Hush. You have so much power, remember? You can withstand this. You could fight me. Escape. Or give up your power for a moment and be powerless for me.” And then the lashes fell, forcing my startled yelp.

“This cat is made with the softest leather available and will not break the skin unless I allow it.” I heard air displacement before I felt the lashes across my tender ass. My cry changed when he brought the head of the whip between my legs, rubbing to induce a moan.

“No relief, only pain. Remember my fate if you leave me.” The lash fell again and again, followed by the soft touch of leather at my core, but he wouldn’t give me what I needed, only wound me tighter and tighter with his whip-soft lashes and his occasional sips from my body.

“I need to cum, Coi. Please.” I begged, sweat running down my spine as he brought me to the edge again before stepping back.

“No. Not this time,” he said, once again leaving me bereft of his heat. “Imagine this for an eternity so that the next time I say you are using too much magic and going too far, you will stop. If not, this feeling? This is a fraction of what I will feel.” I groaned, tipping my head back and forgetting about the nipple clamps. I hissed as they dug into my flesh, making my core clench. “Please!” I begged, and I wasn’t ashamed. I’d never felt anything like this. It was deep, overwhelming, painful, and more than any pleasure I’d ever felt. My vision faded at the periphery, and he stopped his ministrations, rummaging behind the curtain for something else.

“Your ass is deliciously pink, cailíní álainn, but I do not think it is enough.” The sound was different before I was struck on the tops of my thighs with something firm and woody.

The pain was dull at first, but it turned into a firebrand that had me screaming. Just when I thought it was too much, the rod pressed between my legs, teasing my core with entrance. I gasped.

“Caning was the punishment of choice for naughty women back when women endured such things. But it needs an expert touch or leaves terrible marks. Good thing I have the expertise.” The Devil whispered in my ear, “Tip back your head.”

I obeyed, letting the chain pull my nipples tight while the cane struck with beautiful accuracy and skill until I was sobbing, begging, and almost coming in the same breath, but he was merciless.

Duine go Milleann made his point. As much as I needed, I did not get. As much as I wanted, I was denied, and I saw his words in lashes and nips. I needed to stay grounded, stay present, and not do what I did on the moors.

I was a sobbing, snotty mess when he finally stepped behind me, pushing into my chained body with a groan. I held on to those chains for all I was worth as his final punishment played out, and he fucked me with a vampire’s vicious skill set, showing no mercy then, either. My body pulsed and spasmed, trying everything to get what it needed, but he still denied me.

“Imagine this need for a lifetime. I am surely as immortal as you, yet I cannot escape to the stars as you can. I will be forever denied with no end to my misery, Anamcara. You will listen the next time,” he schooled, never slowing his hips. “And there will be a next time, so you must learn this pain now so I do not suffer it forever.”

“Please, Coi, Please, I cried, sagging in my chains, and only then did he reach with one hand and pull the nipple clamps off, letting the blood rush painfully to their steel-hardened points. The other strummed my core with the same skill that he used the lash, and I screamed myself hoarse as I let go, shattering into a million pieces around him.

## *Chapter 18*

### *Duine go Milleann*

My love hung limp in the chains of the cross, my essence leaking from her core and mixing with the sweat I caused to glisten on her body. I took a moment to watch it trickle down her reddened skin. Goddess, but she is beautiful. And Goddess, but I am a Monster.

The pressure I felt growing in my chest was gone, and I no longer thought I would explode and take out half a continent with collateral damage. The last time I felt that way was referred to as the Dark Ages, and thousands upon thousands died.

Undeniably, Lara would forget this lesson after a few decades, but as long as I could keep her on this plane, I would remind her the cost of great power. And I think we will both enjoy it. My wife is a bit of a pain slut.

I released her ankles and then wrists, scooping her up and placing her on my ancient bed while I extinguished candles and dampened the fire. Her deep, auburn hair hung in a limp, sweaty waterfall over the bed's open side and onto the floor, and I couldn't help but think it was the most sensual thing I had ever seen. I would have it painted and hung on the wall as a reminder.

There was something about seeing her in the heart of this most dangerous place that spoke to my demons, and I wanted nothing more than to keep her in my old lair, but Lara would want to wake in her bed, and this place was not yet hers at heart.

Someday.

I loved this drafty old castle, but it needed work to be fit for a queen. Work I would contract now so when the day came when Ireland grew tired of our presence, we could move on. And on. We had dozens of properties and could choose a number that were move-in ready, but I had a soft spot for the old Scottish place, as evidenced by my frequent unintended travels.

I had spent a century or two holed up in the cold, vast place during the worst of my rampage, and while I loved the blood-tinged rustic charm of this home, I knew Lara needed more and more she would get. Once the room was secured, I gripped my wife tightly and sifted home.

I draped her one-handed over my shoulder, leaning to run water



approximately the temperature of hell, as is her preference. I drizzled scented oil under the faucet, letting it mix so it would soothe her skin. While the tub filled, I made her a drink, still carrying her limp form.

She forgets sometimes.

She so rarely sees the monstrous side that she forgets who and what I am. Most of the time, I am okay with that. However, it pays for her to remember that I am not always the placid gentleman she sees most days. I chuckled to myself, patting the reddened backs of Lara's thighs gleefully. I would need to remind her often so she didn't think to disobey me by allowing herself to unite with the stars.

Though, I would not frame it that way.

I smiled, cupping my bourbon and Lara's vodka in one hand and her ass in the other before taking her to the ready tub. Setting our drinks down, I eased her into the fragrant water, enjoying her sigh as she stirred.

Multifaceted emerald green eyes met mine, and she groaned, stretching like a cat and causing the water to roll around her as she held my eyes.

I handed her the vodka, watching her smile. "I should edge you more often; it makes you pliable." I brought the bourbon to my lips, showing her the tips of my fangs as I sipped.

She splashed me like the mink she is.

"You're a terrible creature," she laughed, ducking under the water.

"And it is past time you remembered," I grinned, showing more fang and not in a happy way.

"You don't scare me, babe."

Because, of course, I did not. I sighed. "Then I must try harder. Next time, I will leave you wanting." I winked as she growled her cute displeasure.

"You wouldn't."

"I would do anything to remind you where you belong, including not letting you orgasm." I moved behind her, filling my palm with oil and rubbing it into her shoulders where the muscles would be tight. "It is not always about you." I deadpanned, knowing it was always about her, and that is how I wanted it.

Everything I did was for her. I'd waited an eternity to find my perfect mate and would spend another eternity worshipping her in all the ways she

needed. And well she knew that.

“Humph,” she grumbled, leaning her head into me as I massaged and oiled her arms before soothing oil over her raw nipples as she hissed.

She indulged me by standing so I could wash and oil the rest of her before settling back and letting me wash her hair. Perhaps I had been too hard on her and perhaps not hard enough. Time would tell, but we both needed my care as a reminder of who we are together.

“Do you want a snack before bed?” I asked as I toweled her dry.

“I’m not a toddler.” She yawned, neglecting to cover her mouth in an adorably childlike fashion.

“Of course not, Liomsa.” I hid my smile by leaning to brush my teeth as Lara dressed in one of my worn tees.

I herded her to the bed, watching her eyes droop as she fell asleep before her body finished settling. It had been a long few days, and it showed in the tired lines on Lara’s face. So, I pulled her to me, the little spoon to my big, nestled my nose into her damp hair, and fell asleep alongside my one true love.

## *Chapter 19*

### *Aedan*

I slept longer than intended, waking to the thought that Lara was not the only one who needed rest. I felt her warm and curled into my side, which pleased me. I lay a moment longer, reveling in the comfort of her body and the rise and fall of her breathing. There is no luckier male than I; I know this. I soaked up her heat, allowing it to warm the depths of my soul and brighten the darkness that sometimes surfaces.

Funny how this fiery, wild, passionate, untamable, but slightly dented spirit was my perfect mate when all I had ever wanted was precision, order, and control. After centuries of being little more than a revenant, I never dreamed my love-at-first-sight moment would come in the form of a chaotic, smart-mouthed, fiery spirit named Lara Hennessey. But I am grateful, and my mother says I should thank her.

Eventually, I slipped from our bed, walking the stairs human slow to the kitchen where Cook had left coffee in the French press, scones on the counter, and a rasher of bacon on a plate. How well he knows my wife. She must be going to awaken soon as he times his meals with her rising, not mine since I do not eat. I shook my head, pouring a cup of coffee when I would rather have tea, but Cook rarely considered my wants.

I had expected the brownie to move on without children to care for, but he loved my wife in the way brownies do and stayed. I suspected he used the Ways to care for Sephone and possibly Aurora and PJ, but I did not know. Perhaps the mate we suspected he acquired helped. Brownies were secretive, quiet, and protective of their families, and if you cared for them, they rarely abandoned you. Cook had unlimited resources at his disposal, and any note he left voicing his needs was answered to his satisfaction, no questions asked. But we never saw him anymore, so it could be an entirely different brownie.

Still, the coffee tasted like Cook's as he added a chickory to the mix.

I sipped, smiling into the steam from my cup at my wife's silent descent of the stairs. "I smell bacon. And coffee. I need coffee." She stretched into a wide yawn, her sinuous body curving like a well-formed cat's.

I turned, eyeing her appreciatively. When I first met Lara, she was all

curves and softness, but her association with me had not started well. So many changes struck too quickly, and she'd lost weight. She maintained slimmer curves, but some of the softness disappeared.

Then she died.

It is another story for a darker day, one I cannot relive without losing my mind, but my wife died, and when life somehow returned to her shattered body, she came back a different person. No traces of her former humanity remained, and the so-called God Particle had seated itself deep within her soul.

She didn't gain a pound unless she was pregnant. Her friends cut their eyes at her over it, and we both missed her deep curves, but nothing could be done. Still, her body was a work of art I appreciated on every level. She had aged all she ever would, and nothing would change physically unless she changed it herself with magic and maintained the spell.

"Baaaaaaacoon," she moaned, sounding like a zombie as she pressed multiple pieces of cooling, salty pork into her mouth, chewing. "Ummmmmmmm."

"I will get your coffee, Mo Chroi," I rose, chuckling at her passionate response to Irish bacon, which is, in fact, much better than American bacon.

"Mumf. I camph gethit," she tried, clutching more bacon into her claws and shoving it into her mouth.

She hip-checked me, forcing me to step back while snatching a scone with a growl as she poured herself a cup of rich black brew.

I returned to my barstool, picked up my phone, and scrolled the daily news while watching her cautiously as she devoured everything on both plates with snarls and growls my way before she finished the coffee from the industrial-sized French press. I hid my laughter behind my hands, tucking my face lower to the counter so as not to increase her ire.

I understood a little better why we still enjoyed the grace of a brownie.

"Oooooooh, she said, leaning against the counter and placing her hand over the tiny food baby she had grown. With a professional sigh, she turned to me. "I ate too much. I'm never eating again."

I blinked at her, considering my choices. "You barely ate. Would you like an omelet? I can throw one together." I rose again, moving toward the

stove as she cocked her head in thought.

“Nah. I really did eat too much. She patted her belly, groaning as she stacked the dirty plates in the dishwasher.

She would be starved in an hour. I smiled again, the thing breaking across my face like the sun.

“Good morning,” my mother said, sifting into the kitchen nearest the wide double glass doors that lead out to the moors. Her voice subdued, and her dress more muted than usual, a soft gray instead of one of the brighter pastels she favored. She shielded the babe from view with her arms and long silver hair, holding him angled away from us. Her frame had thinned to its baseline state, and I realized the child was far younger than I had assumed, as that change in my mother would take no longer than a month.

Lara gasped, reaching for the little bundle and wiggling her fingers, saying, “Gimme.”

“He’s,” my mother tried.

“Gimme.” Finger wiggles, and two steps closer, Lara snatched the little child from The Great Goddess like he was hers to steal.

“Hello beautiful,” she crooned, nuzzling into the child’s neck and inhaling grotesquely.

“Darling,” I attempted.

“Oh, look at you,” she interrupted, ignoring me. “You smell like an angel. You *look* like an angel. Coi, your brother is an angel,” she sang, squeezing the little bundle until he let out a faint squeak. “Mother, he’s perfect; I just love him. Do you want to hold your brother?” she asked, not attempting to pass me the child or offering to loosen her grip.

“You need another,” the Goddess announced, smiling happily and clapping her hands like the action was decided.

“Oh, no,” Lara backpedaled, dropping the little bundle into my arms like he’d grown hot. “No, no. Other people’s children are fantastic. Perfect. Amazing even. Mine? Ours? No. Nope. Not happening. “I’ll babysit yours, but no thanks to another of our own.”

I ignored the women as they crossed their arms in a silent standoff, Goddess to Goddess. I knew Lara had discovered magical birth control and did not care. She would want another child, or she would not. The world had

plenty without another of ours, or we could have a dozen more if she wanted. I loved my wife, and what we had between us was more than enough to sustain me.

But the baby did feel good nestled in my arms like a warm, limp sack that provided comfort only a babe can.

“Mother, he is quite perfect,” I added, taking in the child’s soft features and almond-shaped eyes. Wispy-soft blond hair rose from his head as if electrified, waving in an absent breeze.

Growling, Lara snatched the baby from me and pulled him from my reach, making me question the veracity of her claims. “What’s his name,” she almost snarled, hunching over the little thing like she was about to run off with him.

My mother threw her head back and laughed for the first time since her return to our lives, and I knew that Lara was just what she needed to feel better about her newborn son. What better way to prove his normalcy than seeing the covetous desire shown by another mother? Lara was perfect; she truly was.

“Max,” Dani answered. “His name is Max, and his father is Australian. I’ve been seeing him for a few years.”

“Oh, do tell,” Lara cooed, cutting her eyes toward my mother while placing soft kisses on Max’s head.

“Do not tell,” I stated. Absolutely do not tell.” I groaned, moving to make more coffee.

“Don’t,” Dani said, her eyes smiling so brightly they blazed purple.

“Do not what?” I asked, turning from the sink.

They snickered.

I growled, giving them my back to heat the water for the French press.

“He’s magical,” Lara said, sniffing the baby again.

“But his genes are misaligned,” Dani admitted, looking softly at the baby in Lara’s arms, then up at Lara’s expression.

Lara’s eyes closed as she cast a Healer’s glance into the baby. “His heart is normal, and he’s incredibly smart. Yes, he has Trisomy 21, but it’s a very mild form, and he will live a long and happy life,” she paused. “You’re sure his father is human? Because I meant what I said, he’s quite magical.”

“Of course, I’m sure,” Dani replied, reaching for her son. “How can I not be sure?”

Lara reluctantly gave him over as I stirred hot water into the coffee grounds in the French press, watching the exchange.

“He doesn’t have magic,” Dani said, lines furrowing between her brow as she looked at her son.

“Mmmkay, Mom,” Lara chuckled, turning to me to press a kiss to the corner of my smile. “He has magic,” she whispered loud enough for Dani to hear. He will be a great peacemaker,” she finished, proving again how her powers had grown.

My mother’s gaze turned thoughtful as she glanced between my brother and wife. “I don’t understand why I can’t feel that,” she quipped, looking again at my wife. “But, I don’t doubt you,” she sighed. “He needs friends to grow up with. So you will make him some,” she tried for the hundredth time.”

“No, thanks,” Lara answered, causing my mother to give a practiced long-suffering sigh.

“Children are a pain in the ass, Mother,” I chuckled.

“Only the ones who don’t listen,” she mock-snarled until it devolved into a laugh. “Fine. For now,” she sighed. “Maybe Sephone,”

“NO.” Lara and I said.

“Though you should take him to see her. Undoubtedly, he will be spoiled once the Kings get a hold of him. He will have dozens of fae horses answering his newborn cries before he ages another day,” I added to soften the blow.

Sephone was far too young to mate. Decades too young. Maybe a century from now, she could consider taking a mate. I growled internally before shutting it down. I would kill anyone who touched my daughter. Either of them.

“That’s a good idea.” The look on Dani’s face was thoughtful as she smiled at her newest son. “Lara, I’ll be back to talk about your latest creation.”

“Nothing to talk about.”

Dani sighed again. “I’ll see Ari and the boys; then we’ll visit again.

Perhaps a girl's day at the lake is overdue."

"Now, that, I can go for."

Dani sifted away, leaving us alone with our fresh coffee.

"It's nice having her back," Lara chuckled. "I missed her constant haranguing for another grandchild," she added in a voice that said she did not, in fact, miss that part.

"Indeed, it is lovely. Now let us. *Let's* return to bed and practice making a child of our own.

"Excellent idea, babe," she agreed before racing up the stairs, clutching the French press to her chest.

Laughing out loud, I took our cups and followed.



## Chapter 20

After a long morning in bed, a short nap, and a piping hot shower, we managed to leave our bedroom a second time to check in the warehouse offices. “I will drive,” Coi said, cutting his eyes at me and hoping I didn’t notice.

I noticed.

“Then we aren’t taking the Miura,” I sighed, looking longingly at the gorgeous Lamborghini crouched at the second-floor railing, just waiting for me to get my hands on it.

“We can take the Miura,” he tried, walking toward the wall of keys.

“I mean, we can if I’m driving.”

It was his turn to try on a long-suffering sigh, but his mother’s and mine were far better because women definitely suffer more.

“Or, you can take the Miura, and I can sift there. I can’t bear to watch you drive that beautiful baby like a ninety-year-old pappaw. I’ll see you when you get there in an hour or so.”

“That,” he shouted, growling as he turned my way, his whiskey eyes turned a lighter shade. “That is uncalled for, and I am far older than ninety.”

“Oh, I know, buddy. I. Know.” I chuckled, walking to the key wall and picking the one for his 1937 Mercedes 540 Special K. “This one suits you perfectly.”

“You need a spanking,” he growled, using vampire speed to relieve me of it before stalking the glamorous candy-apple red machine with wide white-walled tires. It dripped chrome and sex appeal like a 1950s pinup, and I thought it was indeed perfect for the aged vampire hybrid to tool around in. He’d look like an OG mobster cruising the hills. The top was already down, and the white leather interior beacons like an old friend.

“And these sexy babies need the dust blown out of their carburetors from time to time. Same as you.”

His growl deepened, and I laughed, running the rest of the way to the Mercedes, where I jumped in and closed the door before he could retaliate.

The drive into Belmullet was glorious. Morning mists had given way to a hazy afternoon sun that warmed our heads, chasing away the chill. Coi drove as Coi does, but it was a peaceful trip, and Mercedes had been the right choice. Seeing the world from a classic car driven slowly through the bucolic scenes of Western Ireland as sunlight casts highlights on fields of heather and darkens freckles on Irish skin is something everyone should experience.

Yes, the speed of the Miura would bring a different kind of excitement, but the pleasure would be no greater, and in fact, living in the moment was yet another way to stay grounded, something both of us needed.

Coi worried endlessly about my power, but what about his? Whether he'd been created to match me stride for stride or evolved into it, who can say? Still, as my strength grew, so did his, and I shared his worries on that front.

While his power seemed naturally grounded and mine more stratospheric, it didn't change that he might get so strong as to implode like a star whose light was too bright for too long. Coi understood creation magic, and if you believe Dani, would have been capable of wielding it had he not been genetically altered into a vampire by Cerridwen's Tears.

Being with me had restored his fae magic, but it was changed in what he could and could not do with it. Time would tell if he regained the ability to create, and Goddess knows we had nothing but time. Next to Dani's age, I might be an infant, but Coi was still a teenager. Who knew what he would grow into.

Thanks to my grandmother's meddling and Dani's overreaching grit, we could live a very long time on this plane. Dani thinks that she remembers the first sunrise, and if you believe the science, that would've been some four and a half billion years ago.

I didn't want to live that long, but the way humans were going, none of us might see the end of the century, so I wouldn't worry about it. Dani and I could grab our loved ones and transplant them into another realm if it came down to it. She'd know which was the best, and if not, we'd make a new one.

The sun hovered close to the horizon when we pulled into The Warehouse parking lot. The place was bustling with activity, and lights shone in every window of the converted space. People walked in and out of the

main doors with shopping bags and takeout containers, and I knew Coi's vision had been realized. The locals were coming in, making our Irish headquarters their place, and with the quality it offered, I didn't blame them.

The sound of falling water and laughter made the cavernous space cozy, and shouts met our entry as people ran up to say hello. I didn't know most of them, but that wouldn't matter in a small town like this. Coi was a local hero, and as his wife, well, they may have heard a thing or two about me.

I accepted hugs and handshakes before excusing myself, taking the stairs instead of sifting to my office. I shut the door, letting the silence envelop me in stark relief until my cell rang.

I almost didn't even look at it, but the caller ID caught my eye. "Grania, miss me already?" I laughed, but the laughter died at the sound of a choked sob.

"Aurora is missing," my best friend cried. "She just disappeared. PJ said she ran to her car to get something and didn't come back. Her keys, cell phone, and purse are all here."

"Where are you?"

"The house in Westminster."

I sifted there without thought, stumbling into the kitchen that used to be mine before I'd moved in with Aedan and given the place to Grania.

"I thought you guys were staying at Fangs,"

"We are. PJ and Rora came to get the rest of their things. I thought they'd be safe together.

"We'll find her. Maybe she went through the tunnel to our place; maybe she wanted the things from her room there," I tried, feeling the possibility of that in my soul.

"Paul and I packed the rooms there first. There wasn't anything she'd go back for," she said, trying to pull herself together as she wiped angrily at her ice-blue eyes.

Grania's white-blond hair was pulled into a messy bun, and her normally pale cheeks tinged pink from crying.

"Where's PJ?" I asked, reaching out with my senses to see if I could locate either of the kids.

"He walked to tunnel to your house to make sure she wasn't there."

“Any chance she hopped the Way to Talamh na Sithe to see Sephone?” I asked, knowing that was a little far-fetched.

“I don’t think so,” was all she said.

“She’s not there,” PJ yelled as he bounded up the stairs from the basement. “Mom!” He rushed into my arms like the little boy he used to be, and I hugged him tight.

I should have pushed harder for them to leave the US behind and made them see the upside of relocating to Ireland with us. Sephone needed space, but the rest of us did not. Now, Aurora was missing, and I couldn’t help but think it was my fault.

“Did she say anything? Anything at all that might suggest she wanted to go someplace else?” I asked carefully, keeping PJ in my arms.

“No, she was on the quiet side. We split up to go to our rooms and grab some stuff. Rora ran to the car to get her phone, but we were literally apart five minutes before I went back for her. Her room hadn’t been touched; it was like she never made it that far.”

I nodded, schooling my face to remain blank. “Is the car still here?” I asked, and he shook his head, running for the door to the garage.

“I didn’t even check,” he growled. “It’s there.” His voice was raw with the need to break, but he held on to his cool exactly like his father always does.

“It’s okay,” I tried. “We’ll find her. You called right away, and that helped. I’m taking you to Ireland and grabbing Coi, and we’ll look for her. It isn’t safe here,” I stated the obvious.

“I’m not going anywhere without Aurora,” my best friend growled, crossing her arms, and I understood. I wouldn’t want to go anywhere if Seph was missing. I’d want, no, I’d need to stay.

“PJ,” I started.

“I’m staying,” his response was as vehement and final as his mother’s, so I just nodded.

“Take the tunnel to the other house and call Aedan and Paul, but engage the privacy settings on the AI before you do anything. No one can know we’re here; our situation is a little tricky. I’ll see if I can read anything from the house, and it would be easier if you aren’t here.” Grania nodded, grabbing

PJ's elbow and heading to the basement.

The lights were already on when I sifted in, and as far as anyone knew, Grania's family was still in America, so I didn't attempt to cover my presence by turning them off or closing the curtains. Instead, I walked the house, reaching out with my senses. I tried to get a feel for what happened. I'd always done this type of magic when the kids were little and had gotten pretty good at reading scenes.

When you have kids as close together as Sephone, Aurora, and PJ, cover stories vary, and having a sense of the truth was necessary for all our survival. But it was a vague kind of magic, unlike anything outright and obvious. It helped give impressions but not firm answers.

It wasn't like building something or pushing a storm away. I could get a sense of feelings, scents, and impressions strong enough to imprint the surroundings, but only if the scene wasn't too muddied or old. Had police departments known this little trick, I'd have been inundated with requests for help, but it wasn't reliable enough to be admissible in court.

The kids complained that I was a walking lie detector, and they weren't wrong, but it was a skill I'd learned to turn off since it led to unwanted erosions of my sanity when they got older. With focus, I found I could turn it back on, and the feeling came to me like breathing once I let it.

The house sank into unsettled silence, and misgiving prickled my spine. The smells hit me first when I dropped the shields I used to protect myself from the onslaught of, well, everything. Grania smelled like raindrops on hot pavement, and PJ like lemon and honey. Now that they were gone, the scent of vacancy and dust returned, overshadowing their brief presence. Underlying that was Aurora's electric scent. She smelled like a hot wire since birth, but the spicy smell of fear-threaded excitement underlined that.

Excitement and shifter.

Still, Aurora had dated a shifter boy and may have brought him to the typically empty house to hook up. Both scents were faint like they didn't stay in the space long enough to leave much of an impression. I didn't get a sense of panic, though, which was telling. Despite the mess, it was clear that the kids hadn't been in the house long before she disappeared.

I walked the floor plan again, following the scents and impressions that

cascaded through my mind but revealed nothing more than flashes from everyday life. When I got to the garage, it all changed.

The passenger door of the kids' Lexus was open, and Aurora's phone lay facedown on the concrete. I felt the struggle she aimed at her opponent before the flash of recognition she felt. Fear. Surprise. Happiness. Fear again. Another brief struggle, then half-hearted resignation with the underlying sense of confusion and excitement.

All in all, those things didn't tell me much, but they told me enough. Rora wasn't terrified, and she wasn't forced to leave. Maybe convinced, but not forced. The final thing I did before putting my shield up was to tug on the bond between Rora and me. She'd feel it, but I didn't care. She'd have to know I was coming anyway.

Even though I hadn't birthed her, I'd cared for Aurora like Sephone. In my mind, there wasn't a difference between the two. Grania had been breastfeeding when Seph was born, and it was nothing for us to feed the other's baby. It's just how it was because we were sisters to our core. My bond with our children was one of love, blood, and magic, similar though slightly different from the one I shared with Coi.

I could sense everything with Coi and communicate directly using thoughts when we were in close proximity, but it wasn't like that with the girls. Still, I could find the girls and PJ, plus get a sense of their emotions and impressions of their actions.

Aurora wasn't far. If I had to say, she was less than fifty miles away, smack dab in the middle of Noah's forested area where the shifters roamed. I could pull the bond and sift right to her had I wanted. My long-suffering sigh would've gotten an award had anyone been there to hear it.

I picked up Aurora's phone and shut the car door before entering the house to find Coi seething in the middle of the living room, his eyes wild and scanning.

Not only did I not want him to hear this next part, but I didn't think he could without choosing violence.

"It's okay," I soothed. "We'll find her. I get the sense that she's okay. Would you step out and get Grania and PJ? I'm going to pee real quick," I lied. The cool thing was that I could. Yay, me, because most Fae couldn't,

but sometimes lying to your husband was a teensy necessity.

In Grania's bathroom, I dialed Noah but was sent straight to voicemail. "I have a problem," I growled. "But you have a bigger one. I need official permission to enter your lands. Text. Do. Not. Call," I finished, not wanting his name to randomly scroll across my phone while one of Coi's baby girls was missing. Oh, he'd figure it out. At some point, he'd remember Aurora dating a shifter and toss himself down that rabbit hole. Still, hopefully, we'd have her back long before then because if not, he'd decimate the shifter population without a care in the world.

Aedan might be more civilized than when he tore through the New World fae and vampire populations, killing most of them, but he wasn't tamed by any stretch. It wouldn't take much to flip that switch, and a rogue shifter kidnapping his kid would be more than enough.

The truce between the two paranormal species was long but ever-tenuous, and I didn't want poor choices and rash decisions to be the cause of its breaking, which is why I didn't sift to the heart of Noah's territory and steal back my child. This was a political incident at this point.

I fake flushed and fake washed my hands before returning to the kitchen and finding everyone gathered. Paul had arrived and was wringing his hands as he paced the floor. "Do they want money?" he asked.

"I don't think so," I answered, my voice barely above a whisper as I prayed for my phone to vibrate in my pocket.

"What the hell is happening," Coi shouted, pulling at his hair. His movements mirrored Paul's, giving away his link to the gray-templed vampire glaring at me so similarly that I almost smiled. Almost, because I'm not stupid.

I held up a finger as my phone vibrated. Pulling it out, my eyes flew over Noah's answer. "I have an inkling of what has happened."

My fingers flew vamp fast over the keys. "Fix your shit. I'm taking my kid back." I glanced at the angry faces pointed my way. "Hang tight." I knew my abrupt disappearance would cause a commotion, but I didn't have time to think about that. This whole thing was about to blow up, and Aurora needed to be there to explain herself before there was collateral damage.

I dropped my shields, grabbed Aurora's bond tightly, and pulled myself

to her. Could Coi follow? Yeah, he probably could. Could he do so without going to Scotland first? Nope. Nope, he could not. His strong emotions wouldn't allow him to be accurate and quick on my heels, and I was banking on that. Maybe that was unfair, and maybe I was taking advantage of him, but it needed done. No, it had to be done.

I popped into a room, screeching and turning my head from seeing activities a mother shouldn't. I deserved it, though, and half expected it. I did. It still didn't lessen my shock to find my daughter ass up and naked with a rutting shifter kid. Gripping Aurora by the back of the neck, I used magic to clothe her and sifted back to Westminster to the shock and horror of the boy I left behind.

Not my problem.

That would be Noah's problem, and he'd be lucky if Aedan didn't wipe out the entire population of shifters before this was done. That particular kid was as good as dead, though.

"Explain," I said, pushing Rora into a kitchen chair and ignoring the gaping mouths as everyone stared.

"What bit your neck? Why are you bleeding!" Aedan lost it, shouting at me to return him to wherever Aurora had been so he could kill anyone there.

The room blew up into shouts and arguments. I'd only been gone a few seconds, yet it was a free-for-all now that I returned, errant daughter in tow. Voices rang, each louder than the other, all trying to be heard. Shaking my head, I sighed again, watching as Aurora shrank under the weight of it.

"Quiet!" I demanded, and the room silenced immediately, including both angry fathers. The quiet did nothing for their scowls, and I knew the peace would be short-lived. "You will explain this, Aurora Jane, and you will explain it now." I crossed my arms, letting a little of The Goddess's power leak from my voice so there could be no argument. I knew what had happened, but I needed her to explain to the room.

"I'm his mate, Mom. Jacob loves me," she started, and if I could smell shifter and sex on her, then everyone else in the room could, too, except for maybe PJ. "He claimed me." She clammed up, watching the myriad reactions of the faces in the room.

"A wolf shifter named Jacob?" I groaned.



“That’s what you’re focusing on, Mom? That series is a classic,” she sniffled, and all hell broke loose.

As the room devolved into shouts, threats, and madness, I took a minute to examine the threads that made my daughter and did, in fact, see the bond to the shifter boy. I wouldn’t have thought it possible, but there it was. It shone with gold and silver threads, trailing in the direction from which I’d pulled her.

She wasn’t wrong; it was a done deal. The mate link had settled deep into her soul, binding her to the shifter boy for life.

My jaw dropped as I took it in. The bond was beautiful, made of their different races’ gold and silver threads; it glittered and shone where it wrapped around her. I sighed. Meanwhile, the level of violence in the room was at an all-time high.

“You will remove this bond at once!” Coi demanded, looming over his daughter but looking at me.

Raising my hands in supplication but saying, “I can not,” only made him angrier.

I could. I could untwist those bonds, unmake them, break them, whatever, but I wouldn’t. They’d chosen, and their Goddess must have agreed. Mate bonds among shifters were sacred, and who was I to say this one was wrong?

This was part of being responsible with my power. Part of being humble. Just because I could do a thing didn’t mean I should.

I’d learned this lesson the hard way all those years ago when I tried to still work as a nurse while filled with the power to heal. I couldn’t save everyone then and wouldn’t break this bond now.

“You will not?” Aedan said, glaring first at me, then at Aurora. “You will,” he tried, shouting at me while I remained calm.

I understood; I did. He was angry. In his mind, his baby girl had been taken from him. Forcefully, even, but he was wrong. The thing was, since Aurora wasn’t a shifter, Jacob couldn’t have claimed her if she hadn’t been willing. He could have if she’d been a wolf, but only if he was an Alpha and a complete asshole to force himself on her that way. She’d accepted him, making a bed she had to lie in.

“I will not; the bond is real,” I finalized, hoping my husband would see reason but knowing he wouldn’t. Not now. Not on this topic. The girls were his life, and one had made choices he disagreed with, possibly for forever. I sighed again, thinking of how this day started and wishing I could go back to that.

With another glare at me, Aedan sifted away.

“Explain, Aurora,” Grania demanded, crossing her arms as her ice-blue eyes glistened with tears.

Paul had buried his face in his hands, and like the good kid he was, PJ had wrapped an arm around his sister’s heaving shoulders in solidarity.

I could see the defiance in Aurora’s eyes. She wanted to tell us to fuck off. Moreover, she wanted to tell us that this was none of our business, and maybe that was true. She was an adult. But some things transcend adulthood, and being kidnapped and mated was one of those. I might not remove her mating bond, but I sure as hell would make her talk, and if this Jacob had fucked my kid up, I could make him suffer.

Aurora sighed, giving in to the pressure. “Jacob is a wolf shifter. He’s the guy I dated and Sephone kissed,” she started, looking only at me.

Grania’s head whipped my way, and her eyes narrowed. I held my palm up, stopping her from interrupting to ask questions.

“I tried to tell you then that there was more to it and that I wouldn’t fight with my sister that seriously over nothing, but you were convinced I couldn’t be anything to him. That I couldn’t mean anything to him because I was fae, and I didn’t want to argue with you. I don’t know, Mom. Part of me believed you were right.” She slumped, looking down.

“I spent those few weeks ignoring his calls because of the kiss with Seph, thinking that if he liked me that much, he never would’ve kissed her. I avoided him but felt like a piece of my soul was missing the whole time. Like I was missing a limb.” She looked up, looking at her mother and then at me.

“When he showed up, I was scared at first. I didn’t know why he would do that, but he was wrecked, Mom. A mess. I...He begged me to let him talk, and I needed to hear what he had to say, so I agreed to go with him,” her voice broke, and she looked away. “Even now, it hurts to be away from him.” She rubbed her chest, and a tear fell down her cheek, and I felt terrible for

her. I did. But I worried, too, because it was hard to see this ending well.

Vampires might mix species. Witches certainly did. The few humans with fae blood had mixed with just about every other species known to the Goddess. But shifters? I'd never heard of a shifter mating outside of the shifter community, only to other varieties therewithin, and that wasn't super often.

"He'd told me that we were mates while we were dating. He said he knew as soon as he met me. I thought he was trying to get into my pants. He tried to fight it because I'm half fae, and he's an Alpha. He will lead a pack someday, and most don't accept outsiders.

"He kissed Seph to try and get my attention. I'd been seeing other boys and not taking him seriously, so he kissed her. Then, it all fell apart. Fae pick their mate bonds, but you and Grandpa prove some fae mates are fated."

"Your grandmother is a Goddess, Aurora," Grania interrupted. "She chose Lara for Aedan."

"Dani didn't fate our relationship," I tried, shaking my head.

Everyone humphed their disagreement and my naivete.

"It's going to be hard, I know that, but it's fate. I can't fight it and don't want to. His Goddess chose me. Shifters can't fight their mate bonds, and the bond is never wrong. They'll understand because they have to."

And that was the heart of the matter and a reason for added worry. The shifter Goddess had chosen a half-fae princess, and she'd chosen her for a reason because the pairing was unheard of.

I hated politics in general, but when deities get involved? No thanks. Aurora was part human, part fae, and possibly part vampire since her mother held on to some vampiric traits after I'd inadvertently, uh, changed her.

Aurora's Grandparents, Aunts, and Uncles were some of the most powerful supes out there. She was chosen specifically, which made me want to search out the shifter Goddess and go a few rounds with her.

"Do you love him?" Grania asked, angry tears sliding from her glacial eyes.

And when Aurora wilted, looking down? I almost lost my shit. Paul growled, PJ tightened his arm around his sister, and Grania grew an inch as she stood to her full height, ready to battle with the Gods over her answer.

But Aurora stood taller, too. She'd shown me many faces over the years: immaturity, whimsy, and coquettishness, to name a few. I knew she was more than those facets, but I'd not seen it until her face hardened and her eyes darkened dangerously. "No. I don't love him. Not yet. I care for him. I respect him. I need him like the air in my lungs and the blood in my veins. Love will come. And I chose him.

"He gave me the opportunity to walk away, and I didn't. I accepted his mark, his claim, and my role in his life. Maybe I don't love him right this second, but the foundation is there, and maybe I didn't see my life going in this direction, but here we are. Grandpa is just going to have to get over it. Now take me back," she finished, crossing her arms and turning her iron glare my way, making me sigh.

"It's done anyway," I said, feeling like there was more to the story but knowing it didn't matter anyway. "I meant what I said. I'm not unmaking the bond. I think you're too young for this type of commitment and responsibility, but what I think doesn't matter.

"But don't think this is the end of it. I'm hunting down this Goddess, and we're having a chat. I won't let you be a pawn in some war you have no stake in. It's not happening. Understand?"

"You can't argue with the shifter Goddess, Mom. She's a Goddess for a reason," she tried.

I didn't drop the shields hiding my power, and I didn't say a word. Oh no. I arched an eyebrow and let the silence in the room speak for itself because sometimes people forget. Aurora may have her destiny, but I had mine too.

"Right. Well," she said, looking away first. "Can you take me back, uh, please? Jacob will be frantic." Aurora clenched her hands, unclenching them when she noticed what she'd done.

"Noah is having a very similar, if not more violent, conversation with Jacob as we speak, Aurora," I said, suddenly tired, turning away from them all.

"You can pack your things and take your car properly, young lady." Paul sighed, his eyes finally turning from nearly pure white to their natural or unnatural blue.

Paul had been Grania's chosen for decades, and when he'd aged enough that his mortality became a pressing issue, Coi had made him his final vampire son. His salt and pepper hair had gained more salt before his transition, and the look suited him, as did the readers he still wore despite not needing them. They perched on his nose as he stared down his daughter.

We'd worried that it wouldn't work or that Paul wouldn't transition well, as some of Aedan's children had not. But Paul had. Not too strong and not too weak, he had normal, if slightly above average skills for a vampire, but he didn't flex his muscles very often. In a family of heavy hitters, wading into the fight didn't make sense unless the topic meant a lot to him. Aurora meant a lot to him.

"I'm disappointed you didn't talk to us about this first," he continued. "And I'm very disappointed in a young man who isn't brave enough to come to your parents and make his intentions known. This was poorly done. Very, very badly done.

"You'll bring this Jacob home tomorrow and allow him to explain to me and your mother in person what has happened. In the meantime, you're an adult. I can't make you stay until this wolf gains our approval, but I can make you get your things and return to him under your own power.

"Daddy," Aurora tried, pleading with her father as tears fell down her cheeks.

"No, Aurora. I love you. We all love you, but your impulsivity and reckless choices are yours to sort through. We'll always be here, but you and this boy have a long way to go to regain our trust. Your mothers will deal with the shifter Goddess; I will deal with your grandfather and Noah, but you, young lady. You will deal with Jacob." And with that, Paul hugged Aurora before walking away, wiping a pink-tinged tear from his eye.

PJ pulled Aurora toward her room, her wide, incredulous eyes staying on us as she walked to do what she should have done at the start of the evening. Pack. She should be packing for a trip to Ireland or maybe Talamh na Sithe, but now she was packing to start her new life as an alpha wolf shifter's mate. The idea had been to keep her safe from a government that could use her against Coi and me, but now? Shifters. How did this happen? Meddling Goddesses. That's how. I wanted my cliff and a seagull's mind to fly in for a

while.

## *Chapter 21*

The house was empty when I sifted home. No lights broke the darkness that had settled in the many hours since Aedan and I left that morning. The smell of blood, honey, and fall leaves was faint, letting me know he hadn't returned and making me loose another long-suffering sigh.

It wasn't often that we spent a night apart, but it had happened. We loved hard and fought harder sometimes. Twenty-five years of marriage made us familiar with each other's tactical choices, and this was one of Aedan's. He'd leave me to stew, thinking I might change my mind and do as he asked, but stubbornness was my weapon of choice, and in this, I was right.

I would take up my armor and wrap myself in a cloak of righteousness and iron will. Breaking the bond might have serious, detrimental side effects that I couldn't foresee. Shifters mated for life, and the threads that bound them were strong. I wouldn't take a chance at severing them and damaging my child.

But I could look for the perpetrator of this particular crime and have a word with them.

I glanced around the empty house again before sifting away, not bothering with a note because that's a tactic, too. I held tight to my anger at being left alone to deal with this and sifted to the one place that might help me recover from the day.

My toes hit the shoreline of the seat of my power, the place that both grew and hid me from those who might want to control a goddess rising. The scent of the ocean settled something I hadn't known was stirring, and in one deep exhale, everything was better.

I cycled my power with the earth, letting her endless energy and ample strength refuel my body and revitalize my soul. She took my angst and anger, converting it to energy gratefully, loving the exchange and caressing my soul with gentle touches as payment. The moon was still high in the sky instead of fighting the sun for space as it would soon be on the Irish coast. Ghost pale rays reflected off sleeping birds as they floated over the tiny waves of a

peaceful low tide. And everything off balance corrected.

I turned to find my beach house also dark but feeling much less empty than my Irish home. I walked to the stairs, knowing no one should be there and that it would be a great place to grab a cup of coffee and regroup. Sifting inside to minimize the risk of being seen, I turned on the gas stove to warm water for the French press. The motions were comforting and familiar, as was the house, the sound of waves from the open French doors, and the feel of my soul's home.

Coffee in hand, I sat on the deck, listening to the waves caress the sand as I stretched my awareness into the universe, looking for Jacob's goddess. Noah always referred to her as Luna, which literally meant 'moon,' but I had a feeling she went by dozens of names, depending on the mythos. I closed my eyes, searching for the feel of a wolf Goddess among the stars dancing around the moon.

"Can I help you with something?" my mother-in-law, The Great Goddess, said as she materialized. Dani didn't sift so much as just come together rapidly, one molecule at a time. "You're calling to the primordials," she chuffed, stepping forward. "I'm not sure you want to do that just yet."

Pulling my awareness back, I shifted, indicating she sit. "I need the Luna Goddess," I started before filling her in on the rest. The deeper I got into the story, the harder her face became and the higher her shoulders rose. Her anger flared across her features before settling into a stern, narrow-eyed mien. "Coffee?" I offered, giving her a chance to arrange her thoughts.

"Yes, thank you. Where is Coi?" she demanded. "What does he say, and why isn't he with you?" She scowled, searching the house for her son as I went inside, poured another cup, then returned to my seat.

I sighed, looking into the dark sea. "He demanded I unmake the bond, then left when I wouldn't."

"You did the right thing," she said, shaking her head slowly. "It would've been detrimental to both of them.

"I figured." We sat silently for a minute, both captivated by the ocean's beauty and the starkness of the situation.

"How is Aurora?" Dani asked, bringing back the focus of the issue.

"Stunned, I think. She seemed invested and like she was taking it



seriously. Still, I want to speak to the shifter Goddess and find out what her agenda is. I don't like her doing this, especially without speaking to us. There will be consequences, and I won't have Aurora hurt by angry shifters." I felt a prickle of awareness, but it faded to nothingness as I waited for Dani to reply.

"No," she finally sighed, her shoulders drooping as if tired. I wondered where the baby was but didn't ask. "We can't allow her to be harmed, and no doubt this mating will anger the shifters. I've never heard of a bond this far outside their norm. Even a human pairing makes more sense to them since a human could be bitten and changed. It's unusual for sure, but not as unusual as this."

"That's what I figured. How can we find this Luna?" I asked, finishing my coffee and watching her think through my question.

"She could be anywhere, but if she targeted Aurora specifically, and I believe she did, she'd know we're looking for her. My guess is she'll stick close to Rora and Jacob to make sure things go as she wants. She loves deep woods and her wolves, not the stars. She's probably on Noah's preserve somewhere, staying hidden but watchful."

Taking Dani's empty cup, I rose to my feet and washed both cups, placing them in the drying rack while I thought through my answer. "Well, then, that's where we go. She can't hide forever, and if she planned this like I think she did, she wants us involved. Why else create such a mating bond?"

"I agree," Dani said, touching my shoulder and sifting us away from the wonderfully peaceful South Carolina night.

Sifting with Dani is like traveling through the stars as an atom. It's seamless, swift, and beautiful. There's no sense that you've moved, it simply feels like you've become one with your surroundings. Then you blink, and you're someplace else. There's no displacement. Your stomach does not drop, nor does any time pass. Sifting with Dani is like coming into existence somewhere else. Instantly.

The rich scent of damp loam hit my hindbrain before I could open my eyes. Crickets and night birds sang across the pine needle-strewn forest floor. The moon hadn't moved in the sky, and its pale light was blocked from sight by the dense canopy of trees. I took a deep breath, holding it momentarily

before releasing it into the verdant-black night. I chuckled at my thoughts, full of purple prose and flourishes that were not the norm for me.

“It’s a beautiful place for a showdown with a Demi-Goddess,” Dani baited, not bothering to search her surroundings. “If I unmake her here, at least she will have known peace.”

“I did not intend to incite a war with our Great Mother.” The voice at our backs was deep, smooth, and placating in a way that wasn’t condescending.

“Didn’t you?” Dani asked as we turned as one to face the Luna Goddess.

“I did not.” The woman before us held her palms out before dropping her arms at her sides.

“Then why did you trap my daughter in a mating with a shifter when these things are not done,” I asked, dropping my shields and letting my power roam through the woods. It returned, bringing information on everything living for miles around, including the thing before me.

Chestnut-blond hair hung in dreads down her back. Bare tattooed arms the color of Birch bark hung loose at her sides. She wore complicated leather straps that banded around her chest, down her waist and hips. Wolf’s fur boots came to her knees, and a long bow was slung across her back. Her eye makeup was smudged and smokey, giving her a feral appearance, but a sharp intelligence glinted in brown eyes, looking more canine than humanoid.

“Your child is safe, Godling. A show of power is unnecessary,” she said, nodding my way.

“It’s very necessary. My child is mine. You should have kept your paws off her,” I growled, stepping forward. I wanted to take her head off because maybe that would end whatever bullshit she started, and I was just that pissed off.

Dani moved between us, saying nothing at first.

The Luna bowed her head in deference, pausing a beat before saying. “I did not intend to create a war, only to broker a peace.”

“Explain,” Dani said, moving to stand beside me. Arms crossed and angry. “Explain why you would use my granddaughter, the daughter of the American Fae Queen, The Goddess Rising, and the daughter of the King of Vampires, the King of the American Fae. What would possess you to do such a thing? What would drive you to do this without consultation with beings

who could end you and your people with a thought? Hmmm?” she finished, raising one eyebrow. Her hair floated about her, and I knew she was angrier than she let on.

“Desperation, Great Mother.”

Through the paths between trees, the howls of wolves filtered, some near, some far, but all growing closer.

“Your wolves will stand down,” Dani stated, her words the only threat needed.

The Luna raised her hand, and approaching paws stopped, whines echoing instead of howls as the shadowed moon inched lower. Her dark eyes turned white as her ears lengthened and canines grew. “My people are fading. Too long isolated, our customs have created a disconnect to their inner animals. Each generation loses something as family trees grow closer together. The sun cannot shine, and the trees weaken. Shifter magic wanes as other magic vines and strengthens. We have Fae roots, but they are malnourished and dry, cut off from the land that sprouted shifters everywhere. We need to reestablish them. We need to rebuild weakened foundations, so all our houses stand stronger.

“War comes. Anger, jealousy, and discontent strengthen as their animals weaken. Their ties to The Great Mother dissolve until true shifters are no more. The Changing Bite no longer works, and the genetic shoots at the heart of all things wither to extinction across all shifter species.

“They come from you, My Goddess. As do I. As do we all. We are your children, and we need help.”

“You’ve kept your own counsel when you should have approached me,” Dani interrupted, a twinge of irritation in her voice. “You isolated yourselves. I warned against this long, long ago. You, in your hubris, have forsaken me.”

“And I was wrong. Now, my people suffer. Aurora is Fae,” she started.

“She is also half human,” I growled, narrowing my eyes and letting my own beast show. “The sob story is a good one, and I’d never want Noah or my shifter friends to suffer, but The Luna’s words are a prediction and nothing more. They aren’t worth losing a child for. Not to me,” I said to Dani, ignoring the indignant shifter Goddess to focus on my mother-in-law.

“Aurora is more than she appears, more than genetics would imply, as is

her birth mother, and as are you, Fae Queen. Remember that. Her magic will come, and it will be a terrible beauty. Forgive me for wanting her for Jacob, who will one day be King.

“Their path is not an easy one, but it leads to the betterment of all shifter species, supernaturals, and humans as well. They are destined, as are you. Think about it, My Goddess,” she said, her eyes changing to their naturally dark color and swinging to Dani.

“Forgive me if I don’t believe you,” Dani answered. “There’s more you’re not saying.”

“Queen of the Universe, Queen of the Shifters, Queen of Talamh na Sithe. All the Hennessey Queens will rule. Queen of the Universe, Queen of the Shifters, Queen of Talamh na Sithe. The Queens will rule,” she chanted the words again before dissipating in a burst of moonlight and flowing like bright, molten rivers into the trees, leaving Dani and me with nothing but stunned silence. Thousands of reflective eyes stared at us, blinking, not approaching. Then they were gone.

Yet another long sigh escaped my lungs, and my shoulders sagged where I stood. “That accomplished nothing.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. It can’t be changed without consequences I’m unwilling to face. She’s right in some ways and wrong in others. She was warned. But what is a God without hubris? What is a Goddess without narcissism?” And now it was Dani’s turn to sigh. “I should’ve seen this. I’ve said it before, and I’ll warn you again. Not even I can see every twist and turn a path takes. Our people have free will, and as I’ve maintained somewhat of a life myself, so will you. You will miss things. Sometimes they will be good and sometimes horrible, but while we may be omnipotent, we are not omniscient.” She turned away, and I knew she was thinking about losing her son, more specifically, how she lost her son who was destined to be Fae King but is now King of the Vampires and so much more.

I wondered which she preferred.

But that was life, wasn’t it? Just because you could change a thing doesn’t mean you should.

She was also referring to a time far, far in the future when she believed I’d take her place, but there is no retirement from being a Goddess. No 401K,

golden parachute, or the like.

Dani wove a wrought iron bench from nowhere or everywhere, sitting with a thump. Someday there would be a plaque next to the thing that would say something like “*Conversation of the Goddesses*” or *Goddesses were here: fate be damned*” or some such. Now, it was just Dani and I in the woods with a thousand eyes. I thumped next to her.

“I will watch her more closely. Luna be damned, I will make sure she is safe,” she said as I settled my hands into my lap. She was shook, as the kids would say. Her speech had reverted to a formality that was not normal for the Mother Goddess.

“We both will. We *all* will. Coi and Grania, Paul and Noah, fuck him. Noah will help, too, or Jacob will be King sooner than predicted,” I said, angry. He knew something was up and didn’t tell me. He knew something. “It’ll be okay. We’ll make it so.”

Dani nodded, sitting longer in heavy silence before turning to me and taking my hands. “You’re my daughter, of course. But you’re also like a sister, and it’s nice not to be alone anymore. You’re right. We’ll make it okay. If nothing else, I’ll kill the boy, and she can choose her mate, rewrite her past, and move on. That will also be okay. She’d survive his loss because I’ll make it so.”

And that is how a real primordial power thinks.

I am not a primordial power, but I nodded my head anyway because this wasn’t a point I would argue. Yet.

“Coi,” she started.

“Will be fine,” I finished. “He gets like this. Marriage is sometimes another type of cold war. He’ll realize it’s done and move on to helping us get Aurora through this.”

“Males,” The Goddess of The Universe and The Maker of All Things sighed, making a true smile burst across my face.

“Yes,” I laughed. “Males.”

I stood, hugged Dani, and lost myself to the night.

## Chapter 22

### *Coimeadai*

I could not find my wife. And, yes, it was my fault since I left her to deal with things she should not have to deal with alone. Still, in my defense, my thoughts at the time would not allow me to stay. I was going to kill someone, and I still might.

I had gone into a rage, looking for a fight. I had found one in my father's in-law. They had been sparing when I sifted there on accident, meaning to go to Scotland to cool my heels. Instead, I stripped off my shirt and waded into their fight, turning it into something more. They smiled and allowed it, but now I knew why.

They kicked my ass. Almost. I could see on their faces that they had wanted to do it for a long time, and they did not, did not, go easy on me.

They were formidable fighters, and I would never think otherwise again.

They also, possibly, hold a bit of a grudge against the thing that captured their daughter's heart and made it his.

Parents. Am I right?

So, whilst I was losing strips of flesh under the magic blades of four Fae Kings, I left my wife to deal with Aurora, the Shifters, other Gods, and who knows what else, and now I could *not* find her. I could not find Aurora either, and Noah, the ass, was not taking my calls.

I did not have a metaphysical link to Aurora and could not sift to her. The bond with my wife was a soft present hum, but I couldn't follow it to her side. Every place I sifted once the fight was over, and the sun long since raised into the sky, I could feel our bond, but it was no weaker or stronger. What. The. Hell. I was angry before, but I was furious now. At myself, mostly as I had done this.

The upside was that I was sifting seamlessly now. Practice makes perfect, and I practiced long into the morning, only going to Scotland when I wanted. I checked every property I owned, even the forgotten ones. Twice. I went to Maryland a half dozen times, back to Ireland, Pawley's Island, and even Charleston. I smelled coffee, my mother, and Lara at the beach house,

but those scents were faded. I stayed and tidied the kitchen, putting their dishes away, thinking she might return.

Finally, I gave up and returned to Ireland because if my wife did not wish to be found, she would not be. Had I wanted to be part of the solution, I would have stayed and engaged in the conversation instead of running off like a mad toddler.

I tried her phone, listening as it went to voicemail before I put on a tea kettle to try and soothe my nerves with some Irish morning blend.

“You’re an idiot,” my mother said as she materialized on a bar stool with my sweet little brother in her arms.

“I am aware,” I deadpanned, pulling another teacup from the cupboard. “Where is my wife?” I asked, pouring steaming water over the loose-leaf tea holders waiting in both cups.

“Someplace you can’t go,” she answered, arching a delicate eyebrow. “She’s tired, and you’re an idiot. Leave her be.”

“Bloody hell,” I replied, mad at myself for thinking she would stay in a realm I could actually search. I really was a moron.

“She demanded Aurora bring the wolf boy to Maryland this afternoon. She’ll rest a few days and not miss that meeting for anything,” she finished, causing me to cock my head like a confused teacup poodle before I sussed out that wherever Lara is, time passes much faster. Good for her; I might be jealous.

But I was still mad.

“The wolf,”

“It’s dealt with, Son. There’s only so much that can be done, but we’re doing it,” she condescended. “You should’ve been there.” She kissed the downy hair on my brother’s head before picking up her teacup and studiously ignoring me as she sipped.

But she relented and caught me up on overnight events, making me angrier that I had bailed on the situation. Still, my mother assured me it was probably for the best as these things were better handled by the females and that I, for all my strengths, was neither a female nor a Goddess and that I should probably keep my fat male mouth shut.

I got her message, keeping that mouth shut and letting her lovingly berate

me for most of the early afternoon.

“Go change,” she said eventually, “and I’ll take you to Maryland. Lara will be there; I have no doubt.

“She searched the galaxy for the wolf Goddess, Coi. Understand this. She called to the primordials, and some of them would’ve answered had I not stopped her. I’m responsible, I know. I did this. By reaching for something small for my people, thinking of only making a new Fae Queen to ensure their survival. I did so much more, but isn’t that what Gods do? Don’t all of us overreach?” She turned to tend my brother, but I understood what she wasn’t saying as her words ended in a forlorn sigh.

I am going to lose my wife if I am not careful. I know this. Part of me deigns to believe I can stop it from happening, but the other part? I need to become a better monster. But how can she not ascend? My mother made her a Goddess, and sometimes, I curse that. But my mother returns to us, and is she not also a Goddess? She is *the* Goddess. But I do not want to share my wife with the stars, other Gods, or some vague threat to her that I cannot possibly understand, though my mother warns me of.

I showered and changed quickly, needing to see Lara and Aurora. I needed to understand what type of deal the Goddesses brokered, and I needed to threaten a wolf boy within an inch of his life. I wanted to take his life, but through my many sifts, I came to understand what Lara was saying and knew I could not.

I dressed in a black on, black, on black bespoke Huntsman suit that spoke to the darkness in my soul. I wanted to highlight that I was more than merely Mr. Lara Hennessey. I certainly was Mr. Hennessey and always would be that male, but I was much, much more, and I challenged anyone to forget that, including my wife, mother, and children.

It is easy to forget that I am not a weak male in a House full of Goddesses. As Lara’s power grows, so does mine, something my mother ensured. I lengthened my long, needlelike fangs enough so that no one would mistake the threat, something I never did but would start doing immediately because I am more than one thing, as are we all.

My mother waited patiently in the kitchen, bouncing Max in her arms like a professional, which I suppose she was. She shook her head when she



saw me, letting a smile grace her lips.

“You will make an impression,” she said, her smile widening to show even, white teeth.

“As intended,” I replied, unbuttoning one button under my neck to give the false appearance of nonchalance.

“We must make a quick side trip to drop Max with his father before I sift you to Maryland. It won’t take but a second,” she offered, making me smile this time.

“Go ahead, Mother; I will meet you there.” I sifted away without thought, my destination firmly planted in my internal GPS because the females in my life weren’t the only ones who knew how to level up.

Apparently, Lara had the same idea as I. She wore the gown of a queen or Goddess, if you will, a long, fat braid resting down her back, and a scowl that shook the world. What is a Goddess gown, you ask? It was a heavy thing, brocade and inlaid silver, perhaps a warning to the wolf child who stole my granddaughter from me.

Curled auburn tendrils framed her face and twined around an ornate, curled, silver circlet set upon her brow. This was an arrangement she had woven from magic, not bought off the internet, and yet another nod to her power.

Anger sparked in her eyes at the displaced air heralding my arrival, but she said nothing, focusing instead on a tall, lanky shifter male tentatively holding the hand of the child he’d stolen. He had not even filled out to match his height, showing his age or lack thereof. My anger exploded, and I parted my lips to show the hint of fang I allowed just as my mother popped into the room.

“Sorry I’m late,” she started, immediately diffusing the situation. “I had to drop the baby off with his dad and then sifted to get us all a coffee,” she finished, passing out hot cups to everyone but the wolf, who hung his head lower at the blatant show of power in the room. He also probably wondered that the only three adults currently present happened to appear out of midair.

I set my coffee aside and crossed my arms, eyes lasered on the kid holding Aurora’s hand. In deep contrast to Aurora, his hair was black, eyes dark, and skin the color of aged bronze. Corded muscles stretched across his

lean frame, and when he stood to shake my hand, finally meeting my eyes, he stood over me by at least four inches, and I am not a short male.

“Jacob, Sir. Jacob Mars,” he introduced, and I let his hand linger in the air before finally grasping it in the age-old way of fathers and suitors.

“Aedan Hennessey, King of the Vampires, Husband of the American Fae Queen, and the only Fae-Vampire hybrid remaining apart from my daughter, Aurora’s mother. There are no others because I killed them,” I snarled with a smile on my face and a tightening of my grip. It was not a friendly smile, and he did not mistake it as such.

He didn’t make a sound as I squeezed his hand, hoping to break bones like Lara’s fathers had merely a quarter century ago. He would heal as I had.

“I still can’t believe your parents named you Jacob. Like, why? Don’t think I won’t ask them,” Lara muttered, causing Aurora to huff.

“Really, Mom? That’s what matters here?”

I wondered about their back and forth but said nothing, not wanting this kid to catch any break from my attention. My eyes never wavered from his, and I saw the strength of steel in their depths, liking him only a smidgeon for it.

Until I saw the bite mark on the base of his neck, the impression of eighteen perfectly human-looking teeth marks lowered my fangs to their base and had me baring them at the wolf-child in front of me.

I jerked him to me, banding an arm around his back, “The only reason you are not dead where you stand is because my wife seems to think it might affect Aurora negatively if I were to kill you. You took something that was not yours to take, Wolf,” I whispered, letting my killing voice come from deep within as I spoke.

Wolves and vampires were natural enemies and always had been. It goes back to wars fought long ago to control the same resources both groups needed to survive before our presence was known, but it didn’t end there. An uneasy peace kept us from killing each other, but it existed only because of Noah and me. And this was another reason the situation was bullshit, pardon my colloquialism.

“I do not care about you as her mothers might, and I do not care about you as her father might. All I care about in this situation is Aurora, make no

mistake. I am watching, as are two Goddesses who are decidedly not on your side. Do you understand?" I hissed, raking my teeth over Aurora's claiming mark and making him bleed, only he didn't flinch. Standing immobile in the face of such an attack was an acknowledgment of my right to attack him, which upped my estimation of the boy, if only slightly.

The other thing that raised my estimation of the boy was the whisper of power in the drops of blood I licked from my fangs. The boy would be something one day. But that day was not today.

"Oh," my daughter said as she and Paul walked through the door. "I see we missed introductions."

"We were in the middle of them; you haven't missed everything," Lara said, her voice lilting and her southern accent deep, which only happened when she was emotional.

"I see," Grania replied, her ice-blue eyes nearly white as she tried to hold herself from snapping the skinny kid's neck.

Dropping his hand, I stepped back as they moved forward to greet the wolf-child, and where I thought Paul might be the one to give the wolf some slack, he was the one to audibly break his fingers when their hands met, making me grin and my fangs glint in the light.

It did not go unnoticed.

The kid said nothing about his fingers or my fangs as his eyes caught on the powerful people assembled in the room. He would have to shift to fix the bones, but he pretended nothing was wrong as he returned to his seat next to Aurora, who had silent tears streaming down her cheeks as she took his uninjured hand in hers.

Having seen the game between my in-laws and me, she would have known this was how it would be, and I did not pity her.

She had tried to cover the marks of his savagery with a high-collared shirt, but I saw them, wanting all the more to rip his head off.

Lara sighed, rolling her eyes but kneeling at Jacob's feet, placing a hand on his, and fixing the bones in the span of five seconds. And if nothing else had gotten his attention, that certainly did, and his eyes widened briefly before he dipped his chin, saying, "Thank you."

"We've spoken to your Goddess," Dani started. "We understand that you

couldn't help the result of this situation.”

“But you could've changed the beginning,” Lara picked up seamlessly as she stood, their auras of anger and pity closely matched.

“You made bad decisions worse and a delicate situation more volatile. You understand,” Grania picked up.

“Were her grandfather and I not better people, you'd be dead, and Aurora would survive to find a mate more deserving and one of her choosing,” Paul added, and around the room it went.

“We would never let her suffer your death, child. Regardless of what your wolf Luna wants, I am her Goddess, not the other way around. I will protect my granddaughter in all things,” Dani said, and I enjoyed watching the blood drain from the kid's face as he realized exactly who and what he had crossed. His eyes scanned the room with heightened awareness.

“I couldn't help it,” he tried.

“And that lack of control and foresight almost got you killed,” I said. “At a minimum, you should have wooed our child. Dated her. Appreciated her. Made yourself known to this family, and taken some time,” I spit as I felt my eyes bleed lighter and lighter. “You did none of those things.”

“Grandfather,” Aurora tried.

“Silence,” I hissed, baring my fangs in her direction because I was just that angry. Aurora was no innocent here. She paled, flinching from me, and I did not regret that either. As I had wanted to show, we are all more than one thing, and she needed to see that, too. There is a price for every decision.

“What are your plans now,” Lara asked, absorbing some of the testosterone in the room with her question.

As if we might let him live.

As if we might let them plan.

I was still unsure of those summations, as was my son, judging by the glint in his eyes when I met them over the heads of those seated.

“I'm a contractor, a successful one,” the wolf started. “I have a house and the means to care for my...” he thought better of saying what he'd first planned. “To care for Aurora. She has her plans and her job. Nothing will change if she doesn't want it to. She's my fated mate, and despite our beginnings, I have a lot to offer, and all of that is hers now,” he said, glancing

hopefully at my granddaughter, who refused to meet his eyes yet held his hand tightly. “It’s new to us too. Unexpected even. We’ve got a lot to work out.”

“And when your peers begrudge this pairing and come for my daughter,” Grania deadpanned, emotionless, seething, and burning in her soul because I felt it too. She is also more than one thing and not an insignificant power, not even close. “Because they will.”

“I’ll kill them,” he matched, his dark eyes turning amber as his wolf flashed behind them. And I believed he would. I believed he would try to protect her, but I was unsure he was up to the task because it was huge. Add who Aurora was into the mix, and it was nearly impossible, and entirely the reason that Sephone was tucked safely in Talamh na Sithe.

Lara nodded once in satisfaction, her arms uncrossing.

“I’m not convinced, wolf,” Paul argued.

“My name is Jacob, Sir. And I understand your discomfort, and I’ll play your games, but Aurora is my mate, and my dedication to that bond is not in question, and neither should my dedication to her be,” he said, showing the spine I saw in his eyes from the first moment they met.

“And know this, Jacob the Wolf,” Lara paused to smirk to herself while Aurora rolled her eyes for reasons I still did not understand. “We’re watching. All of us. And that includes Airmed, Queen of Talamh na Sithe, and Aurora’s other four grandfathers with whom you should not want to mess. Any one or all of us combined will set out to destroy your people, take your legacy, and end shifters permanently should this go sideways, you need to realize.”

“Noah will open his borders to us, and we will come and go as we please; this is your fight with him, not ours, but we will have open access. Your people need to understand who we are, where we stand, and that we are united,” Grania started. “Again, your fight.”

My wife picked it up, saying, “You’ve read the room, right, Jacob? You understand who you’re dealing with now if you didn’t before, correct?” she asked. “If Rora kept you in the dark about her genetics, you are now aware.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered immediately, glancing at Aurora so that she knew there’d be further conversation.

“Excellent,” I said, stepping forward. “Make it so.”

“But one more thing,” my mother co-opted, her hair raising with power and eyes narrowing on the young wolf in a den of lions.

A small gash opened on his arm, blood welling up, instantly healing. Dani pulled the droplets to her, absorbing them through her skin. Her voice became layered, and she used God magic to say, “You are my child. Mine. Know this. Where you go, I can find you. You’ve never been safer, but you’ve also never been in more danger because your Goddess *knows* you.” And then she sifted away, leaving the wolf boy and his mate stunned to silence.

Lara sifted without a word, and after I gave one final glare at the currently unhappy couple, I followed, leaving them to iron out the details of their relationship with their biological parents.

## *Chapter 23*

I probably should've stayed and at least offered to take Coi home so he didn't have to go to Scotland a few times before arriving wherever he'd intended. But, nah. He'd gotten to Maryland just fine; he could get out of there, too.

It almost made me mad how good he looked when he showed up. How dare he? He could've had the decency not to look like the perfect monster he was, even if it was only for my benefit.

Instead, I returned to the lake I used to think was in Talamh na Sithe but that I now knew was in another realm. They connected if you knew how to navigate it, but they were not of the same world. Once my feet hit the sand by the shore, I magicked the dress off and jeans and a tee shirt on. Instead of flats, I had square-toed cowboy boots. My oldest and dearest friend and childhood love, Tuffy, or T4 as he was known, waited patiently, munching hay.

"Took you long enough," he said, swishing nonexistent flies from his burnished red-gold coat because some habits are hard to break. Too Tuff To Tame, my Quarter Horse, my savior, my soulmate on four legs, and my true heart horse, was long dead in the mortal realm, but here? He would live forever here, thanks to The Great Goddess of The Universe and The Maker of All Things.

Tuffy had once been my Guardian, protecting me from the threats he could, guarding the secret of my magic, and keeping me sane as an orphan in a world gone mad.

All this was way before I knew my parents weren't dead and that I was what I was. He was my OG best friend and the one creature I was sure I'd die without.

"Are we going to do this or not?" he asked, stomping an impatient hoof and tossing his shoulder-length mane over his neck.

"Impatient?" I laughed, popping onto his bare back and burying my hands in his mane. I lay across his neck, inhaling the scent of love, sunshine, and horse that wafted from his pores.

“You need to stay here more,” he chastised. Galahad comes to visit, but I get lonely,” he said, breaking into a swift run with a toss of his head.

“I come almost every day,” I shouted, laughing as the sun warmed my face. It was always sunny on the lake unless I was sad, and then it rained. It didn’t rain very often. “And, I know for a fact that Dani and Teagan come. Probably my mother when my dads get on her nerves.

“That happens a lot,” he chuckled.

“Of course it does,” I shouted as he found another gear, making my words lose themselves to the wind.

“You’re spoiled,” I chuffed when eventually he slowed, snatching knee-high white clover growing especially for him as he walked toward the water’s edge.

He took a page from my second Guardian’s playbook, playfully dumping me into the water as I cursed him for bucking.

Both Guardians had been a gift from Dani well before I knew she existed. They’d helped me survive the awakening of my magic and many rough years before and after, but those are older stories to tell.

“You’re my human,” he said, ducking his head in embarrassment when he realized what he’d said. “Well, not human anymore, I suppose.” Because sometimes he forgot. T4 was over fifty years old and kind of set in his ways.

“I guess I never was human,” I added, magicking my jeans off and a bathing suit on. I ducked under the water, emerging to let it flow off my face and slick back my hair.

T4 waded beside me, sticking his entire face under the water and blowing bubbles from his nose like he’d done since babyhood. He’d been born during a Cat Five hurricane, and his personality reflected that. He had all the saucy attitude and spiciness you expected in a red horse, and I was the only one who could get near him from birth. I’d been tasked with his training from minute one as a broken teenage girl, and somehow, those broken pieces smoothed a bit just from having him in my life.

It made sense once I found out what he really was since he’d been made for me. It broke me when he died in the mortal realm, and I missed seeing him out my window every time I looked.

But time never stops, and neither do the winds of change. I’d take every



second of every minute I could get to be with him.

“You need to stay more and not just drop in,” he said, snorting through his nose and spraying me with water.

Ducking under the surface, I filled my mouth, spitting at him when I rose again. “You’re not wrong,” I agreed as he pinned his ears at me.

“I need more downtime, and the great thing is that hours and hours spent here are only minutes in the mortal realm.” I kicked back, floating lazily on the lake's surface with water so clear that I could always see the bottom.

“He’ll survive a bit without you,” he growled as much as a horse can,

“Oh, I know,” I chuckled because T4 had never really liked Coi, though that had more to do with his undead vampiric nature than his personality, although they would butt heads on that level too. Being somewhat undead himself had not softened Tuffy toward the millennia-old vampire one bit.

Tuffy was my original protector and the first love of my life, taking a position in my heart that Coi wished to occupy but could never steal from the snarky old sorrel gelding whose bones lay buried under a Carolina oak tree.

I floated on, watching the unnaturally large scarlet heron circle high above the trees. The heron that was Dani enjoying a crosswind in bird form. I hoped to have a bird form someday so I could stop tasting fish when the gulls I occupied caught them. I sighed, flipping over and diving like a dolphin to check out the colorful fish hovering above the sand and rocks below. This place was paradise.

Surfacing with a sigh, I looked on as T4 sank to his knees before stretching on his side to dry in the sun. He dug his neck into the sand, dark eyes closing, and inhalations evening to a soft snore. It really was paradise as long as he existed here.

I walked out of the water, settling on the sand with my back on T’s side and crossing my arms over my middle to dry, nap, and love my oldest friend. He sighed so deeply it changed my position, and I snuggled into his shoulder to run my hands through his long mane. I wove a brush out of the universe and desnarled the thick red mass of hair until it was smooth and tangle-free.

I wasn’t sunburned when I awakened, still curled into T’s side. The sun hadn’t moved either, which was the magic of this place. The realm gave me what I needed, and what I needed was a break. What I hadn’t needed was to

run away, and I doubted that more than a few minutes had passed back home. Still, I felt I needed to go in the way I often felt things that I didn't understand.

I rose quietly, hoping not to disturb the sleeping horse, only to hear him say, "Sneaking away?"

"No, T. I am not sneaking away, but I do have to go," I sighed. I'll see you tomorrow and miss you until then. Love you." He raised his head, and I kissed his nose before ruffling his forelock and sifting away.

The air conditioning was on in the Irish castle when I appeared in the bathroom and turned the shower on. The chill hit my sun-warmed skin, raising goosebumps and the little hairs on my arm. It was a rare occurrence that the air was used because it didn't often get hot enough that opened doors and ceiling fans didn't cool the house.

I stripped the conjured bikini, dropping the blue fabric to the floor before stepping into hotter than the sun on mercury hot water. It sloshed over my sandy legs, rinsing the lake water and horse hair remnants down the drain. Coi was home. His heavy blood, honey, and fall leaves scent carried through the vents, as did the smell of coffee.

I washed quickly, toweling off and dressing in magic and cotton since I was on a roll with both. I didn't gratuitously use magic, but there were times it came in handy, and this was one of them. I swept my wet hair into a high ponytail before opening the door to let the steam escape the confines of our wonderfully modern bathroom.

Only to be blocked at the door.

My husband's eyes were a shade yellower than their standard whiskey hue, showcasing his agitation and his monster beautifully. And he was most definitely a beautiful monster.

"Hi," I said, keeping my voice low and my eyes on his like I would a wounded animal or an angry vampire. It wasn't a challenge to him per se, simply a reminder.

"I apologize for leaving you to handle the shifter situation," he grunted, backing me into the bathroom and pinning my hips against the vanity with his muscular frame. He didn't sound even a little sorry, and his eyes bled a shade paler, proving he lacked contrition. Needle- sharp fangs snicked free,

knicking his fat lower lip and drawing two drops of blood with their length.

My eyes caught those liquid ruby-colored jewels as they glistened in the overhead lighting. He ran his tongue over those plump curves, tasting the blood, and I couldn't look away from the motion.

The scent of questionable decisions and risks overwhelmed the others as he grabbed my wrist and lowered his lips to mine, taking my mouth with a hunger that belied the danger and raising the hair on my arms once again, but they certainly can be the same. Hunger and danger go hand in hand with the creature in front of me.

He groaned, pressing his erection into my hip and nipping my lip so it would bleed. "I am sorry. I need you," he snarled into the curve of my neck. I only believed one of those statements, but he waited until I dipped my chin consent before sinking his fangs into my throat and drinking deeply. I tipped my head to give him access even while I shuddered an orgasm against his thigh because what is danger without a side of pleasure? It can be fun, of course, like the first ride on a new roller coaster. But this was a sinful pleasure that lit my nerve endings on fire.

He drank deeply, not needing to but wanting to take his fill. He got like this after his little moments. "You taste like other worlds and stars," he groaned, still swallowing. "Don't leave me."

And it was his unconscious use of a contraction that showed his genuine worry and contrition. It was that one word that imbued his actions with insecurity and fear.

"I won't, Coi. You were the one that left me," I reminded gently.

"I simply needed a moment," he said as he pulled his fangs free, licking the holes in my neck closed as his blood-drunk eyes swirled with whiskey-tinted emotion.

"I know. Sometimes, we both need a moment, and that's okay. It doesn't have to mean anything other than that."

He sighed, putting his forehead on mine and breathing me in. "Cook knew you were coming, even if I did not; there's coffee and dinner."

I nodded, giving him a soft smile. "I haven't eaten in a while," I said, knowing the statement would both anger and mollify him by proving that I still needed him, if only to take care of me. I would always need him, but he

didn't believe that. Still, I wasn't the best at caring for myself and didn't need to because he'd nailed that role.

"Hmmm," he scolded. "Then you shall eat." He pulled his hips from mine, and I mourned their loss, thinking I wouldn't mind satisfying that need first, but he wouldn't hear of it now. "Come."

Stepping aside, he herded me from the bathroom, down the stairs, and into the kitchen, where the scent of roast lamb, mint, coffee, and soda bread assaulted senses nearly raw from the purity of the lake in another realm.

My stomach chose that moment to growl, making Coi growl too as I sat and took a piece of warm bread, slathering it with sweet Irish butter. It is better. Try it if you haven't.

"Aurora will be fine," I said, needing to close that loop in our communication.

"They're children," he sighed.

"They're adults, Coi. Life is about choices, and they made theirs using the guise of fate to shield them from the consequences. She'll be safe, and they'll survive whatever Jacob's Luna Goddess had in mind. Dani and I will see to it," I assured, knowing I was right.

"The boy is powerful," he said, almost to himself.

"He's a man, babe. A shifter, not a boy. Not anymore. The Luna says he'll be a King but not without some problems first. That will make Aurora a Queen, Coi. They aren't children anymore," I sighed as I shoved a bite of perfectly seasoned lamb in my mouth, letting it melt down my throat.

"I did not want this life for our children," he started, shaking his head with a sad smile and getting to the root of his problem.

"But how could they be anything but Queens and Kings?" I asked, shoveling food faster and faster as my hunger caught on to the spread before it. It'd been days since I'd eaten, not the hours I'd been gone from this world. Because in the Lake realm, it had been days.

"Gods be damned," he said, looking across the moors glittering in the late evening sun of the same day I'd sifted away from the family meeting, proving that time passes how I want when I'm with T by the lake.

"If not for the will of The Gods, then what would men do?" I asked, slathering butter on another piece of bread.

“Perhaps live in peace,” he answered, making me laugh.

“Yeah, I doubt it. Humans are better than the Gods at manipulation and deceit,” I said, smiling as he scoffed dramatically.

“I apologize for leaving you to deal with the situation. I let anger guide me,” he sighed, reaching for my hand and kissing it. His molasses-colored hair swept across his forehead, expertly tousled and begging to be mussed by hand.

“You should be sorry. You worry I’ll become a true Goddess, or my power will become too big a thing, but then ask me to break bonds another Goddess created, Coi. It can’t be both ways.” I gave in, digging my fingers into his hair and sliding them through.

“I know.” He rested his cheek against my palm as I carded my fingers through the dark, loose curls he got when it grew longer.

I cleared my plate one-handed, idly playing with Coi’s hair. I watched darkness creep across the moors as the sun set out of view. The field of heather swayed to the slow song of an Irish breeze, and I felt both things in my soul. I was tired. Being in another plane doesn’t recharge like a solid night’s sleep. Even if your pressures disappear, that bone-deep weariness does not.

“I will draw you a bath, and we’ll go to bed early,” he said, booping me on the nose.

“I’ll,” I said, taking my plate to the dishwasher and refilling my coffee.

“You will what, Anamcara?”

I snickered; I couldn’t help it.

He growled, glaring at me while trying to stop the corner of his mouth from tipping into a smile as he turned his back to leave before striding back and capturing my jaw in his hand. “I love you,” he said, taking my mouth and smashing his tongue to mine.

“What is the meaning of this?” my mother snarled from the doors leading to that beautiful field of heather and the moors beyond.

Coi and I jumped apart like teenagers caught in the back of a steamed-up car.

“What the…” I yipped. “Wait. This is our house, so what *is* the meaning of this?”

“Why do I have a wolf shifter bearing Aurora’s claiming bite and a tearful granddaughter asking to stay at the Inn for a few days until ‘things blow over?’” she demanded, making air quotes around the words. My four dads stood to their full heights at her back, arms crossed and expressions stormier than the Irish seas in the winter.

“Why do I have overbearing parents crashing my party and not minding their business?” I muttered, noting my mother’s eyes narrowed further when I didn’t mutter quite low enough.

“Lara Liann, answer your mother,” Laith ordered, his face red and angry.

My shoulders slumped, and I reverted to being the teenager they hadn’t gotten to know. “Mom,” I whined.

“I can’t believe you let Aurora bond with a shifter, Lara. *A Shifter!* Grania is beside herself, and Paul is livid. *Livid.*”

“I didn’t let them do anything,” I tried.

“And you!” she turned her wrath away from me. “I can’t believe you, Aedan Hennessey. How could you? You should’ve killed the boy.”

“Now let us not be hasty, Airmed,” he started, despite the fact that his very first inclination had indeed been to kill the boy.

“Hasty?” she shouted. “*Hasty?* This bonding was hasty. His death is not hasty enough.” She was gearing up for a rant, her red hair wild and flying. Electricity sparked on her fingertips in an uncontrolled show of magic so unlike her that it stopped me short.

My mother was a queen and an expert in all things magic. She had a ton of power, and I’d never, ever seen her lose control of it.

“Mom,” I tried. “Mom, listen.”

“I don’t want to listen! I don’t want my granddaughter forced into a bond she doesn’t want. Didn’t ask for.” And then she started sobbing, and I understood. I understood completely.

She loves her mates. Loves them more than reason, more than breath and life and the sun. She loves them madly and deeply, and she would burn the world for them.

Now.

But she didn’t choose them. Her mother chose them in a bid to control her and force her to pop out more fae females for the dead old hag to sell. My

mother was forced into an arrangement that she did not want. Her other options were rape, torture, and death. My grandmother was a cunt. Fortunately, she was also dead.

Airmed, Queen of the Fae burst into tears, hugging herself around the middle before all four males surrounded her, crooning and comforting as only they could.

And my heart sank.

And I sifted away.

“Tell me you want to break the bond, and I’ll do it, Aurora. Consequences be damned,” I said after following my link to her. She was settled over a table filled with food, holding Jacob’s hand and crying.

His face was open and kind and warm as he looked at her, closing down immediately when he saw me standing there in all my righteous worry.

“One word, Aurora. One. Either way, I support you, but I want you to have a choice. You’ll both survive the fallout if you don’t choose him. I swear. I can’t let you think you don’t have a choice. I was wrong for not making the offer immediately or clearly. I apologize.”

She sniffled, wiping her eyes and glancing up, holding my eyes for a long span of breaths. Then she let out a breath, her shoulders slumping. “You know what, Mom?” she sniffled. “Thank you. I,” she started, glancing at Jacob and looking down again.

Then she jumped into my arms, her whole body shaking. “Thank you so much. I know what it could cost to offer that; I do. I. I’m okay.” She pulled away, holding my upper arms and meeting my eyes with her ice-blue ones.

“I did want this before. Before it fell apart and he kissed Sephone to get my attention, I did want it. Before...well,” she stopped, cutting her eyes to her fated mate, and I wondered if the rest of the story would come out, but she continued. “He was my first everything, but we just... I didn’t believe in him. I do now, obviously. We have some things to work out, but they will work out, Mom. I’m not unhappy about it. That you would offer, though? It means so much. Probably to both of us because Jacob didn’t have a choice either.”

“Then I make you the same offer, Jacob, one day King of the Wolves.” That took him back, his eyes flashing amber in the dim light of their suite at

the Inn Coi and I owned, in a plane I hadn't known existed not that long ago.

"I believe in Aurora," he said, inclining his head like he might to a queen. "But thank you."

"I will do all I can to support you," I hugged Aurora before sifting home.

"I gave her a choice," I said, sagging onto a barstool by the island before I'd gotten my body solid again. "She chooses him. I gave him a choice, and he chose her. You're right, Mom. Aedan, you too. I'd have done it, consequences be damned, but they chose each other, and we must respect that.

"Yes, a Goddess forced this on them, but they want to let it ride. They weren't strangers. The boy was her first love. She didn't think it could work out. Now she does. Let it go, Mom. Let's be supportive, but I swear if he hurts her, I will do as you ask and kill him. I swear."

"If he hurts her, you won't need to. I will," Coi added.

And a chorus of 'No, I will' rounded the room before my mother hugged me, leaving to walk the Way home instead of sifting as she usually did. Maybe she felt better, maybe not. The heart is a crazy thing, and I knew she'd never change her past but wouldn't want anyone else to live it. That's why she was such a good queen.

"Let us get you to bed," Coi said, cupping my elbow and helping me stand. I'd used the last of my adrenaline, the last of my strength, and he was right; there was nothing else to do but sleep.



## *Chapter 24*

The sun of another day crept through the curtains, highlighting the emptiness of the bed space beside me. Coi didn't sleep much, if at all, and while he tried to rest with me as much as he could, he rarely stayed an entire night.

I glanced at his favorite window seat, finding it empty. He would often sit there with tea and coffee ready for when I woke up, either running through financials or watching the wildlife on the moors. When I checked my phone, I saw I'd slept for a long time. Coi was probably at the office in town, seeing to the transfer of employees and assets from America. I should probably be there too since everything was new and the people were just getting settled.

I took a hot shower and dressed, tired from the long sleep and weirdly increased activities over the last few days. After the mundanity of life for the past few years, the assassination attempts, recalcitrant daughters, emo sons, and mulish husband had left me drained. It felt like old times of being a nurse, thirteen-hour hour shifts, and trying to survive all over again.

I sighed, popping my back that shouldn't need popping based on genetics. Based on life? Oh yeah, that sucker needed a good popping. I sat at the intimate table overlooking the ocean at the front of the house, letting my mind drift from gull to gull as they swept across the choppy seas while drinking fresh coffee Cook left. I checked my social media pages and nibbled on apple-cinnamon French toast because I could multitask with the best of them.

I wanted to go to the office, too, and decided to take a car instead of sifting. The day was so beautiful and bright that it seemed a waste to pop into my office and miss the perfection of the physical world. The sun was brighter than usual, having no mists to contend with, and the cloudless sky seemed bluer because of it.

I picked a classic Bugatti Veyron in gray violet metallic that Coi bought me before he realized how heavy my right foot was. It went from zero to sixty in under three seconds and had the perfect balance of speed and class as to be obscene. It was one of my favorites to drive solo, so I didn't have to hear his opinion on how sports cars should be driven. Slow. That was his

opinion, and his opinion was wrong.

I changed into a light sundress, dusted my skin with makeup I didn't need, and pulled my long hair into a high pony. I grabbed the Versace sunglasses, thinking I looked like a movie star, before starting the Bugatti and nosing toward town.

The cliffside roads were empty, and I took the turns gleefully and hard to the inside. The smile on my face was big enough that I imagined bugs getting caught in my teeth, but that did nothing to dampen it. My hair whipped, and the sun warmed as I raced the narrow Irish roads with nothing but sheep to mark my way.

I slowed, pulling off to the side but leaving the car running. I stalked to the edge because this particular cliff had a fantastic view of Belmullet. The town from above, with the bay behind it and the ocean to the side, was just beautiful, and I hadn't found a more perfect spot and stopped almost every time I drove into town.

Coi said he'd show me others, but we hadn't taken the time to travel like we should've. With a passel of kids, a hectic life, businesses, and responsibilities galore, traveling was tough. Soon maybe. Coi owned a place in Croatia that I was dying to see.

It was a big world, and I wanted to see it. There was beauty everywhere, and what did that mean if I didn't seek it out? Still, I had time. Nothing but time if everyone was to be believed. I watched the sun glisten on the waves and boats float far out to sea. I hated that I couldn't touch the sand barefoot, but it was a long way down and covered with rocks.

Like a bee, I felt a sting at the back of my neck, my hand moving to slap it away, only to find a dart, not an insect, sticking out of my neck. I pulled it out, turning on weak legs to find out what the fuck. Poison shouldn't affect me. It'd been tried once or twice before, but it hadn't touched me after my original poisoning and death by one of Aedan's children.

I tried to sift to Coi and found I couldn't. My knees buckled, and I fought hard to stay upright and failed. I sent a panicked plea through our bond, but even that didn't feel quite right. I could feel him tethered there, but the usual communicative whispers that passed between us felt one-sided and heavy.

I flung the dart forward, using magic to strengthen the throw. It pierced

the eye of one of the men advancing on me, dropping him dead. I created another, weaving it from elements I pulled from the ground, and it, too, landed, killing an approaching figure. But they didn't stop.

Two more darts pierced my skin, their poison crumpling me to the ground. I cast a shield, putting my power into it, but that power was a fading thing.

"She's a tough one," a voice said, his deep southern accent making me pause. These were Americans, or at least, he was American.

"They said she would be. Put those bodies in the car and sink it. The helo will be here in three." A man came into view, poking and prodding at the shield before pulling his hand away and shaking it.

"She's got bite. The tranquilizer will take effect soon, and the shield will drop. Be ready to go when it falls, but remember our orders."

"Don't harm the American Fae Queen."

"Don't hurt the queen. Gotcha."

I heard metal crunching as my beautiful car was pushed over the cliff and left to smash down the rock face and into the deep ocean beyond. All I wanted was a nice drive, sunshine, and peace. Peace is all I've ever asked for. I was not a fighter; despite my history, I was not a warrior. I'd been a nurse, a Healer, a mom, a wife. I'd been on PTA committees and cheerleading carpools. I'd been peaceful.

My thoughts were slipping as the tranquilizer dragged me further away from those things. I felt that gentleness dissolve and something dark and angry take its place. I hope these men understood that much more than a fae queen because if they didn't, they would. Because as the passivity fled, the need for violence filled the void.

But then the darkness won, and I knew no more.

## *Chapter 25*

### *Coimeadai*

I tried Lara's cell for the third time, worrying when it went to voicemail. I knew she was tired, but it seemed unlikely she still slept. Something felt off.

I tugged at our bond. Grown from a thin, delicate chain, it was now a thick and winding thing with links that would be strong enough to raise a warship from the bottom of the ocean. It grew around our souls like ivy, but not insidiously. Where ivy could weaken a structure, our bond only strengthened.

She was at the end of it, as always, but not in the usual way. She felt far off like she does when she goes to the lake or another realm I cannot access. Even when she was in Talamh na Sithe, our link was stronger than this. Something was wrong.

I sifted to the cottage, hoping to find her in a deep sleep, but our bed was empty, as was the house. Lara's coffee cup and a small plate lay in the drainer, still wet from washing. "Honored Brownie, House Spirit from the Gods," I started in the Old Tongue. "I need assistance."

Brownies did not like seeing their charges, speaking with them, or otherwise interacting. Lara was the rare exception, but she was a different creature altogether. The lesser fae bonded with families and homes more than individuals, and seeking one out was nearly impossible.

I picked up a hushed conversation few would, a quick argument, then a pop of air. "How does the Vampire King need assistance?" a squat female asked from a countertop away. She wore an apron and was no larger than two feet tall. Her features were sharp, and teeth sharper. Long blonde hair cascaded down her back in a braid. Cook popped onto the counter beside her, standing to his full height and eyeing me with a wariness I did not deserve.

The female spoke in the old tongue, and I answered, "My wife, can you tell me when she was last here and if anything unusual happened? I fear something is wrong."

"Our little goddess left not long ago," Cook answered, also speaking in old Irish. He could speak English, but maybe his mate could not. I had not interacted with them enough to know one way or the other.

“Nothing happened,” the female picked up. “She mentioned to herself that it was a lovely day for a drive, nothing more.”

“Thank you.” I bowed to the pair, rising to find them gone. I felt a little better, but not entirely. If Lara had chosen to drive, she might still be on the way to town. That did not explain the dampened bond, but perhaps there was a reasonable cause.

In the garage, I found the keys to the Bugatti Veyron missing, and a smile came to my face. My wife had excellent taste in vehicles, even if her right foot was a tad heavy. Pulling my cell, I called Santos, who answered on the first ring. “Sir?” he asked, thinking me in my office and likely wondering why I called from the mobile.

“Has Mrs. Hennessey arrived yet?” I asked.

“I haven’t seen her, but let me check,” he replied, placing me on a brief hold. “Taliah says she hasn’t, and security agrees.”

“Thank you.” Worried again, I hung up. The trip to Béal an Mhuirthead was not a long one, especially with her driving the Veyron.

I grabbed the keys to the nearest vehicle, wishing I could fly and trace the road instead of having to drive it. The new model, American-made Challenger engine, roared to life when I pressed the remote start on the keyfob. Knowing Lara would approve, I smiled before I sprang into the seat and tore out of the garage.

I shifted more gears than usual, encouraging the muscle car to flex. Something felt off, and I needed to find out what. Taking the curves and hills of the cliffs, I flew through the hillsides toward town, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. I passed one overlook, then another before a reflection caught my eye, and I hit the brakes, backing up.

Sun glimmered off the waves of the Atlantic. It had burned off the mists the Island was known for, and the deep blue of the sea was in striking contrast to the cliffs. I knew this to be one of Lara’s favorite overlooks, and it would be unusual for her to pass it without stopping.

There were no skid marks, but there were tire tracks in the loose dirt off the pavement. And footprints. Too many footprints. Leaving the car running, I slid out, checking my surroundings with an eye for trouble. Birds screamed and cried over the water, eyeing me as they vocalized. It sounded like a

feeding frenzy over a school of fish, their pitch was that loud and desperate.

I stepped carefully, using my enhanced sight to scour the area. Parts of the site had been swept clear, but here and there, I found impressions from boots and one set of prints from heels. I found nothing else until I stepped to the edge of the overlook.

Glass reflected the sun's light like the twinkling of a thousand stars. Shattered by its descent, the Veyron rested, mostly submerged but not completely covered by tumultuous waves as they dashed against the cliffside.

I sifted to the nearest boulder, knowing the car was empty but needing to check anyway. Lara could not die in a car wreck, if at all. It had been tried a few times. Had she lost control of the vehicle, she would have sifted out, something she had also done. She was an incredible driver and knew these roads well. My wife did not wreck the Bugatti. I knew that. The cabin was empty.

The trunk had jarred open from the fall, and I saw the bodies of two dead humans dressed in black and looking very much like mercenaries.

Sifting back to the roadway, I broadened my search. On the opposite side of the road, I found blood and an empty syringe shaped like a crossbow dart. I ran my fingers through the tiny drops of coagulated fluid, bringing it to my lips. The salty, sour taste of humanity clung to the droplets, and I wondered what the fuck had happened.

I ripped the plunger from the dart, scenting the chemical smell before catching the barest hint of my wife.

Someone had darted my wife.

No substance in existence should have taken her down. She may not be a full-blown goddess yet, but she had grown past the point when mere poison should affect her. Dani swore that Lara would be stronger than even herself in magic. How had someone taken her because I knew with surety that is what happened.

Lara had grown past the burn of cold iron, the bite of poison, or the diamond's cut of Adamantium. Lara Hennessey had no Kryptonite.

Not that we knew.

Damning the consequence, I sifted to the one place I thought might develop such a thing, pinning the American president to the wall and baring

my fangs at her neck. “Where is she?” I snarled, uncaring about the sounds of many safetys unlocking. Their bullets meant nothing to me. “Where is my wife?”

“Mr. Hennessey, I don’t have your wife. I swear it,” she said, her voice remarkably calm for the danger. If she lied, I could not smell it.

“I swear it,” she repeated.

“If you lie, I will end you. No questions. No excuses. Understand?” I demanded.

She nodded once, and I sifted away, leaving her slumped against the wall and questioning everything she thought she knew about me.

I landed in the Airmed’s throne room, exhausted and on my knees.

“It’s about time you realized your position,” she snarked, turning to her mates with a laugh on her lips.

“Lara is gone,” I said, staggering to my feet. Exhaustion like I hadn’t felt in ages pulled at my limbs. I had sifted too many times without pause and felt the effects.

“So she came to her senses then?” her mother started. “About time.”

Part of me knew she was teasing. The bond between Lara and I was something neither of us could walk away from. Well, I supposed we could, but it could never be comfortable and never be broken, but part of me wanted to rip her throat out because this was no joke.

Something in my expression must have alerted them to the seriousness of the matter because Airmed stood as her face emptied of all expression. Her mates joined her on their feet as the room emptied in a rush of petitioners and friends.

“What’s happened,” Saige asked, his voice deep with concern.

I told them.

“There is nothing that could subdue my daughter,” Airmed tried when I finished explaining what I found.

“That we know of,” Lann started. “Humans are inventive. They could have found something. Made something. Who knows?”

“I feel her through a fog. She is alive, but where, I do not know,” I added.

“We need Dani,” Airmed said.

“I’ll go.” Laith rose to his feet and was gone.

“Where’s my mom?” Sephone said from the door to the throne room. “Dad?” she asked, her green eyes wild when they met mine. “Daddy?” she begged for information I did not have, her voice warbling and whispered.

“Seph,” I started as my shoulders sank. “I do not know.”

“Don’t, Daddy,” she started. “Don’t lie to me.” Her hair, so like mine, blew around her with unseen magic, and if I were not so terrified for my wife, I would be thrilled for my daughter at her magic’s emergence.

“Mr. Hennessey.” A boy stepped forward, his black hair and blue eyes striking contrast against his pale face. Flanking him were two others that could have been his twins they were so identical. Still, small differences in height and shading announced them as brothers, even if they had not shared the womb.

“Not now, Kenzo,” my daughter cautioned, placing her hand on the boy’s arms as a snarl ripped from me.

“Sir, we can help. I’m a Huntsman.” Another black-haired boy stepped forward, daring to meet my eye, and I understood that Sephone was correct. Now was not the time.

But the time was coming.

As soon as my wife was safe, there would be a reckoning for how they surrounded her and how she looked at them.

“Daddy,” Seph tried.

“Don’t forget I am a Huntsman, boy.” Seal stepped forward, his growl menacing and movements tight, and then I remembered his magic.

Seal would find his daughter or die trying. The compulsion toward a Huntsman’s prey was that strong.

“We’ll find her,” Dani added, sifting into the room as Laith returned through the doors.

Nodding once, I stepped forward to make a plan.



## Chapter 26

I groaned, my head aching as I fought to sit up. I hadn't felt like this in a long time. I was never drinking again.

Wait.

Memories filtered through the fog in my brain that was not vodka related, making me sit up, and whatever they'd injected me with burn off faster. Oh, someone had really screwed up. Like, really, really screwed up.

"Welcome back," that Someone said. My eyes might be unfocused, but my smile was razor-sharp.

I forced my eyes to focus, though they fought me to close. I didn't respond to the man. I'd learned the hard way that if you let someone monolog, they will. Anger burned the rest of the chemicals away, letting me take in my surroundings.

I was in a clear box of a cage, suspended by chains above a white tile floor. Men and women in white coats busied themselves in front of screens, test tubes, and monitors, looking anywhere but at me.

TVs showing the news from every channel, security camera footage, and The Weather Channel hung on one wall, their footage muted and silent. My eyes flicked over the man speaking, noting him as insignificant. His eyes flared when I disregarded him, instead noting the lack of windows and the otherwise silent room.

My clothes were intact, and nothing hurt, which made me extremely happy since some men think that subduing a woman allows them to rape with impunity. Opalescent metallic bands clenched both wrists, which I presumed were meant to repress magic. And while they might repress Fae magic, they wouldn't interfere with creation magic as that belonged to the Gods, and if there was a metal that interfered with that, I assumed Dani would have mentioned it.

"It's Godlantium," the man continued, trying again to get my attention. Funny how men think to puff their chests and preen their feathers at their

supposed accomplishments, whereas women realize their accomplishments are rarely noted and simply move on.

“The effects must still be wearing off,” he tried, angry at my lack of response, but I knew this game. He’d keep talking to fill the silence. Meanwhile, his prattling would give me time to figure out what was going on.

“Godlantium was developed as an Achilles heel for the gods. We needed to test it, and the best way to do that was to take down the strongest Fae we could, as Fae are the descendants of The Gods.”

Don’t I know it. I snorted, my incredulity conveying in that one sound. His eyes narrowed. “It kills two birds with one stone, you see.”

Only I didn’t; not yet. I stayed silent, allowing my gaze to settle on the man below. He was an aged human, tall and gray-haired. Muscled like an athlete, he was no weaker for his many decades.

“We’ve tried the serum on lesser fae and other fae humanoids with success, but we needed to know it would work on the greater fae before we attempt to capture a true god.”

I sighed, arching an eyebrow at him and thanking, well, Dani, that he didn’t know the truth of what he’d captured.

I asked one simple thing. “Why?”

“The irony,” he continued, ignoring my question. “Is that I developed Godlantium from one small tube of your husband’s blood. One.”

And now I was curious because I sometimes sipped Coi’s blood and had only positive effects from the experience. Making sure my dress covered my rear so no one had a clear shot of my underwear, I shifted, sitting on my ass and stretching my legs out.

“Your husband is a complicated creature. As are you, I’m sure. The testing is still out on that.” He waved an arm behind him to where someone examined a splotch of red on a slide.”

I glanced at my arms, but I healed so quickly I’d never notice a needle mark. I’d had my DNA run before; I knew it would confuse them. Now that humanity knew what the Fae were, my DNA would register as Fae. What they couldn’t see with current technology was how I got to be what I was and what those odd strands woven through my genome meant, and I couldn’t let

them.

Blood whirled in centrifuges and dried on slides. Maybe all of it was mine, maybe not, but I couldn't let them have unfettered access to any of it. I wouldn't take that chance. Look at what they'd done with Aedan's blood. They could have some left, but even if they didn't, it was a risk to let the experiments continue.

Over twenty-five years ago, he'd been abducted and tortured. His blood drained, and him weakened, they'd planned to take his head and kill him true dead. Once freed, he succumbed to madness and bloodlust, returning briefly to the darker times of his past. I didn't care because, in my opinion, everyone involved deserved to die.

I'd destroyed every vial I found and burned the place to ashes using magic I hadn't learned to control yet.

Eventually, we traced a few final boxes to a lab in West Virginia, where they'd created supernatural fighters meant to ensure their supremacy or annihilate humanity. I don't know which. We destroyed them, along with the lab that had created them. Seems we missed something.

“Again, Why?”

“It's all about balance, you see,” he answered, making me sigh because I knew this would be the longest villain monolog ever. Nope. No easy answers for me. I released a long sigh, watching him narrow his eyes at my lack of enthusiasm.

“Humans are God's favorite creation, and supernaturals upset that. Vampires, were-animals, fae, and witches upset that balance. You have too much power, and we too little. It was never meant to be this way,” he continued, and I wanted to stop and argue, but it wouldn't matter. I'd met people like him before.

Before I met Aedan, I'd casually dated a man I worked with. He seemed like a nice guy, kinda dull, kinda boring, but okay enough in bed that I kept him around until I got bored with the boring. When I met Coi, everything changed. I didn't know I had magic, and never dreamed I was anything but human.

That seemingly dull man viciously attacked me after he found Aedan and me together. He had a thing against vampires, women, and human decency in

general and tried to kill me. Instead, my magic broke through the barrier my parents created to keep me safe, and I'd killed my first human.

Afterward, it was a battle to put the broken pieces of myself together again, learn the limits of my power, and train to be something more than I'd ever dreamed. But the more I learned, the harder it became to understand those limits because I wasn't simply Fae and might not have limits, something the man droning on about a balance of power could never come to learn.

The vampires and weres declared themselves publicly years before I'd outed myself as Fae. I'd done it to protect myself and others from being hunted but also because the streets were already talking. I didn't want to be hunted then, and I certainly didn't want to be hunted now. With Sephone, PJ, and Aurora on the line, no one could be allowed to discover the truth of what I was.

"We don't want to eradicate supernaturals," he magnanimously offered. "We just need to boost the human genome, modify our DNA as it were, to level the playing field. I've heard your husband's blood helped make a prototype human, unfortunately, destroyed in a lab fire. That research was lost, but we're working toward a new prototype. With the addition of your genetics, we could advance our research by decades."

I sighed again, leaning my head against the wall of my cage. I had to pee, was thirsty, and felt a little sorry for myself, if I'm honest. Because, really? As old as this guy was, I could still be his mother, and man-oh-man, did I want to mom him but good. He needed it. Someone had failed him.

I didn't blame them, not really. When the only reality I knew was humanity, I'd read those PNRs. I'd wanted something more than seventy to a hundred years of life, a lot of it painful. I got it. In my mind, I was closer to humanity than the supernatural. Yes, time would change that, but I was near enough to those days to sympathize with their plight.

But kidnapping wasn't the way to go. I did not doubt that legitimate labs were working on the same goals as this guy using donated materials. Significant strides have been made in gene mapping and modification, cancer treatments, and medications, all working together to extend humanity's good years. Eventually, humans would figure it out, but this was not the answer.

This was not the way.

“Sir,” the technician nearest to us interrupted. “We have some preliminary results.”

George, as I decided to call him, walked to the work area, reading over the printout with narrowed eyes.

I took the opportunity to inventory my magic, testing to see what would work and what wouldn't. I sent my awareness through the lab, smiling when it responded. I wouldn't do anything overt, but I needed to understand the types of genetic materials they were working with.

My senses filled with the smell, feel, and cosmic vibrations of weres, vampires, fae, and more. My samples were relegated to the one table currently at the center of George's attention, and I took just a moment to twist them into something incomprehensible.

It wouldn't stop what they were doing, but it would slow them down. Humans were motivated and innovative regarding this type of thing, so they'd plow forward. I reached as deep as my senses went, twisting and untwisting until their samples were a jumbled mess. I was too late for the DNA report, but I'd seen it many times and wasn't worried. It was inconclusive and messy. Once it had actual question marks on it. Technology hadn't caught up with the intricacies of supernatural DNA.

“Rerun it,” George said, not yet looking up. “Your husband's genetic material may have made a hybrid prototype, but I'm not sure how,” he started, turning to face me. “Without access to their notes, it's a guess. We've tried multiple approaches but haven't had anything survive beyond the Petrie dish.” He shook his head as I kept silent.

I knew the initial attempt to make supernatural soldiers involved full-grown adults, not cells on a slide. Of course, I said nothing.

“Your daughter seems unimpressive, no offense,” he continued. My attention swung to him because I would kill him if he said much more about Sephone. I could give him a one hundred percent blockage of his Widowmaker vessel that no cath lab could fix, and no one would be the wiser.

“She's simply fae with a little bit of human far down her family tree, and like most modern fae, seems to have little or no magic. That's why we need

you, Mrs. Hennessey. You're a throwback to when the fae were great. Powerful. All-knowing. We're not sure how or why, but those recessive genes thrive in you."

"How did you get my daughter's DNA?" I asked, keeping the question as innocent as possible while my blood boiled and I plotted the man's death.

This anger. This *fury* is why the US government worried. I could go nuclear. In fact, I would go nuclear if some asshole like this went after my family.

"The same as any law enforcement agency. She threw a cup away. We took it. The sample is only enough to test, of course. But don't worry, unlike you, she's not interesting to us." He smiled like his words would bring me comfort.

And this is how hubris got you killed.

There were so many good things about being drugged and dragged here that I settled back to let him keep flapping his gums. They thought modern fae were weak, putting them squarely in a humanoid box. That was a good thing. They hadn't managed to recreate the monsters made from Coi's blood over two decades ago. That was another good thing.

Sephone was uninteresting to them. That was a very good thing. They'd stalked my family, which was a very bad thing. For them.

I'd learned they made a serum that could take me down. That was a good and a bad thing. The way my body worked, the poison would likely be ineffective if used again, but that didn't mean others couldn't be affected. Others like my children, parents, and possibly even Dani. Knowledge is power.

This particular group's knowledge was outdated, but surely they shared it with other fringe groups, which meant the fae were doing an excellent job of keeping their strengthening powers a secret. That was another good thing.

But what if they shared Godlantium with others? What if, as humans do, they kept innovating? We were in danger, but at least I knew that now. Knowledge is protection and power.

As pissed off as Aedan would be about this, it was a successful little side trip I hadn't known I needed to take. And on top of it all, I'd destroyed what I could of their research. It was a win-win all around.

“Back to your husband,” he droned on, making me smile a little to look impressed. “The Godlantium comes from his blood. We’ve heard the rumors. Heard the stories. Aedan Hennessey is a fae-vampire hybrid created by the Gods. His DNA is unlike any we’ve ever seen. Vampires, by nature, are simply altered humans. Take away the vampirism, and their genome is human. Mr. Hennessey started as a fae. Old fae. He was never a standard vampire because his DNA was altered at a most foundational level. He’s always been something more.

“We may not’ve replicated the prototype, but we did make Godlantium. His blood is the basis, though, and we have a very short supply, hence the second reason you’re here. The one thing we know for sure is how protective he is of you. He’ll come, and then we’ll have you both. That will change everything,” he finished, clasping his hands in front of him as he waited.

And I was speechless.

All in all, it wasn’t a *terrible* plan. Not taking into account that Coi would rip them to shreds. As I’d grown, so had he. The metal on my wrists was nothing. Maybe it would hold a witch. Maybe a weaker fae, but not Coi. Not me.

I had to escape before he found me, killed these people, and ripped apart their Fischer-Price lab set. I mean, the last part was okay by me, but it would be hard to cover up so many deaths. There were a lot of people in the building, some of whom might be innocent.

I reached out with my senses one more time, looking for stray building blocks of the universe that didn’t belong, and destroyed them with a thought. I couldn’t sense any caged beings, but I wanted to make sure before I escaped.

“As enlightening as this conversation is, I have to pee and am quite starved,” I added.

He sighed, showing his irritation that I wasn’t as impressed as he’d hoped. Maybe he wanted tears and begging but wouldn’t get that from me. I’d heard enough, though. “Take our guest to her room,” he said.

Four men stepped from corners I hadn’t known they’d hidden in. Gas seeped into the box around me, and I caught a hint of Coi’s smell beneath the scent of chemicals. How? How could his blood affect me when I sometimes

drank it? How?

But it did. I tried to sift away, but I couldn't. Nothing happened when I focused on my Irish home or any other. My head dropped, and I felt my strength leave, realizing my situation might be more complicated than I thought. My vision dimmed, and awareness narrowed until I only knew that I smelled blood, honey, and fall leaves until I knew nothing.



## *Chapter 27*

### *Coimeadai*

For a moment, I felt her, and that feeling pulled my head to the south as if on a tether. But the feel was gone as fast as it came, replaced by gauze and only the faint knowledge that Lara was alive. I felt the veins pop on my forehead, and my eyes bleed impossibly light. My fangs lengthened to their entirety, and the room went still as the barometric pressure dropped as it will before a storm.

Oh, and it would storm.

This desire to rend my wife's enemies would break over her foes like a tsunami, ruining all in its path.

Seal glanced at me, giving me a silent command to control myself, but I didn't think that was possible. My growl echoed through the throne room, making hairs rise and primal instincts scream. They may be kings, but I was the apex predator, and they knew it.

The males at my daughter's side stepped toward her, not away. Seeing the movement, my reticulated gaze turned to them, venomous and ready to strike.

"Daddy?" she said, her sweet scent turning sour with fear. "Daddy, stop," she demanded, stepping forward and away from the boys. "This isn't helping."

And just like that, the growl stopped, and my fangs retracted. "You will not tell me when enough is enough, Princess. You may be my world, but your mother is my life. Careful," I warned, but the wildness receded with her warning, and the storm calmed a degree, if just one.

Papers I hadn't known were swirling settled, and the temperature in the room rose a few degrees. My mother-in-law rose to her feet, her gaze wary and sharp. My family had no occasion to see the stretch of my power as our life was mostly peaceful, and they forget. Everyone forgets.

They forget I am the born son of one Goddess and the mate of another. They forget I was the most powerful Fae ever made before my DNA was twisted. After the Twist?

Well, I was more.

“Let today be a reminder,” I snarled, giving the fae queen and kings my back as I stormed away.

Once upon a time, a different fae queen threw the lifeless body of my first wife and unborn child at my feet.

Once upon a time, I destroyed that empire, almost eradicating the Fae race in my anger, for they’d tortured and abused me. Raped me. Chained me. Changed me. That change had made something the world had never seen, and I almost destroyed it because they’d taken my family.

Now?

Oh, now it would be so much worse because I was so much worse.

I did not pity whoever held my wife now. They would die. They would all die. How dare they take her from me?

“Coi. Stop.” My mother’s whisper and sad gaze brought my eyes to her as I flew across the pavers toward the Inn to regroup. “We’ll find her.” Her hand touched my arm, quenching my anger from molten metal to a honed blade.”

“And I will burn the world to ensure it,” I replied, sifting away. Let them hunt their way. I would hunt mine.

Jeremy startled when I entered his rooms at The Warehouse. “Someone has Lara. I need to know who.”

“On it, Dad.” He was on his feet in moments, no questions asked. I followed him to the office, where his fingers flew over the keyboard on a sleek, state-of-the-art machine.

His eyes watched multiple monitors, scanning information as it scrolled across their screens. “This may take a minute,” he said, never looking my way.

I poured myself a drink, sitting in a deep leather chair. Jeremy was incredibly good with computers and the internet, and there was nothing he couldn’t find. He had hacked into so many systems as a teenager that the government tried to recruit him; only his parents and I had kept him free of their clutches.

Knowing what I know now about their long-range plans, they had likely wanted an insider from our family as well, and I was more grateful than ever

that we'd kept him free of it.

"I'm following a trail," he commented, not to me, more to himself. "It's deep."

I had every faith and confidence in him. Lara had saved his life as a child, and they had bonded as close as any parent-child might. He loved her.

"She'll be fine, Dad," he added, not taking his eyes off the screens. "She's a badass."

"She should not have to be," I sighed, rubbing a hand down my face. I was tired, weary more like, but sleep would not come until my wife was by my side.

"You're right. She shouldn't, but she is. We'll get her back if she doesn't save herself first. Not much can hold her." His head jerked vampire-fast between screens and words as his fingers typed far faster than any robot could. It was eery and unsettling to see.

"That is what worries me. Nothing should be capable of holding her. Why hasn't she simply sifted back to us?" I admitted, finally sharing my worry because Jeremy was as much a son to me as Sephone was a daughter.

"Then there's a reason she's staying. We'll figure it out, Dad. Don't worry." His breath hitched, and his fingers sped up until I could not see their movements.

"All I do is worry," I mumbled, knowing he would hear anyway.

"Gotcha!" he said, slinging himself backward and turning to face me. "Deep, deep on the dark web, there is mention of a "corporation acquiring an asset."

My eyes bled a shade lighter, and I felt my fangs itch in their desire to draw blood. I no longer fed from anyone but my wife, but I made exceptions for whoever harmed her. They would die, same as all the others.

He returned to the computer, his head moving like a snake's when it sights prey. "Testing is so far inconclusive," he continued. "Godlantium worked."

"That's what pops. It's all encrypted, but they didn't try to bury that as deep. I'll work on the rest of it." Attention riveted to his screens, he hummed as he worked.

"Can you trace the IP address?" I asked, finishing my whiskey in one sip.

“Of course I can. I’ll need a few minutes. I can text or call when I get it.” He did not stop working to answer, but I knew when I was dismissed.

“Thank you,” I said as I set the glass on the bar.

“Anything for either of you, always,” he responded as I sifted away.

The throne room was empty save for my mother and Airmed, who had their heads together over a map.

“The Huntsmen are in the New World and being pulled south,” Mother said without looking from the map.

“South where?” I asked, remembering the way my head turned for one brief moment.

“South in the New World,” she answered, making me smile at her delineation.

“We don’t have many travel Ways in the Southern Hemisphere, but Dani sifted us to the US briefly, which was not far south enough.

“How could they travel so fast?” I asked. “Are they using magic? Possibly opening portals?”

“Possibly,” Airmed answered. “Maybe they have a private jet. They may not be on the ground yet. All I know is Seal’s pull is far, far South. Ravena’s boy and another strong Huntsman are with him, and they all agree.

I nodded. “Jeremy has found information on the dark web pointing to an asset acquisition, testing, and something called Godlantium. I believe they are speaking about Lara. He is chasing the IP address and will let me know.”

My mother-in-law growled, and I wanted to join her in the sentiment.

“We’ll find her,” Mother said, placing her hand on my arm.

“Oh, I know. We will most assuredly find her and make them pay.” My fangs lengthened at the prospect and what semblance of control I held to fled.

## *Chapter 28*

I woke slowly, my head throbbing as I struggled to sit. I lay in a bed, on top of the covers, cringing at the thought that someone put me there. I hated it. Hated being touched like that. It was intimate and personal to place someone on a bed, especially when unconscious. Even though I was untouched, I was still very much offended.

The room I opened my eyes to was clean and devoid of personality. No windows looked to the exterior, so I had no reference to where I might be. The bracelets still decorated my wrists, and I tried to pull them off. Tried to sift away. Tried to do anything other than get angrier.

The last time I woke up from the Godlantium, it had taken a bit for my power to return, so maybe all I needed was patience. I hated how the drug made me feel and knew in my bones that more was involved than Coi's blood. However, he had the blood of a Goddess in his veins, two actually, and who can say how that could be twisted.

My headache eased, and I took a second to map the room. An open door led to a tiled floor and what I assumed was a bathroom. Another open door showcased clothing that appeared to be my size. The number of clothes revealed that they never intended to let me go.

I couldn't see cameras but could feel them in my soul. The room smelled like disuse and loneliness. Those things would not be my life. I'd see to that. Power trickled through the bracelets, but not enough to help. Human slow, I made my way to the bathroom, shutting the door behind me.

I couldn't see or feel cameras and felt a little better about drinking my fill from the faucet before emptying my bladder. The shower was large enough to be inviting, and I decided to take advantage.

I turned the water on hotter than Georgia asphalt hot and let steam blur the room's corners before going to the closet and grabbing a pair of jeans with the tags still on and a tee shirt. Let them think I would comply, but what I needed was out of that dress and into something comfortable. Embodying Grace Kelly couldn't help me now.

The door had a lock, so I turned it and stepped into the shower, letting the hot water soothe me. I washed everything quickly, feeling power trickle in despite the metal on my wrists.

How could we not have known about something like this? Dani was The Great Goddess of the Universe and The Maker of All Things, how had she missed a substance that would disable her? I didn't know, and it bothered me.

I rubbed soap on my wrists and tried to wiggle them off, but they were too tight. I sighed, frustrated, and continued my shower until the only thing left to do was get out. I toweled off, dressed, and ran my fingers through my hair before calling it done and exiting the room.

A tray of food waited on the dresser, but I worried it was laced with more drugs and ignored it. Pacing the room once before lying on the bed, where my eyes drifted shut almost immediately.

My eyes opened faster this time, but the disorientation was no better because I wasn't where I'd fallen asleep.

"There's our newest kin," the voice was so gravelly as to be hard to understand. "We were wondering when you'd find us. Danue keeps you away." My head slow-turned toward the sound to find something incomprehensible. The power levels in the room were enough to crush me had I not had magic to hold myself up.

A pile of gray stone that I realized was flesh sat on yet another pile of gray stone so that it looked like one thing. Its, or his, eyes popped open, redder than the fires of hell, and I stopped breathing. Two sets of horns graced the sides of his head, the second pair more prominent than the first. They were gray like his exterior, the only color being his eyes. Two smaller horns reminiscent of a traditional Halloween devil's costume curved from his forehead, only this was no holiday.

"You've scared the girl, Tartarus," my head craned toward the words to find a withered old man sitting on the same colorless rocks. He had a giant hourglass around his neck like some musician's fashion statement, and I wondered for the second time what the fuck?

"Where am I?" I asked, pulling myself to my feet before I noticed that I wasn't quite right. It was like a part of me had sifted here but left another part behind. I wasn't precisely corporeal, more not there than there. It was

disconcerting.

My magic thrummed and pulsed around me, pulling tight into a shield. My senses weren't as sharp as they should've been, but the smell of hot metals, sulfur, and steam registered well enough.

"It speaks." My eyes were drawn to something in the corner, a thing there yet not. It was a discordant mass, moving in all directions so that it held no shape or identifying features. "I did not think it would have the intelligence to speak in our presence." The voice was decidedly male, as was the attitude, making me stand straighter and pull my power tighter.

"Hush, Son. Don't be rude to our guest. She is still forming into something," the old man said, scowling at a point deep within the heap of particles that was the voice.

"Do You Need Another Mate?" the rocks boomed as if unable to modulate his tone.

"Uh, no. Thanks. One is quite enough. What's going on, why am I here?" I looked at my wrists, where the shadow of the bracelets remained, confusing me. I wore the same clothes I'd gone to sleep in and decided I was in a fever dream. Too much had happened for it not to be.

"It's no dream," the void grumbled. "You are here and there." The huff of his words was unmistakable, and I felt his disdain to my toes. "This was a mistake, Father," he said, and I felt his attention turn to the old man.

"Silence, Chaos," he said, turning to me. "I am Chronos," he added. "Tartarus." He pointed to the not-so-humanoid rock pile. "We brought you because you're in a situation. A situation that cannot stand."

I nodded, knowing what he meant, partially anyway.

"Let me start from the beginning," he sighed. "Make yourself comfortable."

A rock appeared behind me at the perfect height of my knees, and keeping my eyes on the creatures in front of me, I sat since I was in no position to argue.

"Before Danue was Dani, she was Gaia; before that, she was the stars. Even before that, she was the essence that made the universe. She was atoms, neutrons, and particles. She just Was. She floated until the concept of time was created, and I was born. Together, we created Chaos, and all things have

grown from the two of us.

“She may have created me, but I was the father of her first child and not a child to her myself. We made many creations after that. Once the souls came, We made Tartarus to deal with them, and so on and so on.” He paused, meeting my eyes.

And I knew where I was. These were the Primordials that Dani had threatened, begged, and cautioned never to get the attention of, and here I was, at the center of it. She considered these things a great danger to me, but I didn’t feel endangered. This was her family. Her original family. Still, the power levels in the room were uncharted, so there was that. I held my breath as he continued.

“The thing you know as Dani went from something incomprehensible, enigmatic, and omnipotent to what she is now, a,” he paused, looking for the right word. “Person,” he sneered. “She has limitless power and does not use it. She makes children with creatures below her. She casts small nets on smaller ponds when she could pull the strings of the universe and make it dance to her will.” He stopped, staring at me for a full minute before continuing as he rubbed a hand down his face in a very human gesture. “She’s tired.”

“Then there’s you. You,” Tartarus ground out.

“You are a primordial; act like it,” the vortex growled. “Take her place. The Universe Primordial is ineffective. It needs replaced.”

“Don’t talk about your mother that way,” Chronos threatened, giving his attention to the mass in the corner before sighing like an annoyed parent, a sound I recognized well.

“You are the enigma. You were created to replace her, yet you started as a human and are rising in opposition to her descent. You must understand what you are and are not. You are limitless in that you decide the limits.”

“You are not Fae,” Chaos scoffed, spitting on the floor as the center vortex of his mass changed directions, causing my ears to pop.

“You are not human,” Tartarus added.

“You are The New Universe, the New Particles, the New Creator,” Chronos picked up the thread.

“There is stasis in the absence of creation. A stasis that will not stand



static for long. Vacuums are abhorred, and something will fill it. Even I cannot stand for that,” Choas said, their words one coherent message.

“You can only be what you allow yourself to be. In all things. Mother has told you what you are, but perhaps not as succinctly as she should. She has not explained your role.

“Do not allow the scourage of humanity to know our secrets. They grow too powerful as it is. They are too numerous to ascend to levels that would make them happy, for it will accelerate the end of their plane,” he added, and I could feel his glare ignite my skin.

“You are The Creator. You are what you make yourself. Don’t be a puppet,” Chronos finished.

“Dani said I have time to grow. I’m not ready,” I whispered, wind whipping my hair so it lashed my cheeks.

“You have Time,” Chronos answered. A millennia or so, maybe more, but not the countless, endless eons we’ve had. Time waits for no one; it always moves forward.”

I watched the sand fall from the top of the hourglass, one grain at a time. Still, more sand was on the bottom than the top, and I understood what that meant. I lowered my eyes, letting one tear fall. It hit the ground with a thunk, and I was surprised to see a glittering diamond where saltwater should be.

“It is now how it will be. As Below, so Above,” Tartarus soothed. At least, I thought that was his intention since his voice was softer than I’d heard.

I was thinking about Coi and losing him to the stars, and as these Gods seemed to read my thoughts, I hoped that’s what the rock pile meant. I knew Coi’s worries, and he wasn’t wrong to have them. But there was time. Time to figure it out and hope that the God before me was telling the truth. As Above, So Below. As Below, so Above. I would take Coi with me because we wouldn’t survive apart. We could be stars together.

I nodded in understanding. I’d known. Dani told me where my future lay from the beginning, and the Primordials weren’t changing anything or moving up a timeline. It just...it was hard to hear because it was true that I wasn’t ready. Would I be in a thousand years? Two thousand? Who’s to say.

“You are what you wish to be. Do Not Forget,” Tartarus grunted as all

three watched me silently until I disappeared into nothing.

## Chapter 29

### *Coimeadai*

Australia had no travel ways, and the ones we used to travel through South America became fewer and fewer. We were wasting time. However, we managed to rule out many locations. Even in the southernmost part of South America, the Huntsmen continued to point deeper into the Pacific Ocean.

Still, I seethed. “I will sift with a Hunstman,” I argued, unwilling and unable to be without my wife for another moment.

“We have a treaty with the Australians,” Airmed countered.

“You have a treaty with the Australians. I do not.” I vibrated on a dangerous level, nearly coming apart where I was fused together.

“They have detection technology, Aedan,” she started, and my growl deepened so that her mates slid in front of her as a unit.

They had reason to fear me because the face I showed the world was not my true face. I cared nothing for treaties, niceties, or politics. I would rip through it all to get to my wife. White-blue flames licked across my hands, traveling up my arms because I was The Flame Keeper for a reason. Fire is my oldest magic.

In another lifetime, my fae magic had been taken. Stolen. Rendered inoperable by the twisted curse Lara’s grandmother forced upon me. My wife had given it all back. And more. If they thought for a second I cared about anything other than getting her back, they could fuck right off. I cared nothing for anyone but her.

“Son.” My Mother walked to me, placing a tiny hand on flames rising from my arm, and the flames extinguished. However, the room remained silent as I fought to breathe through my desire to put an end to anyone who stayed my hand. But my wife would be unhappy to come home and find her parents dead.

The silence continued. It was not often that I showed such power, and few knew I had full use of my fae magic. My in-laws forget or choose not to acknowledge such things. They think of me as a son and don’t remember I am millennia older. In the ways of fae, they are still very young. I am not and

care nothing for stepping on governmental toes.

Those loose constructs of authority weren't around when I was born, and they will cease to exist long before I am gone. They meant nothing.

"What about New Zealand," Airmed asked, turning to the map spread between us on a table. "Its further south. We have one Way in, and they don't have an express moratorium on sifting.

"Excellent idea," my mother said. "If she's there, we'll know, but if she's just north in Australia, we should also know."

"Take Seal and meet us at the Way. You'll get there well ahead of us and should have made a determination before we arrive. We'll regroup."

I took Seal by the elbow and sifted without acknowledging their plan. Our feet touched down in Bluff, near one of my smaller properties, and I let go of Seal's arm.

Bluff was a seaport town with a population of less than two thousand. I'd once used this place as a rustic getaway from vampire politics, but those days were gone. Lara made a Way when we'd briefly visited once. Quaint and cozy, the place was little more than a cottage I mostly forgot about until I needed to remember.

"We want her back, too," Seal said, pushing past me to open the cottage door. "You're not the only one who loves her," he finished, moving to the brazier to light the dry kindling to chase away the damp chill.

I sighed. "What if it was your wife?" I challenged, already knowing the answer, before he turned haunted eyes to mine.

Running from an attack orchestrated by her mother, Airmed had fallen through a forgotten Way and had been trapped in the New World for weeks. Before the Ways were repaired and traveled, most fae hadn't known of their existence, and the New World and Old remained separated. Lara had changed that, too.

She will not admit it, but she has changed many things in her short life, likely not even understanding her impact.

Most gave up on Airmed ever returning or believed she died in the attack. But Seal almost died Hunting her, as his magic demands.

Unable to take it anymore, he tried to kill himself by jumping off the cliff where she had last been seen. That's not the story he tells, oh no. But it is the

story Airmed's other mates repeat on nights when too much alcohol loosens their tongues.

That is the curse of a Huntsman.

They cannot stop until they find their prey or die.

"You're right," he acknowledged. "I would destroy it all. I almost did." His eyes went distant as if those memories were not so far away, and I knew he understood.

We might be alpha assholes, as Lara says. The lot of us. We might be overbearing and protective on the best days, but we loved our women, and there was nothing we would not do for them.

I nodded and grasped his forearm in the old way as understanding settled between us. "Then let us focus."

Seal closed his eyes, his body swinging to the right. "She is very close. What is south of this point?" he asked.

"Hmmm," I paused. "To the southeast is Ruapuke Island, and the southwest is Stewart Island. Ruapuke is uninhabited, whereas Stewart has a thriving tourist industry and many places to hide someone."

"That's where she is," he said, his body sagging with relief as he turned toward the desolate Ruapuke. His quarry might not be in front of us, but the answer eased the chokehold of the magic driving him.

"There's nothing there but penguins and rocks. Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes. It clicked. Lara is there."

The door to the cottage opened, and the rest of our group trailed in.

"Well?" Airmed demanded.

"She's on Ruapuke Island," I answered.

"Then let's get a boat. Sifting in will take too many trips, and we have no idea what awaits us there," she said, taking over and showing why she was Queen of the Fae.

"The island is supposed to be uninhabited," I started. "The seas around it are barely navigable, and they would spot us and possibly hurt Lara before we can extract her," I finished, the hair on my arms standing at the thought.

The room warmed by degrees as the fire burned, scenting the air with woodsmoke and disuse. But the smell lessened the stronger scent of the sea, and once we rescued my wife, she would have a warm place to return to and

recoup if needed.

“I will go as a bird and recon. It’s safer for everyone, especially Lara.” And where my dainty mother, who is also The Great Goddess of The Universe and The Maker of All Things once stood, an oversized Scarlett Heron fluttered, her violet, all-seeing eyes eerie on a feathered face.

This family was nothing if not powerful.

With a squawk, she flew away.

“Whiskey?” I offered, going to the wet bar where a selection of old, single malt choices awaited. I poured glasses and passed them around.

I eyed the raven-haired boy who dared step close to my daughter as he sipped his whiskey. I should kill him now. The need to end him for the possessive way he looked at my child was overwhelming. How dare he insinuate that my daughter needed protecting from me? I would never touch a hair on her head. Still, he reminded me of Ravena, who was like an aunt to Lara and a sister to Airmed, so I held my blade. For now. Not forever.

He met my eyes and held them over the rim of his glass, and my estimation of the boy increased by one point, but just the one. He had strong magic; I could feel it simmering under his skin like slow-boiled tea. Still, he looked away first, and I smirked because he was brave but not stupid. My impression of the boy inched a tad higher.

After what seemed like an eternity but was only a short time, my mother returned, shifting effortlessly into her humanoid form. “The island is deserted. There’s nothing but rocks, birds, and marshland. The fields are overgrown, the birds fat, and the bones dusty,” she started, holding her hand up when I started to protest.

“But upon deeper investigation, there’s evidence of an underground compound. There’s a hidden ventilation system and a rickety dock on the island's far side that’s not quite rickety enough. There’s a path to shockingly even more rocks that isn’t overused but used enough to indicate the occupants must stay for extended periods. Lots of security thingys and whatnots, but it looks easy enough to bypass with enough muscle. I commandeered a boat.” She smirked as the silence dragged on a beat longer than was polite.

Seal started toward the door, and Ravena’s boy followed along with the

others while I brought up the rear.

“We need a plan,” Airmed said as the boat launched. “We can’t just bang on the door or knock it down.”

“Whyever not?” Seal asked, crossing his arms and staring at the horizon.

“We need a little time,” the boy said. I should have learned his name, but that suggested he would survive this trip.

“I have birds sitting on the cameras that monitor the dock. That’s all the time we should spare,” Mother added.

“Then we go in hard with the element of surprise,” I suggested because that was the only plan I would get on board with.

## *Chapter 30*

I awoke with a start, the scent of burnt umber and ozone stinging my nose and eyes. My wrists ached from the bracelets. I could chalk it all up to a dream, but I could only pretend so much ignorance. The Primordials were real, and they were right.

The atmosphere was charged and ready to ignite. Something was coming; I could feel it. The air had weight to it that anticipation brings, and I wondered what changed. It's true that I was what I allowed myself to be, and I wouldn't be a prisoner anymore, but this heaviness was more than that.

Sitting up, I looked at the bands of metal on my arms and willed them gone. They dissipated like powder in a strong wind, leaving no trace that they'd been there. I walked to the door twisting the knob and demanding it open, and it did. I wasn't surprised, not really. I'd known what I was.

Still, I'd let others take advantage of me so I could cling to something that was always an illusion. An intricate glamour. A farce meant to protect me from my grandmother. Maybe I'd had zero point something human DNA, but that gene died during yet another time someone had tried to control me. And I agreed with the Primordials that it had to end.

I walked down the hall, feeling the urge to sift away and ignoring it. These people had research they shouldn't. They'd taken things that didn't belong to them. I passed a wide-eyed staffer, and it was comical how fast he flung his papers in the air and took off running, his scream something from a horror movie. The papers fluttered to the ground one at a time like falling snowflakes not hurried by the wind.

The scream elicited running footsteps, and a small army of men stood to block my way, guns raised. They froze with a wave of my hand, and I walked through them like so many little GI Joe figurines.

I passed a closed door, then another. Stretching my senses, I found a shifter female and a dhampir male. The product of a turned vampire and human mating, dhampirs were rare, and I can't believe I didn't feel these people earlier. Somehow, the floor was warded and warded well. With a flick



of my wrist, I tore it down.

After reaching out with my senses with the ward down, I found a few more creatures hidden away in the bowels of the place, the scent of desperation and fear followed them into the hall ahead of me when their doors flew open, and I encouraged them to come with promises and soft words. I threw a bubble of protection around them before we climbed the stairs and fell into the lab as one.

I checked one more time, ripping down wards and obliterating every biological sample, shred of paper, and electronic trace with a thought. I was who I wanted to be, and I wanted to be the thing to destroy this place and protect others.

There was a part of me that hated what came next because how could I let these people continue taking others against their will? And they would. Who knows what those kept here had suffered for their crime of being superhuman? I couldn't let that happen again. Maybe some of the humans were innocent, and maybe not, but innocence doesn't participate. Innocence doesn't exchange currency for the suffering of others. Hence, no innocents were working in the lab.

Their desire to level the playing field made them a danger, and what they called equality, ingenuity, and research, my people called torture and enslavement. As the apex supernaturals in this world, Coi and I had turned a blind eye to it.

No more.

At that moment, I knew what I wanted to be. I didn't want to poke my head in the sand and ignore the suffering of my kind anymore. I didn't want to continue to overlook the injustices done to the lab's supernatural survivors. I wouldn't just destroy the research. I'd destroy anyone who thought it was okay to subjugate my kind for their gain.

And what did that make me?

Maybe it made me a monster, but maybe it made me a savior. It was about perspective and choices. And I came back to that.

Life choices.

But now I also understand that sometimes there is no choice.

I paused for a minute, letting the screams and cries around me dim,

fading to a surreal silence as I saw the path forward clearly before me. Everything slowed until the atoms of every molecule constructing each object, animate or otherwise, paused where they moved in the room. I saw the beauty in the creation of those things to a particulate level. But there is sometimes horror in beauty.

With a whoosh, it moved in real-time again. The screams, the smoke, and the desperate need to flee all tinted the air. George ran toward me, arms outstretched, carrying a wand with a dart on the end of it.

Not again, George. Never again.

I blinked, gripped the souls I'd released from the cages, and reorganized our genetic matter on the surface of a tiny island, leaving behind those other particles, atoms, positrons, and neutrons changed to rock.

Stunned, I looked at the outcroppings of island rocks and the violent splash of waves against them. The roaring sound of an engine fighting the waves hit me as the cacophony of bird cries and wild surf overwhelmed my senses when compared to the quiet sterility of the lab.

Once again, time stopped. My hair blew against my face as the scent of a foreign sea hit my hindbrain, relaxing me like a kitten held by the scruff. And I smiled because it was what it was. I was what I was, and acceptance is the first step forward. My body slowed as I took it all in, straddling one world and the next, one body and the other. At that moment, I saw everything. And I understood.

Time resumed, and surprised shouts and the running of feet pulled me to the present. "Lara!" my dad shouted, sweeping me into his arms.

"Daddy!" I smiled into his handsome face. "You found me."

"Always, Princess. Always."

"I killed them all," I admitted, my voice smaller than intended.

"Good," he said with a nod, releasing me.

"Anamcara!" Coi shouted before sprinting vampire-fast to my side.

"He's been unbearable," Seal admitted in the last alone moment we shared.

"I've no doubt," I sighed, preparing to be swept into the storm that was Coi.

Strong arms banded my ribs until I couldn't breathe. His nose met the

hollow of my throat, inhaling me like I was the oxygen he needed to survive, and the low growl that came from his throat was chilling. “Is liomsa thú,” he snarled.

“I know, babe. I know,” I sighed as his arms loosened.

“I am no babe. Who are your friends, and where are your enemies?” he demanded, not stepping from my side.

“My enemies are gone, and these friends, I do not yet know,” I stepped back, surveying the crowd stuffed onto the island’s small surface.

“Kian!” I smiled, reaching to hug Ravena’s son. “Thank you for helping.” I held onto my giant nephew, smiling as his arms wrapped around my back.

Coi growled, crowding into me as Kian shook his head with a rueful smile, making me wonder what happened between them. Sometimes Coi could be an ass. Maybe more often than sometimes.

“Anytime, Aunty Lara,” he said, his bright white smile lighting up his handsome face as he stepped away, bowed to me, and smirked at my husband. Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no. I knew those looks.

Coi’s growl deepened, and my mom laughed so hard I thought she’d probably peed a little. Me too, to be honest.

“You’ve got hard times ahead, darling one,” Mom said when she pulled me into a hug to match Coi’s. “We’re very glad you’re safe.”

“Very glad, indeed,” Dani said, her narrowed eyes taking in my appearance while her keen nose scented the air, picking up what my husband missed. She nodded once, looking resigned.

“Let’s get them out of here. I don’t know who they are or what they’ve been through, but they were prisoners in the lab. I’m sure they have needs to be met.

“The boat is small. Lara and I can sift over,” Coi offered.

“I need a moment with my daughter-in-law,” Dani said, eyeing me carefully. “Take them and go.”

Everyone stopped talking. Even the huddled supernaturals stopped whimpering to look between the Goddess and me. I nodded in understanding because we did need to talk.

“Mother. I,” Coi started.

“No, Coimeadai. Not this time,” she said, seeing the argument coming but never taking her eyes off me.

Coi looked between us before grabbing Kian and sifting away.

“Coi will be fine. Kian, too,” Mom said. “He likes Sephone. All those boys do, and Aedan is on to them,” she finished with a shark-toothed smile, and her earlier words made more sense. Because oh my...My-oh-my. Seemed I missed a few things.

The others loaded the survivors onto the boat while explaining who we were. Maybe it made them feel better, maybe not, but they boarded quietly under the assurance that we were there to help and that they were free.

“It’s my fault,” Dani started when the boat’s engine whined further away.

“Maybe some of it,” I agreed because she wasn’t wrong. I’d never asked to be what I was. Never asked for the power of the universe or anything at all, really. I’d not have chosen to be a Goddess. I’d wanted a quiet life as a nurse, riding horses and living on my farm. I’d have chosen to move to the beach and retire to a hammock by the sea one day.

But we have some choices, and I wouldn’t change meeting Coi. Wouldn’t change what happened afterward. Maybe some things I’d rewrite if I could, but that’s the story of life. Once it’s on paper, we have to follow through with the tale. We make decisions the best we can with the information we have at the moment, and fear has no place in that.

Life happens on a continuum and not in a vacuum. I know that, the same as I know where my future lies. It would be fine. I understand that now.

“You met them,” she stated. “I can smell them on you.”

“I did.”

She sighed, leaning against the rock that had once been stairs to a place that no longer existed. “I didn’t want it to be like this. I need to do more to give you time.”

I didn’t answer, watching as she thought things through. “It was selfish of me to leave them. Selfish to want something more. I abandoned my duties. I’m sure you heard their arguments, and they’re not wrong. I’ll do better.”

“Selfishness is the hallmark of sentient creatures, Dani. There’s nothing wrong with a little bit of selfishness. And if you think your original family isn’t being selfish, you’re wrong.

“There’s probably nothing more selfish than Chaos and his need to get you back in his life. I’d have made the same choice you did, and I will when it’s my time.” And I would. Again and again, I would choose life over the needs of the universe, even if the universe was my family. Dani had wanted to live. “The world moves on,” I added, knowing it was true.

“Does it?” she asked.

“Yeah. It does. What you did. What you all did was plant the seeds of life and watch them grow. They’re growing. I don’t see the harm in not being a helicopter parent. It’s what free will and humanity is all about. There’s got to be a way to balance your needs versus theirs. I know there is because I intend to find it, too.”

“Then I must start. Max will have some time with his father when he is a bit older, and I will see to the Primordials. It’s only fair to try and find this balance and not leave it to you. Your time will still come, but let’s hold it off as long as possible so you can do it right. I see a new fire in your eyes, and I want you to be able to follow that path. Your people need you on a level that mine never did.”

“That’s not true at all, Dani. We all need you,” I argued.

“Not the way your people as a whole need you. The Fae, the weres, the witches, the vampires. They need a champion. Humanity has many, and the supernatural so few. Follow this new path, and I’ll forge a balance for you later. I need to do something to mitigate what I’ve done. What I made.” Her smile was small, but it crinkled the corners of her eyes.

“You didn’t make a mistake,” I said, taking her tiny hands in mine. “I’m not a mistake. And I’m happy. I swear it.”

“I know, my child. I know. You are my greatest creation, and only a small-minded pile of rocks might consider you a mistake.” She winked at me, flipping a snarky bird at the heavens.

I laughed until my sides hurt.

“Fly with me?” Her face beamed with excitement while my head tilted in confusion. “You are what you want to be. Remember that.”

Then the Scarlet Heron she loved was before me, watching with pale lavender eyes. Dani was a tiny woman, and the bird was about the same height as her humanoid form. Long, curled red feathers rested on the ground

as she waited for me to decide who I wanted to be.

When Grania and I tested the limits of my powers all those years ago, she'd told me I was strong enough to take any shape I wanted. It was an old Fae power that had died off as the magic weakened, but I knew there were Fae who could shapeshift now. They didn't have the animal's soul like a true Were but could take the form. Some could take multiple forms, and I wondered who I wanted to be.

I used to take a lot of naps back then because I didn't understand, and meditating on being a tree made me sleepy. Or maybe I hadn't been ready for this change. If there'd been one last thread to humanity in me that did not exist, I'd cut it today when I destroyed a lab full of humans. It was like being reborn yet again, and as I'd already decided to embrace what I was, I chose.

And then I was a bird.

"You're beautiful," Dani said in my mind. "It's fitting that you'd choose a Royal Tern."

"I didn't choose the species," I squawked, thinking the words to her and feeling the shape of my body as it shifted on clawed feet.

"A part of you chose," she cawed, flapping her wings and resettling to the ground. Your feathers are pure white, though, and your crest tall, like a crown. You should see yourself. You are a true queen, my daughter. Now, let's fly."

And so we did.

It took a minute to learn. I didn't have the soul of the bird or the knowledge of one, but I'd flown in enough gull minds that I figured it out pretty fast. We rode the wind's currents together, dancing with the wind in a new way. Our cries echoed across the waters as we dipped and turned in the general direction of a much larger body of land.

I still didn't know where I was in the world, but The bond with Coi pulled me North and West. I felt his concern and confusion because he might feel my joy, but he'd have no context for the situation. I laughed, the noise harsh and shrill from my beak as I sped up, circling the boat as it docked.

Dani alighted gracefully on one piling and I on another, almost falling as I missed and readjusted. My wings flapped until I settled ungracefully, shaking my feathers as every occupant on the boat stared. I squawked at

them, tilting my head.

“Lara Liann Hennessey. Why are you a bird?” my dark-haired father scolded, hands on his hips. “Stop that right now.”

Coi pinched the bridge of his nose from the dock where he waited with Kian, then looked to the sky and said, “Really, Mother? Was this necessary?”

The Heron’s shoulders shook with laughter as if saying that, yes. Yes, it was necessary.

Kian tossed a rope to a male on the boat, and as they secured it, Dani flew off, and after hovering briefly in front of my husband, I followed.

## *Chapter 31*

### *Coimeadai*

My wife was a bird, I sighed, palming my face. I would ask how this happened, but I knew. Dani. It was always Dani. Just when I thought I had a handle on the enigma of power that was my wife, she changed the script.

She was glorious, though. Bright white feathers over long, curved wings cut through the air as she flew away from me and toward our house. But her eyes? Those startlingly green multifaceted gems had looked even sharper against the bright white feathers, and I knew I'd never forget that first sight of them pinned on me.

She was an incredible creature in any form she chose, and I wondered how many decades it would take me to learn this new power so we could fly together. Or run as beasts. Oh, the fun we could have in any form. A slow smile spread across my lips, and I forgot the boy I'd spent the last hour threatening.

Kian.

Kian, who had designs on my daughter. He and his two brothers. The women in my life would be the death of me, and it is a wonder my hair was not gray. One child was mated to a werewolf, three Fae males were chasing another, and my wife was currently a bird. Thank the Goddess for Jeremy and PJ.

I needed a drink.

A very strong drink.

Airmed's low, continuous chuckle broke my thoughts as she patted my shoulder and mirrored my stride. "Serves you right," she said. "Now you'll get the full experience."

"I do not need the full experience," I growled, hating that she did not fear me. None of these people feared me. I had failed somewhere along the line.

"Apparently, you do," she laughed once more before her tone turned serious. "We'll walk the Ways and deliver everyone where they need to be. It might take a while, but most were held in the compound for months and



desperately want to go home.”

“Thank you,” I said, stopping to face her.

“You’re welcome. It’ll be okay,” she added. “You know it will. Take care of my baby,” she said, hugging me, her small body belying the strength in her arms.

“I will. You know I will.”

Her eyes, lighter than her daughter’s, met mine and smiled as she nodded once and walked away.

Lara had stoked the fire and poured two tall glasses of single malt whiskey. She waited, sipping her drink and staring into the flames. Her sealike scent, stronger by her proximity to the coast, drowned the scent of sunshine that usually accompanied it. There was a wildness about her and a hint of ozone I had missed.

I took the other drink, angling my head to explore the depth of her eyes. “Are you alright?” I asked, letting the first sip of exquisite alcohol burn the stress away.

“I’m fine, Aedan,” she said, never meeting my gaze.

“Aedan is it now?” I asked, my Irish accent thickening with emotion while my eyes bled yellow. I could feel it along with the tips of my fangs as they elongated behind closed lips. Only my wife could do this to me. I had been in complete control before we met, but no longer.

“It’s just,” she paused, taking a deep breath and holding it before letting it out. “It’s just that I really am fine. Maybe I shouldn’t be.”

“Tell me.” I poured a second drink as the tale tumbled from her sweet lips. My ire grew as she stared into the flames while she spoke, never once meeting my eyes.

Kidnappers and Primordials. A toxin that could flatten a Goddess, and she was right. It did need to end. But my concern was less for the humans that would attempt a coup on the supernatural race as a whole and more on the Gods who wanted my wife in the stars with them.

It was inevitable, I knew. We all did, but Lara was yet a babe in the calendar of the universe, and I refused to let her go just yet. Still, this might be the one area in which I had zero expertise or power. None. My fangs grew longer as she finished, her story trailing to silence.

A clock ticked on the mantel above the roaring fire, and those two noises, married to the sound of distant birds crying, were the only sounds to break the silence.

“Say something,” she whispered.

Finally, she turned her eyes to me, emerald green to a yellow so pale it must look white. In our time together, I do not believe I had ever been more desperate than that moment.

She gasped, her hand flying to her mouth as her eyes roamed the sharp angles of my face, made sharper by firelight and shadows because I undoubtedly looked like a demon. I felt like one as I gripped her waist and dragged her to me. Delicate hands braced against my chest as she strained to pull away, fear overriding the knowledge that I would never, ever hurt her. She was my life, my heart, my grace.

But there is something primal about being gripped by a vampire in the throes of desperation and pulled toward his open maw, where the sharpest of fangs await. I loved my wife, but I hated her a little bit at that moment, too.

Why had my mother done this? Why had my mother made my perfect counterpart even as she conspired to take her from me, all in the name of retirement?

Not happening.

“Who do you belong to?” I growled into the hollow where neck meets shoulder.

“You, Coi. You,” she answered, her voice low and shaking. “Only you.” She trembled against me, and I didn’t care that I scared her. Sometimes, she needed a reminder of who the apex predator was in the room and where the danger lay. The correct answer was that it was always me.

I licked her neck, letting her feel the scrape of my fangs as their length grazed her skin, and I savored her taste. The tremble in her legs grew stronger, but underlying even that was the sweet scent of her arousal. Ah, yes, my wife was a dirty girl.

“How wet are your panties?” I purred, scraping a fang so it drew a line of blood I licked clean.

“Speak,” I demanded when she was silent.

“Very,” she answered, and I struck her jugular with surgical precision,

enjoying that first sip feeling as the richness of her blood hit my tongue and melted down my throat.

She screamed my name. My real one, as she came shuddering in my arms, reminding her for the first of many times that night to whom she belonged. I filled my belly to the point of gluttony, so full that blood leaked from my lips as I came too, filling my trousers like a teenage boy.

This is what we did to each other.

Always this.

And there was no circumstance under which I would let this go.

I ripped the pants from her body, pinning her to the wall as she struggled to find purchase when I thrust into her in one rough stroke. Her walls gripped me, making me groan and want to relent, but I would not. I could not afford to. My hips thrust at a speed no fae or vampire could match, and I fucked her to silence against the old plaster wall, the sound of her forced inhales music to my ears.

Her body jolted helplessly as her eyes rolled back, and I drew another scream from her as she clamped me hard enough with her inner muscles to pull my cock tight as I tried to withdraw before I came too quickly. And just like that, I came again, the strength of her holding me balls deep in her wet heat as she took what she wanted too.

I scooped her up, wrapping her legs around my waist as I stumbled with my pants around my ankles to the nearest bedroom, my cock still hard and buried inside of her.

“I can’t, Coi. No more,” she whimpered, barely able to raise her arms and clutch my neck.

“You can and you will. You will take what I give you.”

And she did.

Over and over she did.

## *Chapter 32*

He broke me. I was one hundred percent sure that this time, he'd broken me.

Groaning, I rolled to my side from where I'd slept spread eagle and thoroughly used. Everything hurt. There wasn't a spot on my skin that was not crusted in dried fluids or covered in bite marks. I needed a shower and the world's strongest coffee. And for once, I wasn't sure what I needed first. Never before had it been a question.

A mug of steaming coffee slipped into view on the bedside table where my eyes had fixed, glazed and staring at nothing. My throat was raw from screaming, and I couldn't believe the police hadn't shown up, or maybe they had. I wouldn't know.

Strong arms scooped me sideways, cradling me like a baby, and the hot mug came to my lips. Every muscle protested the movement.

"Drink," Coi said, making me smile as he held the cup to my lips like it contained precious, life-sustaining liquid, not black coffee.

I drank.

He made a purring sound of satisfaction, feeding me coffee until the cup was empty and my body less sore.

Then he used vampire magic and a fingernail to cut a line down his wrist, bringing it to my lips. "Drink more," he demanded.

I took his wrist, cradling it to my lips, and drank deeply, the rich taste of aged wine, love, and chocolate overrunning my senses.

We groaned together and had my vagina not been closed for maintenance, I'd have climbed him like a tree. Instead, I drank my fill, but probably not much, before pulling away and staring as the line on his wrist sealed, healing as soon as my needs were met.

Instantly, I felt better. The aching throb between my legs eased, and the soreness of my muscles disappeared. A full night's sleep would have accomplished the same results, but we'd only stopped torturing each other a few short hours ago.

We sighed together as I snuggled into his chest and finished my coffee.

“The bathroom is rudimentary, but the water runs hot,” he offered, snuggling me closer to his chiseled chest.

I sighed, then was almost airborne as he moved at vampire speed, only slowing when the shower was on and the water warming through old, metal pipes that popped and groaned as they heated.

Talk about the give and take of love.

And when two are truly one, love is wild, love is fierce. Love suffers no injustice, real or perceived.

Love is protective. Love is relentless.

Love endures. Love is reckless.

Like the ebb and swell of the tides, love persists.

Love is eternal.

Coi set me on my feet in the small space, not big enough for two. Instead, he rolled up his sleeves and washed me from outside the shower as he mumbled about contractors and renovations.

His hands soothed the last stiffness as they washed me clean, his lips occasionally finding my skin. Each caress of soap and cloth lingered lovingly, demanding nothing but giving everything.

His fingers untangled knots as they rubbed shampoo and conditioner left from some long cold flame, but I didn't care. It felt amazing, even if the scent was five decades too old. We'd shower properly when we got home, but in that moment, Coi needed to care for me more than I needed to be clean.

“Once you dry by the fire, we'll sift home, you will sit on my lap, and I will feed you. It's been a long week,” he ordered.

“It sure has, babe.” I agreed, booping his nose.

“I am no babe,” he chuckled, swiping soap from his face before turning me under the spray until the water ran clear of suds.

Wrapped in a fluffy towel and drying by the fire, I sipped hot coffee while Coi went through the house, tidying the place and preparing to lock up. I could see the mental notes accumulating as he made plans to modernize the quaint cottage by the sea.

“We should rent these smaller properties out. We would make a fortune,” he hypothesized more to himself than me.

“Do we need a fortune, my love?” I asked, eyeing him over the steaming

cup.

“No, but they just sit, and income is income,” he rebutted like a true one-percenter as he looked out the window into the street.

“Spoken like a true millionaire,” I laughed.

“Now, that’s insulting,” he huffed because he was way richer than that. I guess we both were.

“I mean, if you want to rent the properties, then do it. We can make them AirBnBs, so they’re more available or open them up to longer-term rental. You own so many places, it would take forever to stay at them all anyway.” I shrugged a shoulder, looking into the dying flames as my stomach growled.

“Jeremy has a list of our properties; I will have him devise a plan. Now, it is time to get you fed.”

“I agree,” I said as I wove myself some yoga pants so I didn’t sift home in a towel.

We were standing in our Irish kitchen a moment later, looking at a feast. My mom and dads were there, laughing and piling plates high as they talked quietly. “Shit, they’ve caught us,” she said, looking guilty and trying to hide her plate.

“I told you they’d be here soon,” Lann laughed, pulling my mother to the table and plopping her on his lap. “It’s like they knew Cook was setting the table.”

“It’s more like he knew they were coming. It’s creepy,” Laith added.

“If it helps, I brought a cake and several dozen cookies,” Mom said, shoving a forkful of something into her face.

My mom was a hell of a baker. Before she’d mated with my dads, she’d had a bakery in Talamh na Sithe. It had been destroyed and never reopened after the war with her mother. Still, she baked for the Inn and her spouses, but she baked more when worried, and I knew I worried her.

“Cake?” I asked hopefully. “What kind?”

“Your favorite,” she answered, making me groan.

“I’m going to gain ten pounds,” I groaned while Coi scoffed.

“You never gain an ounce,” he argued. “No cake until you eat your dinner.” He went to the counter, grabbed a plate, and filled it with my favorites with a soft smile on his lips.

“I’m sorry about the Bugatti,” I added, smiling when his face snapped to mine.

“Fuck the Bugatti. I will get another.” He turned back to the plate, adding another slice of rare beef.

“I’ll,” I said, stifling a chuckle.

“You will what, Liomsa?” he asked so earnestly that my mother laughed out loud, tilting her head back and making my fathers smile.

Coi growled, glaring at me as he went to the table, snagged a seat, and motioned for me to join him on his lap, not forgetting his demand.

Looking around the room, I may not have known exactly what day it was or what time. I might not know how many days I’d been gone or what had happened in my absence, but I knew what was important: these people. Yes, some were missing, but family is family, and I wouldn’t trade them for anything. At the same time, I missed Grania and Paul and knew that Aurora had problems that may seem insurmountable to her.

Sephone was at a crossroads, and PJ needed time to grow, but this? This was everything, and I’d miss it if I were gone. I might be a Goddess rising, but I was still just a woman, a mother, a wife, a daughter, and a friend. And I needed these people. So for now? For now, things were perfect.

Life choices.

Tomorrow would come with new problems, or old ones might reappear, but none of that mattered because The things that did matter were safe, even if just for now. And our family, like in everything, would deal with tomorrow, whenever tomorrow came.

*Dear Reader,*

Thanks for reading the latest installment of The Lara Hennessey series. Lara has come a long way from her human nurse roots, but she always remembers what's important: Life, Love, and Family. Ultimately, she is right that it's about life choices.

Life choices took me from writing four books a year to watching my daughter graduate high school and then go on to win a world title doing what she loves as I hauled her and her horse across the country.

My boys graduate this year, and then life changes again as it always does. Choices and change that's what it's all about because there is no ending that doesn't create a beginning.

If you loved Goddess Rising, please consider reviewing it on your favorite site. What's next? As you might be able to tell, I'm setting up books for Sephone and Aurora. They'll likely be stand-alone PNRs, but we'll see what they say about that.

Trinity Jade and her boys will be back first, as will the next installment of The Omegas of The New South. It's wintertime in my world, and that's writing time, but it's also reading time, so grab a book, sit by the fire, and enjoy life.



*About Sharilyn:*

Sharilyn spent most of her early years on the Grand Strand of SC, annoying local police officers and pretty much everyone else. She graduated from the University of South Carolina and lives on a small farm outside Morgantown, West Virginia, with her family and various farm animals.

Sharilyn writes Urban Fantasy, Fairy Tales, Omegaverse romance, and women's fiction. Each title in her Omegaverse series, Omegas of The New South, spent weeks on Amazon's best sellers list, and her Healer series has a following that borders on cultish. (She adores you, you crazy Lara Hennessey fans!)

She loves showing Quarter horses, trail riding, reading, and being annoyed by her teenagers. If she is missing, check for her horse trailer. If it is missing, no worries; she'll be back.

Probably.

*Also by Sharilyn:*

**Trauma:** stand-alone contemporary women's fiction

**Healer Series: Series Complete**

Cerridwen's Tears

Healer

House of Fire

The Scarlet Heron

The Flame Keeper

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**The Eight Series:**

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Ravena

Teagan

**The Omegas of The New South:**

The Omega Rule

The Omega Challenge

An Alpha's Grace

An Omega's Choice: Predators and Prey

An Alpha's Ruin

The Omega's Dance- coming winter/spring of 2024

**Goddess Rising Series: Lara Hennessey returns**

Goddess Rising

**The Iron Princess-** Aurora and Jacob's shifter romance- coming late 2024.

**The WidowMaker:**

Widowmaker

Gravedigger- coming winter of 2024

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