



CRIME
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The Zone Man

5

DEMONIC MESSES (AND OTHER ANNOYANCES)

L.L. FROST

the bone man

The Veils Universe

demonic messes (and other annoyances)

book five

L. L. Frost



THE BONE MAN

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synopsis

Demons are vanishing from the Bone Yard, and the streets tremble with the threat of ancient forces awoken.

Life in Clearhelm has changed since the new mayor took office, putting a halt to the work the Cleaners do for the Joint Task Force of Paranormal Investigations. With no other choice, Pen is forced to return to work as a mercenary, but cases are slim after turning away so many clients.

When a woman comes to her office begging them to find her missing husband, The Cleaners take on the job, their destination the Bone Yard. But what should have been a simple missing person's case gets tangled when the city council assigns them a quest of their own, one that could get them all killed.

Something strange is happening in the Bone Yard. Demons are vanishing, and the clatter of bones fills the street. What used to be a safe haven for demons has become a place of nightmares and death. Ancient beings long locked away have awoken, and the Cleaners must stop the Bone Man from rising, or all of Clearhelm will be consumed.

pocket full of feathers

- Pen -

THE QUIET CLICK of my keyboard fills the office as I make notes on the case I wrapped up yesterday.

Bright overhead lights compensate for the lack of windows in my below-ground office, and the scent of freshly brewed coffee drifts in from the hall outside my open door.

Just a typical afternoon in the Cleaners' office. If I'm not out solving paranormal problems, I'm here doing paperwork.

Spring had arrived with tension in the air as we scrambled to figure out the meaning behind Mr. Berdherst's ambiguous threat regarding the Bone Man, but then summer slipped in, bringing scorching heat and still no big, bad monster, so things had returned to normal.

Or a new normal, as the case may be.

As I hit save and close the file on my computer, a husky voice curls through the room, sending a shiver down my spine. "Was that the sound of a case closing?"

I glance up to find Darius—part of the new normal—leaning in the doorway, holding a steaming mug of coffee, and my pulse quickens.

Even after four months of living with him, I'm still not used to him walking around in a corporeal body. His broad shoulders, encased in a ridiculously expensive burgundy sweater despite the heat, fill most of the doorway, and his head nearly brushes the top of the frame.

Just back from a visit to a salon, his buffed bronze skin shines, and his tamed burgundy hair now just brushes his broad shoulders, with a soft fringe around his face. The new cut only serves to highlight the masculine lines of his jaw and high cheekbones.

An impish smile curls his lips, his golden eyes gleaming, and I realize

I've been staring.

Despite everything we've been through, the raw attraction that pulled us together like magnets all those centuries ago still simmers between us, made worse by him having a body again. But I refuse to dive back into his arms, despite having forgiven him for his part in my first death.

Whatever we become going forward, it won't be based on our past.

Ignoring the flutter in my chest, I hold out my hand for the coffee mug. "Don't think I didn't notice you took exactly as long to refill my cup as it took me to finish my notes."

Fire dances in his eyes as he strides forward to place the mug in my hand, the fingers that brush against mine hotter than the scalding liquid inside. "I don't know what you mean."

I pull back from his touch before he tempts me. "You said you wanted to learn the business. Paperwork is part of that."

"The *boring* part." He trails his fingers along my desk. "I far prefer the active part of cases where we destroy things."

I do, too, which he knows, but I roll my eyes, anyway. "Then you should have taken Sharpe up on his offer to join the Woo Woo Squad."

"And be lower on the totem pole than Johannsson?" He shakes his head. "Pass."

Johannsson had finally made his lieutenant rank, much to Troy's annoyance. Troy is now the only one in Sharpe's core team who's still a detective, and O'Hara teases him about it constantly.

If Troy hadn't suffered a broken leg that sidelined him for over a month, Sharpe would have promoted him before the new rules halted rank advancements.

After the summer elections—which I'm pretty sure were rigged—gave Mr. Berdherst a landslide win, it ushered in a change of regime that tightened the city's purse strings.

The Joint Task Force of Paranormal Investigations was the first hit. Now all expenditures undergo review before a board led by Captain Bailey, Chief Lynch, and the new Mayor Berdherst.

For Sharpe, it means a lot of time spent in a boardroom arguing for funds to solve cases, knowing that they'll ultimately deny his request.

For the rest of us, it means no more contract work for the Woo Woo Squad.

It's the first volley in trying to force us to work for the city and one we've

resisted so far. Only Flint gets a pass as part of the Conservatory's effort to bring the Hive Queen's victims back to consciousness.

While we still consult with Sharpe in the privacy of our home, publicly, a line has been drawn.

The JTFPI will either succeed on its own or fail.

"You're frowning again," Darius admonishes.

"There's a lot to frown about in the world." I take a sip of scalding coffee and hum happily. "But not this. This is excellent, as usual."

Darius circles around to my side of the desk and leans over me under the pretense of opening the most recent file in front of me. "Will this new case be exciting?"

The warmth of his body surrounds me, bringing with it a faint scent of smoke that wasn't present when he lived inside Marc. It reminds me of battles fought beside Darius and the scorching nights that followed, where I didn't have to resist the call of the fires that burn inside him.

With effort, I focus on the new file. "It doesn't sound like a case that falls within our jurisdiction, but the client paid the deposit, so we'll at least hear her out."

"So magnanimous," he purrs.

More like boredom. Darius isn't the only one who hates paperwork. I'm not great at sitting idle, but there haven't been many exciting cases lately. Maybe Meredith is right and the months we spent turning people away ruined our reputation.

But something about the quiet feels off. Like a wave pulling back before it crashes forward to destroy a city.

I just hope I'm being paranoid based on the back-to-back disasters that came before the lull.

On the desk, Darius's hand slides over mine, his long fingers slipping into the spaces between my knuckles, and fire licks at my skin. "I was hoping, after we hear this poor, unfortunate soul out, that you would give me the honor of sharing a meal."

Desire flickers through me, and I swallow hard. "We share meals all the time."

"Not alone." His hot breath caresses my cheek. "Let it be just us this time."

Danger lies down that path, but when I turn my head to deny him, the fire in his gaze burns the words from my lips.

“I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness.” His touch slides over the back of my hand to my wrist, where his fingers trace over my racing pulse. “But I can’t help but hope that you will give me a second chance.”

“I’ve already forgiven you.” I stare at him, torn between the desires surging through my blood and the rational part of my mind warning that he’s burned me before. “But we can’t just pick up where we left off.”

His jaw sets with determination. “I’ll wait until you’re ready, Merri, for as long as it takes.”

A throat clears, and I jerk away from Darius to find our secretary, Meredith, hovering in the doorway.

Amusement dances in her heavily-lined eyes. “Your appointment has arrived.”

Darius doesn’t move, his body still surrounding mine with tempting heat.

A sharp elbow forces him to straighten with reluctance. “Please, send her in.”

“You sure?” Meredith glances from me to the ignis demon. “I can tell her you had a prior meeting that is running long.”

I give our secretary a hard stare. “No need. We’re ready to see her.”

“If you say so, but I think you’re making a mistake.” She turns with a flare of her long skirt and strides back toward the front.

“I like her,” Darius rumbles from behind me.

Of course, he does. “Just stand back there and look pretty.”

“You think I’m pretty?” Delight fills his voice.

“Shut up.” I glance down at the file in front of me, quickly refreshing my memory.

When Meredith returns, her tone is all business. “Ms. Cay, Mrs. Lewis is here to see you.”

I glance up as a woman—girl, really—shuffles into the office and perches on the chair across from my desk. She tugs on the hem of her oversized T-shirt, then picks at her nails.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Lewis.” I extend my arm across the desk, palm out.

She lurches from her seat to shake my hand, her skin clammy against mine, before she quickly releases it to sit back down. “Thank you for taking my case, Ms. Cay.”

I haven’t accepted her as a client, but no need to make her more anxious at this point in the meeting.

The sores on her face and her chewed-up lips suggest Mrs. Lewis is a drug addict, but a sober one at the moment. Her trip here meant enough for her to scrape together the money for a deposit, which is no small feat when those funds could have bought her a week's worth of her preferred substance.

Resisting the urge to wipe my palm on my pant leg, I instead fold my hands on top of her file. "So, you're here because your husband went missing three days ago, and you haven't seen him since?"

She nods jerkily. "Jimmy." She licks the blood from her cracked lips. "He left for work and never came back."

"Have you reported his disappearance to the police?" I ask.

Her gaze jumps around my office. "They said they'd look into it, but they won't. That's why I came here."

"Because Jimmy's a drug dealer?" I guess.

Nodding again, she leans forward. "But he's a good man. He takes care of me. He wouldn't just vanish like this. Not without telling me."

I make a mental note to call the coroner's office about any John Does. The most logical explanations are an overdose, murder by a rival gang, or city lockup.

If we can locate Jimmy's whereabouts quickly, we can scoot her along to make room for other clients. I dislike wasting time on cases the police can easily solve.

"Please." She lunges across the desk, then freezes when Darius growls a warning. She settles back in her seat and picks at a string on her skirt. "Don't write Jimmy off just because he has a questionable profession."

"His profession isn't in question," I assure her. "We aren't the police."

"He's doing the best he can," she insists, clearly not believing me. "We've been saving money for a long time now to make a better life for ourselves. We want to start a family. Once we get clean, we can buy ourselves a nice place to live."

Tears fill her eyes. "Please, I have the money to pay you. That's what matters, right? You'll find Jimmy?"

Sighing, I look down at the cashier's check sitting in the file in front of me. The deposit probably drained their little nest egg. "Look, Mrs. Lewis, we'll make some calls, but this kind of case..."

I slide the check back across the desk. "This money will more than cover the expenses of a private investigator. I can give you some references to trusted companies, and I'll call in a referral—"

“I know what you guys do here.” Eyes fever bright, she shoves the check back across the desk. “You’re the only ones who can bring my Jimmy home.”

I lean back in my chair. “What do you think we do here, exactly?”

“You’re based out of a fortuneteller’s shop.” She grips the edge of the desk hard enough to turn her knuckles white. “You’re one of those Others. You can go places a regular detective can’t.”

Others are what the humans call the demons and witches who came out to the public five years ago. They claim it’s more politically correct, disregarding what the paranormal call themselves, and thus making a clear distinction between *normal* humans and the *Others*.

But Mrs. Lewis isn’t here to discuss politics. “Why do you think an *Other* is needed to locate Jimmy?”

Her gaze jumps around the office once more, searching for surveillance cameras. They’re present, so she’s not paranoid, but she won’t find them. We’re too good at what we do to show our hand so easily.

Despite not spotting anything, her voice drops to a whisper. “Jimmy was working the Bone Yard three nights ago.”

The Bone Yard is several blocks of Clearhelm that had once been middle-class businesses and apartment living until demons claimed it as their own. When the city couldn’t take it back, they’d done the next best thing and built a wall around it, turning it into a lawless sanctuary for Others.

People who enter do so at their own risk.

“He got his hands on some real angel feathers,” Mrs. Lewis continues, her tone hushed. “It was going to be his last run. It would have set us up for life.”

Gods, humans are dumb. They see one succubus with her wings out and suddenly they think they’ve seen angels.

But if Jimmy had acquired real succubus or incubus feathers and not the spray-painted ostrich feathers sold online, then the chance that he’s already dead just doubled.

Sure, there are non-harmful ways to acquire succubus and incubus feathers. But the sex demons are excellent at policing what they shed, since a single feather can send a room full of humans into a sex frenzy.

No, most demon body parts are stolen at the cost of the demon’s existence through the use of dark magic. Humans caught trafficking demon body parts don’t survive for long.

I glance over my shoulder at Darius, who gives an almost imperceptible lift of his shoulders.

Body retrieval isn't that challenging—when there's a body to retrieve—and the Bone Yard is only a few blocks to search. It shouldn't take long to find out where Jimmy met his end.

At least Mrs. Lewis will have closure.

I slide the check back into the folder and close it. "We'll find your husband, but we make no guarantee that we'll bring him back alive. Understood?"

Tears fill her eyes, but she nods jerkily. "I just need to know what's happened to him."

Nodding, I stand and motion for her to follow me from the office. "Meredith will walk you out. If you need a referral to a rehab clinic, she can provide you with one. We have places that are state-funded."

Having her in lockdown when she finds out Jimmy's dead might prevent her from overdosing in her grief.

Meredith takes her hands and smiles gently. "Staying sober is your goal, right? For your new life? I'll get a car to take you to a nice place."

Mrs. Lewis nods and follows her out, casting nervous glances back until they disappear down the hallway that leads to the psychic shop that acts as a front for our agency.

I turn to Darius. "Call the coroner's office to make sure they don't already have a body matching Jimmy's description in their fridge."

His brow arches. "Do you really think you'll find him there?"

I shrug. "It's better to cover our bases. There's always the chance Jimmy got cold feet when he made it to the Bone Yard and turned around."

Darius grunts, as skeptical as I am. If Jimmy was heading to the Bone Yard with a pocket full of angel feathers, there's no way he chickened out. Not with that kind of fortune at his fingertips.

I check the time before wiggling my mouse to turn on my computer. "I'll file a hunting license with the Demon Clerk's Office while you make your calls."

While the human world may not care about Jimmy the drug dealer, I still need to submit a form on the demon side. If someone has Jimmy—or his body—and refuses to release him, we need to ensure our contracts are in place to prevent anyone from filing a blood grievance against us later.

Nothing burns more than finishing a job, only to hand over the earnings because of laziness.

Darius heads for the office door. "The Bone Yard is dangerous."

I glance up at him through my lashes. “Then it’s a good thing you’re going with me, right?”

A smile forms on his lips, and he bows deeply. “I will protect you with my life, my lady.”

I snort and wave a hand for him to leave. He knew his warning wouldn’t change our path.

We go where the job takes us, even if it means going to the Bone Yard.

jimmy bob's exterminators

- Marc -

“DID EVERYONE DOUBLE-CHECK UNDER THEIR BEDS?” I ask as I load the last of the boxes into the van.

A chorus of voices rises around me. “Yes, Uncle Marc.”

“Don’t forget this.” Lia carries over a heavy bag. “We’ll need cushions for our new home.”

“We bought you new cushions,” Flint teases, but he takes the bag, anyway, and crams it in between the wall of boxes and the side of the van.

Today, we’re finally moving Lia and the kids to their new home. It took longer than we wanted to get the paperwork finalized, and we’d had our people monitoring Berdherst’s people to make sure he didn’t locate where we stashed little Aediva.

He had our shop under surveillance for a while. Mine and Darius’s suggestion to set them on fire had been downvoted. It’s understandable, but it would have been fun.

Then one morning, the unmarked cars vanished from the street, and life had seemingly returned to normal.

Not trusting the change, we waited another month while we set up the new house. But as suddenly as Berdherst’s interest in the half-demon his wife had spawned appeared, it had vanished.

It appears that getting elected mayor flipped a switch, and whatever plans he had for Aediva vanished.

The little blond girl runs up to me and solemnly holds out a large teddy bear.

“Why don’t you put it right there?” I point to an empty gap between boxes.

Aediva nibbles her lip as she steps forward, sliding her bear into place,

and I catch the box at the top as it wobbles, threatening the careful stacking job I did.

She quickly retreats, fear in her wide eyes, and I give her a reassuring smile. “No harm done. We’re fine.”

Lia hurries forward to rest a hand on the little girl’s shoulder, and the chaotic energies swirling around Aediva settles.

Lia is one of those rare, gifted humans able to neutralize magic in any form, which makes her ideal for raising a household of half-demon children.

How demonic magic comes out in mixed-blood spawn is never predictable, and often dangerous, like with Aediva. The small girl has enough chaos in her to trigger negative events.

Right now, it’s only tipping over a stack of previously steady boxes, but left uncontrolled, she could cause buildings with enough code violations to collapse.

We’re hoping that, with enough training, she’ll be able to learn control and even trigger positive events in the future, but she wouldn’t have time to learn that skill without Lia here to help.

It’s lucky that her mother hired us to exorcise her demon-half just as her powers were coming to life, or she’d likely be dead, along with anyone around her when it happened.

Instead of performing an exorcism that would have ripped her in half—she wasn’t possessed, she was naturally born with demon DNA—Flint and Pen made it appear that she died in the process, then whisked her away to safety and put her in Lia’s care.

"Come on, Aedi." Alaska, a boy a couple of years older than her, grabs her hand and smiles, cracking the ice crystals on his cheeks. "You can sit next to me. Star says she can glow the entire trip to our new home, but I think she’s full of it."

Star tosses her hair, the magenta streak stark against the black, and her purple eyes flash. “I’m not full of it, and when I *do* glow all the way there, I’ll get first pick of the bedrooms!”

“I want to sit next to Anny!” Trevor yells, and Flint’s familiar barks from inside the van.

The kids race away, Alaska and Star squabbling while Aediva stares on with wide, blue eyes that have seen too much in her short life.

Lia steps up to my side and gazes around the garage. “I’ll miss this old place.”

“The new one is twice the size,” Flint assures her. “With an entire entertainment center in the basement. I’m talking movie theater, mini-bowling alley, and air hockey.”

“There’s a rock-climbing wall and a swimming pool in the back, too.” I close up the van. “And a better home security system.”

Lia looks over at the kids. “They’ll like that, but are you sure we need to leave Clearhelm?”

I understand her reluctance. She’s been in this house since before the Others came out of hiding. She has her patterns set, her favorite places to visit, and the layout of her stores memorized.

But as soon as Mr. Berdherst showed up at our office demanding we return Aediva, we decided to move them. We still don’t know how he found out Aediva is alive, but after we learned his ancestors have a history of human sacrifice, it cemented our determination to keep Aediva away from him.

So here we are, once again spiriting these kids away to a new location.

“It’s safer this way.” Flint glances toward the closed garage doors. “There’s something coming. Clearhelm’s not a good place for kids right now.”

He had mentioned that the students at the Conservatory have been restless lately, and even some of the teachers have brought up the tension in the air. The city feels like it’s holding its breath. But for what?

Tension filled the air when we set out from home before dawn with our vans. We drove out of town until we were sure no one was tailing us, then pulled over on the side of the road to slap magnetic decals on the sides of our vans, transforming them into Jimmy Bob’s Exterminators work vehicles.

With our disguise in place, we drove to Lia’s new house, where we draped the windows in plastic to sell our purpose for being there.

Then we hauled ass to get the vans loaded with their most important belongings. Everything else will be left behind.

The new house is fully furnished, with a stocked kitchen, which makes this escape easier.

Blinking back tears, Lia reaches out to grip Flint’s arm. “Thank you for always taking care of us.”

“No, thank *you*.” Sincerity fills Flint’s eyes as he pats her hand. “We wouldn’t be able to do this without you.”

“Go on.” I tap Flint on the shoulder. “You take Lia in the van with the

kids. I'll follow behind."

Flint cups Lia's shoulder. "Don't worry, with Marc watching our backs, nothing will go wrong."

My gaze shifts to the rearview mirror once more.

Now that we're out on the highway, I'm sure we're being followed. I'm not sure when the nondescript gray sedan appeared, but I noticed them a few cars back once we hit Main Street and headed out of town.

Flint had taken several random turns along the way, and the gray sedan did the same, always keeping at least one car between us.

When Flint circled a city block before getting on the highway, it sealed the deal. All our precautions meant nothing. Berdherst out-maneuvered us on this one.

I tap the phone attached to a magnetic holder on the dash and call Flint.

He answers on the first ring, his tone upbeat for the kids. "Do you need a pit stop already?"

"Can't go on a road trip without snacks," I reply, and a cheer sounds in the background.

I hang up, trusting Flint to find a suitable spot for a confrontation.

Thirty minutes pass, and we leave the major cities behind, heading out toward the mountains.

A sign flashes for a gas station ahead, and a mile later, Flint pulls off the highway into the small parking lot of a run-down gas station.

The rusty sign at the entrance announced it as Henry & Sons, though I know for a fact Henry doesn't have any sons.

Flint pulls his van over to the side of the building, while I stop at the pump, where a plastic bag covers the nozzle, announcing that it's out of order, as is the one ahead of me.

Henry & Sons hasn't sold gas for over a decade, but the shop stays open, selling snacks and firewood for those who like to go camping in the mountains during summer.

This time of the week, he doesn't get much business, which works out perfectly for us. It's too bad we'll be putting him out of business during his busiest season.

As Flint hustles everyone into the shop, I pull the shotgun from behind my seat. Climbing out, I crouch behind the pumps nearest my bumper.

A few minutes later, the gray sedan pulls into the parking lot, and two men climb out.

I lift the shotgun to my shoulder and fire at the one on the passenger side, who carries a gun.

The men duck back into the safety of their car.

I pump in a fresh round, aim at the front passenger tire, and blast a hole in it.

A shot rings out, and I duck as a bullet slams into the metal box next to my head.

Fucking amateurs.

I return fire, taking out the other tire, then set my shotgun on the ground and press my hands against the asphalt. The amulet beneath my shirt heats as the fires inside me rise, and I push past its attempt to suppress my magic, shoving the fire out of my body.

Flames roll across the parking lot like a tidal wave, sweeping under my van and leaving it unharmed before bursting out the other side. They quickly surround the sedan, and the blast of tires exploding fills the air, followed by panicked shouts and car doors flinging open.

The asphalt bubbles beneath the car, and the rims melt into the parking lot.

Another shot fires wildly, hitting the sign over the gas station, and rage boils inside me, feeding the flames. That's too close to where Flint and the kids hide.

Fiery tendrils snake out, wrapping around the gunman, and a series of shots explode as the powder in his bullets ignites.

He screams, either from the fire or from being shot multiple times by his own weapon. My flames eagerly slide down his throat, cooking him from the inside out.

His partner panics and runs away from the fire toward the safety of the convenience store, seeming to have forgotten in his instinctive need to escape that I'm still here.

Standing, I swing my arm out at throat height, and he clotheslines himself right into it. His feet shoot out from under him, and his back slams into the ground, his skull hitting with a hollow crack.

I straddle the gaping man and grab his shirt by the collar.

His wild eyes meet mine. “We were told you lost your demon.”

Anger twists my features, and I lean closer to snarl. “I’m a fucking fire witch, asshole. I don’t *need* a demon.”

Fire crawls from my hands onto his clothes, and he lets out a panicked shout as he tries to escape my grasp.

I plant a knee on his chest to keep him pinned. “Tell me how you found us before I barbecue you just like I did your partner.”

“You’ll just kill me, anyway.” His eyes roll as sweat breaks out on his face and the smell of piss joins the scent of melting metal and fire in the air.

“I might,” I drawl in agreement. “Or I might use you as a messenger for the person who hired you.”

He slaps at the flames on his chest. “I don’t know. It was anonymous!”

“Did you know that fire witches can stop flames from burning you?” I ask.

His eyes dart to his shirt, which hasn’t burned beneath the fire that crawls over his chest.

“That means that I can also direct them to only burn specific parts of a person.” I send small tendrils to crawl up his cheeks toward his eyes. “How hot do you think eyeballs need to get before they pop? Or do you think they’ll just cook inside your sockets?”

“The job came through a third-party source,” he babbles, rattling off a website. “We were supposed to grab the blond girl and take care of anyone who tried to stop us! That’s all I know! The drop-off location won’t be set until they have confirmation that we have the kid.”

“How did you find us?” I repeat.

“We got a tracker on the van,” he pants out.

“Bullshit,” I growl. “We swept for trackers.”

“It’s spell tech,” he whimpers. “Attached to the license plate. New stuff.”

Great, just what we need.

I pat my hands over his pockets but find them empty. “Where’s your phone?”

His eyes dart to the flames dancing at the corners of his eyes. “It was in the car.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate,” I drawl. “That means there’s no way to deliver a message, huh?”

His eyes widen in terror. “No, please—”

Fire cuts off his words as it engulfs him, turning his body to ash in

seconds.

I rise and dust off my pant legs before striding to the small convenience store, where I find Flint huddled in the candy section, his revolver at the ready.

His blue eyes meet mine. “Everything good?”

“It’s taken care of.” I raise my voice. “You best head home, Henry. I’m afraid your gas station is about to catch on fire.”

“Well, I suppose that’s what we have insurance for. I’ve been needing to replace the pumps, anyway.” The old man rises from behind the counter. “Just make it look good on paper.”

I dip my chin. “We always do. Say hi to the Missus for me.”

Flint rises and glances around at the kids. “Well, what are you waiting for? Grab your snacks before this place goes up in flames. Anything you want.”

“Badass,” Alaska breathes.

He starts shoving candy bars into his pockets, while Star and Trevor race for the chip aisle.

I look at Flint. “There’s a spell on one of the license plates tracking us.”

His face twists with anger. “I’ll take care of it.”

A small hand touches mine, and I glance down in surprise to find Aediva gazing up at me. “There are faulty wires in the credit card reader on pump two.”

My brows shoot up. “Is that right?”

“And an outlet next to a leak in the bathroom,” she whispers.

I give her a nod of thanks. “Those will both help. Now, choose your snacks so we can get back on the road.”

She blinks several times before her focus shifts to all the candy around her, and she hesitantly walks over to select a peanut and caramel candy bar from the multitude of offerings, slipping it into her pocket.

Lia’s attention shifts from the small girl to me, and she tilts her head toward Aediva in question before her eyes dart toward the parking lot.

At my nod, Lia’s shoulders pull back. A determined expression settles over her features, and she goes to stand behind the girl to keep her safe.

If only Lia’s powers were a shield for those she protected.

But hopefully, this is the last bit of trouble Berdherst and his people will cause for this small group.

suffering fools

- Darius -

MY CALLS to the morgues prove fruitless, so an hour later, we bid farewell to Meredith and close up the office.

As we near the rear exit that allows us to bypass the customers at the front, I dare to brush my hand over Merri's back. "Are you sure I cannot entice you to a meal before we venture into the Bone Yard?"

She glances back at me, her golden eyes gleaming. "The Harbor is in the Bone Yard. Or is that too high class?"

My heartbeat quickens at the suggestion of visiting the fancy hotel where Marceau and I passed a month together. "Is there something specific you desire, my lady?"

She faces forward once more. "I have a craving for a cup of *capunis*."

"Ah." I tamp down the disappointment that her desire is for the fiery coffee of the demon plane and not for one of the luxurious rooms available at the hotel. "It will be my pleasure to purchase a cup for you."

I knew full reconciliation would take time, but now that I have a body of my own, patience is difficult. While I lived inside Marceau, we held her often, and while it was not my name she called out, I was at least not deprived of her touch.

But as I told her before, I will wait until she is ready to once more let me into her heart.

With that in mind, I step ahead of her to open the door. I can hear Marceau's snide comment in my mind about pretending to be a gentleman, but the soft smile that graces my love's lips makes the gallantry worth the effort.

As we step into the underground garage, I venture, "Might I drive?"

Her lips purse, letting me know I'm pushing it. But she lets Marceau

drive all the time, so this is really no different.

“Fine,” she relents and passes me the keys.

I jog ahead of her to the passenger side of the sedan we drove in this morning. Flint and Marceau are using both vans to help their friend Lia relocate to the new house they purchased for her and her misfit collection of half-demon children.

My suggestion that we take my far finer car to work today was met with a hard no, and I now regret not pressing the matter. My lady deserves to be squirmed around in only the finest, which this nondescript sedan is not.

As I open the door for her, I frown at the worn interior. Maybe if I have it detailed? Or entirely replace the interior?

Merri pokes my side as she pauses next to me. “Stop whatever you’re thinking. This is a work car, so no changing it.”

I frown at the scratches on the faux leather seats. “We can work in a nice car just as easily.”

She slides into the seat. “Okay, next time we’re escorting a slime demon who’s lost their hold on their human form to the way station, we’ll take your car.”

My nose wrinkles at the suggestion, and her laughter echoes through the small garage before I shut the door on her.

Wooing my lady in this century will prove harder than I anticipated.

I hurry around to the driver’s side and slip behind the wheel. Perhaps I can win her over while indulging in coffee at the Harbor. We have half the day to ourselves before the others will even think to question where we’ve gone.

With that in mind, I turn the car on and head for the garage exit, hitting the little button attached to the visor as I drive up the ramp.

The door rumbles up as we near, and I slow at the top, cautious of oncoming cars, even in the back alley.

As I look to the left, a box-nosed sedan screeches up in front of the garage and slams to a stop, blocking our exit.

I press hard on the brake, and Merri’s curses ring in my ears.

The passenger door opens, and a man in the Clearhelm Police Department’s uniform climbs out, his hand on the gun at his hip.

My fingers tighten around the steering wheel. Even if I back down the ramp, the door closes too slowly to block him from following us. We’re trapped, and by the smirk on his face as he approaches, he knows he has the

upper hand.

I roll down my window. "Is there a problem, officer?"

Ignoring me, he leans down to peer inside at Merri. "Your presence is requested at the station, Ms. Cay."

Merri leans over the center console. "I don't have a meeting with Captain Bailey scheduled, and we're on a case. Please have him contact my office to make arrangements."

"This is a summons from Chief Lynch himself, so you'll have to reschedule your current plans. You can either follow us or..." He glances toward his sedan. "We can take you in the back of our car."

Fire simmers in my blood at the blatant threat and the disrespect this man shows to Merri, but she simply smiles. "Well, if it's that urgent, by all means, lead the way."

With a nod, he straightens and returns to his vehicle. They pull forward far enough to let us out, and another box-nosed sedan enters the alley from the left, leaving no avenue to flee.

I grit my teeth as I pull into line between the two vehicles. "Back in the day, we would burn these pests alive for such disrespect."

Merri leans back in her seat. "New world, same assholes throwing their weight around to prove they're powerful."

I hum in agreement. As a court guard on the demon plane, my time had been filled with tasks set to me by my sponsor, and my failures were dealt with swiftly and without compassion. It was how I learned to never fail, not even when it meant the deaths of me and my love.

Allowing others to wield power over me? That experience put a bad taste in my mouth. Especially for those who, on every level, have not earned that right.

The cruiser ahead leads us to Clearhelm's Police Department, and Merri's annoyance peppers the air like sparks about to combust.

For that alone, I would burn the building to the ground. But such actions would cause difficulty for my family, so I bide my time. I can release the fires after we discover what this summons is about.

Once we park and disembark, the officers lead us up the steps, into the red brick building, and down a dingy hall to where a familiar, dark-haired figure stands outside.

"Wait here," the lead officer commands. "You'll be called in soon."

Ga'Vine glances over his shoulder, and his eyes widen when he finds us

behind him.

Our escorts leave, and Ga’Vine takes a step away from the door to join us. “What are you doing here?”

“We’ve been kidnapped,” I inform him.

Worry creases Merri’s brow. “You don’t know?”

Ga’Vine glances between us. “I’m here for a city safety meeting.”

“They pulled us off the street to drag us here,” Merri murmurs, then stiffens when the door swings open, and an officer beckons us forward.

Ga’Vine and I exchange a look over the top of Merri’s head, one guard to another, and fall into place on either side of our love, flanking her protectively.

The maneuver doesn’t go unnoticed, but she holds her tongue as we enter the room.

Captain Bailey, the thorn in Ga’Vine’s side, sits on the left side of the table set up in the room. The smirk on his face bodes ill for whatever comes next. In the center sits Chief Lynch, his spine ramrod straight in the position of power.

But it’s the newly elected Mayor Berdherst who holds my attention. His presence in the police station is unusual, and his cold, calculating gaze sets off all my danger instincts. He is an akuzal disguised as a human, and we are his prey.

“What’s going on?” Ga’Vine’s gaze sweeps over the room’s occupants. “Why have the Cleaners been brought in on a city safety meeting?”

Captain Bailey arches a brow. “What, are *you* the only one allowed to call them in for help?”

Yes. Ga’Vine might as well have spoken the word for how loudly it hangs in the air.

Mayor Berdherst leans forward, his voice dripping with authority. “We’ve invited the Cleaners here for the special task of cleaning up the Bone Yard.”

My gut tightens at the announcement. The man can’t be serious. Clearhelm’s police force already attempted that once, with far more people than Merri has on her team, and failed miserably. It’s why the demons now own that part of town.

It’s a dangerous, lawless part of the city that even the JTFPI avoids. Chaos thrives there. And death is handed out as easily as breathing. Peace is tenuous at best, but if we go in there intending to clear the demons out, it will

be a declaration of war.

“With all the media coverage Clearhelm has been getting recently, we’re seeing an increase in tourists, something our city dearly needs in order to replace the funds the Joint Task Force of Paranormal Investigations continues to drain.” Mayor Berdherst casts Ga’Vine a disapproving look. “Once the Bone Yard has been tamed, it will be a tourist attraction that people will flock from all over the world to see.”

Ga’Vine’s fists clench. “That’s a suicide mission!”

Chief Lynch stirs. “Your force, combined with the Cleaners, have taken on dragons and monsters from myths. Surely you can handle cleaning up a few city blocks? Captain Bailey has even volunteered some of his people to assist in the matter.”

“The same officers who refused to listen to orders and nearly got us all killed during the altercation with the dragon?” Ga’Vine demands in a hard tone.

Chief Lynch dips his head. “It’s true that there have been some issues with working together between your departments. Since this is such a delicate task you’ll be taking on, Captain Bailey won’t object if you choose your own people from among his officers.”

Captain Bailey rears back, his lips parting, but a look from Chief Lynch shuts his mouth.

Chief Lynch turns back to us. “You will be provided with the necessary equipment and resources to assist you in this endeavor. Complete the task and prove you can be a beneficial part of Clearhelm’s resources.”

The underlying threat comes through loud and clear. If we refuse or fail, then Ga’Vine will no longer run the JTFPI and the Cleaners will lose their license to work within Clearhelm.

Burning this place to the ground is sounding better and better.

Mayor Berdherst focuses on Merri. “Do you have any questions, Ms. Cay?”

Her head tilts to the side. “How much?”

Captain Bailey smirks. “Mercenary to the core. Don’t worry your pretty little head. You’ll be paid fairly.”

Merri’s hand on my arm stops me from stepping forward to defend her honor. “I mean, how much of the Bone Yard do you want cleared? A strip down the center? A few shops on the main street that humans can enter? How much are you asking?”

“When I say to clean it up, I mean *all* of it, Ms. Cay,” the mayor snaps.

Merri turns to me. “Fire?”

“The great equalizer,” I agree, though I’d rather set this room on fire over the demons in the Bone Yard.

I’ve never been one to suffer fools gladly.

Merri turns back to the table. “We can have the entire place burned down by dinner time. Maybe a few city blocks around it, too. It will make your tourist attraction larger, so you should be okay with that, right?”

Red flushes Captain Bailey’s face. “That’s not what you’re being told to do.”

“Then narrow your expectations,” Merri snaps, a glow illuminating her skin as her anger finally gets the better of her. “We can either go in and raze the place to the ground so no living being remains, or we can negotiate a compromise.”

“And before you consider the former as an actual option,” Ga’Vine cuts in. “It won’t look good to the demon citizens of Clearhelm, whom we swore to protect, if you now turn around and destroy their only sanctuary on the human plane.”

Chief Lynch considers that for a moment before he nods. “Fine, see what you can negotiate first.”

Mayor Berdherst turns to him in anger. “That’s not what we agreed on.”

“Slaughter isn’t good PR, mayor.” His focus shifts to Ga’Vine. “Put your task force together, Sharpe. If negotiations fail, we’ll resort to force. The lawless have held a part of our city hostage for too long. We will get some part of it back, or we will destroy it.”

“You heard the man.” The mayor points toward the door. “You’re dismissed.”

fiery fridays

- Pen -

HELPLESS FURY BURNS through me as we leave the police station.

How *dare* they put us in this position. And for what? Some twisted version of a theme park where humans can gawk at demons? Why not just bring back freak shows?

At least that way, everyone would be complicit in agreeing that demons are lesser than humans. A novelty to be stared at instead of full citizens.

Darius's hand brushes my shoulder. "We could simply set this place on fire. It would eliminate three distasteful people at once."

Tempted by the suggestion, I shake my head. "Sharpe's still in there."

"He'll be reborn." Darius's brows lift. "Perhaps with his memories intact this time."

I elbow him. "It doesn't work like that."

He lifts a shoulder. "Ga'Vine is a better man now, anyway."

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I hurry down the steps to the parking lot. "Let's just get this over with. We have a lot to do today."

"Ah, yes, the case of Jimmy Lewis." Darius's hand spreads over my lower back. "In the investigative business, do we search for a missing drug addict first? Or risk our lives and go straight to Nickodemus?"

I purse my lips. "Jimmy the drug addict first. Nickodemus is probably still pissed at me for something that happened before the magic resurgence. He's likely to make us jump through some hoops."

Darius's eyes widen in surprise. "Do you mean the whole matter of the bear?"

"Yeah, that whole matter," I say with a frown.

Back in the day, we'd been hired by Nickodemus to locate one of his young progenies who had answered the summons of an untrained witch,

Amber, to exact revenge against a man who attacked her.

We had located the young boogeyman and returned her to Nickodemus's fold. But Amber refused to give up and summoned an even stronger boogeyman who had killed her parents before cornering Amber and her younger sister in the attic.

The police had been alerted by the neighbors before we arrived, which meant we needed to leave behind an explainable, non-paranormal reason for the slaughter.

Hence, the bear.

We had no way of knowing the body would be put on ice instead of cremated, and the boogeyman had been trapped ever since.

Darius waves a hand. "A non-issue, now. I handled it while I... It's been handled."

I don't miss the way that Darius avoids reminding me of the time he took off in Marc's body, but I let it go. We're trying to move past the mistakes we've made and find a new balance.

"Ga'Vine didn't tell you?" Darius asks.

I gaze up at him. "Sharpe knows?"

Darius glances off to the side. "There were cameras I didn't account for when I destroyed the bear's body."

Since the bear was in Spooky Storage, Sharpe would have been alerted. Did he cover it up to protect Marc?

Darius waves his hand. "Regardless, Nickodemus's flock is full once more, so he should be in a moderately benevolent mood for negotiations. I think he will be delighted that the Clearhelm police wish to bring in humans for his people to terrify. He may even set up a haunted house."

"You're being far too cavalier about this whole thing." I wrench open the car door and drop inside. "Don't you care at all about the bigger issue here?"

"Humans make others suffer, they are forced to change or die, and the cycle starts over. You've seen this yourself," he points out. "They'll get their way with the Bone Yard, demons will be unhappy, heads will roll, and we will start anew. It is the way of things."

"You won't be so blasé when it's your head that rolls," I grumble.

Darius's hot hand settles on my thigh. "Has Flanagan added my summoning stone to his little hoard?"

Warmth spreads from his palm up my leg, and I reach down to move it to his own lap. "You'll have to ask Flint about that."

“He probably chucked it into the river.” Darius stares out the windshield. “But, no matter, I will always find my way back to you, Merri.”

Even without his hand on me, he still warms me with his words. His head turns toward me. “Did you fall for me just now?”

I snort. “You sure know how to ruin a mood.”

He smiles and faces forward once more. “You fell for me.”

Blood creeps into my cheeks. “Think what you want.”

“You fell for me *hard*,” he says with a note of delight in his tone.

I laugh and reach out to smack him. “Stop it.”

“Never.” He reaches out to catch my hand and lace our fingers together. “Even when you *do* fall, I will continue, so that you fall for me over and over again for eternity.”

“Yeah, keep dreaming.” But I don’t pull my hand away.

I flash the picture of Jimmy Lewis at the demon who runs the meat cart on the street. “This isn’t, by chance, today’s special, is it? Or any day’s special this week?”

“Could be. They all look the same to me.” The demon squints at the pic. “Naw, too blond. My customers prefer the brunettes.”

I grimace and tuck the picture away. “Have you seen someone like him asking around? He was trying to sell angel feathers?”

The demon spits out a greasy laugh. “If I did, you won’t find him here no more.”

I lower my voice. “Know anyone selling feathers?”

His front two eyes sweep over me, while the ones on the side of his head swivel toward the carts on either side of him. “How about you buy some meat?”

I glance down at his offering. “How much for a leg bone?”

“Half a silver, or fifty human papers.”

I pull a hundred-dollar bill from my pocket and pass it over.

He takes it without offering change and slides the leg bone into a baguette bag. As he passes it over, he whispers, “There’s a guy on the corner of Black and Squelch who has what you’re looking for.”

I lift the bag. “Looks delicious. Have a rotten day.”

“You, too.” He raises his voice as I head toward Darius. “Come back on Fiery Friday, when I serve redheads all day!”

I reach Darius. “Any luck?”

“Not yet.” Darius peers down at the bag I carry. “I’m not sure Ga’Vine will let that into the house.”

“Don’t worry, it’s cow. The guy is making coin over fist, though, hocking it as human.” I glance around. “Which way to Black and Squelch? There’s a shop owner who might give us a better lead.”

Darius shifts to place me on the side close to the building and leads me deeper into the Bone Yard. We’d been on the street vendor block for over an hour, and I can’t say I’m sorry to leave it behind.

The combination of smells and noises grates against my nerves, and everyone triggers my internal danger alarms. Darius already had to set one demon on fire for coming too close, which earned us a little breathing room, but it didn’t last long.

If we linger here another minute, I’ll start bashing people with my batons, and then we’ll have bodies on our hands. Which isn’t necessarily a bad thing in the Bone Yard, but doesn’t back up the whole *We Come In Peace* schtick we need to sell Nickodemus on.

There’s a fine line between showing we’re not easy targets and willful slaughter, and the king of boogeymen is canny enough to know the difference.

As we leave the market, I take a deeper breath of the humid air. Like breathing in a rainforest just after a downpour. Thick and earthy, but not in an unpleasant way.

I’m still not used to the way the mid-class district has morphed to fit the needs of its new inhabitants. Treehouses sit next to fantasy-like towers, and rock outcroppings make homes next to slimy ponds.

Ahead of us, a square slab of sidewalk juts higher than the ones on either side.

I take a large step forward to slam the trap door back down on the earth dweller waiting to attack.

A screech rises from beneath my feet, and the cement jumps as the creature bangs its fists against the underside.

I pound the bottom of the bone I carry on the ground next to my feet. “Be a better hunter! You’re too obvious!”

Darius’s hand finds the small of my back. “Come, my lady, stop

terrorizing the trapdoor demon.”

I give the slab another thump. “You’re going to starve to death with skills like that!”

Darius sighs and pulls me off the block of cement. It creaks upward as soon as my weight leaves it, and brown tentacles slither out to investigate the surroundings.

I drop the bone on top of a pair that creeps toward us, and they snatch it up, the bone vanishing into the sidewalk before the cement thuds back down.

“Such a softy,” Darius murmurs.

I ignore the happy crunching rising from beneath the sidewalk. “We probably would have gotten arrested if we walked out of here with it.”

“Are you going to let Marc put tiny ignis demons in the bathroom fireplace, too?” he teases.

I cut him a sharp glance from the corner of my eye. “Sure it’s only Marc who wants that?”

He looks away. “It would be nice to have something of home.”

A lump forms in my throat at the yearning in his voice. Long before we met, Darius was kicked out of the Black Mountain for choosing a station as a court guard.

Before I can say anything more, he nods to a shop across the street. “That must be it.”

I follow his line of sight to what looks to be an old coffee shop, the windows stuffed full of racks with an assortment of jars. The owner had spray-painted a cauldron onto the window in neon green with the universal symbol for magical items.

Darius steps ahead of me to burn a path through the pedestrians clogging the street, forcing them to leap out of the way or be scorched.

I follow close on his heels, one hand near the baton clipped to my belt in case someone gets any bright ideas about mugging us along the way.

A bell over the door tinkles when we enter, and a cheery voice calls out from deeper within. “I’ll be right with you!”

Drawn by the familiar cadence, I head toward the voice where a glass display case holds jars of body parts next to shriveled heads, hands, and feet.

A short cash register sits on a counter next to the case, and the man behind it bags up his customer’s purchase in a discreet black bag before passing it over. “Safe travels to the exit.”

The woman darts a nervous glance at us before scurrying toward the exit,

and I take her place.

The shopkeeper smiles, his wizened face folding like origami around his mouth and eyes. “How may I be of service?”

“Philip?” I reach out to grab his cheek and tug it out like taffy. “What the hell are you doing running a shop in the Bone Yard? Does Julian know you’re doing this?”

Philip is an imp we hire for odd jobs when we need a shapeshifter. But after he got squashed between buildings during a fight that had broken out, he’s made himself scarce.

I assumed that Julian, the previous owner of HelloHell Delivery and now the Ambassador for the Others, had stashed him away somewhere far from danger. But this is *worse* than a clutch full of harpies out for blood.

Philip slaps my hand away, and his wrinkles smooth out to reveal a bland-looking, brown-haired man in his early twenties with a baby face. “Of course, he knows I’m here. Half this shit is his.”

My gaze sweeps over the items on display. “And the other half?”

“Things people bring in for trade, or that Adie and the demons of destruction find during their travels.” He grabs a spiky, purple rock off the counter and an upside-down flower pot. “Check this out.”

He places the rock on the mat in front of him, then covers it with the pot.

Grinning, he says, “It will be fast, so don’t blink.”

He whips the pot away, and for a heartbeat, an alien-looking creature stares up at us, like amethyst come to life, before it curls in on itself and turns back into a rock.

“I have to keep it under a lamp when I close shop, or it scurries away and takes forever to find. Apparently, a bigger version of this got into their house and little Storm tried to befriend it.” Philip sets the pot aside. “So, what can I do for you?”

I pull out the picture of Jimmy Lewis and hold it up for Philip to see. “We’re looking for this guy, presumably dead. He came to the Bone Yard with a pocket full of angel feathers.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember him.” Philip reaches under the counter and pulls out a steel box. Using a key attached to his belt, he unlocks it and flips it around to reveal four white feathers tipped in vibrant red. “Guy had no idea what they were worth. I gave him twenty thousand for all four and sent him on his way.”

Darius reaches out to touch one. “They’re real.”

Philip snaps the lid closed. “Damn straight, and I already have a buyer, so don’t get your fingerprints on them.”

Philip can sell *each* feather for fifty thousand, so it’s no wonder he’s protective.

His eyes narrow on us with suspicion. “You weren’t hired by the incubus these came from, were you?”

“No, we were hired by the wife of the guy you ripped off.” I flick the picture in my hand. “Any idea where he went to after he left here?”

“Man was pretty hard up. Looked like he was coming down off something.” The bell at the door jingles to announce a new arrival. “He asked where he could get a little puff. I directed him to the Poison Frog.”

Puff is the street name for *genicae* in vapor form. The drug had hit the streets as soon as Others came out in the open, selling a magical experience to regular humans.

It fell out of use fast, though, because of the terrible side effects. But it keeps popping up every so often, and it’s not surprising that it can be found here, where nothing is off limits.

“The Cellar is under the Poison Frog,” Darius murmurs. “If we go there without greeting Nickodemus first, he’ll take it as a slight.”

“Well, we can’t have that.” I turn toward the exit. “Let’s go speak to the Terror from Beneath.”

lost zombies

- Flint -

AN HOUR after leaving behind the smoking remains of Henry & Sons, I spot a pair of black vans sitting on the side of the highway and pull up behind the nearest one.

I send my magic sweeping forward, touching briefly on the five people inside to make sure Trent and his people hadn't been waylaid and replaced with more of Berdherst's men.

When the souls waiting for us are familiar, my shoulders relax.

While I had scrubbed the magic off the license plate, there's no way for us to know if other trackers were put on our vans, which means Lia and the kids are no longer safe with us.

So we called in the only backup we trust to finish this job for us.

I turn to Lia. "This is where we part ways. I'm sorry we couldn't get you settled in person."

"You've already done enough." She pats her large purse, where she stashed the portal gun I gave her. "We'll take it from here."

Throat tight, I hop out of the van, and Anny scrambles onto my seat from the back and leaps out beside me.

My hand settles automatically on her head, and a surge of ley line energy rises to my fingertips, calling to the well of magic inside me.

Trent jumps out of the van nearest us and squints. "Is that your familiar, Flint, or did you trade your fox in for a dog?"

Pride shoots through me that my illusion fooled even someone who knows about Anny. It took a lot of trial and error to extend the glamor I use on my face to encompass Anny's entire body. But now when people look at her, they see a Shiba Inu.

"Nope, she's still a fox under there." I stride forward to meet him at the

back bumper. "Thanks for meeting us halfway."

The man's salt-and-pepper beard splits with a grin, and he claps me on the biceps. "Anything for our old friends."

Savannah slides the side door open, hops out, and straightens, the top of her closely cropped black hair reaching the top of their work van. "Where are the babies?"

"They're not babies." I eye the black tattoos on her bare arms, nearly invisible against her dark skin. "Don't give them any ideas. They're still impressionable."

She rubs her hands together, her biceps bulging, and strides to the side of my van to open the door.

Elizabeth pokes her head out of the driver's window of the van farther down the road. "Should I turn around to make unloading and reloading easier?"

At my nod, she pulls out onto the empty highway to perform a quick U-turn and backs onto the side of the road with the noses of the black vans now touching.

Marc drives up a few minutes later and cruises past us to pull in behind her.

"Jerry, wake up and get a hustle on!" Trent barks out. "We need to be back on the road in thirty minutes!"

A small, lanky man tumbles out of Elizabeth's van and strides over to help Marc open the back doors.

While they work, Lia settles the kids in Trent's van. The adrenalin from the fight at the old gas station, followed by a sugar overload, has left them cranky and half asleep.

Hopefully, they'll sleep through the rest of this journey and wake up safely in their new home. If not, then Savannah will keep them entertained.

Anny chases after them, scrambling into the van to get more pets before she loses her rapt audience.

I hop back behind the wheel to turn my van around.

Trent pops open the back doors and grabs a box, and I hurry around to help him.

Since I was transporting the kids, there are far fewer items to transfer, and we make quick work of it. Once we finish, we walk toward the other car to help them.

As we pass Trent's van, the sound of laughter drifts out.

Trent smiles. "Savannah's good with kids. She'll keep them riled up so they sleep hard tonight and won't have to think about why they had to move."

"It's your funeral." I shake my head. "You have a long drive ahead of you."

He lifts a shoulder. "We got nothin' else to do. After taking down the Hive Queen, everything else feels mediocre."

"You can always come to Clearhelm." I glance back toward the van. "Savannah can have a teaching job at the Conservatory. She'd put more than a few of those stuffy old farts in their place."

He gives me a considering look. "You really want her terrorizing the place?"

I shrug. "No skin off my teeth. I'm nearly hands-off, now. She can be Headmaster Xander's headache. I think she'd get along with Reese."

"And what would the rest of us do?" Trent scrubs a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "Me and Elizabeth are getting old, but Jimmy's still young."

"I'm sure we can rustle up some imp-collection jobs for him." I straighten and turn to Trent. "Or, he can take on the ghost tours people are constantly hounding me to do."

Trent frowns. "Jimmy can't see ghosts."

"But can he tell a good ghost story?" At his nod, I wave the other part away. "People don't really want to see ghosts. They want to be titillated and scared. He'd do fine."

"Might be nice to take a break from monster hunting for a while." He strokes his beard. "Can't say it would be a permanent thing, but a little vacation to relax would be nice."

"Talk it over with the others." I jog ahead to grab the stuffed bunny from the back of the van and retrace my steps to the other van.

Leaning through the open door, I pass the bunny to Aediva, who clutches it to her chest. She sits in the back next to Lia, with Alaska beside her, while Star and Trevor have the center bucket seats.

Savannah squats in the space between the front driver's and passenger seats, facing the group.

I sweep an assessing glance over them. "Everyone all buckled up and ready to go?"

A chorus of affirmatives rise from the kids.

I give them a stern stare. "And you'll listen to what Ms. Savannah says, right?"

Savannah cracks her knuckles, and more affirmatives fill the air.

“No fighting once you get to your new home,” I add. “There are plenty of rooms to choose from, and they’re all good.”

“Get on with you.” Savannah makes a shooing motion. “We got this handled.”

Not ready to leave them, I linger at the door. “You have my number if anything goes wrong?”

A warm hand grips my shoulder, and Marc drawls, “Come on, pretty boy, say goodbye or you’ll be fretting all day.”

“I’m not fretting,” I protest.

“Yes, you are.” He clicks his tongue. “Let’s go, Anny.”

She hops around giving all the kids wet kisses before bouncing out of the van to join us.

Marc pulls me away from the open door. “It was good seeing you again, Lia. Bye, kids.”

As Marc leads me away, I hear Star whisper, “Do you think he’ll teach me how to shoot? That was so cool.”

“No, he won’t,” Lia says firmly.

“I can teach you something better than shooting,” Savannah boasts.

Alarmed, I turn back toward them, but Marc tightens his hold, steering me toward my van.

He stops next to the driver’s door. “What are we going to do about the possible trackers?”

“They’ll know we stopped here, so there’s no point in giving them the runaround.” My hand drops absently to the top of Anny’s head. “They know where we live, too, so no point in hiding that, either. We can do a full scrub down and have Xander come over to check for more spells.”

“Or you could check for spells.” Marc glances down at Anny. “You’ve been improving.”

I shake my head. While I’ve been working more on what I can do now that I have direct access to the ley line again, my specialty will always be with souls. “I don’t trust myself not to miss something.”

Marc purses his lips but doesn’t push. “Then get Xander and Reese to work up some kind of magic-detecting bug searcher. We can’t call him out every time we leave the house and risk getting tagged again.”

“They’ll have fun with that.” I open the door and wait while Anny scrambles inside. “I want to stop by the Woo Woo Squad to check on the

sleepers before heading home. Want to come?"

He shudders. "They creep me out."

I climb up into the van. "They're just lost."

"They're zombies, and not the good kind you make." Marc grabs the door before I can shut it. "Wait until I'm behind you."

I stiffen. "You know I can take care of myself."

"I do, but I've always had an easier time with death than you." He touches my scarred cheek through the glamour. "Just because you can rip out people's souls doesn't mean you have to. Leave the killing to me if we get caught up again, okay?"

I narrow my eyes and give him an assessing look. "How are you doing? You wielded a lot of fire back there. Do your insides feel charred?"

There's a reason fire witches rarely make it to adulthood, and Marc was throwing around a lot of magic back at the gas station.

He touches the amulet hidden under his shirt. "Nope, this baby has me covered better than Darius ever did."

I open my mouth, then close it and nod.

Marc smirks. "Still not going to ask?"

We've all seen Darius coming and going from Marc's room, but no one has had the guts to question what's happening behind closed doors. "Not my business."

"No, it's not." He steps back and grasps the edge of the door. "Wait until I'm behind you."

As he closes the door, I turn on the engine, then wait while he jogs to his van and performs a U-turn.

As I pull onto the road in front of him, I glance over at Anny. "What do you think they're doing at night?"

Her ears prick forward.

"You're no help." I stare out the windshield.

I don't care if the two men are fucking, but what if Marc's letting Darius into his body at night? He only just got his mind back to himself.

What if Darius decides he likes Marc's body better than his corporeal form and runs off with him again? If the Fox God hadn't shown up, who knows how long it would have been before Marc escaped his control and returned to us?

Anny lets out a sharp bark.

"I'm *not* fretting." I glance over at her once more. "Should we use this

drive to find a better name for you? What do you think of Daphne? That's appropriately mystical."

Standing, she climbs between the seats and into the back of the van.

"Don't think that will stop me, Demeter!" I call out and hear her chuff of annoyance. "We have a lot of Greek names to get through!"

In answer, she starts to howl.

It's going to be a *long* drive back.

At Clearhelm's border, Marc and I part ways.

He takes the winding road that runs along the town line toward our cabin while I pop onto Main Street and drive to the other side of the city, toward New Clearhelm and the Joint Task Force of Paranormal Investigations.

The new development had seen a couple of hard hits recently, but the shop owners bounced back quickly, determined to make the most of the profit they could turn in the area.

I use my badge to access the underground parking garage, then pull out the bright yellow *Service Dog* vest I picked up for Anny and flap it in the air.

She comes bounding back into the front seat, her tail wagging so hard her entire back end shakes.

"Sure, *now* you're excited to be up here with me." I drape the vest over her and fasten the buckles in place. "Remember, no creepy laughing. You're a *dog*."

Her mouth drops open, and she pants happily.

I rub her pointed ears. "Good job, Orianna."

She lets out an excited bark.

Shocked, I stare at her for a heartbeat before repeating, "Orianna?"

She barks again and wags her tail.

A smile spreads over my lips, and I breathe, "Good old Latin. So *that's* why you're so acceptive of Anny. What do you think of Ori?"

Her tail stops wagging.

"Rian?" I try.

Her lips peel back to show her canines.

I sigh. "Fine, but we're telling Pen that Anny no longer stands for *annoying*."

She lets out a happy bark.

I push open the van door and then flatten myself against the seat when Anny—no, *Orianna* launches herself at the opening.

She lands on the ground and circles herself before facing me, again with the open mouth panting.

“We’re going to watch more dog videos when we get home.” I hop out to join her. “You need some character references for your acting.”

Once I lock up the van, we walk to the elevator, and I use my badge to take us down to the Ward.

There are two levels of holding cells at the Woo Woo Squad. Those for the standard lawbreakers and those for the beings too dangerous and difficult for the Joint Task Force of Paranormal Investigations to contain.

We had helped set up the Ward when it was built and had convinced the local coven leader at the time to reinforce it. Hence the name.

The victims of the Hive Queen aren’t actually dangerous enough to qualify for the Ward, but there are too many of them to take up the cells one level above, and the JTFPI doesn’t see nearly as many big bads as they have cells for them.

As the elevator descends, my stomach rises, then drops when it stops just as quickly.

Gods, I understand sometimes being in a rush to get to the holding cells, but a body can never get used to that.

I run my badge over the electronic reader again to verify that I’m allowed to be down here. Only those who are immune to mind tricks are supposed to come down to the Ward, but I have special clearance.

I hurry my steps down the long hall, and *Orianna* whines as she presses closer to my side.

I pet the top of *Orianna*’s head. “It’s okay, girl. It protects us, too.”

This part of the prison is buried deep beneath the ground, surrounded by running water and built within the node of a ley line, with spells carved into the cement of the foundation and walls, powered constantly by the very node surrounding it.

The hall opens into a small room with a guard desk and a second entrance behind it that blocks access to the cells.

Two guards sit at the desk, and the one nearest the door gives me a wave of greeting. “Here to see the zombies again?”

“Yep.” I scribble my name onto the sign-in sheet. “Cell five.”

“You’ve been visiting that one a lot.” He passes me a temporary access key. “Do you really think you can help them?”

“I won’t know without trying.” I take the key and head toward the door.

When the guard buzzes me through, I push it open, and silver sigils glitter in my periphery as I step through.

The spells carved into the metal will only activate if something breaks out of one of the cells. They’re a last resort and result in total annihilation, which means it takes both guards to activate them.

Thankfully, they haven’t been needed yet.

I pass the interrogation rooms and stop in front of cell five to run my temporary badge over the scanner attached to the wall.

The woman inside lies on a hospital bed, staring vacantly at the ceiling. Machines keep her nourished and monitor her vitals, but so far, we haven’t found a way to bring any of them back.

She’s one of a handful of people who were infected by the Hive Queen, her body changed by the venom the monster injected into her, turning her into a mindless drone.

Those who hadn’t yet succumbed to the Hive Queen’s sting miraculously healed after her death, while those who were only recently converted returned to their former selves after several weeks.

But the oldest of them remain frozen inside their bodies.

I pull up a chair beside the hospital bed. “Hello, Katheryn, it’s Flint again. Let’s see if we can find you today.”

Closing my eyes, I stretch out my magic and find only a void where her soul should be.

With a deep breath, I sink into the darkness.

team effort

- Sharpe -

MAYN HANDS me a coffee as soon as I step through the door at the Joint Task Force of Paranormal Investigations, then falls into step beside me.

My siren partner isn't allowed to come with me to the weekly meetings at the Clearhelm Police Department, but she's always waiting when I return.

I give her a nod of thanks and chug half of the cup, the scalding contents hitting my empty stomach to ease the ache of hunger. But it can't ease the burn of anger over what just happened.

After making their ridiculous demands, the meeting dragged on with the same mundane discussions that I force myself to sit through every week in a show of toeing the line.

But what's the point in playing nice when the others obviously meet behind my back to scheme about ways to take me down?

I knew publicly pulling Chief Lynch to my side after our victory over the Hive Queen would have repercussions, which is why I've been keeping my head down and jumping every time he barks.

But I hadn't expected him to weaponize my lover against me. I can't even call him out on it, because I'm the one who keeps saying that my personal life and my professional use of the Cleaners are completely separate.

The metal detector goes off as I stride forward without taking off my gun and head through the squad room at a fast pace, my jacket flapping behind me.

A few officers call out a greeting, and I lift a hand in response without slowing until we reach my office.

There, I unlock the door and force myself to maintain my calm when all I want to do is throw it open and let it slam against the wall.

Mayn follows me into the room, her black eyes fixed on me as she closes

the door. “Did the meeting not go well, sir? Is it another budget cut?”

“No.” I loosen the tie at my throat and yank open my desk drawer to pull out antacids. “No budget cuts. We’re actually getting an increase.”

She cocks her head to the side. “Why are we angry about this?”

Ignoring the question, I pull my phone from my pocket to check for messages but find none.

Pen and Darius had set out hours ago for the Bone Yard. Hours in which I was forced to sit and nod with a smile on my face while my people went into danger.

Darkness slithers through my thoughts about how I would like to deal with the new mayor, Chief Lynch, and especially Captain Bailey, who is the mastermind behind all of this.

My hand tightens around the bottle of antacids until my knuckles ache.

If I could just make them all disappear...

The tension around the antacids abruptly vanishes, my nails hitting my palm, and I quickly open my fist to find my hand empty.

Shit. This has been happening more and more lately.

I flex my fingers, then check my pockets and find the bottle next to my keys.

“Sir?” Mayn asks.

I pull the bottle out and study it before popping the top off to shake out two pills. “The city council wants to start a new project that will draw in tourists.”

“Tourists, sir?” Mayn comes up beside me. “Why would tourists come to Clearhelm? There is nothing here to see.”

“We’re ground zero for the Resurgence.” I toss the pills into my mouth and chase them with the rest of my coffee. “Now that people have settled down about the Others, they want to start capitalizing on this being where it all started.”

Mayn shakes her head. “I do not understand.”

I throw my cup into the wastebasket next to my desk, then turn and rest my butt against it to face my partner. “They want to open the Bone Yard to tourists.”

She blinks, her dual eyelids shuttering over her black eyes. “People will die. The city will be sued. This will be a revenue loss, not a gain.”

I pick up a pen from my desk and squeeze it in my fist, focusing on the dark slither inside me, and it vanishes from my hand with intention this time.

“Not if we clean it up first.”

Her braid ripples in its tight coil on her head, and a pin bounces to the ground. “We, sir?”

“Yes, we.” I draw the pen from my pocket and toss it back onto my desk. “Pen and Darius have already gone to request an audience with Nickodemus to see if he’ll help.”

More pins bounce to the floor. “The king of boogeymen has no reason to help open the borders of the Bone Yard.”

“He won’t have a choice.” I clench my teeth as anger turns the coffee in my stomach to acid. “If he won’t share the Bone Yard with humans, then Pen and Darius will be tasked with destroying it. And if they do that, we’ll become the targets for every demon in Clearhelm.”

Mayn’s braid breaks free to whip around her shoulders.

“Either way, the JTFPI is expected to be outside the wall to back them up or capture any demons who try to flee the destruction.” I scrub a hand over my face. “We promised to *protect* Others, the same as any citizen of Clearhelm. How am I supposed to go out there now and tell my people we may be part of a slaughter?”

Mayn takes a step closer. “Pen and Darius agreed to this course of action?”

“Pen argued for negotiating a compromise. The mayor initially wanted the entire Bone Yard cleaned up, but Chief Lynch agreed to only a section if it can be made safe.” I pull out my phone and check it again for messages. “I was hoping to hear from them before we meet with Captain Bailey’s people.”

My partner stiffens. “We are working with Captain Bailey again?”

I understand her reticence over the idea. Every time we partner up with him, shit hits the fan. Bailey demands absolute loyalty from his officers, and he likes to counter my demands just to prove he’s still the one in power.

“Since this is a large task we were assigned, Chief Lynch has ordered Captain Bailey to loan us some of his officers.” I meet her eyes. “I’d like your help in sorting through the potential candidates. If we’re going to be forced into this merger, we might as well make the best of it.”

She snaps to attention. “I am at your service, sir.”

“I thought you’d say that.” I straighten from my desk. “The first wave will be here soon, so let’s go greet them.”

“Thank you for coming on such short notice.” I nod at the officers as they file into our station. “Please, leave your cell phones at the security desk and go to meeting room two. There are cupcakes and coffee waiting. Take one and find a seat.”

Beside me, Mayn dips her pointed chin and murmurs greetings as each man and woman passes.

Everyone Bailey sent over is at the end of their shift for the day and unhappy to be delayed in going home. Hopefully, the cupcakes will help make them less grumpy.

The next round of people will arrive in thirty minutes, as they’re directed to report here before starting their shifts. It was the easiest way to pick people while disrupting the scheduled patrols as little as possible.

I’m surprised so many came. I expected Bailey to send over his worst or most loyal officers, regardless of Chief Lynch’s directive. Maybe I’m not the only one being evaluated, though I hold no illusions over which way the wind blows.

When the last officer disappears into the squad room, I turn to Mayn. “Ready?”

She gives me a closed-toothed smile. “Of course, sir.”

I turn on my heel and return to the squad room, striding toward meeting room one.

The majority of the officers mill around the room, cupcakes and coffees in hand as they talk amongst themselves.

When we enter, they turn to face me with wary expressions on their faces.

“Please,” I gesture to the chairs set up. “Have a seat.”

“Remain in place,” Mayn murmurs behind me.

Three people start forward before stopping when they notice the rest of the officers in the room remain frozen.

I beckon them forward. “Please, take your seats. The rest of you may leave.”

“You may go,” Mayn murmurs, releasing them from her siren spell.

The three officers who remain, one woman and two men, take seats and exchange nervous glances.

I lean against the desk at the front. “Did you come to the wrong room because you can’t follow directions?”

“I saw the others coming in here and thought I’d misheard the room number,” says one man, and the other two nod in agreement.

“How long have you been with Captain Bailey’s department?” I ask.

The woman pulls back her shoulders. “Three years, sir.”

“Nearly five for me, sir,” the man on the left says. “I joined after the Resurgence.”

“One year for me, sir,” the youngest of the group announces.

“And were all of you sent for testing before being given your badges?” I watch their expressions.

“We’re not Others, sir.” The woman’s gaze darts to Mayn. “Not that there’s anything wrong with being an Other.”

Both men nod in agreement, and the older one speaks up. “We’ve all been certified as human, sir. You can check our records.”

Yes, I’m sure their records will match what they claim, but Bailey is supposed to have them take another test to check for magical resistance, which all three officers obviously possess.

These people should have been assigned to me the second they graduated from the academy, not put under Bailey.

I had long suspected the tests were skewed to keep my department small, but suspecting and knowing are two entirely different beasts.

“Okay.” I motion for them to stand. “Bring your things to meeting room two, where you should have gone originally.”

Mayn opens the door and leads them across the hall, where we find five more officers waiting with looks of confusion and annoyance on their faces.

Eight officers, just from the first shift.

I grit my teeth to suppress my anger. It’s not their fault Bailey rigged the system.

As the three officers settle onto empty chairs, I slide behind the desk and open the folder waiting there. “Please, introduce yourselves, starting from the front left row.”

As the officers stand and give their names and ranks, I write them onto the paperwork in front of me in triplicate and sign the bottoms.

When the last officer sits down, I pass a copy of each form to Mayn, who hands them out, along with thick booklets.

The woman from earlier reads hers and frowns. “Sir, I don’t understand.”

I rise and move to stand in front of the desk. “Congratulations, detectives. You have just passed your magical resistance qualification.”

She shakes her head. “No, I failed that test when I took it.”

With varying levels of confusion on their faces, the others all nod in

agreement.

“I assure you that whatever test you failed before was not the magical resistance qualification.” I press my hands on the table behind me to stop them from curling into fists. “Every one of you was given two directions when you arrived. One from me to go to room two, and one from my partner, Lieutenant Mayn, to go to room one. Those who could resist Lieutenant Mayn’s order withstood a siren using Voice.”

All eyes jump to my inhuman partner.

“So, once again, congratulations.” I give them a hard stare. “You have just officially joined the Joint Task Force of Paranormal Investigations, not on loan, but as permanent officers.”

As they start protesting, I head for the door. “Review your handbooks while I test the next round of officers.”

Mayn follows me out, shutting the door on their questions. “A healthy haul, sir.”

“Let’s hope our next hunt nets us an equal number.” I grin at her. “And get those documents to O’Hara. I want them filed before Captain Bailey gets wind of this.”

She smiles back, showing a hint of sharp teeth. “Right away, sir.”

into the grave

- Pen -

THE POISON FROG was a bar in its previous life and embraced the demon takeover with enthusiasm, leaving its doors open even during the worst of the riots.

Now, it thrives as a gathering place for beings from all walks of life, demons and witches swilling questionable alcoholic beverages alongside humans who have won the right not to be killed on the spot.

As we approach, a sense of vertigo strikes as my eyes struggle with the level sidewalk and the tilting building. Only a few feet of space separates the bar from its neighbor on the right, but as it rises, the wall leans to the side until the two roofs press against each other at the top.

The exterior of the building, once painted a cheery yellow, now holds a poisonous, green tint from the slime that leaks from the siding, and the torn, red awning flaps in an ozone-laden breeze.

Through the cracked windows, I make out a warped view of the beings packed inside. Those who don't fit spill out onto a section of sidewalk cordoned off by a thick rope to designate a patio.

Music and laughter spill out of the open front door where beings hover, hoping to grab a free spot inside.

As we near, a breeze carrying the stench of bodies packed too close together mingled with stale alcohol assaults us.

Suddenly, I'm grateful that we need to greet Nickodemus first. If we tried to push our way through that crowd to the bar counter, it could get us killed.

Darius leads me past the main entrance and into the alley, and within a few paces, the pressed-together roofs cut off the sunlight. The stench of stale alcohol increases, and my shoes stick to the ground, every step forward accompanied by a sticky ripping sound.

A cellar door on the side of the building stands open, the wooden cover propped open by a metal pipe.

Darius raises his hand, and fire flares to life on his fingertips, illuminating the way down beneath the Poison Frog.

At the bottom of the stairs, a solid steel door without a handle blocks entry into The Cellar.

Darius lifts a hand and knocks.

A slit at eye level opens, and poisonous, yellow eyes stare out at us. “Do you have an appointment?”

“Darius of Fumontis and Lady Merripen Cay here to see the Terror from Beneath,” Darius announces.

“One moment.” The panel slams shut.

I turn to watch the stairs leading to the surface level, one hand on the baton at my belt. This rickety set of steps could easily transform into a kill box if the wrong demon notices we’re down here waiting like sitting ducks.

“Will Nickodemus see us without an appointment?” I ask in a low voice, aware of how sound travels.

Darius’s hot hand touches my back. “Curiosity will get us through the door, but we may have to deal with some theatrics so we know our place in his kingdom.”

After several minutes pass, a clunk sounds from within, and the door swings outward, forcing us back onto the stairs to make room. A scent of damp earth sweeps out of the space beyond, and flickering light illuminates the entry.

The same yellow-eyed demon glares down at us, towering above the door frame. Gray skin clings to its androgynous, skeletal body, and stringy, black hair hangs to its shoulders.

Its nostrils flare, and its lower jaw unhinges to reveal three rows of sharp teeth, letting us know we face a fully grown boogeyman.

Long, triple-jointed fingers curl toward us, the black claws at their tips wickedly sharp, while the mouth below its protruding ribcage hisses, “The Terror from Beneath will see you.”

The fire in Darius’s hand snuffs out, and he steps forward, forcing the boogeyman to take a step to the side, away from me. “We are honored by his magnanimity.”

My gaze sweeps over The Cellar as we walk farther inside. The space is little more than a large room carved out of the earth beneath the bar above,

with heavy wooden beams supporting the structure.

The earth under my shoes gives with every step as we walk in a circuitous path around small hills of dirt. I frown at the number of mounds. We're not early enough in the day for so many boogeymen to be slumbering.

The flickering light in the room comes from candles mounted to the rough-hewn beams, which makes it difficult to count how many boogeymen there are. Deep pockets of shadows against the walls speak to more dwellings within the earth.

The king of the boogeymen lounges in a pocket of shadows at the back of the room, his large body sprawls across a rug made of human hair draped over a mound of bones.

He looks much like our escort, though he attempts to humanize himself by wearing a fitted black shirt that ends at his rib cage and a pair of slacks that do nothing to hide the sharp protrusions of his joints.

"Ahh, the royal couple, back together again. How delicious," the mouth in his stomach hisses.

He bares his front row of teeth at us in greeting. "It has not been long since you last came begging for favors, Darius of Fumontis, and with Lady Merripen at your side. Have you done away with the fire witch, then?"

Darius bows at the waist, dipping a few inches. "Greetings, Terror from Beneath. You humble us with your acceptance of our unannounced visit."

"Such empty words from such pretty lips," his lower mouth hisses.

"I agree. Court flattery has no place here." Nickodemus strokes his pointy ribs. "Be blunt about your business. I expected you months ago. That it took so long for you to come leaves me annoyed."

Darius straightens with uncertainty. "We did not have a reason to come until today."

"Not you, perhaps." Nickodemus's yellow eyes shift to me. "But *you* did. And that police captain of yours."

"We were only informed of the city's intention this morning," I tell him. "And we came directly to the Bone Yard."

"But there were whispers." He tilts his head to the side to study me. "You had an inkling. Your captain had more than that."

I pull back my shoulders. "If we acted on every inkling, we'd be chasing shadows with no end."

"No, instead you chase demons that are not demons." Before I can question that statement, he waves one clawed hand through the air. "Go

ahead. Enthrall me with your negotiation skills.”

This is not how I expected our meeting to go, and I take a deep breath to recenter my thoughts. “The council of Clearhelm would like to make a small part of the Bone Yard safe for humans. It will draw more money into the city, and by default, more business to this district.”

The mouth in Nickodemus’s stomach cackles. “There’s nothing that stops humans from entering the Bone Yard. Let them come.”

“They would like assurances that a modicum of safety will be promised,” I add.

“You wish to tame our streets,” Nickodemus sneers. “Do humans not have enough of the world to themselves? Why do they need our few blocks?”

“They would say that the demons who live here have stolen the land, and they are willing to concede it if you make a small part more hospitable,” Darius murmurs.

That’s a nicer way than I would have put it, which is why he lasted so long as a court guard.

Nickodemus chortles. “One could say this land was already stolen. It is a matter of one pirate taking another pirate’s treasure, with no regard for the lawful owners.”

“They are willing to destroy the Bone Yard,” I say bluntly.

“Ah, yes.” His long legs drop to the earth, and he leans forward, his yellow eyes gleaming. “Now *this* is more like it. You should have simply started with the threat.”

I slip my hands into my pockets. “It is not the path we wish to take.”

“I seem to remember the pair of you quite enjoyed destroying towns back in the day.” His face splits in half with a sharp-toothed grin. “I quite enjoyed those times, too. So much terror. We hardly needed to leave our kingdom to hunt with all the fear in the air.”

“Is that your answer?” I demand. “You’d rather see this sanctuary burned to the ground than make some concessions?”

“And there you reveal your hand. *Sanctuary*.” Derision fills his voice. “This is squalor, Lady Merripen. Do not paint this place with your hopes of a future. If you do not destroy us, we will do so ourselves soon enough.”

Darius nods. “Without some form of rule in place, demons will eat each other until there is nothing left.

“Just so.” Nickodemus clicks his sharp claws together. “There is a hierarchy within the demon plane, rules and regulations that stop us from

destroying each other, unless we want to pay the consequences. But no such thing exists here."

"This is the first step of negotiations." Darius clasps his hands behind his back, reverting to the old habits of a court guard. "This is not just about keeping humans safe within the Bone Yard. We would want to keep the demons safe from humans as well."

"You would bring in the CURSD to keep us safe?" Nickodemus asks, a bit too quickly.

My lips twitch before I force my face back to a passive mask. When I joked that the JTFPI should change the department name to Cops United for Restricting Supernaturals Department, I never thought the demons would latch onto it.

CURSD really does sound more threatening, though, as far as acronyms go.

Darius's head tilts to the side a fraction. "If the Joint Task Force of Paranormal Investigations is what's needed to make this happen without bloodshed, then it will be done."

"What of the fire users?" the mouth in his stomach hisses.

Nickodemus's eyes jump between us. "Yes, will you also be joining the CURSD in protecting us? And the soul man? It is not enough that those who protect the Bone Yard are immune to magic. Not all who live here rely on such things to attack."

Darius dips his chin. "We are working with the JTFPI."

Nickodemus shifts restlessly. "A counsel is required, and an accord must be made with your captain of the CURSD and the Cleaners. Only then can we negotiate."

Caution tickles at the back of my mind. He's far too eager to bring law to this quarter, where previously such measures were ruthlessly dealt a killing blow.

I study his face before I glance back at the mounds of dirt that pepper the floor. "Where are all your children, Terror from Beneath?"

His yellow gaze flicks to me before he rises from his throne to tower over us. "Promises to keep us safe mean nothing. A show of faith is required."

Darius and I step to the side as Nickodemus strides forward and kneels next to one of the mounds.

With clawed hands, he digs through the soft dirt, flinging it to the sides, until a dark hole appears, sloping away from The Cellar.

He sits back on his heels and looks at us. “My children laid down to slumber, and one by one, they never woke. Only one remains.”

The silence around us takes on a different tone, a deafening absence where there should be life.

Is every mound empty like this one? How did it go this far? Why didn't Nickodemus seek help before now? Was he merely biding his time, waiting for the right opportunity to come, so that he wouldn't approach us as a beggar and look weak in front of his kingdom of one?

“Their bodies have vanished,” the mouth in his stomach hisses, “and the terror they wreak no longer haunts the night. They do not return to the demon plane, and they do not come home.”

Nickodemus stares down at the hole, his stringy, black hair hanging over his monstrous face. “Find what is hunting in the Bone Yard, Darius of Fumontis and Lady Merripen, and you will have your wish.”

Darius and I move to the edge of the hole and stare down into the darkness.

Even without the city council's directive, this threat would have to be dealt with. A monster that will steal nightmares is a danger to all.

Darius holds out his hand. “My lady?”

I place my palm within his hot grip and step down into the boogeyman's grave.

under the bone yard

- Darius -

"BE CAREFUL, MY LADY," I caution as we move away from the limited light of the boogeyman's lair. "The ground is uneven."

Merri steps off to the side. "Would you rather take the lead?"

"Yes." I ignore the sarcasm in her tone and step forward as I summon fire to my fingertips.

The spreading light reveals a roughly dug-out tunnel leading several dozen feet forward at a gentle decline before it curves out of view.

Merri runs a hand over the wall and dirt crumbles beneath her touch. "I'm going to be pissed if this thing collapses on top of us."

"Suffocation and being crushed are both horrible ways to die." I shiver as I remember Lady Casira, the demon assigned to administer my punishment for oath-breaking, dealing out both tortures. "I will kill you before I allow you to suffer through either fate, my lady."

Her gaze shifts to me. "Darius..."

"Please, do not look at me with pity." I turn from her to lead the way deeper into the tunnel. "It was a mere blip in the time I have lived. Do not dwell on it."

Merri's hand touches my back. "It was a recent blip, though. We are immortal, not inhuman."

I snort. "Only half of you is human, and I'm not human at all."

Her hand falls away. "You know what I mean. Centuries of existence don't make what we live through now less painful. Or haunting."

The pain in her voice pulls my gaze to her. "What haunts you, my lady?"

"Recently?" Her golden eyes reflect the fire in my hand. "I watched a child cut your heart from your body."

"A sacrifice I volunteered for," I remind her. "It was not unwilling."

Her lips twist with remembered pain. “And then you disintegrated in my arms.”

My heart thumps hard. “You held me?”

“Marc and I both.” She looks away. “We were planning a memorial for you.”

“Ah.” A pleased sigh slips from me to know that the two people I hold most dear wished to celebrate my existence. “I would like to see that very much.”

She chuffs out a laugh. “Memorials are for the dead, and you are not dead.”

“I could lie very still,” I insist. “Will you beat your chest and weep over my prone form?”

She shoves me into motion once more. “I’ll set you on fire if you keep pushing this.”

I peer over my shoulder. “Your flames are a pleasure to embrace.”

The light from my fire dances shadows across her face, making it difficult to see her expression, but I think she blushes.

As an ignis demon, I’m one of the few with whom Merri can entirely let herself go. Even with Marceau, she must be careful not to take too much of his fire, because she can’t feed it back to him at the same rate she can consume it.

But her fire only makes me, a being of flame, more powerful.

Many times in the past, we tested those limits, pushing each other to find the breaking point of our power. We’d been foolish and reckless back then, without the burden of immortality to fall back on.

It’s shocking we made it as long as we did without one of us killing the other.

Until I killed all of us.

Merri’s smoky voice breaks me out of my reverie. “What do you suppose dug this tunnel?”

I pause to raise my hand overhead and study the curved ceiling. “Could be a magabilumis demon.”

“If we had a giant worm problem, half the city would be sunk by now,” Merri says dryly. “Besides, they’re dirt eaters. They wouldn’t be kidnapping boogeymen.”

“A black-market dealer could have gotten their hands on a baby, and it escaped.” I sweep my hand down toward the curved ground. “You have to

admit, this tunnel is rather circular. Most beings who dig through the ground create a level path to walk on.”

“You just want it to be a magabilumis demon so you can set it on fire,” she accuses.

A smile spreads over my face. “Would you rather it eat you by mistake and be shit out its back end?”

“And that right there says this *isn't* a magabilumis demon.” She steps up alongside me to point at the ground. “No shit. And we’d have smelled it before we even climbed into the hole.”

“True,” I relent with disappointment. “You’re correct.”

A magabilumis demon’s excrement has a distinctive earthy odor mixed with bile. And the tunnel would be covered in the sludge leftover from the dirt it consumes. Even after it dries, it leaves traces that differ from the dirt that surrounds us.

Not to mention, magabilumis demons are rare. They cluster up and the bigger ones eat the smaller ones by accident as they move beneath the ground with their maws wide open, consuming anything in their path.

I glance down at the top of Merri’s head. “Well, what tunnel dweller do you think this is?”

“I’m not... What’s that?” She grabs my arm and drags my flaming hand to the left.

The flickering light dances over the earthen walls, illuminating a small white rock embedded into the soft surface.

Merri strides forward to dig it out, sending a shower of dirt to the ground.

I join her and bring my fire closer, shedding the long finger bone into sharp relief.

Merri prods the concave tip. “This isn’t human.”

“No.” Unease curls through me. Any demon who died here should have disintegrated, their energy core returning to the demon plane. “Perhaps a relic from a Hunter?”

The evil witch group likes to use their twisted magic to bind demons to their corporeal bodies and harvest their body parts to use in their spellcraft.

Merri shakes her head. “I don’t feel any energy bound to the bone.”

Demon energy creates our bodies. If there is nothing left, then the bone should not be left, either.

Merri digs her fingers into the soft wall, expanding the hole, but no more bones appear.

Disquieted, we continue farther down the tunnel until we reach a branch.

I walk down each side several feet, lighting the way, before returning to Merri's side. "They both curve farther in, so I can't see where they lead."

She tips her head back, gaze focused on the dirt ceiling. "We should be back near the market right now, which means the tunnel on the right leads toward the wall, where the wards should stop anything from entering or leaving."

"So, the potential dead end first?" I suggest. "It will be faster than having to circle back later."

After a moment of consideration, she nods. "Better not to leave it unexplored, just in case."

My arm aches from holding the flame up, and I call fire to my other hand to give myself some respite. "If I'd known we would be dungeon crawling, I'd have brought a lantern."

"If you..."

I turn back when Merri trails off, and my pulse quickens when the light in my hand reveals her flushed cheeks.

She licks her lips and looks away. "Let's keep going. I'm worried about how long we've been gone without checking in."

Before she can move away, I catch her chin and tip her head up. "If I what?"

She swallows hard. "My glow is better than your small flame."

Turning, I close the distance between us. "You want my fire?"

Her hand presses against my chest. "Whoa, there. Don't make this more than it is. I'm just trying to make things easier on us."

The words coming out of her mouth don't match the flush in her cheeks or the way her golden eyes drop to my mouth. But if my lady needs to pretend in order to let this happen, I'm more than happy to play along.

I sweep my thumb over her cheeks. "How do you want to receive it?"

A quick breath escapes, and her tongue sweeps out to skim her bottom lip.

If I simply kiss her right then, I know in my core that she will allow it.

But then later she could write it off as something I took without permission. And as much as I want to feel Merri's lips once more, I don't want our first kiss after centuries to be stolen.

I bring the fire in my hand closer, offering it to her. "Like this?"

Confusion knits her brow before her expression clears, and she settles her

palm over mine.

My flames eagerly curl around her fingers before sinking beneath her skin.

Her eyes close on a gasp, her head falling back as pleasure and hunger morph her features.

An answering hunger swells within me, and I trace the path of the fire into her body, finding that well within her where her firebird sleeps. Its fiery feathers rustle at the first brush of flame, but the creature continues to slumber, uninterested in such a small amount of fuel.

Around us, the tunnel brightens as a golden glow fills Merri's skin, illuminating the narrow space better than any lantern could have.

Before I'm tempted to give her more, to rouse the beautiful creature within her, I snuff the flames in my hand.

Chest rising and falling quickly, her eyes flicker open, their golden depths liquid with desire. Her hand on my chest curls, nails scratching lightly against my sweater, and she sways closer, drawn by hunger for my flames. But I want her to hunger for *me*.

I weave my fingers through hers and step away, putting distance between us. "Shall we continue, my lady?"

She flinches, returning to her senses, and tugs her hand away. "Yes. We should hurry."

Turning to the side, I sweep a hand toward the tunnel on the right, and she strides past me, illuminating the way.

The deeper we venture, the more the air thickens with a damp, musty scent, the air stale so far from the entrance, and the walls close in around us, suffocating and oppressive.

Eerie silence surrounds us, broken only by our breathing and the sound of dirt bouncing from the walls to scatter at our feet.

I steal a glance at Merri beside me, her face a mask of determination, her jaw set in stubborn resolve. Is she unhappy that I didn't kiss her? I like to think so. But it's more likely she's angry with herself for wanting my lips on hers.

"Shouldn't we have reached the wall by now?" Strain fills Merri's voice.

"Yes," I agree, feeling uneasy. "It hasn't curved enough to lead back into the Bone Yard."

Merri pulls her phone out. "I don't have a signal down here, do you?"

Despite knowing what I'll find, I check mine. "No signal. Should we turn

back?”

Merri’s hand clenches into a fist. “If our wards have been breached, we need to know how far it goes.”

I touch her back. “I will follow wherever you go, my lady.”

We tuck our useless phones away and press on, our fingers brushing against the dry earth.

Smaller tunnels start to branch off from the larger one, and our path becomes twisted as the tunnel turns into a maze that seems designed to confuse.

The turns we take seem promising at first, but they invariably lead us to dead ends, the passageways choked with fallen earth or tangled roots.

We backtrack from yet another dead end, and Merri’s frustration cracks her resolve. “Maybe we *should* turn back. We can try the other tunnel, then return to this one better prepared.”

I gaze back into the shadows of the way we came. “This feels like a job for more than just the two of us. But Nickodemus will not be happy if we return empty-handed.”

She pats her pocket where she tucked away the finger bone. “Not completely empty-handed.”

“True.” Though I don’t think the king of boogeymen will appreciate the distinction.

Merri steps to my side, then moves past, leading the way back.

After a few turns, the tunnel ahead ends in a tangle of roots, bringing us up short.

I touch Merri’s back. “Perhaps we took a wrong turn.”

She nods, but the uncertainty in her eyes holds the same doubt that fills me. We’ve crawled through enough tunnel systems to know how to retrace our steps.

We back up to the last branch in the tunnel and take the open path, crawling through a narrow passage.

Another dozen steps, and we reach a caved-in part of the tunnel.

Merri wipes a bead of sweat from her brow, smudging dirt across her skin. “This is starting to feel purposeful.”

I cup her elbow. “Let’s retrace our steps.”

She nods, and we crawl back through the narrow passageway, only to find the other tunnels now collapsed.

The glow in Merri’s skin brightens with her anger. “We’re being herded.”

I nod in agreement. Something is collapsing the tunnels as we pass, directing us to return to our original path.

But what choice do we have except to allow it and prepare for an ambush?

We move forward, one cautious step at a time, our breaths shallow and quick in the suffocating air.

We reach yet another fork in the tunnels, and Merri stops. This feels like the first fork we came to, but that's impossible. Even with all the twists and turns, I know we're now far away from the Bone Yard.

My best guess says we're beneath the woods along the road that leads toward the New Clearhelm.

Merri turns to me, her expression a mixture of frustration and determination, though I catch a glimmer of vulnerability in her eyes. I want to reach out to her, to offer comfort, but it's no longer my place.

At least for now.

Frustration tightens Merri's voice. "Right again?"

"No reason not to," I agree.

With a resolute nod, Merri strides to the right, and the walls narrow, the earth pressing in from all sides.

The tips of my fingers brush against the wall on my left, and something slithers away.

My hand darts after it, furrowing through the dirt, and I catch what feels like a leathery snake before it slips my grasp.

I reach out and touch Merri's back. "There's something in the walls."

She freezes, even her breathing cutting off.

In the silence, the rustle of dirt comes from behind us, the sound of a tunnel collapsing.

Our eyes meet, and for a moment, it feels like time stands still. Then she spins back around, moving quickly, pushing through the narrow passage.

All at once, the ground beneath us gives way, and we slide down a narrow chute before flying out into thin air and falling dozens of feet.

We crash into a larger chamber, landing on our backs, the ground crunching beneath us. Above our heads, tree roots burst from the walls and ceiling, tangling together to close the hole we fell through.

With a groan, Merri shifts beside me, more crunching filling the air.

"Are you alright?" I climb to my feet and reach out a hand to help her up.

Her hand clings to mine, a fine tremor shaking her body. The urge to pull

her to me, to offer comfort, nearly overwhelms me.

But then her eyes drop to the ground, and she stiffens, pulling her hand from mine. “Well, I think we’ve found Nickodemus’s missing children.”

I peer around us and realize we landed on a pile of bones. The elongated skulls of boogeymen with their multiple rows of teeth rest next to humans and other demonic shapes. I even spot a few akuzal skeletons, their slender legs with taloned feet pointed toward the ceiling.

My gut clenches. “This is a killing ground.”

She spins in a slow circle. “But what is doing the killing?”

“I don’t know, but we need to get out before it comes for us.” I bend and grab one of the boogeyman skulls. “Do you sense any energy?”

Merri touches the skull and shakes her head. “Nothing.” She crouches to touch more bones. “I can’t feel any energy left in these.”

My stomach sinks. “This monster is eating energy as well as flesh.”

The glow in her skin brightens. “How far down do you think we are? Can we burn our way out? Or will that kill us?”

“If it does, I don’t mind dying, if it means escape.” I smile down at her. “At least this time when I come back into existence, you’ll be by my side, and you’ll love me until the others arrive to remind you that you shouldn’t.”

Her face morphs into a scowl. “Stop chasing what we had in the past. Who we were isn’t who we are, so make the current me love you even more desperately than that girl in the past.”

Hope surges through me, and I reach out to cup her cheek, sparking the fire between us. “I *will*, my lady. Just give me time.”

A rustle comes from the shadows in the cavern, and Merri steps closer, shifting to put her back against mine. “You’ll have it if you stop dying for love and instead figure out a way to save our asses.”

out of my element

- Marc -

RAIN LASHES against the sides of the house and creates a metallic tapping against the closed, bay doors of the garage. The storm started sometime while I was using the pressure washer on the van and shows no sign of letting up.

I summon the fire inside me to warm my body against the chill of the concrete floor as I complete the meticulous cleaning of the van's interior. I already finished the exterior, but it's been a while since I did a deep clean, and who knows what spells Mayor Berdherst's henchmen have snuck onto our vehicles?

Better safe than sorry.

When I finally step back and survey my handiwork, a sense of pride fills me.

It took me hours, but the van now gleams under the fluorescent lights, as good as the day we drove it off the lot. I even buffed out the nicks and dings from our road trip. It's been way too long since I spent time in the garage caring for our equipment.

I stretch my arms over my head with a groan, my spine popping and my muscles tight. One downside of no longer sharing a body with Darius all the time is that I now get to experience the minor discomforts of being human.

But there's something to be said about the burn of well-used muscles after a long job.

I strip off my shirt, the material soaked with cleaner, water, and sweat. The cold air hits me, raising goose bumps, but I welcome the discomfort. Stepping out of my rubber boots, I shuck out of my jeans and toss everything into the garage bathroom to drip dry before heading upstairs.

After a long, hot shower, I pull on fresh clothes and head to the kitchen.

The large windows in the living room display a gray sky and a rain-

soaked forest. It feels like night already, with the gray light coming into the cabin, but it's only creeping up on five o'clock.

Everyone should be arriving home soon, so I start a fresh pot of coffee before pulling out vegetables to chop for dinner.

Just as I turn on the stove, my phone vibrates on the countertop.

I wipe my wet hands on a dish towel and grab the phone, only for my gut to clench when I see Meredith's name on the scene.

Pen and Darius should be at the office, so why would our secretary be calling me?

I hit answer and put her on speaker. "Hey, what's up?"

"Have you heard from Pen?" Worry tightens Meredith's voice.

I turn off the stove and move the pan off to the side. "Not since this morning. She's not at the office with you?"

"She and Darius took a missing person's case and were heading to the Bone Yard, but they were supposed to check in with me hours ago." Frustrated typing punctuates the words. "I've been calling and texting, but nothing. This isn't like her."

Pen is meticulous about checking in when she's running a case.

"I'll call Sharpe and Flint," I tell her. "Maybe they've heard from her."

"I hope you have better luck than I did." Fear mingles with her frustration. "Why do we all have phones if no one answers them?"

Without waiting for a response, Meredith hangs up.

I dial Sharpe's number, but it goes straight to voicemail.

My fingers clench around the phone. Today is usually when he's in session with the city council, and they can keep him locked up into the evening with their petty squabbles.

I try Flint next, and again, no answer.

My jaw tightens as I disconnect the call, my mind racing through scenarios I'd rather not imagine.

When I pull up the tracking app on my phone to see if Flint is still at the Woo Woo Squad, I spot both him and Sharpe in the same location. I expand the map, searching for Pen and Darius, but they either turned theirs off or something is blocking their signals.

Throwing the cutting board with the veggies into the fridge, I grab my coat and wallet before heading back down to the garage.

I pull the keys for Darius's sports car from the lockbox attached to the wall. We haven't driven it in a while, so it's unlikely there are any spells

locked onto it.

When I slide behind the wheel and press the button for the bay door, the rain comes down in a solid sheet.

The sports car's engine purrs to life, the sound almost drowned out by the downpour.

As I back out, water sloshes over the windshield. Flicking on the wipers, I carefully navigate up our steep driveway, then down the winding path through the woods to the main road.

Sometimes, living out in the middle of nowhere really sucks.

Once on solid ground, I pick up speed, heading into Clearhelm. Despite the hour, few cars share the streets with me. When I flick on the radio, the weather forecaster predicts flooding in some areas.

Great, just what we need. At least it's keeping sane people inside.

Turning off the main road, I drive toward the Woo Woo Squad. I'll collect Flint from the Ward before pinning down Sharpe to find out why he's not answering his phone if he's already out of his meeting.

When I hit a red light, I tap my fingers impatiently on the steering wheel, the sound a counterpoint to the frantic swish of the windshield wipers.

No cars come from either direction, and after a minute, my patience wears thin, and I speed through the light.

Soon, the buildings of Clearhelm give way to trees on either side of the road. Halfway down the road, something draws my gaze to the right, a sense of someone there, but I can't spot a pedestrian in this rain, and a deep puddle on the road reminds me to focus.

The trees quickly give way to New Clearhelm, and I drive past the businesses that line the street until I reach the Joint Task Force of Paranormal Investigations.

From the outside, it looks like a one-story building, but that's only because most of it is underground.

I pull into a spot in the empty upper parking lot and step out into the rain-soaked air. Instantly, water plasters my clothes to my body, but I ignore it as I stride to the main entrance.

Once under the overhang, I shake off the water outside the doors and send a burst of heat through my body, drying me in an instant.

Stepping inside, I pull my wallet out to pass to the guard at the front desk. "Hey, Tonya, I'm just here to collect Flint from the Ward."

"Hey, Marc." She scans my badge and passes it back before typing away

on her computer. “Looks like he came in through the garage.” She raises a brow at me before glancing toward the windows. “Like any *sane* person would do in this weather.”

I tuck my badge away. “What can I say? I like to step out of my element every so often.”

I scribble my name onto the sign-in sheet and hand it back to her, my eyes lingering on the bustling activity within the squad room. An unusual buzz fills the air, and I spot several unfamiliar faces.

My curiosity gets the better of me, and I lean against the counter. “Quite a crowd today.”

Tonya glances toward the squad room and drops her voice, a conspiratorial twinkle in her eyes. “Sharpe went on a recruitment spree. Rumor says he nabbed a dozen new officers out from under Bailey.”

I whistle softly. Sharpe's been short-staffed since they opened doors five years ago. How did he find so many magic-resistant people in one day?

“Better barricade the door before Bailey finds out.” Bailey and Sharpe's relationship is antagonistic at best, and this won't make things easier between their departments.

She chuckles without an ounce of concern. “We can take him.”

I hope she's right. With a nod, I stride for the security door into the squad room.

Not spotting any officers I'm on speaking terms with, I head straight for the elevator that will take me down to the Ward.

It takes a swipe of my badge to make the button work, and another to get the doors open again after the stomach-rising descent into the bowels of the Woo Woo Squad.

When the doors open, I step out into the white hallway, my steps quick.

The men at the guard desk don't look surprised to see me. This isn't the first time I've had to come to collect Flint when he stayed too long with the zombies. The man gets lost in his search, and time vanishes.

I sign in and receive a temporary key card to the cell Flint is in before heading through the thickly warded door to search out the cell.

I find Flint seated in a plastic chair, his arms loose at his sides and his chin against his chest, his black hair hanging forward to cover the unnatural beauty of his face.

An orange corgi with a *Service Animal* vest paces restlessly beside him. When I step into the room, she lets out a very non-corgi bark, and her tail

starts wagging as she races over.

I drop a hand to the top of her head, feeling long, fox fur despite what my eyes tell me. If Flint can still keep up the illusion on himself and his familiar, then he isn't too far gone, despite the hours he's spent here.

I scratch Anny's ears. "How about we wake Flint up, huh? We have bigger problems than the zombies right now."

As if she'd only been waiting for the excuse, Anny races back to Flint's side and shoves her head against his limp hand.

Flint jolts upright with a startled cry, snatching his hand to his chest.

"Dammit, I was onto something just now." He glares down at Anny. "We've talked about jolting me with ley line magic."

"Better that than fire," I drawl as I join them. "You've been out too long, pretty boy."

Clear, blue eyes lift to meet mine, the thick fringe of black lashes turning them vibrant in his pale face. "Did you come to take me home, mama bear?"

"No." I push his hair back into place, restoring the image of perfection he presents to the world. "We have a problem."

Flint's brow furrows, and his hand absently drops to the top of Anny's head as his gaze sharpens. "What's happened?"

"Pen and Darius missed their check-in." I help Flint stand and steady him while the circulation returns to his legs after sitting too long. "Meredith called me, and when no one picked up their phones, I came to get you."

Flint's eyes widen, a mix of shock and fear crossing his face. "What do you mean, missing?"

His fear mirrors my own. When one of ours vanishes, it never means anything good.

"They haven't checked in, their phones are untraceable, and last Meredith heard from them, they were heading for the Bone Yard," I explain. "I figure finding them will go faster with you in on the search."

Flint's gaze turns distant as he processes the information, his fingers curling into fists at his sides. "Damn right, I'll make the search faster. I'll send every demon in the Bone Yard back to the demon plane, if that's what it takes to find them."

Anny, sensing the tension in the air, leans against Flint's leg with a soft whine.

"I don't think we'll need anything so dramatic." I crack my knuckles. "Though, I won't object to busting some heads together. Come on, I'll drive

while you gather your power for more deep diving.”

“There better be pain relievers and coffee waiting for me,” he grumbles.

I grip his shoulder in comfort. “I have one of the two.”

Wary eyes meet mine. “Please say it’s coffee?”

“We can get some in the break room before we head out,” I promise, and he lets out more grumbles.

The coffee in the break room is notoriously bad, which is why the shop down the street gets good business around the clock.

Leaving the Ward behind, we make our way back up to the main floor of the Woo Woo Squad.

We step off the elevator into chaos, the bustling activity in the squad room having doubled in the short time I was in the Ward.

The new people bunch up around the break room and the conference rooms, looking hoodwinked and still getting their bearings for their new office.

Over their heads, I spot Sharpe’s tall figure and Mayn’s sleek head, giving directions.

Even without calling for Sharpe's attention, his hazel eyes find us through the chaos. He murmurs something to his partner, who nods before he pushes through the crowd.

He stops in front of us, his body blocking the rest of the squad room. “Marc, Flint. What brings you two here?”

“Pen and Darius are missing,” I say. “They went to the Bone Yard and haven't checked in.”

Sharpe’s brow furrows. “How did you two already hear about the Bone Yard directive?”

“Bone Yard directive?” I shake my head. “They were running a missing person’s case.”

Sharpe’s eyes narrow, a flicker of concern passing over his features. “Missing person’s case? No, Bailey, Lynch, and Berdherst pulled a power move in the meeting this morning, and Pen and Darius were sent in to start negotiations for opening the Bone Yard up to tourists.”

“Sounds like they were running two cases at once,” Flint says.

I nod in agreement and relay the information Meredith gave me earlier. Then Sharpe catches us up on his side of things.

“This is a cluster fuck,” I say. “But we can deal with that later. Right now, our people are missing. We’re heading there now to find them.”

Sharpe's lips tighten into a thin line, his gaze flickering between Flint and me. "I was planning to go with a team in the morning, but Mayn can finish organizing shifts while we go now."

Flint shifts restlessly from foot to foot. "Then let's not waste any more time."

"We wouldn't have wasted this much if either of you had answered your phones," I point out, earning irritated glares from both men.

"Where did you park?" Sharpe asks as he turns to wave Mayn over.

"The parking lot on the street," I say.

He nods. "I'll meet you in my patrol car. Just give me five minutes."

We leave him to sort things out and head to the sidewalk outside the Woo Woo Squad, where a lull in the rain allows us to make a break for my car without getting soaked.

The rain kicks up again as I back out and pull onto the street, then park at the curb, leaving the engine idling as we wait for Sharpe to join us.

Within minutes, his squad car drives out of the underground garage, and I pull onto the street, leading the way back into town.

As we leave New Clearhelm behind and enter the tree-lined road, that sense of awareness fills me again, this time more urgent, like sparks pricking at my skin and drawing my magic to the left, into the trees.

Then a rush of fire streaks over me, demanding attention.

I slam on my brakes, and we fishtail on the wet street. Sharpe's car shoots past in a squeal of tires, narrowly missing a collision.

Flint flings a hand out against the dashboard while wrapping his other arm around Anny. "What the hell, Marc?"

"Darius." My heart pounds as realization dawns on me. "I feel him. He's close."

Flint's gaze sharpens, his eyes locking onto mine. "Are you sure?"

I nod and look toward the woods. "Run a check, Flint. See if you can locate them."

"But we're nowhere near the Bone Yard," he protests.

"They're here." I fling open my door and step out into the rain, the blaze in my skin demanding I follow. "I don't know what's going on, but they're not in the Bone Yard. They're *here*, and we need to find them *now*."

inevitable

- Pen -

DARIUS LETS out a shout of frustration as the fire he sends toward the roots snuffs out, and the singed pieces of wood tuck back in on themselves to form a solid barrier once more.

I wipe sweat from my face, the air in the cavern warming with each attempt Darius makes to burn our way out of our prison.

As the last of his flames flicker out, the shadows creep in once more, the only illumination coming from the golden light emanating from my skin. The glow has dimmed over the last hour, obscuring the cave's outer edges, and an ominous rustle of bones emerges from the darkness.

Our initial investigation of the space revealed smooth stone walls, with no roots or vines low enough for us to use as rope even if Darius blasts a hole through the roof. We attempted to dig through the bones but abandoned the effort when we couldn't find a bottom to the pile.

While the disturbingly white bones on top are still fresh, the ones underneath show signs of age, the bones yellowed with time. Whatever monster uses this place as a dumping ground has been at it for a long time.

Far longer than the Bone Yard has existed.

Darius paces back to my side, his fiery eyes clouded with frustration. Dirt and ash dull his bronze skin, and his burgundy hair lies in tangles around his shoulders.

“It’s no use.” His growl reverberates through the cave. “I can’t get close enough to burn the roots without setting the entire room on fire.”

I settle uncomfortably on the skull of an akuzal and prop my elbows on my knees. “Even if you did, there’s no way we can reach it.” My voice sounds tired even to my own ears. “There’s no escape.”

Darius turns to me, his expression a mixture of frustration and

determination. "I won't accept that. Give me more time to figure it out."

I reach into my pocket to check my phone again, but we haven't miraculously found reception since the last time I looked. The only change is that my battery is low.

I tuck my phone away. "What if you discorporealate?"

The idea has nagged at me for a while now. Our only way out may be for Darius to shuck his corporeal body and escape that way. He can take on a new form and return for me.

But he shakes his head. "I haven't tried it yet without—"

When he cuts off, I tilt my head back to find him looking away with a guilty expression.

"I know you and Marc have been sharing a body at night," I say softly. "Did you really think I wouldn't notice that he never comes to my room to sleep anymore?"

Darius's shoulders sag. "I'm sorry, Merri."

"It doesn't bother me if it makes you guys happy." I reach out to catch his hand. "I imagine it's comforting for both of you after you were together for so long. There's no reason to hide it."

He lifts my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles. "You're too understanding."

My pulse quickens, and I clear my suddenly dry throat. "So, you haven't tried discorporealating except for when you join with Marc?"

Darius dips his head in acknowledgment. "It's not the same as simply abandoning a body. The process is slower. I'm not sure where I'll end up if I step out of this form with no other body to move in to. I could be pulled back to the demon plane or to the safe house where our soul stones reside."

I squeeze his fingers. "If you have to kill me, do that and discorporealate. We need to know what will happen to you, and if you're sucked back to the safe house, you'll be there to remind me of who I am."

"I'm not ready to choose that path." He kneels beside me, bringing our clasped hands to his chest. "We're in this together, my lady. We'll find a way out."

I manage a weak smile, the corners of my lips twitching. "We've gotten out of tighter binds."

Amusement lights his eyes. "So we have."

With a heavy sigh, I push myself to my feet. "Okay, so what's the new plan?"

Darius's grin widens, and he rises as well, his broad shoulders brushing against mine. "Well, I have an idea. But you might not like it."

I raise an eyebrow. "Try me."

His gaze drops to the ground. "We pile up the bones so I can get closer to the ceiling, then burn through the roots."

I frown. "But the roots will just heal themselves."

His jaw clenches with determination. "Then I'll keep burning until we create a big enough hole to escape through."

I chew on my lower lip, torn between the knowledge his plan is still likely to fail versus the need to try anything, no matter how unlikely it is to succeed.

"Okay," I say at last. "Where do we start?"

Working together, we gather bones from the outer edges of the pile and stack them in the center. It will be a precarious mound, and Darius will need to work fast once he climbs on top.

It's mindless, tedious work, but at least it keeps us busy instead of focused on the inevitability of our situation.

Sharpe and Meredith both know we headed to the Bone Yard, but there's no way a search party will find us down here. Even if someone retraced our steps to Nickodemus's lair, the boogeyman would have no reason to tell them where we went.

And if, by chance, he sent them into the hole after us, they'd just fall prey to the same trap we did.

All too fast, we run out of bones from the fringes, and taking more from the center area keeps creating small avalanches that threaten our work. When we step back, our new mountain only reaches halfway to the ceiling.

I stare up at our gruesome creation. "Will it get you close enough?"

"It will have to." Darius turns to me. "Once I break through, come up to join me. I'll have to lift you the rest of the way to reach the outside."

Fear roils in my stomach. "Then how will you get out?"

"You'll have to find something to use as a rope." He grips my shoulders. "Worst-case scenario, you get out, and I disincorporate, right?"

"Right." Still uneasy about the plan, I step back.

Darius carefully climbs the mountain of bones, the unstable structure shifting and rocking beneath his weight.

At the top, he carefully stands and raises his arms above his head. Fire rises from his palms, slamming into the roots with more force than he could achieve from the ground.

As the thick roots sizzle and blacken, hope unfurls within me.

This plan might actually work.

Movement from the corner of my eye pulls my attention away from Darius's battle as a human skull bounces off the mound we made, followed by another, and a light tremor rolls through the ground beneath my feet.

"Darius..."

"I'm getting there," he gasps out, his full focus on directing the fire.

The tremor increases, and then a wave of bones heads toward us, as if a giant creature moves beneath them like water.

"Get down from there! It's going to collapse!" I shout as I run across the bones toward the far wall.

Darius's head whips toward me, then his eyes widen when he spots the approaching wave.

His fire cuts off, and he slips and slides down the hill, hitting the ground running.

The wave strikes the hill, throwing bones in every direction just as Darius's body slams against mine, his broad back taking the brunt of the projectiles as he curves around me protectively.

He grunts as bones pummel his body, his eyes closing and his jaw clenching through the pain.

When the bones settle, he slumps forward, his head on my shoulder in defeat. "I'm sorry."

Heart pounding, I slowly wrap my arms around him. "There's nothing to apologize for. Your plan was working until whatever that was went on the attack."

Darius's face turns toward my neck, his lips brushing my racing pulse as he speaks. "I wanted so badly to save you."

My arms tighten around him. "You will."

"I don't know if I'm capable." He releases a ragged breath. "I couldn't even save myself before. I'm no good with traps."

"Darius..." Pain tightens my chest at the vulnerability behind his words, and I gently push him back to gaze up at his face. "You never talk about what happened to you when you were captured by Lord Talkis."

His expression tightens, and his eyes refuse to meet mine. "It was nothing."

The others had told me how they found him in the dungeon, with metal poles driven through his body, then melted to the ground. And that was only

on the day they found him. Darius had been in that dungeon for months, enduring torture for being an oath breaker.

“It wasn’t nothing.” I cup his cheeks. “Talk to me.”

For a moment, I think he’ll refuse, but then he lets out a long sigh, his gaze fixed on the wall at my back.

“It was...hell, Merri,” he admits, his voice rough. “Lady Casira administered my punishment, and she was creative in how she tortured me. She found my ability to resurrect so many times...intriguing.”

I reach for his hands, squeezing them in reassurance. “You don’t have to go into details if you don’t want to.”

He shakes his head, a bitter smile tugging at his lips. “It would have been easier if she had wanted something from me, but all she sought was my pain and death. I tried so many times to free myself, but it was all part of the torture.”

His hands squeeze mine so tight that I lose feeling. “She would leave the box with my summoning stone just out of reach, then loosen the chain enough to make me think I had a chance and watch while I tortured myself in my desperation to escape.”

My heart squeezes painfully. We had left him to suffer that, thinking he was dead. If only we’d looked sooner, he could have been spared.

As if he hears my thoughts, his gaze meets mine. “Your sire came to me once. He was trying to bargain my contract away from Lord Talkis. He told me you all thought I was dead, so I never expected you to come for me.”

Tears burn my eyes for the depth of his suffering. “We did come, the second we found out you were alive.”

“So you did. And threatened the High Council in order to set me free.” Darius gives a wry smile. “And you and Marceau were even planning a memorial for me.”

Sensing his need to change the subject, I force a smile past the tightness in my throat. “Yes, well, you deserved a proper goodbye.”

He chuckles softly, the warm sound stroking over me like the brush of flame. “How would you have memorialized me?”

I lean my head back against the wall behind me. “I don’t know. Maybe built a big statue?”

He leans in closer. “I’ve never had a statue before.”

My pulse quickens. “Marc would have cussed a lot about what a pain in the ass you were.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.” Darius’s eyes soften as he gazes at me. “And you?”

I lick my lips. “It probably would have been something about how you were a skilled hunter and kept your word.”

“Merri,” he chastises softly. His hand cups my cheek, his thumb brushing away a tear that had escaped. “What words would you have given me?”

My walls crumble, and I melt into the heat of his eyes. “That I held on to grudges for too long, and that I should have forgiven you sooner. That you gave mercy in the only way possible. And that you are too honorable for a demon.”

He leans down, his lips a hair’s breadth from mine. “I could be less honorable for you, Merri.”

The warmth of his body sinks into me, melting away my resistance, and I lean forward that last breath. His lips burn against mine, fever hot with centuries of pent-up desires.

He lets me lead for only a heartbeat before his head tilts, his mouth slanting over mine, and his tongue pushes past my lips, greedy for more.

I clutch his shoulders, rising onto my toes so our bodies slot together like puzzle pieces separated by time and finally finding their way home.

A hungry growl rises from his throat, and he presses harder against me, shoving me back against the wall.

His hands drop to my waist, lifting me that last inch to bring our bodies into alignment, and the hard proof of his desire presses against me. He groans and rocks his hips against mine, as if unable to restrain himself a second longer, now that he has my approval.

An answering desperation fills me, and I hook a leg around his waist, needing to feel this man against me. This body, a distant memory, yet so familiar and now real once more. This mouth that tastes of fire and promises to burn.

As if summoned, flames rise from his depths and sweep past his lips to pour down my throat, feeding that well of endless hunger inside me that craves to destroy, to unmake the world and give it new life.

With a gasp, he pulls back, his breaths coming fast as he presses his forehead against mine. “If we continue, we will burn.”

I wrap my arms around his neck, wanting his mouth back on mine. “It is inevitable.”

With a groan, he lifts his head and presses a kiss on my forehead. “I’m

not ready to give up this life just yet. I promised to save you.”

“There’s that pesky honor again,” I grumble in thwarted desire.

“It was inevitable,” he teases, though strain fills his voice.

With a moment to cool my head, I realize he’s right, and as much as my body desires him, in a pit of bones with an unknown monster lurking nearby, now is not the time for such things. I drop my leg back to the ground and release my hold on him.

I smooth back my hair as I will my pulse to slow. “Okay, what’s our new plan?”

His lips part before his head moves up and to the side. “Marceau.”

My brows pinch in confusion. “What about Marc?”

Darius’s gaze goes distant as he focuses on something only he can see. “I sensed him just now.”

“Marc?” At his nod, I grip his arm. “Did you form a bond with him?”

“I don’t know.” His brow furrows in concentration before his shoulders slump. “It’s gone.”

“Try again,” I urge, hope sinking claws into me once more.

Closing his eyes, Darius takes a deep breath and goes still as a statue, searching for whatever connection has forged between him and Marc over their long centuries of sharing a body.

As the minutes stretch on, the hope inside me wavers.

Then Darius grins, his eyes opening once more. “I got him. He stopped.”

Excited, I fling my arms around Darius. “You’re amazing.”

His arms encircle me. “Don’t praise me yet. We still don’t know if he’ll be able to find us.”

“He will,” I say with confidence. “We always come for each other.”

The ground beneath our feet shifts restlessly, bones bouncing on top of each other.

Darius pulls me closer. “Let’s just hope help arrives before whatever is in here with us gets hungry.”

glow bright

- Flint -

I SCRAMBLE out of the car after Marc, the rain pelting down and flattening my hair to my head in an instant.

Ahead of us, Sharpe's car door slams shut, and he strides back to join us. "What's going on? Why did you stop so suddenly?"

When the fire witch remains fixated on the woods, I shout over the downpour. "Marc says he can sense Darius nearby!"

Sharpe wipes futilely at the water streaming down his face. "Can he do that?"

I shake my head, then shrug. After spending so long cohabitating in Marc's body, there's no telling what kind of bond formed between him and the ignis demon.

Closing my eyes, I sweep my magic out into the woods, skimming over the smaller life forces of animals and insects until I find two blazing souls that strike a chord within me.

My eyes snap open in shock, and I meet Sharpe's gaze. "They're out there. In the woods."

"We can't leave the cars in the middle of the road, or they'll cause an accident." When Marc still doesn't move, Sharpe grabs his arms and gives him a shake. "Pull your car to the side of the road! Then we'll go searching."

Jarred out of whatever trance he'd fallen into, Marc nods and slides behind the wheel.

Sharpe turns and hurries back to his sedan.

While they steer their cars to the shoulder and park, I lead Orianna across the road and take shelter under the trees to get out of the rain.

Shivers wrack my body from the cold, but I push back the discomfort. I'll worry about freezing after we find Pen.

Orianna shakes out her fur, flinging water in all directions, and lets out a sharp bark of displeasure.

Looks like only one of us can grin and bear it.

Sharpe and Marc jog across the wet street, and Marc grabs my arm. “Do you know where they are?”

“Not yet.” I lean against him. “Give me a minute to find them again.”

Marc supports my weight as my magic sweeps out, finding the two shining stars faster this time and locking on.

I open my eyes. “I’ve got them. They’re in the woods not far from here.”

Marc checks his phone, where the tracking app fills the screen. “They’re still not popping up.”

“Maybe they dropped their phones.” Sharpe’s gaze sweeps over the woods. “We have no idea how they got from the Bone Yard to all the way out here.”

“You just focus on getting us to them, pretty boy.” Marc squeezes my shoulder. “Let Sharpe and me keep an eye out for danger.”

Nodding, I plunge into the woods, guided by the beacon of Pen and Darius’s energy sources.

As I walk, the life in the forest around us tugs at my senses, begging for my attention and trying to entice me to look away, to follow other souls.

A headache builds, and I rub my temples to ease the pain. After spending so much time earlier in the black hole that displaced the sleeper’s mind, I find it harder than usual to focus.

Fat drops of rain make it through the canopy of leaves, plopping down on my head and shoulders, the cold bursts shocking me out of my light trance.

Orianna brushes against my leg, and I let my hand fall to the top of her head. The ley line magic that rises to my fingertips helps push back the smaller distractions, making Pen and Darius shine brighter.

Pen’s soul holds more warmth than usual, a sleepy awareness but not yet woken. She’s taken Darius’s fire, though not enough to risk waking her firebird.

I want to be angry about it, but if not for Darius, we would have driven past, and there’s no telling how long it would have taken for us to track them back to these woods.

“We’re near,” I murmur, only half seeing the surrounding trees. “They’re just up ahead.”

Marc raises his voice. “Pen? Darius?”

The noise of the wildlife around us cuts off, leaving only the heavy fall of raindrops and silence.

“Maybe they couldn’t hear you?” Uncertainty fills Sharpe’s voice.

“Or there’s a reason they can’t hear.” Marc steps forward before Sharpe pulls him back.

“We take this smart.” Sharpe moves him back to my side. “If they’re caught in a trap, we don’t want to be caught, too. That won’t help them.”

Marc’s hands curl into fists, but he gives a tight nod, and we continue forward another few dozen feet until we stand right on top of their energy signatures.

I stop and look around in confusion. “This is it.”

Marc spins in a slow circle. “What? I don’t see them.”

I back up a pace and direct my attention to the wet, leaf-covered ground, my heart sinking. “They’re under us.”

Marc grabs me. “What do you mean, they’re under us? Are they alive?”

“Yes, they’re alive.” I shake him off. “If they weren’t, we would have gotten an alert about their rebirths. Calm down.”

“How far down?” Sharpe demands, keeping a more level head.

I focus downward, sifting through tiny pinpricks of energy made up by insects until all signs of life vanish before I reach Pen and Darius once more. “Twenty feet, I think. There’s a void without life. Maybe a cave. But they’re not moving. They must be stuck.”

“Fuck. Okay.” Marc scrapes his wet hair back from his face. “We have shovels and an ax in the sedan.”

Sharpe grips my arm. “Stay here while we go get those. See if you can figure out anything else.”

The two men race off through the woods, retracing our path back to the road.

Stepping back farther, I kneel on the wet ground and spread my magic out before letting it sink into the earth. One by one, I latch onto the hundreds of insects in the ground and summon them to the surface.

The ground in front of me boils as the insects and worms make their way up, loosening the hard-packed soil.

Orianna yips with excitement and darts forward, snapping up a fat earthworm and tossing it into the air before catching it between her teeth.

“This isn’t a buffet for you,” I tell her when she darts in for another.

“What’s going on?” Marc appears by my side and stares down at the

roiling ground.

“I thought I’d soften up the forest floor to make digging go faster,” I explain, “and my rotten familiar is taking it as a chance to glut herself on worms.”

Sharpe comes up on my other side and drops a shovel next to me before looking at Orianna. “Stop eating and start digging. All hands—and paws—on deck.”

“What I wouldn’t give for an Earth witch right now.” I release my hold on the insects.

As Orianna’s snacks burrow back beneath the softened forest floor, she whines and paws at the ground.

I nudge her in the side. “You heard the man. Start digging. You can eat whatever you catch along the way.”

We form a loose circle above where I sense Pen and Darius’s energies and start digging.

Even with the softened earth, it’s back-breaking work filled with frequent pauses when we hit thick tree roots and Marc grabs the ax to hack through them.

As we work, the rain worsens, making it harder as the loose earth turns to mud and footing turns treacherous.

“Anny, get back, girl,” Marc says when we’re shoulders-deep in the hole. “It’s too dangerous for you to be down here.”

She yips and scrambles up the slippery side, then runs circles around us, barking in encouragement.

Mud pools around our feet and seeps into our shoes, the hole filling in even as we try to empty it.

Marc’s shovel slams into something hard, and he grunts as he wiggles it free. “Hit another root.”

Sharpe’s shovel strikes an obstacle on his side, and then a reverberation travels up my arm as my shovel gets stuck, too.

“Hold up.” I crouch and thrust my hand into the mud, feeling around.

Thick ropes of tree roots tangle together, forming a solid barrier below us.

“There must be a build-up of roots over the cave roof.” I trace the line of a root as thick as my thigh. “These are going to take a while to cut through.”

“Okay, everyone out.” Marc tosses his shovel onto the edge of the hole and grabs the ax. “If this collapses beneath me, I don’t want you both going down, too.”

“Wait, let’s tie the rope around you first for safety.” Sharpe turns to Orianna, who stares down at us with her mouth hanging open. “Bring us the rope, girl.”

She barks and disappears, returning a moment later with the end of the rope clamped between her teeth.

She tosses it over the edge, then nudges the slack until Sharpe grabs it. “Good girl.”

She yips several times, the sound echoing through the forest, and an answering whistle comes back, faint but there.

I straighten with surprise. “Did you guys hear that?”

Marc cocks his head. “I’m not sure.”

“Orianna, yip again,” I encourage.

Marc’s brow lifts. “Orianna?”

“Yeah, that’s her full name,” I say distractedly. “Now hush.”

Prancing in place, Orianna lets out a sharp yip, and a faint whistle comes from below us.

“That’s them.” Marc takes the rope from Sharpe and knots it around his waist before grabbing his ax. “Tie off the end. I’m making a hole.”

The wet thwack of the ax sprays water in every direction as Marc swings at a frenzied pace.

Sharpe and I scramble out of the hole, and we quickly loop the rope around the nearest tree a few times.

Several minutes pass before Marc lets out a triumphant shout. “I’ve broken through!”

Rope in hand, Sharpe and I return to the edge of the pit, careful of the soft ground at the edges, and peer down. The building water now pours through a ragged hole, exposing the solid root foundation Marc stands atop.

“Hello!” Pen’s voice, muffled and distant, drifts up from the hole. “Marc? Is that you?”

“We’re all here.” He falls to his knees to peer into the small gap. “We’re going to get you out.”

“Be careful! There’s something down here with us!” Darius yells. “And the roots—”

His voice cuts off, and Marc scrambles backward as the roots writhe beneath him, the small hole closing.

Sharpe and I reach down into the hole, pulling him out as the roots claim the ax and drag it under.

Wide-eyed, we stare as the roots settle, and the hole fills with water once more.

“Oh, hell no.” Marc stands and raises his hands. “We’re burning this thing.”

“Just be careful,” Sharpe cautions. “Forest fires can start, even in this weather.”

“I’ll keep it contained.” Fire spreads from Marc’s hands, funneling into the hole.

Black smoke rises, the water inside turning to vapor that smells like scorched earth, then wet wood burning.

At the first brush of flame, the roots writhe again, and the ground trembles beneath our feet.

Sharpe and I back away, taking a firmer hold on the rope, but Marc stands strong, his determined expression painted in flickering red light.

The air around us grows humid and smokey, but the rain helps us now as it washes away the noxious fumes.

When the fire cuts off, Marc’s chest heaves with hard breaths. “Hurry, bring the rope.”

Sharpe and I haul the long end of the rope to the hole. I peer down to see Darius and Pen staring back up, their faces covered in dirt that doesn’t mask the way Pen glows brightly with golden light.

We heave the rope over the edge, and it uncoils as it drops, only to stop a foot above Darius’s head.

Without hesitation, he grabs Pen around the waist and tosses her up.

Pen catches the end of the rope, and Marc braces his feet, gripping the rope still tied around his waist.

Hand over hand, Pen quickly climbs, fear and determination on her face.

As soon as she’s within reach, Sharpe and I lean into the hole to grab her arms and haul her the rest of the way out. She collapses on the muddy ground, gasping in deep breaths.

I rub her back, my hand trembling with the aftershocks of adrenaline.

With Pen free of the hole, Darius leaps up and catches the end of the rope, hauling his body up quickly.

With him on his way, I finally focus on the cave they were stuck in, and it takes a moment for me to realize that the off-white ground isn’t stone but hundreds of bones.

My gut clenches when I notice the skull threaded through Darius’s left

arm. It sways from side-to-side as he climbs.

Halfway up, something tugs hard on the rope.

Marc slides backward a foot, and Darius drops toward the ground.

“The roots are regrowing.” Sharpe rushes to Marc’s side and grabs the rope, hauling on it.

I join him, with Pen right behind, and we work as a team to quickly haul Darius out.

He scrabbles up onto the muddy forest floor, panting hard, and scrambles away from the hole as the ground shakes.

Orianna barks and whines, her tail wagging frantically.

The tremble in the ground worsens, and Marc rips off the rope around his waist. We abandon our gear and run several paces away before turning back to watch as the hole spreads outward.

Dirt fills in all of our hard work, and the earth shifts and churns for several minutes.

When it settles, only a shallow crater remains, with no trace of the horrifying pit of bones below.

three made one

- Pen -

DARIUS THUNKS the skull down on the dining room table.

After escaping the woods, we drove to the cabin to regain our bearings and still haven't taken the time to dry off from the storm.

Mud soaks my clothes, chilling my skin to the bone, and my wet hair clings to my cheeks.

The others are in the same state, though Marc and Darius appear slightly dryer, and I envy their ready access to their fires.

"Is that from a boogeyman?" Sharpe asks, uncertainty in his voice. "Like with the bear case a while back?"

Flint shakes his head as he runs his hands over the dirty skull. "No, that bound the boogeyman to its corporeal form. These bones are lifeless. Not even a Hunter would touch this."

"There were hundreds of bones in that cave, demon and human alike." My gut tightens at the memory. "And something moved beneath them like they were water. Something big."

"Here's the map." Marc returns from the garage and unfolds an old paper map of Clearhelm on the table. "I can't believe we had one of these."

He sets a handful of pins on the table, too.

Sharpe grabs a blue marker and leans over the map, drawing a box around several blocks in what used to be a working-class neighborhood. "This is where the Bone Yard is now."

Darius picks up a purple marker and draws an X over the location of The Cellar. "This is where we entered the tunnels."

He traces the old roads to the woods and draws another X. "And this is where you found us."

Flint lets out a whistle. "That's a long way from where you should have

been.”

“And it leaves me questioning how it’s even possible we got there.” I shiver, my wet, muddy clothes making me cold. “There are wards all around the Bone Yard. Nothing should be able to get under those walls and escape.”

“Or get in,” Darius murmurs.

At my confused look, Darius draws a curved line from The Cellar toward the wall, then draws a fork, one leading in the direction of the Bone Yard’s Main Street and the other splitting off toward the wall.

“Either something came from over here in the Bone Yard.” He circles the pen over the main road without marking it. “Or something came into the Bone Yard from outside and split in two directions. The tunnels outside the Bone Yard were much more extensive than the ones within the wall.”

“Like whatever this is, it had a lot longer to dig around before it found the Bone Yard,” Flint says slowly.

“The cave we were in had been gathering bones for years.” My hands curl into fists on the table. “We should have grabbed one of the older skulls. We could have run an analysis to figure out how long this has been going on.”

“It’s not a skull, but…” Darius reaches into his pants pocket and pulls out a hand, setting it on the table. “I grabbed this.”

I stare at it for a moment before shifting my gaze to him. “How long has that been in your pocket?”

His eyes widen, and he rushes out, “I grabbed it when I grabbed the boogeyman’s skull. When that monster tipped over our hill of bones, it stirred everything up, and it looked important.”

I stare down at the hand. While it certainly looks old, it looks no more significant than the other old bones that were down there with us.

My focus returns to Darius. “Why did this one look important?”

“The lines.” He traces the fracture lines that stand out as a darker brown against the aged bone. “It’s a pattern.”

Flint walks around the table to lift the hand and study it. “I think you’re right.”

“Of course, I’m right,” Darius says stiffly. “I’ve been around long enough to recognize the occult.”

“What is it?” Sharpe asks. “Do you think it’s related to whatever is eating people?”

Flint shakes his head. “It’s too hard to make out. I’ll have to take it to the Conservatory and see if Xander or Reese can pull out the image.”

A shiver rolls through me, and muddy drops of water fall from my hair. Marc touches my shoulder. “You should go shower and warm up.”

“I’m not the only one who needs to get dry,” I protest, even as another shiver wracks my body.

“No, but you’re the most susceptible to cold.” He urges me toward the hall bath. “Go get in the bath. The rest of us can take turns using the upstairs shower and the one in the garage.”

I peer back over my shoulder. “If you’re sure...”

“We should order something warm to eat, too,” Flint adds.

Sharpe’s gaze moves to the floor to ceiling windows in the living room, where rain pounds against the glass. “No one’s going to deliver in this weather.”

“Then we’ll just have to go get it.” Flint races past me toward his room. “I want some bratwurst stew and fresh rolls before Hopper’s takes it off the menu.”

Laughing, I duck into my room to grab my robe before stepping across the hall to the bathroom.

Sharpe is already there, stripping as the bathtub fills, and it’s a testament to how cold I am that the warm water lures me more than the man I love.

He tosses his shirt into the dirty clothes bin and bends to kiss my muddy cheek. “Marc is prepping a fresh batch of coffee while Darius starts a fire in the living room, so take a nice long soak. Flint and I will be back soon with food.”

“Thank you.” I catch his hand. “And thank you for getting us out of that pit. We were running out of escape options that didn’t involve self-annihilation.”

Fear flickers across his eyes. “I’m glad it didn’t come to that.”

“Stop dawdling and get into the shower!” Flint runs into the bathroom, already naked. “I just placed our order, and it will be ready in thirty minutes.”

Sharpe tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “Get warm.”

Nodding, I release him and hang my robe on the hook by the gas fireplace, then strip and step into the tub. Thanks to our water system, it’s already half-full and scalding, just the way I like it.

I curl up my knees and sink lower, the water lapping at my breasts as it swiftly rises. Some days, I wonder why I bother to work when I could just spend all my time in the bath, boiling myself alive.

The water continues to rise until it completely covers me and sloshes over

the rim of the tub, but I can't bring myself to move to shut it off. Not when the warmth is finally sinking beneath my skin.

Flint appears at the end of the tub, now fully clothed, and twists the faucet to stop the flow. Concern fills his blue eyes. "I'll tell Marc to keep an eye on you."

I blink slowly in acknowledgment.

Sharpe's hand cups under my chin, lifting me higher out of the water. "You're a firebird, not a mermaid. No drowning."

I lean my head against the side of the tub and let it roll backward, away from the tempting warmth of the water.

Both men still look worried.

"I'm an immortal being," I remind them. "Go get me food."

"Marc's fast in the shower." Flint heads for the door. "He won't leave her alone too long."

"Yes, send my babysitter with coffee," I call after them as they leave.

As soon as the door shuts, I sink below the surface of the water, relishing the stinging burn against my skin.

The water around me turns cloudy from the mud on my body and in my hair, and I pull the plug to drain the tub before refilling it again, adding the honey-and-cardamon bath oil that Flint gifted me for Christmas.

Then I lean back and close my eyes, soaking in the perfumed warmth of the bath.

The sound of the door opening rouses me from a half-sleep, and I crack my eyelids open to see Marc peeking inside.

After our shared moment in the cave, I half expected Darius to be the one who came to check on me, and I tamp down the disappointment that he didn't want to continue what we started earlier. With my body now warm, other desires are stirring from the near-death experience.

I shift in the bath and notice that the water is no longer scorching hot. "I'm still alive."

"And likely wrinkly, too." Amusement fills Marc's voice. "The fire is roaring, if you'd like to switch to a less liquid warmth."

Warmth from the fire isn't the only thing I want, and I lift my arms. "Help me."

Chuckling, he pushes the door wider and steps inside. He had opted to change directly into his pajamas, a set of neon blue fleece with green aliens scattered amid stars.

I have a matching set in my dresser, as does Flint, but Sharpe is still building up his collection.

As Marc lifts me from the bathtub, I pluck at his sleeve. “Darius needs some pajamas.”

Marc freezes for a second before he laughs. “There’s no way he’d wear them.”

“But I think he’d like them, regardless,” I insist. “It’s the thought behind them that counts.”

“You’re right,” he says gruffly, leaning past me to grab my robe and wrap it around my shoulders. “We’ll get him some for Cinco de Mayo.”

My eyes widen with ideas. “They can have cactuses and sombreros on them.”

“He’ll hate that,” Marc says, and we grin at each other.

He grabs a towel and pats my hair to absorb some of the water before scooping me up into his arms.

Laughing, I throw my arms around his neck. “What are you doing?”

“Your feet are bare.” He sidesteps through the open door and strides down the hall toward the living room. “We can’t have your precious toes getting cold, or you might stick them into the fire.”

I nuzzle my face against his neck. “You could have grabbed me socks.”

“But then you wouldn’t be clinging to me right now,” he drawls in a way that sends warmth simmering in my stomach.

“Oh, you like me clingy, cowboy?” I nibble his ear, and his hold on me tightens. “If you want my arms around you, all you have to do is ask.”

He turns his head toward mine. “Kiss me.”

Pulse tripping, I leave his ear alone to press our lips together.

His mouth parts under mine, his tongue sweeping in for a possessive kiss that leaves my toes curling and my heart racing.

We don’t stop kissing as he enters the living room and drops to the floor in front of the fireplace, where someone has already piled blankets and pillows in front of the roaring flames.

Marc groans and shifts his hold on me, so I straddle his lap, his hands slipping into my robe to cup my breasts. My eyes close as desire builds, liquid heat pooling between my thighs.

Then Marc’s lips leave mine, and he ducks his head to catch one of my nipples between his teeth.

Pleasure shoots through me, and my back arches, my hands tangling in

Marc's damp hair.

When my eyes open, they lock with Darius's heated gaze, who watches us from the chair I usually prefer. He wears a pair of silky lounge pants and a button-up shirt that lies open, exposing his bronze skin.

The firelight dances over the defined curves of his chest and abdomen, painting over his hard lines like a lover's caress.

Pulse racing, I moan as Marc's fingers slip between my legs to find my swollen folds. He teases at my entrance, gathering my liquid desire before sliding his fingers farther back to slide into my ass.

A gasp escapes me at the burn of being stretched open before I bear down on his fingers, taking them deeper, welcoming his presence.

He rumbles encouragement against my breasts as he alternates between sucking and biting until my flesh feels tender and bolts of pleasure shoot through me at the lightest touch.

Darius bites his lip and slides from the chair, crawling toward us with liquid grace, his burgundy hair swinging forward.

My breaths quicken, my chest rising and falling as he comes up behind Marc, his body pressing against our fire witch's back.

Marc's breath hitches against my breasts, and he leans back slightly, letting the ignis demon take his weight. Marc's body heats beneath mine, his temperature rising to rival the flames at my back.

Darius reaches around Marc, opening the buttons on his nightshirt to expose his chest. My hands drop to the hard planes, stroking the smooth swell of his pecs to find his small nipples. When I pinch them, Marc's breath hitches again.

Head lifting, he catches my lips in another heated kiss as his fingers work inside me, a third one slipping inside to stretch me wider.

I moan, rocking my hips on his hand, desperate to be touched at my center, too. To be filled with heat at my core.

A hot hand slides up my thighs, pushing my robe up, and my eyes open once more to meet Darius's liquid gold gaze.

His hand moves higher, slipping under my robe, daring to brush my sex. A moan escapes as I lift onto my knees, tilting my hips toward him.

Long fingers slide alongside Marc's hand to find my center and thrust inside me.

I pull my lips from Marc with a gasp, my eyes closing at the dual pleasures of being filled.

Hot fingers touch my jaw, drawing my head up, and Darius's lips slant over mine, his tongue thrusting deep and picking up where we left off in the cave only hours before.

The tie on my robe loosens, and someone pushes it off my shoulders. Pleasure fogs my mind, making it impossible to tell the difference between Darius and Marc's hands, the two men moving together like a single person.

Warm air strokes my bare body, and someone catches my hand, drawing it to the hard length of Darius's cock straining against his silk lounge pants.

Another hand draws my free hand to Marc's cock, and I fist their lengths, pumping them in time to their fingers inside me.

Darius draws his lips from mine to press our foreheads together. "Merri, my lady, my love, let me join with you."

My body clenches around his fingers, and I gasp out, "Yes."

Fingers slip from my body, and I flow from Marc's arms into Darius's waiting embrace.

Desperate to be filled, I shove his lounge pants down, freeing his cock before fisting him once more. My fingers don't meet around his thick shaft, and small nubs run down his length, bumping against my palm.

Without looking, I know they'll be a darker shade of bronze than the rest of his body. I spent long hours in our previous life worshiping each little ridge, and a shiver goes through me at the thought of feeling them inside me again after so long.

Darius leans back on his heels and draws my hips forward, the blunt head of his cock nudging against my entrance.

Slowly, I sink down on top of him, my body stretching to make room for his girth. Each little nub on his cock heightens our pleasure, and our groans mingle in the breath of space between us.

Warm lips trace along my shoulder before Marc finds my ear. "You're so beautiful right now, with your skin glowing and the fire on you."

I reach back to grasp his hip. "Hurry."

"So impatient." His clothes rustle before his bare cock rubs against my ass. "I didn't grab any lube or condoms."

"Touch where we join," Darius growls. "She is plenty wet."

"Is that right?" Marc's fingers slide along where my body connects with Darius's, and he releases a shuddering breath. "Look at how much you're enjoying this."

My inner muscles squeeze around Darius's cock.

He groans with pleasure. "Hurry, or I won't last."

"Both of you are so impatient," Marc drawls as he gathers my desire and slicks his length.

Then the head of his cock nudges against my tight ring of muscles, and he presses forward. My body resists for only a moment before giving beneath him, and his cock slides into me at a slow but steady pace until he seats himself fully.

I gasp and dig my fingernails into Darius's shoulders, the sensation of being filled from both sides nearly too much. My inner muscles flex around their hard lengths, adjusting to the sensation.

Marc's lips find my shoulder once more. "Everything okay, love?"

At my nod, Darius hooks his arms under my knees and eases forward as Marc leans back, until the two men kneel upright with my body sandwiched between them.

When they start thrusting, their bodies move as one, driving pleasure through me, and I forget everything but their touch and the way they surge inside me.

Then the fire comes, rising from Marc at my back and sinking into me before Darius draws it into his own body, protecting us both.

Marc and I moan as one, the relief of letting go without worry flowing through us. Darius continues to siphon off our magic, taking away the risk of setting the house on fire, or worse, setting us on fire.

Turning my head, I seek Marc's lips in a frantic kiss as pleasure and power flow between the three of us. Then I seek Darius, feeding him the flames from Marc's lips.

He drinks them down greedily before he leans past me, and Marc leans forward, the fire passing between the two of them.

Clutching them both, my body tightens, my toes curling as all of it becomes too much.

Marc stiffens against my back, his cock slamming in to the hilt, and hot cum floods into me. The pulse of his cock sends me over the edge, and I cry out as release blazes through my body, my inner muscles squeezing around Darius.

He groans and pulls partway out just as the base of his cock swells, a hard knot forming. Then hot cum pumps into my channel, and I come again as his release burns through me, imprinting himself on my womb.

We gasp against each other, locked together in this moment, the three of

us made one, sealed in passion and fire.

pocket magic

- Sharpe -

RAIN BEATS a steady rhythm on the car roof as we drive back from Hopper's, the scent of freshly baked rolls and savory stew filling the air.

I steal a glance at Flint, who cradles the takeout containers in his lap while keeping one hand on Anny's head to stop her from wiggling her nose into the bag.

"You know," I say with a teasing grin, "the stew's not *that* amazing."

Flint gasps dramatically. "How dare you! I've been trying to seduce the recipe from Hopper all month, so I can have it out of season!"

I snort out a laugh. "And how is that going?"

"He's resistant to my charm." Flint bats his lashes at me. "Am I not pretty enough?"

"You know you are." Flint's glamour ensures he's the prettiest one in the room wherever he goes. I reach over to pat his arm. "Maybe Hopper is part fae and immune to your charm."

Despite the long day and the fear of discovering Darius and Pen trapped underground, warmth spreads through me at this moment of normalcy. Everything's been so tense at work, and life at home has settled into an uneasy truce as we all struggle to figure out how Darius in a corporeal body fits into our lives and into the cabin, which seems smaller by the day.

Moments like this, where all the tension melts away, have become rare, and I treasure them, even if it meant venturing out into a storm for greasy stew.

The tap of rain pelting the windshield and the rapid sweep of the windshield wipers fill the comfortable silence as I turn onto the long road on the outskirts of Clearhelm that leads toward home.

"It wasn't just for the stew," Flint says, his serious tone breaking the

silence. “It was also so Marc and Darius could have some alone time with Pen. We’ve been hogging her at night, and I thought they could use some time together.”

I glance at him in surprise. “That was thoughtful of you.”

Flint sighs, running a hand through his black hair, his fingers briefly tangling in the strands. “Things haven’t been right between me and Marc since Darius stepped out of his body, and I know a lot of that is my fault. Darius is just so cozy with Marc. It’s like they have their own language that the rest of us don’t understand.”

He thumps his head against the seat. “Am I *jealous*? Is that what this feeling is? I don’t want Marc to have someone he’s closer to than me? Am I *that* insecure?”

I’d say yes to all of the above, but I don’t think Flint wants a response. He already knows the answer, and just needs to work through it out loud.

“Gods, I’m petty.” He squeezes his eyes shut. “Logically, I know they share a special bond and have for a long time. How could they not when cohabitating inside Marc’s body? But he never talked about it with us.”

Flint rolls his head toward me, opening his eyes, and I nod without comment.

He lets out a frustrated huff and stares out the windshield. “But now that Darius has a body of his own, *seeing* that bond just seems so *sudden*. Like it happened overnight. And I need to get over it before I permanently damage my relationship with Marc, but I’m struggling to move past my history with Darius.”

I reach out and place a hand on Flint’s arm. “You don’t have to be perfect. We all have our flaws and insecurities. It’s how we work through them that matters, and you’re taking steps to change.”

“Do I have to cuddle with Darius?” he whines.

I squeeze his arm before returning my hand to the wheel. “No, but if Marc wants to cuddle with him, then you need to be okay with it.”

“They’re sharing a body at night.” Flint looks at me. “Did you know?”

I meet his eyes. “Does it matter?”

“What if he runs away with Marc again?” The fear that underscores those words cuts to the heart of the matter.

Flint isn’t afraid of Marc and Darius being close. He’s afraid that Darius will take Marc from him the way he did a few months ago.

“Darius was living inside Marc to avoid being found by the demon court,

right?” I wait for Flint’s nod. “And the reason he can now have a corporeal body is because he’s been absolved of oath breaking, right?”

Flint shifts in his seat. “Yeah.”

“So Darius has no need to run off in Marc’s body,” I say gently. “If he wants to leave, he can do it with his own two legs.”

“You’re right. I *know* you are. It’s just...”

“Sometimes it takes your heart longer to accept what logic tells you.” I turn onto our gravel road and slow down, worried about what the rain has done to our access road. “And you should talk to Marc. If he knows *why* you distrust Darius, it will help him understand the distance you’ve been putting between you.”

Flint stiffens. “I’m not the only one putting distance between us. They hole up in his room alone every night.”

“They’d probably stop doing that if they knew everyone in the house was okay with what’s going on,” I point out.

Flint’s shoulders slump. “You’re right, and I’ll try. You may not remember this, but I’m not actually good at talking about my feelings.”

“I don’t need my old memories to know that.” I slow at the gate that blocks our driveway and press the button on my visor to open it. “You don’t have to change overnight. Just take that first step. And I’ll be there for cuddles if Marc isn’t.”

He laughs. “Careful, Sharpe, or I’ll start clinging to you like glue. I’m a bit touch-starved.”

“Cling all you want.” I roll through the open gate and up the hill toward the cabin. “But I’m the big spoon.”

I park in front of the house, not trusting the steep slope of the driveway that leads to the garage at the back. The rain shows no signs of letting up, and I can’t use the excuse of a muddy hill to take tomorrow off work.

I reach for the door handle. “We’ll have to make a run for it.”

Flint doesn’t move, his gaze fixed on the cabin.

“Flint?” I touch his arm. “Food’s going to get cold.”

He shakes his head and turns toward me, wedging his shoulder against the car door. “I propose a picnic in the car. The rain is rather romantic, don’t you think?”

I glance toward the house, then take in his forced cheer. “Sure, if that’s what you want.”

Flint’s lips curl into a half-smile, but his eyes hold a hint of sadness. “I

just think...Darius and Marc could use a little longer with Pen.”

“I’ve never had a car picnic.” Turning the car back on so we have heat, I unbuckle and shift to face him. “How is it different from eating during a stakeout?”

“Well, for one, we don’t have to pee in bottles and keep a constant eye on our surroundings.” Flint pulls out two containers of stew and passes one to me, setting the other on the center console while he digs out the bag of rolls.

I crack open the lid on mine, and the delicious scent of beer, cheese, and bratwurst drifts out. While I may tease Flint about his current obsession with the stew, it really is good. There’s not a single thing I’ve eaten at Hopper’s that’s bad.

Flint opens his own container, and a twinkle fills his blue eyes. “You know, with three fire beings in the cabin now, we really do need to install a sprinkler system.”

I laugh, the sadness in the air dissipating. “You might be onto something there. If we’re doing that, we should add an extension with another bedroom and a second bathroom.”

Flint frowns. “We have a second bathroom.”

“The garage one doesn’t count.” I shudder. “It’s like showering in a locker room.”

Flint’s smile widens. “We could build one with a sunken tub big enough to fit everyone.”

“Why not just add a hot tub at that point?” I take a bite of stew, savoring the rich flavors.

“No way.” Flint shakes his head. “Two houses ago, we had a hot tub, and Pen was constantly floating around in it. It became a real problem.”

I laugh. With how much Pen enjoys her baths, I can see how a hot tub could become an issue.

I accept one of the pretzel rolls from Flint and tear off a piece, tossing it to Anny before dipping the rest into my stew. “So, I’ve been practicing something.”

Flint’s black brows arch. “Do tell.”

Setting my stew container on the dashboard, I reach over and pluck the spoon from Flint’s hand. “Watch this.”

I squeeze my hand around the spoon, focusing on that dark slither inside me, and the spoon vanishes.

Flint leans forward. “Holy shit, when did this start happening?”

“After the first encounter with the Hive Queen’s drones. I think it triggered something in my mind.” I reach into my pocket and pull out the spoon. “Unfortunately, I can only make things vanish to my pocket.”

When I hold the spoon out to him, he shakes his head. “I don’t want your pocket spoon.” Leaning forward, he grabs the one from my stew container. “This is mine now.”

“Fair enough.” I grab my container and dig back in. “It’s not much, but I wanted to show you.”

Curiosity dances in Flint’s eyes. “What else have you made disappear?”

I chuckle, a bit embarrassed under the weight of his scrutiny. Flint is so powerful with what he does that my little trick feels silly. “Mostly things on my desk. Nothing bigger than what will fit in my hand. It’s nothing more than a parlor trick, so I’m not sure how useful it will be.”

Flint sets down his spoon to give me a firm stare. “It’s *not* a parlor trick. You’re teleporting objects from one location to another, without a spell, and without turning them into a mangled mess. That is high-level magic.”

My eyes widen. “What?”

“You’ve read about the dark fae, right?” At my nod, he continues, “Then you know that their power is dominion of space.”

My brow wrinkles. “I didn’t really understand what that meant.”

“Do you know why it’s so hard to get replacement cartridges for our portal gun?” he asks.

The change in topic confuses me. “Because the spell is complicated?”

He shakes his head. “Because it’s not something witches can do.”

“But Reese does them,” I point out. “And he’s almost perfected the one for the portal gun.”

“Reese isn’t fully witchblood. He’s fae-touched.” Flint points at his eye, where Reese has a dark slash across his pupil that allows him to see past illusion and pass through the veils. “Being fae-touched means that part of his ancestry is dominant enough that it affects his magic.”

“Ah.” Realization dawns. “So portals are fae magic?”

Flint nods. “Yep.”

“But the High Lords can use portals,” I say. “I’ve seen Lord Marius do it.”

“Because they have rings created by the fae.” Flint leans closer, his voice dropping. “They want everyone to think it’s because they’re the most powerful demons in the world, but half their shit is spells made by witches

and fae. And before you bring up the Librarian, she's the Librarian. She has her own thing going on."

My lips twitch. "Are you saying I'm special?"

He smacks my arm. "Yes, you're a unique butterfly in a world abandoned by the rest of the fae."

I pick up a napkin and vanish it to my pocket. "Still doesn't seem very useful. My pocket can only hold so much."

"Baby steps," he says. "You'll get better with practice."

"Like what?" I ask, wanting to know what I can look forward to in my new world of magic.

Flint reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small clay bottle. "This may look small, but it contains infinite space."

I've seen his spirit bottles in action before. They may look unassuming, but they're powerful tools for containing souls. "Are you saying I could make something like that someday?"

"I know you'll make something like this someday." He hands me the bottle. "You made all my spirit bottles."

"I did?" I roll it between my fingers. "How?"

"Dominion of space means you have the ability to manipulate the space around you." He taps the cork that seals the bottle. "In this case, folding space to create a pocket inside the bottle. On a larger scale, dark fae created the Between, which is why the demon court hasn't recreated it after it was torn apart."

The Between, or the Forgetting, once contained the worst of monsters in existence. It's where the Hive Queen was trapped until she escaped, along with all the other big bads.

"How long did it take you to consistently make things teleport to your pocket?" Flint asks.

"A few weeks." I pull the napkin out and make it vanish again. "The first time it happened, I wasn't sure if I was imagining it. But the more I tried, the easier it became. There's something inside me, a darkness slithering around in my brain, and when I focus on it, the magic happens. Sometimes it happens when I'm angry, too."

Flint sets his food container down. "How long have you been sensing the darkness?"

"For a few months," I admit.

"Before the drone attacked us?" His expression turns thoughtful. "You're

blooming faster than usual.”

“Blooming?” I question.

“Fae are a long-living race, and they don’t come into full maturity until they’re in their fourth decade. They call it blooming. Like you’re a little acorn until you turn into a tree,” Flint explains. “Without your memories, you have no reference for how to access your powers, so we thought you would follow the natural cycle this time around.”

Excitement and worry war within me. “How does that change things?”

Flint’s expression turns wry. “Just don’t shake anyone’s hand and accidentally put them in your pocket.”

“I’m being serious here,” I protest.

“So am I.” Flint sighs. “You have the ability to literally make people vanish off the face of the earth. Without your memories to guide you, you could stuff someone into a fold of space and not know how to bring them back out.”

I swallow hard. “That could really happen?”

Flint’s expression softens, and he reaches out to take my hand. “You’ve always been powerful, Sharpe. We know what you could do before, even if you can’t remember. We’ll help guide you so you don’t accidentally send Bailey into outer space.”

That pulls a laugh from me. “That wouldn’t be a bad thing. Can we send the new mayor and Chief Lynch with him?”

Flint sighs wistfully. “That would make all of our lives easier. Then we could run Clearhelm how we want. A true sanctuary city for the Others. Can you imagine?”

I can, and it would be a beautiful, deadly place to live.

new beginnings

- Darius -

CONFUSION FILLS me when I wake up in my corporeal body, in a room other than Marceau's.

The fire witch lies sleeping in my arms, his heat comforting and his body more familiar than my own. His brown hair tickles under my chin, his strong arm thrown over my waist as if, even in sleep, he tries to merge our bodies into one.

It fills me with a sense of rightness that, even in two different bodies, we still find comfort in each other. But it's the woman whose slender waist my hand rests upon, her lithe form pressed up against Marceau's back, that sends a wave of shock through me.

Then the events of the prior night come blazing back to life. If not for waking in Merri's bed, I would have thought last night a dream.

But here she lies, her face softened by sleep, her thick blond lashes resting against her cheekbones and her ash-blond hair fanned out across her pillow.

Our limbs tangle together in her bed, the three of us wrapped around each other, and the happiness that crashes over me nearly becomes my undoing.

I've longed for this moment for so long. Yearned for the right to be here once more. Now that it's happened, the moment feels fragile, like one wrong move can shatter it into a million pieces that I'll never be able to put back together again.

For so long I dreamed of this, but never dared to believe it would come true.

But now, in the quiet of the morning, fear creeps in. A fear that slashes through the happiness of the moment and cuts into my heart. Pen had said she wanted to start our relationship anew, and it was Marceau who had initiated

the beautiful night of passion we shared.

Was this just a one-time thing? Did I simply get lucky last night? Things had seemed to shift while trapped in the cave with Merri, but there had been danger and risk of death heightening our emotions.

In the cold clarity of the morning after, what if Merri still rejects me being here?

Uncertainty gnaws at me, and the fear that I won't be welcome spreads. When Merri's eyes open, instead of love, will I once more see rejection in their golden depths?

Slowly, I extricate myself from the tangle of limbs, careful not to disturb Merri or Marceau. My pulse pounds as I slip out of bed, and my long legs carry me silently across the room.

As I open the door, I glance back at them one last time, my heart aching with longing, wishing I could stay with them forever.

But the worry, the fear of rejection, consumes me, and like a coward, I slip out of the bedroom, closing the door softly behind me.

Quiet fills the cabin, the early morning light filtering down the hall from the main living space. I head to the room I share with Marceau and step inside, then lean against the closed door as I will my pulse to slow.

There's nothing wrong with a tactical retreat while I assess the situation. I just need to keep a level head until my lady gives me the sign that I am welcome back at her side.

I push away from the door and stride across the cozy room filled with Marceau's presence. There is nothing of me in this space, but when I inhale deeply, the scent of his cologne mingles with the wood of the cabin and grounds me with a sense of home.

I push open the closet door where my expensive clothes hang next to Marceau's functional items.

Choosing my clothes with care, I dress in the navy-blue, fitted shirt I've noticed Merri admiring before and pull on a pair of charcoal gray slacks that flatter my figure. I know Merri finds my body appealing, and I want to look my best when she lays eyes on me once more.

I step out of the bedroom and head down the hall, where the scent of coffee drifts from the kitchen. A note from Ga'Vine sits next to the coffee pot, announcing that he has already left to make arrangements for equipment to dig into the forest to uncover the bone pit once more.

Was it the closing of the front door that woke me? He can't have been

gone for long, since the coffee pot is still filling.

The clock on the wall tells me that I woke early, and a glance out the living room windows shows dawn's light still fights back the night, filling the sky with a gentle blush of pink and purple.

Someone put the blankets away and banked the fire after we went to bed last night. What did Ga'Vine and Flint think when they returned with dinner, only to find us locked inside Merri's room? Had there been anger? Jealousy? What moods might we face today?

I take a seat at the kitchen table, my fingers tracing patterns on the worn wood. The boogeyman skull stares back at me, and the hand rests off to the side. The paper map, refolded, shows the Bone Yard and woods on top.

I pull the map closer and lift one of the abandoned pens, carefully drawing out what I remember of the tunnels we traveled below ground. There had been many smaller pathways that came to dead ends, with nearly a direct line from the Bone Yard to the cave where we were trapped.

The sound of footsteps approaching the kitchen snaps me out of my thoughts, and my heart leaps into my throat. Should I greet Merri with a kiss? Or act normal so as not to pressure her to accept me before she's ready?

When the unmistakable click of claws on the wooden floor fills the air, I stiffen, not in the mood to be alone with Flint when I'm filled with such uncertainty. Perhaps leaving Merri's room was a mistake. At least there, I had a small chance of welcome.

Anny trots out of the hall first, her red fur glinting in the morning light. Spotting me, she races over, shoving her head against my leg for attention. I scratch her ears and the sides of her muzzle, and her eyes close with pleasure.

Flint follows Anny, his black hair combed back. Despite the early hour, he wears a pair of lightweight tan slacks, a cream, short-sleeved dress shirt, and a vest covered in golden starbursts. Even if Flint and I don't get along, I have to admit he has a sense for fashion that the others lack.

When Flint spots me at the table, his eyes widen in surprise, and he stiffens. "Good morning. I didn't expect anyone else to be awake."

I release Anny, and she trots back to Flint's side. "Ga'Vine has already left for the day. The coffee is almost ready."

Flint's brows lift, and his vibrant, blue eyes shift to the windows, where the sun now peeks above the tree line. "Did something happen?"

I shift in my chair to face Flint as he walks into the kitchen. "He wants to dig up the bone pit as soon as possible."

“Of course, he does.” Flint opens the cupboard with the mugs, then glances back at me. “Would you like a cup of coffee?”

Surprised by the offer, I hesitate for a moment before accepting. “Yes, thank you.”

It’s a small gesture, but a significant one given our antagonistic history.

I stand and join Flint, stopping at the kitchen bar to stay out of his way.

He fills two mugs and glances at me once more. “Cream? Sugar?”

“Black, please.” It’s the way Marceau always drinks the nasty stuff, and I can’t imagine embellishments making it more tolerable.

Flint passes me the mug before walking to the fridge to pull out the bins that store Anny’s food.

Awkward silence stretches between us as he chops up vegetables, adding them to a large bowl.

I take a cautious sip of coffee, and my nose wrinkles at the slightly sour, burnt flavor. I set the mug back down and clear my throat. “So, have you had any luck coming up with a new name for Anny?”

Flint glances at his familiar, and a soft smile tugs at the corners of his lips. “Yes and no. Her name is Orianna, but she won’t answer to any abbreviation besides Anny.”

“Orianna,” I repeat, the word tasting like the promise of a new day. “It’s Latin, right? Meaning sunrise?”

Flint’s gaze meets mine, and there’s a flicker of something in his blue eyes. “Yes.”

I smile down at the fox, who sits in a growing spot of sunlight, her fur glowing red and gold. “It’s fitting.”

Flint nods and finishes chopping the vegetables. He then pops open the second bin and uses a pair of tongs to lift out a dead rodent to lie on top before setting the bowl on the floor for Orianna.

She eagerly dives in, happy crunching rising from the floor just out of view.

As Flint returns the bins to the fridge, he speaks up again. “I’ve been wanting to thank you.”

His words catch me off guard. “For what?”

He turns back to me and hesitates for a moment as he searches for the right words. “For stepping in to be sacrificed in my place when we faced the Fox God.”

I study his pinched expression as he washes his hands in the sink and

dries them. “I was going to die, anyway. The demon court had put a bounty on my head. Sacrificing myself seemed like a better option than what I would have faced there.”

Flint’s gaze meets mine, and he squares his shoulders. “Maybe, but you still stepped in without hesitation. You saved my life, and I owe you for that.”

“You saved mine, too, from the demon court,” I remind him. “There is no debt owed between us.”

His expression grows even more pinched, as if his next words are harder. “I also want to apologize for how I’ve treated you since your return. I played a part in bringing the Fox God’s attention to us, and I’ve struggled to accept that responsibility. I gained Orianna from it, for which I will be forever grateful, but it cost you and the others a great deal. My actions hurt everyone, and I’m sorry for that.”

His words hang in the air, and I find myself at a loss for how to respond. Flint, who masks his pain through flippancy, is being vulnerable in front of me, a man he’s hated for centuries.

It’s a moment I never expected to witness.

I take a deep breath, trying to find the right words. “We’ve all made mistakes that hurt each other, but we can’t change the past. What we can do is find a new balance and a way to move forward together.”

Flint’s gaze softens, and he nods in agreement. “I want Marc and Pen to be happy. And if that means finding a way for the two of us to coexist, then I’m willing to try.”

A smile spreads over my lips. “I think that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

Flint’s cheeks color slightly, and he looks away. “Well, if you’re going to be part of this household, you should know that it also means helping with chores.”

I blink at the change of topic. “Chores?”

Flint grins at the incredulity in my voice. “Yes, chores. Which includes helping with breakfast.”

I glance at the kitchen, at a loss. “Can’t we just order delivery?”

Amusement fills Flint’s eyes. “You’ve never cooked a day in your life, have you?”

“Marceau cooked,” I offer weakly.

“And how much did you pay attention?” At my blank expression, he beckons to me. “Come on. I’ll teach you how to make breakfast sandwiches,

since we'll probably need to leave as soon as Sharpe calls."

Cautious of this new truce, I join Flint next to the counter, and we work together to prepare breakfast for the household. It's a simple act, but it feels significant, like we're building a bridge over the rift that divided us until this moment.

As we work side by side, I hear familiar footsteps approaching.

Marceau emerges from the hallway, dressed in dark-wash jeans and a gray T-shirt.

When he spots Flint and me in the kitchen working together, he smiles warmly. "Well, this is a sight to see."

"Flint is teaching me to cook," I say stiffly, disliking having to admit that I don't know something in front of Marceau.

His gaze warms, and he walks around the bar to join us. His hand rests on my back as he reaches for my mug and takes a long sip. "Why are you drinking this when you hate coffee?"

Embarrassed at being called out, I avoid looking at either man. "I thought I'd give it another try,"

Flint, standing beside me, looks at me in surprise. "Next time, speak up. No one wants you wasting precious coffee."

I nod, keeping my focus on the toaster as I wait for the English muffins to pop up.

"I'll get you something else," Flint offers. "What would you like?"

"Tea, if there's any in the house," I request, warmth spreading through me at this unexpected show of consideration.

"I think we have some in the pantry." Flint passes his spatula to Marceau, who takes over the eggs at the stove.

As Flint leaves to go search for my tea, Marceau turns his attention to me, his gaze filled with curiosity. "What's going on?"

I glance at Flint and lower my voice. "We've agreed to let go of past grudges and be amiable toward each other."

Happiness spreads over Marceau's face, and he curls an arm around my waist in a side hug. "I appreciate the effort."

Turning to face him, I rest my hand over the fire amulet that hides beneath his shirt. "I would do anything to make this work and be a real part of this family."

"You already are." Marceau's hand covers mine. "You're a vital part of this family, and to me."

Flint returns from the pantry, an unopened box of tea in hand, and places it on the counter. “It’s a bit expired, but we can pick up what you like on our next shopping trip.”

“Thank you.” As I reach for the tea, I can’t help but believe that maybe, just maybe, we’re on the path to a new beginning, one where I truly belong here.

I just hope Merri feels the same when she awakens.

return to the gave

- Pen -

I WAKE up alone in bed, the sheet straightened over my body, with no sign left of the heat of the night.

Confusion and disappointment fill me when I stare at the place where Darius should be. He didn't stay, and it leaves me wondering why. After so many centuries of trying to get me back, why am I waking up alone?

A sinking sensation fills my stomach. Was he disappointed with the reality of being with me again? Does he regret last night?

I push those thoughts away as I force myself to get up and dress for the day in a pair of black cargo pants and a fitted T-shirt.

When I step out into the hall, the sound of conversation drifts from the living space. I follow the scent of coffee and bacon to the kitchen, where I find Flint, Marc, and Darius all crammed into the narrow space.

"Well, doesn't this look cozy," I say, my voice husky from last night, and stop at the bar to study the three men.

The coldness that's existed between Flint and Darius seems to have eased overnight, and Marc no longer tries to hide how close he and Darius have grown. A sliver of jealousy fills me at how much things have changed in the last few hours, while I'm left standing on quicksand, unsure of my footing now.

Darius's fiery eyes meet mine, filled with warmth. "Good morning, my lady. Did you sleep well?"

The casual tone of his voice further throws me off balance. Why does he sound like nothing happened between us? Is he just going to pretend that everything is the same as always?

I want to demand a reason for why he left my bed, to understand the thoughts running through his head, but I can't bring myself to speak the

words in front of Flint and Marc.

Before I can figure out an answer that doesn't leave me snapping with anger, my phone buzzes on the kitchen table.

I stride over to grab it and see a message from Sharpe.

My brow furrows. "What equipment is Sharpe talking about?" I glance back at the others. "And why are we meeting him so early in the morning?"

Flint looks up at Darius. "See? I told you we'd need breakfast on the go."

"So you did." He turns to pick up two paper-towel-wrapped sandwiches and a to-go cup, while the others do the same.

Flint slides a sandwich and to-go cup onto the counter. "Here's yours. We should head out before Sharpe starts without us."

Feeling like I'm missing something, I snatch up my breakfast. "What is he starting without us?"

"Ga'Vine is planning to reopen the bone pit." Darius steps ahead and opens the garage door for everyone to head downstairs. "He rose early to obtain the proper equipment."

Marc snorts. "He probably had to flash his badge to get them to let him in so early. There's no way any stores were open when he arrived at the ass crack of dawn."

Flint freezes on the bottom step and spins back around. "We should bring the bones and the map. We can drop the hand off at the Conservatory later, and you'll need to skull for Nickodemus."

"I'll get them," Darius offers. "You go on ahead."

"You just don't want to ride in the van," Marc drawls.

"If you know, then there's no need for you to wait," Darius says without shame. "There's no reason to bounce around in the back when I can ride in luxury."

His feet retreat on the stairs behind me, and the door to the house opens and closes.

The rest of us step into the garage, and Flint hesitates at the van. "Should we be driving it out to a crime scene? What if the scrub down didn't remove a tracker placed by Berdherst's people?"

"Does it matter if he knows we're parking on the road that leads to the JTFPI?" Marc asks. "Besides, it will make it easier to have Xander check it for spells when we drop off the hand."

"True." Flint grabs the keys and tosses them to Marc before heading for the passenger side.

He opens the door, then looks at me. “Pen, you coming?”

After a moment of consideration, I shake my head. “I’ll ride with Darius, just in case something happens.”

“Good old buddy system.” Marc climbs behind the wheel. “See you at the grave site.”

The garage door rumbles open, and I watch as Marc backs out, then drives away.

I eat my sandwich while I wait and throw the paper towel into the bin marked for compost.

A few minutes later, the door to the house opens, and Darius’s footsteps sound on the stairs. He must have paused to eat his breakfast to leave his hands free to carry the bones. He cradles the large skull in both arms, and the hand dangles from his fingers inside an evidence bag.

When he sees me waiting in the garage, he pauses in surprise. “You didn’t go with them?”

Did he want me to? Agitation fills me. Yesterday, he would have been overjoyed to have me to himself.

“We’re on the buddy system,” I tell him, my throat tight with all the other words I hold back.

How can he look so unaffected when the burn of his hands still lingers on my body?

With a nod of understanding, he grabs the keys for his expensive luxury car, then juggles the bones into one arm so he can open the passenger door for me.

Unreasonably annoyed by the show of gallantry, I slide into the soft leather seat.

After he deposits the bones in the trunk, Darius hurries around to the driver’s side and slips behind the wheel.

The car purrs to life, and when he backs out of the garage, the smooth glide of the tires earns my unwilling respect for the expensive vehicle.

As we drive into town, silence fills the car, awkward on my side, but I have no idea what thoughts run through Darius’s mind. His face is a mask of concentration as he navigates through early morning traffic.

My leg bounces with agitation, and I press my hand on my thigh to make it stop. Why isn’t he saying anything? This is *worse* than how things were before last night.

When he pulls onto the road that leads to New Clearhelm, I can’t stand it

anymore. “Did you change your mind? About us?”

His head snaps toward me, his eyes widening. “No, I haven’t changed my mind.”

Relief washes over me, followed by confusion. “Then why did you sneak out of bed this morning?”

Darius wrenches the car over to the side of the road in a spray of gravel and slams on the brakes.

I throw a hand against the dash as my seatbelt snaps taut across my chest. When I turn to look at him, my heart pounds hard at the raw desire in his eyes.

He reaches out to grasp the back of my neck and pulls me closer until our faces are just inches apart.

“Merri, my love,” he says, his voice rough with emotion, “I’m sorry if my leaving hurt you. That was not my intention. I was unsure how much last night changed things between us and didn’t want to pressure you if you still needed time.”

I swallow hard, my fingers trembling as they brush against his chest. “You still show too much restraint. Didn’t you swear to make me fall for you over and over again?”

In answer, he closes the distance between us, capturing my lips in a searing, passionate kiss that ignites the fire within me with a hunger that can’t be denied.

Our tongues curl together, and the kiss deepens, our bodies pressed together as much as the seatbelts and the center console will allow.

Heat surges through me, rising toward the surface. I still hold much of the fire I took from Darius and Marc last night, and it craves to awaken, to meet Darius’s fire with my own.

When he pulls away, the sound of our ragged breaths fill the car, and my lips sting from the intensity of his kiss.

Darius’s gaze meets mine, holding the same uncertainty that plagued me all morning. “I’m still willing to wait for you to fall for me again. But right now, all I want is to cleave to your side, to make a nuisance of myself with my desires.”

My heart pounds, the fires inside still surging with desire. “Maybe cleaving to me is a bit much, at least in public.” I lick my lips, taste him there, and shiver. “But don’t be so distant. I want to continue to explore this new relationship.”

Nodding, he pulls me back in for a tender kiss that promises more once we're home again.

Tension fills the air when he pulls back onto the road, but it's a different kind now, a promise of what's to come later. When Darius reaches for my hand, I weave our fingers together.

Up ahead, traffic cones narrow the road down to one lane, and a man with a sign waves for us to continue forward slowly.

At a gap in the cones, Darius steers his car over to the side of the road and parks near our van. Several JTFPI squad cars line the road, and an officer peers our way, recognizes us, and waves before pointing toward the forest.

We climb out and walk across the narrow swatch of damp grass, then step into the woods.

"What kind of equipment do you think Sharpe got to use?" I ask, my voice hushed amid the densely packed trees. The branches that form a dark canopy block most of the morning light. "It can't have been anything big."

"I'm not sure." Darius's hand on my elbow pulls me around a large root sticking up from the ground and lingers there. "We'll see soon enough."

As we walk, a sense of being watched itches between my shoulder blades, but when I look back, the forest is quiet behind us, without even the sound of birds in the trees. It's eerie, and I take a step closer to Darius.

Conversation comes from up ahead, and I spot Sharpe's people through the trees. A dozen paces more, and we join the crowd.

Johannsson, O'Hara, Troy, and Mayn stand with Sharpe, Flint, and Marc around an odd machine with a giant chainsaw attached to the front, while several new faces hover farther back. O'Hara and Troy wear backpacks with fuel nozzles poking up over their shoulders, and they hold flamethrowers pointed at the ground.

Everyone wears protective gear, with clear goggles shielding their eyes. A man in a construction uniform stands at the controls to the chainsaw machine, ready to start the machine.

Flags mark the perimeter of the hole Darius and I had climbed out of last night, and the chainsaw points toward the center.

Sharpe glances over and nods in greeting. "Glad you guys made it. We're about to start."

Marc walks over to us and passes out earmuffs and goggles, his eyes lit with excitement. "He's going to let me try that thing out."

"Just be careful," Darius and I say at the same time, then grin at each

other.

Marc puts on his earmuffs, then shakes his head and points to one ear, pretending he didn't hear us.

I can already see one of these machines appearing in our garage.

Darius and I put on our protective gear as the machine roars to life, the blades spinning faster and faster. A shiver goes down my spine, and that sensation of being watched raises the hairs on the back of my neck.

I try to will my pulse to stop racing, but it's hard not to be on edge after what happened here last night.

Darius's arm brushes against mine, and the subtle gesture sends a jolt of fire through me.

Dirt and rocks kick up in all directions as the blade cuts into the ground, chewing through it with ease.

The scent of damp earth and sap fills the air, and the ground vibrates beneath my feet as the chainsaw digs deeper.

For a moment, it seems like we're making good progress, but then the machine bucks, and the teeth stop spinning. The man fusses with the controls, and the blades stutter back into motion, moving in reverse.

He rocks the machine, backing it out of whatever it got hung up on, before he tries again. Dirt and debris fly from the ditch as the machine digs into the earth, revealing a thick tangle of roots. The machine groans under the strain, its blades struggling to cut through.

Then the machine shudders and comes to a stop again, black smoke rising from the engine.

Sharpe curses and takes off his earmuffs, the rest of us doing the same.

"I'll have to bring in the other machine," the construction worker says. "I think we'll get through with a little more power."

Sharpe nods for him to go get it.

Frustration fills the air as we wait, attention fixed on the hole.

So far, the roots aren't moving or attempting to repair the damage, but it's only a matter of time. Hopefully, the man will return quickly with his new machine.

Flint joins us, his expression filled with worry. "This place gives me the creeps."

I lift a brow. "Besides the magical roots that want to imprison us?"

"Yeah." His gaze lifts to the trees. "It feels like we're being watched."

Mayn walks over to us, her sleek, black hair bound in a braid and the tip

wiggling restlessly. “I, too, sense something watching us. There is more to this forest than it appears.”

Flint’s eyes unfocus, and his magic sends tingles through me as it sweeps outward.

After a few moments, he shakes his head. “I don’t sense anything beyond the usual forest creatures and insects.”

A shout of warning comes from the ditch, and we turn toward it as the roots come to life, trying to repair the damage wrought by the chain saw.

O’Hara and Troy lift their flamethrowers, aiming the nozzles into the hole. Flames roar to life, casting an orange glow through the forest to prevent the roots from taking over again.

“I should help them before they set the forest on fire.” Darius moves to join Marc, and they help contain the fire to keep it from spreading farther.

They work together seamlessly, their movements fluid and coordinated, as if they’ve done this thousands of times. Which they have, but not with two bodies.

The sound of an approaching vehicle comes from behind me, and I turn to see the new machine being brought in. This one looks heavy-duty, designed to cut through the toughest of obstacles.

Sharpe calls off the fire team, and they waste no time getting the new machine into position over the charred roots, its blades poised for action.

Everyone puts their earmuffs back on, and the machine screams to life. The giant blade slices through the roots, spitting wood chips off to the sides.

Within minutes, he cuts a hole in the ground, revealing the dark cavern below.

Sharpe steps forward, snapping a few flares and throwing them into the hole.

They spin on the way down, casting red light in every direction before they land at the bottom, illuminating the cave’s floor.

Shocked, we stare down into the hole. Where there had been a mountain of bones only hours ago, now only bare earth remains.

The mass graveyard has vanished.

in need of bones

- Sharpe -

AS I STAND at the edge of the empty pit, frustration fills me.

I had worried about making it back through those thick roots, but I hadn't considered that, once we did, the mountain of bones would be gone.

When I left the cabin early this morning to launch this investigation, I skipped running it by Chief Lynch, thinking it would be better to ask for forgiveness than permission. Not with Mayor Berdherst as one of the budget executors.

As a member of Clearhelm's founding family, he owns part of this forest, and I suspect there are secrets buried out here he wouldn't want us stumbling over.

So I crossed the line, knowing that a mass grave would have been a huge deal, and Chief Lynch would only give me a slap on the wrist for breaking protocol if I brought this to his attention.

But without the mass grave? I'll be lucky not to be fired. Tearing up a protected forest won't look good without an irrefutable reason.

A reason that has vanished right out from under us.

Mayn joins me, her black eyes unblinking as she gazes down into the pit, her expression thoughtful.

"I can still smell bones down there," she says, her voice low and melodic. "They're just hidden now."

I scrape a hand through my hair. "Hidden doesn't do us much good. We need evidence. Concrete proof of a mass grave."

O'Hara, one of my best hunters, steps forward. "If Mayn says the bones are there, then I'll go down to get them, sir."

I appreciate his fearless dedication, but the slithering roots that surround the opening make the task too dangerous. I saw last night how quickly the

roots can react, and the last thing we need is for one of our people to get stuck underground.

“No,” I say with regret. “I’m not risking you.”

“There was something else in the pit besides the bones,” Darius adds. “We didn’t have eyes on it, but it was big. It could still be down there.”

“We have the bones we found last night, if you need the proof,” Pen reminds me.

I shake my head. “Chain of custody was broken. And two bones don’t equal a mass grave.” I grimace before adding, “And I need human bones if I’m going to get the city council motivated enough to be involved.”

Flint steps forward, Anny at his side. “I can send some furry helpers down there. Creatures that can navigate through the dirt and search for the bones.”

“Good idea.” It’s less risky and might be our best chance to uncover the evidence we came here for. “What do you need from us?”

He rubs the top of Anny’s head. “Just a quiet place for us to sit.”

I call my people back from the hole, and Flint clears a place on the ground, outside the ring of flags that mark how far it moved the night before.

Seemingly unconcerned that he’s about to ruin his nice dress pants, Flint lowers himself to the wet ground, and Anny sits beside him, still as a statue.

Johannsson jumps when the first rodent scurries out of the forest, earning a punch on the arm from O’Hara for flinching.

Dozens more of varying sizes follow, and they swarm into the pit.

“I’m never going to get used to that,” Johannsson mutters under his breath with a full-body shudder.

“Better than you, right?” Troy whispers back.

I pace restlessly, time ticking by. I got this started early enough in the morning that I’d hoped to be taking pictures and hauling up bones before Chief Lynch arrived at the office and got wind of what I was up to.

But the more time that passes, the less likely the outcome is. I took a huge risk, and I’m not sure my department can bear the weight of my failure if we can’t find these bones.

As we wait, the silence of the surrounding forest gets to me.

Shouldn’t there be birds singing right now? Or leaves rustling in the breeze? It feels unnatural, like the forest holds its breath, waiting to see what we discover.

Pen approaches me, stepping into my path. “Darius thinks we should take

the skull to Nickodemus now. If we can bargain for use of part of the Bone Yard, it might help.”

I hesitate. If we give the skull to Nickodemus, we really won’t have any evidence besides the hand. But no one on the city council will care about a dead boogeyman.

“Go ahead,” I say at last. “If we can get him to cooperate on the tourist idea, then it should make the city council happy.”

“Should we drop the hand off at the Conservatory, too?” Pen whispers. “It will help identify how long this has been going on. And the symbol could tell us what kind of monster we’re facing.”

The hand is human, and while ancient, it could still solve a cold case. “Take Johannsson with you to maintain as much of the chain of custody as possible going forward.”

Pen’s nose wrinkles, but she nods in agreement, and determination lights her golden eyes. “We’ll get something locked in for you.”

Turning away, she strides over to where Johannsson hovers as far from the pit as possible and collects him before returning to Darius and Marc, and the four walk away from the scene.

I appreciate their determination and faith in me, but the weight of responsibility rests on my shoulders. The JTFPI relies on me to keep the department running, and I fear I seriously messed up today.

I got too cocky when I should have remembered to toe the line. This is a delicate game where I’m trying to prove I can be a team player, and I fumbled.

As they vanish into the woods, my phone vibrates in my pocket, and my muscles stiffen with dread. For a moment, I’m tempted to ignore the call, but that will only make things worse.

I step away from my team, putting distance between us before pulling out my phone and answering. “Captain Sharpe speaking.”

“You have some balls on you, Sharpe,” Chief Lynch growls into the speaker. “What is this about making Bailey’s people permanent transfers?”

My shoulders relax some. “I had them tested when they came in to be interviewed for the Bone Yard task force, and I discovered officers with magical immunity that had somehow slipped by the magical immunity test. Per protocol, I had them transferred to my department as permanent officers.”

Lynch grunts. “You’re just determined to keep kicking that beehive, aren’t you?”

“Captain Bailey is welcome to test all of my officers the same way, and commandeer any who fail the test,” I say in an even tone, knowing full well all of my people will pass. “But I would suggest an investigation into the people administering the test, sir, as it is clearly failing somewhere.”

He grunts again. “What’s the update on the Bone Yard project? Were the Cleaners able to negotiate a compromise?”

“They’re still working on it.” I pace a little farther away. “The king of the boogeymen will help, but he wants something in return.”

“Of course, he does. Demons are the best politicians around.” A tapping sound fills the speaker, like a pen against a desk. “What does he want? Is it something we can do without pissing everyone off?”

“Some of his people have gone missing, and he wants them found.” I reach into my pocket and fist the bottle of antacids I’ve taken to carrying. “The Cleaners started on the case yesterday and already have a lead.”

“Good,” he grunts. “How quickly can they get this resolved?”

I stiffen my spine. “That’s where we’ve run into a snag.”

A beat of silence comes from the other end of the line before Lynch’s voice barks through the speaker. “What kind of snag?”

“A mass grave.” I close my eyes. “Under the forest off the New Clearhelm access road. We’re out here now, trying to open it back up.”

Another long silence follows. “Sharpe, you know we can’t just tear up protected land without proper authorization.”

I take a deep breath to steady my nerves. “It’s a bone grave, Chief. A pit filled with the remains of countless victims. And it’s connected to the missing boogeymen, who we need to find if we want to avoid burning the Bone Yard to the ground. If we destroy the demon city, there will be nothing for tourists to gawk at, and this entire venture will have lost its merit. We have to go where the lead takes us.”

“And you have proof of this mass grave?” Lynch demands.

I glance back toward the empty pit, my jaw clenching with frustration. “We will.”

“You better not leave that forest without it, Sharpe,” Lynch grits out. “I already saved your ass once for tearing up personal property on founder land. Berdherst is going to have a fit when he hears about this.”

“I’ll get the proof,” I promise.

Lynch’s sigh fills my ear. “You’re on thin ice here. The mayor is pushing to get this project on the schedule. We can’t afford any setbacks.”

I grit my teeth. “We’ll get the disappearances solved, and you’ll have your tourist attraction.”

At least, I hope that’s the case.

“Keep me updated,” he snaps, his tone curt.

With that, the line goes silent.

I pull my phone away from my ear to see that he hung up and tuck the device back into my pocket.

Slowly, I make my way back to the pit to join the others while we wait to see if Flint will pull off a miracle and find those bones.

the hand in the bag

- Marc -

WE MAKE it back to the road, the morning sunlight bright after the shadows of the forest.

As we cross the street, Darius pulls out his keys to pop open the trunk of his expensive sports car. We all gather around to peer inside at the skull, which lies nestled in an emergency blanket so it won't bounce around.

Johannsson lets out a low whistle. "That's a lot of teeth. I wouldn't want to run into one of those on a dark night."

Pen looks at him incredulously. "Boogeymen like to come out from under beds while you're sleeping, or don't you know your lore?"

He shakes his head and backs away. "I'll wait in my car and follow you guys to the Conservatory."

"Scaredy cat!" Pen yells as he hurries off.

I turn to Darius and raise my eyebrows. "I can't believe you allowed these dirty bones inside your car."

"He's trying to convince me that his luxury ride is appropriate for running cases." Pen reaches inside and grabs the evidence bag with the hand. "Convince him that the sedan is better."

I grip Darius's shoulder and look him in the eye. "The sedan is better."

"Liar." His skin heats through the fabric of his shirt. "You love my car."

I shake my head. "It costs way too much for what you get."

He leans closer and purrs, "But you love it."

Warmth sweeps through me, but I don't back down. "As long as it's you spending the money and not me, I don't mind the luxury, but no whining when you get scuff marks on the leather seats or, gods forbid, bloodstains."

His nostrils flare with offense. "I don't whine."

"Yes, you do," Pen and I say at the same time.

We grin at each other, and Pen strides ahead toward the van, calling back, “Bring the skull.”

I look at Darius, who purses his lips. “I pulled it out of the hole and put it in the trunk.”

“No reason to stop your streak now, then.” I grip the lid of the trunk and wait.

With a sigh, he gathers up the blanket, wrapping the skull inside.

I glance toward Pen and lower my voice. “Everything okay?”

Darius stiffens. “I miscalculated.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “For future reference, only sneak out while everyone else is sleeping if it’s a one-night stand. Don’t do that to the people you love.”

“I won’t make the mistake again.” He straightens with the bundle cradled in his arms. “If there is a next time.”

I close the trunk. “What do you think?”

His gaze drifts to the van. “That I will still need restraint, but not as much as I used to.”

“Good plan.” I hold the van keys out to Darius. “Trade? We need to leave your keys for Flint.”

He shifts the skull in his arms to pull out his keys and drops them on top of the ones in my hand. “I’m not driving that thing.”

I shake my head. “You are such a snob.”

Fire simmers in his eyes. “What can I say? I like what I like.”

That warmth returns, and I avoid answering by walking to the driver’s side door to hide the keys in the visor. This new dynamic with Darius keeps catching me off guard.

After spending centuries sharing a body, I know him on an intimate level, but living with the essence of him in my body is different than facing Darius as a physical being. Seeing him standing in front of me makes everything we say to each other more real.

Last night was the first time in a while that we’ve slept in separate bodies, and I didn’t enjoy waking up to find him missing any more than Pen had. I just hid it better. I’m used to waking up with Darius inside me. For him to be gone gave me a moment of panic before I realized what probably happened.

While Darius likes to think he was good at keeping our thoughts separate, I’ve spent enough time with his insecurities to understand that he probably panicked and bolted. But he hadn’t fled far.

Discovering him in the kitchen with Flint had been worth the momentary

fear. I hope it's a sign that we'll all be able to move forward together without the friction that's filled our home since Darius took on his corporeal body.

I hurry to the driver's-side door and climb behind the wheel. Pen sits in her usual spot in the center seat, with Darius on her far side, the skull cradled in his lap.

Pulling out onto the road, I wait for Johannsson to drive up behind me before I head toward the Conservatory across town. As I drive, I keep an eye on the speedometer to make sure I don't break the law.

We may have a JTFPI officer following us, but Bailey has to be in a rage right now after losing his officers. We don't want to give him an excuse to harass us.

Tension fills my body, and I grip the steering wheel. "What do you think happened to the bones?"

Pen's leg bounces on the center well. "Buried beneath the dirt? Though, I don't know how. There were so many last night."

"The monster that was down there with us had to have done something with them." Darius's hand on Pen's leg stops the bouncing. "We didn't get a look at it, but it was big enough to knock down the tower we built to escape."

"It looked enormous." Pen's hand swoops through the air in an arc. "Like a whale making waves."

"Maybe it ate the bones?" My brow furrows. "I don't remember any monsters like that, but a lot of monsters we've never seen before have been cropping up lately."

"Could be another like the Hive Queen." Pen pushes Darius's hand off her leg, and it starts bouncing again. "Something from the Between that was let loose."

If the demon courts locked it up in their space prison instead of exterminating it, it must be bad.

The others must have a similar thought, because silence falls for the rest of the drive through Clearhelm and out the other side, where I turn onto the road that borders the city.

Trees line one side, with the forest that surrounds the city running right up to the edge of the asphalt.

Only the Conservatory and the Remington Brother's Farm are out this far, so traffic is nonexistent. The sanctuary for young witches needs the space to commune with nature and to avoid putting human lives at risk with any power outbursts.

I slow as I flip on my blinker and turn onto the tree-lined road that leads to the school. The heavy branches form a dome overhead, offering shade from the rising sun.

As the trees pull back, the large building comes into view.

The reconstruction has been completed, but the landscaping is still in progress. The new parks and pathways lead through the forest to the new greenhouse we built on the land we bought from the Remington Brothers.

While much of the building changed, the glass dome at the center remains the same, with an ancient tree rising through the roof.

I park in the small lot in front of the building amid the general use vehicles we bought for students to check out and the small bus for larger groups to go into town.

Johannsson pulls into a spot beside us, and we all climb out, Darius with the skull still in his arms.

We make our way up the stairs to the heavy wooden doors, and I step ahead to pull one side open.

This is another big change after we took over the Conservatory.

Under the past leadership, Darius and I wouldn't have been allowed inside. The old coven leader had been a bit of a racist against demons, and those prejudices got her killed by one of her own people.

Kids race back and forth in the main entry hall in everyday clothing, which is a far sight better than the robes they were forced to wear before. The new headmaster doesn't want this place to look like a cult. It's a school like any other. They just teach magic here in addition to English and Math.

We find Xander and Reese in their office, and Reese's ugly little dragon familiar lets out an alarmed squawk when we enter.

"Don't worry, Flint's not with us," Pen assures the alarmed beast.

Reese and Flint's familiars do *not* get along, which is entirely Anny's fault, as she tries to eat the ugly thing every time they're in the same room.

As Reese settles his familiar back on his shoulder, Xander stands from his desk and smooths a hand through his short brown hair. "Hey, we weren't expecting visitors. What can we do for you?"

While young, Xander is one of the most powerful witches Flint's encountered in a long time, and his younger brother Reese is a close runner-up. If anyone can figure out the symbol on the hand bone, it's these two.

Pen steps forward to set the evidence bag on Xander's desk. "We found this in a pit of bones last night. The bones have since vanished, so this is our

only clue as to what's happening. We're hoping you can help identify the symbol burned into the bones."

Curiosity fills Reese's fae-touched eyes, and he rises from his desk to join us. His gaze sweeps over Darius, the slash of brown across the blue of one eye allowing him to see more than most people.

I always wondered what he saw when he looked at me when Darius and I shared a body. Did he see Darius's physical form superimposed over mine? Or was Darius only a different ball of fire energy within my body?

Reese's gaze moves past us to Johannsson, who hovers near the door looking uncomfortable, and he lets out a short laugh. "I remember you."

We all turn to look at Johannsson, who frowns. "I don't think so."

"No, I do." He looks at his brother. "He arrested us, remember?"

"Yeah," Xander says shortly. "We were breaking and entering. We deserved it."

"Wait a second." Johannsson steps farther into the room, squinting at them. "You're those two little punks whose daddy sprung them on a technicality!"

"If by daddy you mean Kellen Cassius, the demon who owned our souls at the time, then sure, that's totally what happened." Xander pulls the evidence bag closer. "Let's see what we're dealing with here."

"Hold on." Johannsson strides up to the desk to grab the bag. "We can't have criminals touching evidence."

Reese widens his eyes at him. "But our daddy made sure no charges were ever filed."

"They're on the approved list with the JTFPI." I take the bag back from Johannsson and set it on the table. "Their dip into the criminal side would have come up already if it was an issue."

Johannsson's eyes narrow. "The *Conservatory* is on the approved list, and it was sanctioned under the previous coven leader. Has it been recertified?"

It's unlikely anyone has thought of doing that. The city has always had a hands-off approach when it comes to the school, since it keeps to itself and is the only place outside of the Bone Yard to get magical assistance. We didn't rock the boat when we took it over, and the city just looked the other way.

That Johannsson brought it up shocks me. He's never been known for being a great detective, but he's been trying harder lately, and that effort is now getting in our way.

Pen rolls her eyes. "Don't choose now to be a pain in the ass, Paul. That

hand is at least a hundred years old. Whoever killed them is already dead, so there's no justice that will be obstructed."

"Pretend I didn't say anything," Reese advises. "It's not like there's a record, anyway."

I tap Reese on the arm. "Rule of thumb is that if the officer doesn't remember arresting you, don't bring it up."

He nods and mimes zipping his lips.

"I can't just ignore—"

Xander pops open the bag and upends it on his desk. "Too late now. Evidence is out of the bag."

Johannsson shakes his head. "*You're* the pains in the asses, not me. Sign the bag."

Xander dutifully opens a drawer in his desk and pulls out a Sharpie to scribble his name on the plastic.

As Reese lifts the hand and turns it over, his familiar leaps onto the desk and sniffs the bones, then lets out a snort and twin streams of smoke rise into the air.

"Please don't set the evidence on fire," Johannsson groans, squeezing his eyes shut.

Reese scoops the little beast up against his chest. "The hand is dead."

"No shit," Johannsson mutters.

Reese blinks at him for a moment before he straightens. "Oh, I know it's dead, obviously, but I mean it's *dead* dead."

"We also noticed a lack of any energy." Pen looks at Johannsson. "Even bones usually have a residual energy in them. But these are drained dry. It's significant for what they're lacking."

Reese turns the hand so the symbol faces up. "But this is clearly magic of some kind."

Xander scoots his chair toward the end of his desk and grabs the edge of a roll of paper attached to the side. With a tug, he rips off a piece large enough to cover the top of his desk, and Reese sets the hand down in the middle of it.

When Xander moves the Sharpie over the hand, Johannsson lurches forward. "What are you doing?"

"Magic." Xander draws a circle around the hand on the paper, then symbols around it that only confuse me.

As an elemental witch, I never had an interest in academia, and the patterns for spell work never came naturally to me. If Flint were here, though,

he'd know exactly what Xander is doing.

Xander caps the pen and grabs the roll of paper, ripping off another piece to lie on top. "Reese?"

His brother slips his fingers between the two pieces of paper, and a flash of magic brightens the room.

Xander stares down at the paper. "Huh."

"What does that mean?" Johannsson demands. "What was supposed to happen?"

Xander peels back the top layer of paper to reveal a blank sheet of white beneath, the circle and symbols he drew around the hand now gone.

My stomach tightens, and Pen shifts restlessly next to me.

Reese clasps his hands behind his back and leans down to peer at the hand. "Fascinating."

"What happened?" Johannsson demands again.

"We have a magic-eating hand." Xander picks up the Sharpie and prods the symbol. "But where does the magic go?"

Reese straightens and turns to study Darius. "Are there more symbols on the other remains?"

Surprised, I glance at the blanket he carries, but no hint of the skull shows through the folds of the material.

"No, but it was also in the bone pit." Darius flips back a corner of the blanket to reveal the boogeyman skull. "We need to deliver this back to the Terror from Beneath."

"We also need one of the cars out front." I toss the van keys to Reese, who catches them. "We got slapped with a new kind of tracker on our van. Spell tech. I deep-cleaned it inside and out, but Flint wants you guys to look it over to make sure we didn't miss anything."

Reese rubs his hands together. "Sounds like a nice, hands-on demonstration for my class."

"Just don't break it," I drawl. "We're not looking to buy a new van."

Xander draws another circle around the hand and different symbols. "I'll keep working on this. It could take a while to figure out what spell is being used."

I clap Johannsson on the shoulder. "Better pull up a chair. You're going to be here a while."

He mutters under his breath, but grabs the chair from Reese's desk and pulls it up alongside Xander, settling down to watch like a good little

policeman.

“Call as soon as you have something,” Pen says.

Xander nods absently, his focus on the puzzle in front of him.

With nothing more that we can do here, we depart, heading to our next stop.

unfulfilled bargains

- Pen -

LEAVING Johannsson behind at the Conservatory, we make our way to the Bone Yard in one of the standard-model sedans while Darius grumbles about going back for his fancy sports car.

“Stop whining.” Marc glances at him through the rearview mirror. “You don’t want to park your car near the Bone Yard. It could get stolen.”

“I’m not whining.” Darius props his elbow on the window ledge. “The back seat is just incredibly cramped. How tall are the people meant to ride back here?”

Laughing, I twist in my seat to stare at him. “The backseat in your car is even smaller.”

His fiery gaze flashes to me. “It is at least comfortable.”

He sits with his legs at an angle, pointed toward the center of the car, with an uncomfortable pinch to his brow.

I pull the lever under my seat, but it won’t scoot forward any farther. “I offered to take the back seat.”

His lips purse with displeasure. “I would never allow that. But Marceau could have let me drive.”

“My legs are almost as long as yours,” Marc protests. “This is the price of having a corporeal body.”

“I find it overrated at the moment.” He leans forward and reaches for Marc’s shoulder. “Perhaps, just for the ride—”

I slap his hand away. “No body jumping while we’re driving!”

With a huff, he settles back in his seat.

I look away from the side mirror so he can’t see the smile tugging at my lips. Darius was always so reserved as a court guard, only allowing himself to relax when we were outside of the demon citadel. It’s nice to see him acting

spoiled right now.

We luck out with traffic through the heart of Clearhelm, hitting the sweet spot between the morning and afternoon rush. But it makes street parking harder.

Marc circles the block several times before he grabs a spot at the curb just as the car occupying the spot leaves.

While the wall of the Bone Yard rises to our right, it's not the best parking spot, with the entrance to the small demon city on the opposite side. It means less chance of our car getting vandalized in what has turned into a seedy part of town, but it will be a bit of a hike to and from the entrance.

The sun beats down on our heads as we walk the block to the corner and take a right.

A greasy diner catches Marc's eye across the street, and he pats his stomach. "Hey, we should go back there."

Confused, I look up at him, "We've never—"

Darius lets out a distressed noise. "Please, no. It was bad enough the first time. My stomach isn't as resistant to food poisoning as yours is."

Oh, this was something they did together without the rest of us.

Marc nudges me. "Pen and I will just go without you, then, right?"

I meet his amused gaze, and the tension that was building vanishes. I smile up at him. "Can't remember the last time I got food poisoning. Sounds like a challenge."

Darius's arm presses against mine, sending heat through me. "Didn't you promise me an evening at the Harbor? You were craving a cup of *capunis*."

My focus jumps back to him. "But you said you wanted that to just be us."

Surprise fills his eyes, and he glances over my head at Marc. "I didn't mean... Marceau is not someone I need to be alone from."

"Ah." I turn my head to study Marc, whose cheeks hold a light flush. "That makes sense."

They haven't been separated long enough to be used to the new distance. How long will it be before they stop acting like they're still one person?

"We could do both?" I suggest after a moment. "Fire in the belly will make food poisoning less likely."

Darius lets out a long sigh. "If we must. But let us at least get it to go so the others may suffer with us."

"That's the way to do it." Marc reaches past me to tap Darius's arm.

“Spread the misery.”

We reach the archway that announces the entrance to the Bone Yard, and my gaze lingers on the plaque attached to the outer wall, warning of the danger that awaits just past the line in the ground. Wards sparkle around the outer edges and within the stones that form the arch.

The magic is supposed to keep the more dangerous beings within contained. No one who actively plans to harm humans should be able to cross the line once they enter, but the tunnel beneath the wall gives lie to those protections.

Why didn't we sense the breach? And how do we close it off and stop it from happening again? Especially with the city council's plan to turn this place into a tourist trap?

My steps slow as we enter the demon part of the city, and a shiver of apprehension rolls through me. “Do the streets appear emptier than they did yesterday?”

While they're still crowded, they're not as packed as usual, with large, empty spaces between people that haven't existed since the demons first took over these city blocks. The Bone Yard has always been a place teeming with life, no matter the time of day, but now, a tense wariness fills the air.

Darius peers around and nods. “Yes. But why? Have more than the boogeymen gone missing? Or are residents showing caution for another reason? I can't imagine Nickodemus would tell anyone what's happened to his people. It would make him appear weak.”

“Nickodemus preferred to let all his children be taken instead of reaching out for help.” My gaze lands on a group of demons huddled together who watch us with wary stares. “He'd rather go extinct than have anyone know what's happened at The Cellar.”

We head toward the Poison Frog, which was packed just yesterday, but now no one hovers around the door, and the tables on the patio sit empty.

The unease inside me builds as we walk down the dark alley to the stairs that lead below the bar to The Cellar. When we reach the door at the bottom, it stands open, with no sign of light from within.

My pulse quickens, the lack of security sending trepidation down my spine.

Are we too late? Is Nickodemus gone now, too? Was he attacked after we saw him yesterday?

I exchange silent glances with the guys and unclip the batons at my belt,

snapping them to their full length.

Flame erupts in Marc's hand, and he steps through first, illuminating the dirt floor filled with open graves and the tunnels that peek from the shadows against the walls.

I follow a pace behind him, facing the right, while Darius covers the left, his arms encumbered by the skull he carries. As we step around one of the open graves, I peer inside at the hole that slopes down deep into the earth, leading toward the center of the Bone Yard.

Do they all go in the same direction at first? And do they all eventually lead to the pit of bones?

We reach Nickodemus's grisly throne and find it empty.

"So you survived where my children did not," a voice hisses from the shadows.

Marc swings around, the fire in his hand casting a red glow over the tall figure hunched within the darkness in one of the tunnels.

The king of boogeymen has cast off his human trappings since our last visit, and his leathery skin stretches over his bones grotesquely. The mouth below his stomach hisses, baring sharp teeth at us.

Nickodemus lumbers forward, his body hunched forward and his stringy black hair covering his face, with only the glint of yellow eyes visible. "What have you found?"

Darius cautiously steps forward and pulls back the edge of the blanket to expose the multiple rows of teeth within the misshapen skull he carries. "We found a mass grave with this inside."

The mouth in Nickodemus's stomach opens in a grief-filled wail that splits our ears.

He lurches forward to take the skull, and fury fills his voice. "Who has done this to my children?"

My hands tighten on my batons, and I keep a cautious distance between us. "We don't know. There was a monster in the tunnels, but we couldn't see it."

"Where are the rest?" His head lifts, and wet snuffles fill the air. "You left them down there?"

"We nearly died getting even that much," Darius says. "We tried to go back this morning with more manpower, but the pit was empty."

"Then you have failed our bargain. You are not strong enough to offer protection for the Bone Yard." Nickodemus sets the skull on top of his

throne. "Leave."

I stiffen. "We're not giving up, Terror from Beneath. This is only the first clue."

"Then why are you here?" He whips toward me, his claws raised. "I tasked you to find what is taking my children. Not to bring me empty bones."

Marc and Darius both move to stand in front of me, and flames erupt in Darius's hands. "Step back, Nickodemus, or your kingdom ends here."

Gently, but firmly, I move them aside. While I appreciate their desire to protect, I don't need it. "We *will* figure out what did this. Flint is still at the grave site with Sharpe, searching for the bones."

"If they are missing, then you have already failed." He turns and lumbers back toward the tunnel he came from. "Leave me to my grief."

"Wait." I step after him, only to come up short when Marc grabs the back of my shirt. "What's going on in the Bone Yard? Why are there fewer beings walking the street?"

Nickodemus grips the wall, his thick talons digging into the wooden beam that holds up the ceiling. "You have not fulfilled your bargain. Leave before I kill you all."

We exchange uneasy glances and retreat from The Cellar, not turning our backs until we reach the alley once more.

"I don't like this," Marc mutters as we head toward the street. "He knows more than he's saying."

"All we can do is keep running the case." Reminded of another case we're running, I turn toward the Poison Frog. "Let's go in and ask about Jimmy while we're here. This is the least packed I've ever seen the bar."

"Jimmy?" Marc questions.

"Drug dealer who disappeared in the Bone Yard," Darius informs him. "We took on the case yesterday because Pen was bored."

"*You* were bored," I correct, "and avoiding paperwork."

"*We* were bored," Darius amends. "He's most likely dead."

The statement sends disquiet through me. While I had the same thought when we took the case, with the sudden shift in the Bone Yard and what's happening with the boogeymen, I find myself hoping that we find Jimmy still alive.

We don't need another body right now.

I collapse my batons and return one to my belt to free my hand while keeping the other at the ready. The bar may be less packed, but not less

dangerous.

I push open the door to the Poison Frog, only to come up short. Not because of the noxious fumes of liquor and ozone that sting my eyes and nose, but because of the caged madman sitting on the bar.

“This is unexpected,” Darius rumbles from behind me.

The man grips the bars and shouts over the conversation in the bar, “They ride with death, and the world burns. You can’t stop it. No one can stop it!”

“Hey, don’t we know him?” Marc says.

I nod and continue farther inside. “Yeah, that’s the crazy prophet we were in lockup with. How’d he end up here?”

“All paths are paved in blood!” the madman screams.

“Boo!” Several demons hiss and throw peanuts at the man.

“Give us something new!” a few yell.

A club bangs against the cage, and a baby-faced man shouts, “Come on, old man. What’s the next sign of the apocalypse? We have a bingo card to fill!”

The madman’s eyes roll toward us, and he presses his whisker-covered face against the bars. “Sacrifice your queen!”

The baby-faced man looks toward us and grins. “Well, well, well! The queen herself is in the house!”

I frown as we push through the gathered crowd to the counter. “Philip. What’s this about?”

He grins at us. “We got our hands on a real prophet, so we’re playing apocalypse bingo.” He points to a board behind him. “*All paths are paved in blood* we figure was that whole mess at the Conservatory, and *Sacrifice your queen*, well, that was obviously you on Main Street with the Beast.”

My gaze lifts to the board, where lines of the prophecy fill squares. The center and top right square are already crossed off, with images from the news taped around them. Other squares include: *When One Falls, Another Rises* and *They Ride With Death, The World Burns*.

My frown deepens. “You have a lot of empty boxes there.”

“This prophet seems really fixated on these specific events, unfortunately.” Philip taps the club he holds against the cage. “He’s not giving us any new ones.”

The man lunges at Philip. “You can’t stop it! No one can stop it!”

Marc squints at the board. “These aren’t signs of the apocalypse. They’re just mad ramblings that you’re forcing context onto.”

“Entertainment is entertainment.” Philip shrugs. “So, what brings you lovely people into this hell hole?”

“We’re here to talk to the bartender.” I reach into my pocket and step past Philip to thrust the picture of Jimmy toward the demon behind the bar. “Have you seen this man? He was here looking for puff in the last few days.”

The demon doesn’t even look at the picture. “We don’t sell puff here.”

“I don’t care if you sell puff.” I tap the picture. “Was he here?”

“Might have been,” he grunts. “We get a lot of customers through our doors. I just take their coin and give them booze.”

“Aww, too bad,” Philip pokes out his bottom lip. “But I’m sure he’ll pop up somewhere.”

Annoyed that he’s the one who gave us this lead and wasted our time, I tuck the picture away. “You think that’s funny?”

Philip shrugs with disinterest. “He was selling demon body parts. Stop wasting your time on this case when we have an apocalypse coming.”

With a broad smile, I snap my baton to full-length and flick it out, blowing off the lock on the cage.

The madman bursts free, tumbling to the floor, and Darius sends a streak of fire through the crowd, forcing open a path for the man to race to freedom.

I turn back to Philip. “Now *that* was fun. Enjoy your bingo night.”

As we head for the door, a man at the entrance catches my eyes before he ducks out of view. But in that brief glimpse, I recognize the gaunt, dirty-blond man as the one in my photo.

Looks like Jimmy really has been hanging out at the Poison Frog. And he just made us.

dozens of lives

- Flint -

I CLOSE my eyes and take a deep breath, releasing the world around me as my consciousness spreads outward. Orianna, who sits at my side, shines like a beacon of energy, her presence an anchor as my magic flows downward into the pit, connected with the rodents I summoned.

Small granules of dirt shift beneath my paws, the swish of dozens of tails travel down my spine, and air ruffles my fur, while the scent of earth fills my nose with a richness I'm unused to. My senses feel sharper, and my vision of the pit comes from all directions.

Small claws dig through the dirt, burrowing beneath the surface in search of the missing bones. We need to find them, not just for Sharpe, but for all the beings who've died, whose loved ones never knew what happened to them.

I guide the small creatures, directing their movements to scurry into the depths of the earth. The rats can only go a foot and a half, but the mice can burrow far deeper.

It takes time, but after nearly ten feet without even a finger bone found, I direct them to return to the surface of the cave.

Once they're back on top of the dirt, I send their tiny bodies to the walls, seeking out narrow passageways. They spread outward, moving in different directions that pull my consciousness thin.

As we delve deeper, I sense a shift in the energy around us, and other movements join the scurry of small bodies. A slithering that sends tiny hearts racing with the need to flee, but my hold keeps them moving forward.

And then, two of my mice find it—another pit deep within the earth, filled with all the missing bones from the mass grave, hidden in the heart of the forest.

A surge of triumph and relief courses through me, and I pull the other rodents back, directing them to the tunnel that leads to the new grave site.

Just as they enter the new tunnel, the ground shakes, jolting me out of my trance. My consciousness slams back into my body, and the disorientation of being human again hits me like a tidal wave.

Orianna lets out a startled yip from beside me and presses her body against my side, adding support and seeking comfort.

The officers around us shout in alarm as they drop to the ground, their eyes darting to the surrounding trees that rain leaves down on us. The earth continues to shake, the tremors growing in intensity for a heart-stopping moment before they stop.

Cautiously, the officers rise to their feet.

“We haven’t had an earthquake in Clearhelm in over a hundred years,” mutters Webb, one of the new officers, her voice trembling with fear.

“Then I’d say we’re due.” O’Hara plants a hand on the nearest tree trunk and pushes against it. “Don’t worry, the roots here run deep. This forest isn’t going anywhere.”

“That’s not what those moving roots implied earlier.” Troy touches the hooked chain attached to his belt. “Never fought a forest before.”

“And we’re not planning to fight one today.” Sharpe strides over to grip my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Heart still racing, I nod. “Yeah. Just a little disoriented.”

He squeezes my shoulder. “Have you found anything?”

“Yes.” Despite the lingering woozy sensation of only having one body, my voice rises with excitement. “I’ve located the bones.”

Cheers rise from the officers, and relief washes over Sharpe’s face. “Are they just buried now?”

“No.” I stroke Orianna’s head. “They’ve been moved deeper within the forest.”

Sharpe gazes at the trees, which grow closer together farther in. “Not sure we can get the trench digger that far without taking down trees, and that’s not getting sanctioned without proof.”

“Then I’ll get you that proof.” I slip back into a trance, my consciousness once again merging with the souls of the rodents.

They had scattered in panic during the earthquake, but I summon them back, directing them to return to the tunnels that lead to the new pit.

As their small bodies move through the earth, the sound of movement

pricks my senses from dozens of ears.

Then the earth beneath us moves once more.

My first thought is another earthquake before I realize that it's not the ground itself that's shifting—it's the earth around us.

Roots shoot out from the soil, reaching for the rodents with deadly precision. Their fear and pain fill me as some are grabbed and dragged squealing into the walls.

Intense, searing pain pierces through me, jolting me back to my body.

I gasp as I'm thrust back into reality once more, but I maintain a tenuous link with a few of the rodents. My vision becomes a strange, dual perspective, with the forest and the officers visible in one layer and the rodents deep within the earth in another.

Orianna's presence fills my senses, and when I look down, I find her teeth latched onto my arm, her amber eyes filled with fierce determination. She growls in warning, her instincts kicking in to protect me from whatever threat lurks beneath the ground.

Settling a hand on her head, I firm my connection to the rodents who are still alive and push them to hurry.

We need that proof.

The rodents break into the new bone pit, and I direct them to grab whatever they can carry.

As we work, the mound of bones shifts, and I remember Pen and Darius's description of a monster lurking beneath the surface, waiting for an opportunity to strike.

Distantly, I feel Orianna's grip on my arm, her pointed teeth a warning of the danger.

"What's happening?" Sharpe's worried voice sounds muffled in my ears, but I can't spare the focus to speak.

"Anyone else see the trees moving?" Troy asks.

"Just the wind," O'Hara says without conviction.

"This is unnatural." Mayn's voice slithers through my mind, louder than the others, tickling at my senses to draw me back to my body.

I struggle to maintain my focus on the rodents, my mind divided between their efforts underground and the restlessness of the humans around me.

Deep beneath the ground, the rodents race back toward me, dragging the bones.

The roots return to the tunnel, crushing some, and I flinch at their pain

before I release their souls.

Sharpe's voice fills my ear. "Flint, stop. You're panicking Anny."

"We're almost there," I mumble, the words hard to form. "Just a little farther, and I'll bring the evidence to the surface."

As if they heard me, the roots surrounding the pit's opening writhe, closing over the hole.

The ground rumbles beneath us, and Sharpe's curse fills the air. "Everyone, get back! Mayn, bring Flint!"

Mayn doesn't hesitate to pick me up with a surprising show of strength. My feet barely touch the ground as she drags me backward, away from the vanishing hole and the evidence I so desperately fought for.

Orianna's sharp barks fill the air as she races along beside us.

Still linked to the rodents, I witness their desperate struggle against the roots as, one by one, they're crushed, their pain searing through me like a white-hot blade, until only one rodent remains.

It cowers, a finger bone gripped between its small teeth, its tiny heart pounding with terror. Through its eyes, I watch as the roots gather up the bones and drag them back toward the pit.

I direct the rodent to release the bone it carries. With the hole closed, there's no reason for this creature to die, too. As soon as the rodent drops its prize, a root snags the bone and retracts, leaving the small creature alone.

The ground continues to rumble beneath us, and the trees sway, their branches clattering together.

Webb smacks falling leaves from her hair. "Is this another earthquake?"

"We're not waiting around to find out!" Sharpe gestures for his people to head toward the road. "Everyone, move out!"

Mayn bends and scoops an arm under my legs, lifting me bridal style as she races ahead of the other officers.

The move barely registers as my mind remains with the rodent, riding along as it follows the roots back to the bone pit.

If I can't get the evidence, I can at least see what this monster we face looks like.

The roots slither over the bones, settling them back in place like some kind of dragon hoard before withdrawing into the earthen walls.

Across the pile of bones, a dark shadow in the earthen walls shows a larger tunnel. I send the rodent scurrying across the bone pile, its small body too light to disturb them.

The rodent climbs into the tunnel, its little legs racing forward, traveling farther and farther away from us.

Distantly, I register Mayn stuffing me into the back of a car, of Orianna nipping at my fingers, demanding I return to my body.

But I can't, not yet.

I travel with my furry companion as it comes out into another, smaller cavern filled with hundreds more bones. Roots slither through the grisly remains, weaving around and through them, a grotesque form taking shape, as the ground shakes once more.

All at once, I snap back into my body, and my eyes fly open.

Lurching upright, my heart races as I grab Mayn's arm. "We need to go to the Bone Yard, right now! Something is happening!"

maze of death

- Darius -

“THAT WAS JIMMY!” Merri races toward the entrance of the Poison Frog, leaving me and Marceau to chase after or be left behind.

Out on the street, Merri shoves past demons, using her baton when some fail to move fast enough.

Several paces ahead of her, a skinny man with greasy hair weaves through the crowds like a frightened rabbit, losing his lead every time he casts a terrified look over his shoulder.

In the brief flashes of his face, I glimpse sallow skin, hollow bruises beneath his blue eyes, and a gaunt face. In his picture, Jimmy hadn’t looked especially healthy—as expected of a long-time drug addict—but the week that he’s been gone has done a number on him.

Jimmy casts another frantic look over his shoulder, stumbles, and catches himself against a building before ducking down the alleyway.

“Pen, wait!” Marceau shouts, but she either can’t hear or she ignores him as she follows, her lithe form vanishing from view.

My pulse leaps with fear.

While my warrior queen is more than capable of taking care of herself, this is the Bone Yard, and the alleys form a twisted maze where we could easily lose her.

Beings surge around us, and I send spurts of fire ahead to force them from our path.

Marceau’s hand grips my arm, yanking me clear of a barbed tail that slashes through the air inches from my face, and then we reach the alley, ducking into the shadows.

The close press of buildings on either side muffles the sounds from the streets and blocks out the sweltering sun. I raise a hand to light our path as we

charge down the narrow space.

The air grows heavy with the scent of ozone and decay, making my gut tighten. Beings have lost their lives in these tight confines, dragged from the street or wandering here unwary of the danger.

We reach a T-intersection, and a glance to the left shows the way clogged with broken furniture, so we race to the right.

Another intersection comes up ahead, and I spot Merri's ash-blond hair in the shadows as she darts to the left, around the corner of a building.

I reach out to grab Marceau's arm, pulling him in the correct direction.

The ground trembles beneath our feet, and I stumble, the fire snuffing out in my hand. I land against the side of the building and brace myself as the stones beneath my feet vibrate, while the sound of breaking wood and falling stone comes from up ahead.

When the shaking stops, a firm hand grips my elbow.

Flames bloom to life on Marceau's fingertips, illuminating his furrowed brow. "What was that? An earthquake?"

I shake my head. "I'm not sure. If it was, this is the last place we want to be trapped."

His hold on my elbow tightens, and we race forward once more, fueled by desperation to reach Merri.

We round the corner to find her shoving fallen boxes out of the way, her angry gaze fixed on a fire escape attached to the wall on the other side. A flicker of movement halfway up shows Jimmy clinging to the railing, his eyes wide with fear.

"Dammit, Jimmy!" Merri kicks a box, sending it flying. "We're not here to hurt you!"

Jimmy ignores her words as he picks himself up and continues to climb.

Marceau catches her shoulder. "Don't run off like that! Not here!"

"I can take care of myself!" She flings a hand toward the rooftop. "He's getting away!"

I send fire out, turning the boxes to ash, and race for the ladder as Jimmy disappears onto the rooftop, leaving us in his wake.

The ladder to the fire escape ends just out of reach from the ground, and I kneel beneath it, cupping my hands. "Come on. We're not quitting now."

Merri hurries forward and plants her filth-covered shoe against my palms. I ignore the sticky feel of it against my skin as I heave her upward, and she nimbly catches the bottom of the ladder, pulling herself up.

I kneel once more and look at Marceau.

He rolls his eyes. "You think I can't jump that high?"

"Less posturing and more climbing," I snap, not liking how quickly Merri is putting distance between us once more.

He grunts but plants his boot in my hold, and I toss him upward. The ladder rattles as it takes his weight, and Pen grabs the handrail for balance before continuing her ascent.

The rickety thing looks ready to fall right off the side of the building. Worried that my added weight will be too much, I linger in the alley until Merri reaches the roof before jumping up to catch the bottom of the ladder.

The metal groans but holds as I pull myself up, scaling the groaning ladder one rung at a time. The cold metal bites into my hands, and my heart races with the knowledge that my delay will separate me from my team.

When I reach the top, though, I find Marceau and Merri waiting, Merri pacing like a caged tiger thwarted in her hunt.

I step up beside Marceau. "Did he get away?"

Marceau's eyes narrow as he scans the rooftops. "He can't have gotten far. Not in his condition."

He's right. Jimmy's health won't allow him to keep up his pace for long. "Everyone, be silent."

Merri freezes, and beside me, Marceau holds his breath.

I close my eyes, stretching out my senses. Distantly, I hear the sounds coming from the street below, and I push those away, searching for something out of place.

A soft cry reaches my ears, a sob of fear choked off.

He's close, so close.

I follow the sound, turning until I can practically smell his fear.

Eyes opening, I point silently at the building directly across from ours, where another fire escape leads back down to the alley.

Steps silent, we walk to the edge of the rooftop and peer down to see Jimmy caught between two piles of junk, with nowhere to run.

His terror-filled eyes stare up at us, and he chokes off another panicked sob. In desperation, he tries to climb over the pile that leads toward the street, but the bags shift under his feet, sending him back to the ground.

We easily jump across the rooftop and descend the ladder, landing in the pocket of filth.

"Jimmy." Merri approaches slowly, her hands out to show she's unarmed.

“It’s okay. We’re here to help.”

Jimmy’s eyes roll in his head, a cornered animal terrified of the approaching predators.

Then his gaze fixes on me, and his eyes widen. “You... You’re one of them.”

Merri steps in front of me to draw Jimmy’s attention. “He’s not here to hurt you. We don’t care that you were selling demon parts.”

Jimmy’s voice quivers. “I didn’t kill anyone, and I’m no dark witch. I got those feathers in trade.”

Considering how much those feathers are worth, I doubt anyone would *trade* them. It’s more likely Jimmy mugged—or possibly killed—someone for them, but that’s not our problem.

“We don’t care how you got those feathers.” Merri keeps her tone firm. “We’re just here to make sure you get out of the Bone Yard in one piece.”

He gnaws on his cracked lips until they bleed before he shakes his head. “I don’t believe you. No one helps people for free.”

“It’s not free,” I inform him. “Your wife paid a lot to get you home.”

Confusion fills Jimmy’s eyes. “Jenny sent you?”

Pen nods. “She’s worried about you. She wants you to come home.”

Jimmy snuffles and wipes his dirty forearm under his nose. “I can’t go back. I have to... No, I can’t go home yet. I need to make my money back.”

Marceau steps forward. “Your wife doesn’t care that you lost all the money from the angel feathers. She just wants you safely back at her side.”

Jimmy’s eyes water, and hope fills them. “You think she’ll forgive me? I promised her a new home.”

“It wouldn’t be a home without you there.” Merri extends a hand, beckoning him toward us. “Come on, let us get you out of here.”

He shuffles forward. “You’ll help me? You’ll protect me?”

Marceau nods. “We promise, Jimmy. We don’t fail cases once we take them.”

Jimmy takes a deep, shuddering breath, his tear-filled eyes fixed on Merri. “You really think Jenny will forgive me?”

Pen gives him a reassuring smile. “She loves you more than money. Why else would she hire us to come find you?”

Emotions choke his voice. “We’ve been together since high school. We had plans, you know? To start a family, build a life together.” He stops beside us. “But I messed it all up with the drugs.”

I place a hand on his bony shoulder. “We’ll help you get clean and find a job. You can still have that dream.”

Jimmy snuffles, his shoulders shaking with tears. “I love her so much. I was so afraid she’d kick me out when she found out what I did.”

“Jenny loves you,” Merri repeats, backing toward the ladder. “And soon, she’ll be telling you that in person.”

Tears flow down Jimmy’s cheeks, leaving streaks of clean skin amid the grime. “Thank you. Thank you for coming for me.”

As we near the ladder, the pile of garbage behind us rustles, and an earth-laden breeze fills my senses.

Alarm shoots through me, and I reach out to shove Marceau to the side before diving toward Merri, tackling her against the wall.

Heart pounding, I catch my balance and turn back to see multiple tree roots slithering out of the alley and slamming into the place where we stood just moments ago.

Marceau reacts with lightning speed, blasting one of the roots with fire, breaking it off.

Before we can react further, the roots snap backward, grabbing Jimmy around the ankle and yanking him toward the pile of trash.

He slams butt first into the ground, his screams piercing the air as he claws at the smooth concrete in a desperate attempt to hold on to anything.

I push away from the wall, my hands lifting and fire coming to my call, but hesitate for fear of burning Jimmy. In horror, I watch as he vanishes into the garbage pile, his screams echoing in the narrow alley.

Then, the screams cut off, followed by a sickening, wet squelch.

While I stand frozen, Merri darts past, racing toward the hole that Jimmy vanished into.

With a shout, Marceau lunges forward and catches her around the waist, pulling her back before she can follow Jimmy to his death.

She struggles within his hold, her face etched with shock and anger.

“No, Pen!” Marceau drags her farther away, bringing her to my side. “It’s too late!”

“We had him!” she shouts.

I reach out to cup her face, turning her wild gaze to me. “We can’t save him now.”

Tears blur her golden eyes, but she blinks them away as her focus returns to the hole. The gut-wrenching squelches continue, and blood seeps out to

coat the ground in red.

Then slender, green shoots reach out of the bloody hole, pulling the trash back into place to hide the monster within.

As we stand there, dazed and shaken, the ground beneath our feet trembles with another earthquake.

Stones buckle and crack, and more roots snake up through the widening fissures, reaching hungrily for anything in their path.

In that moment, it becomes painfully clear that the monstrous threat lurking beneath the ground isn't some external entity. It's the very roots themselves, a malevolence that sprouted from deep within the earth.

"Get back up the ladder!" Marceau shouts, stumbling and shoving Merri toward the fire escape.

As soon as she climbs far enough to make room, Marceau jumps up to grab the bottom and starts climbing.

The roots slither closer, and I blast them with fire, scaring them back long enough to jump for the ladder and scramble up.

The fire escape shrieks and rattles as we climb, the building it's attached to swaying ominously, but we make it to the roof without it falling.

As soon as I reach the top, I leap across the gap between buildings. Marceau and Merri catch me on the other side when the shaking building threatens to send me to my knees.

Cracks break out over the cement surface, and we hug the roofline, avoiding the worst at the center. Cautiously, we make our way to the opposite side, where the other fire escape will take us back down into the alley.

Merri reaches it first and swings a leg out over the ledge just as the metal screams, and the fire escape peels away from the building.

Marceau and I both lunge forward, grabbing her arms and pulling her back to safety.

"We'll have to find another way down." I look around and point at a two-story building to the right. "There. We can reach the ground safely from there."

With a shaky breath, Merri nods, and we carefully make our way across the roof, testing it with each step to make sure it won't collapse beneath us.

On the other side, Merri stares down at the swaying roof. "I'll go first."

"No, let me," Marceau protests.

"I'm the lightest," she argues.

"And I don't want you to risk falling through." Marceau gives her a little

shake. “If it can’t hold my weight, then it can’t hold Darius’s, either.”

“By that logic, I should go first as the heaviest,” I point out. “If it can hold me, then it can hold both of you.”

Merri’s lips part to argue, but I take the decision away by leaping over the ledge. I hit the rooftop and roll, coming up on my feet.

My heart races as I wait to see if the rooftop will hold. When it does, I turn back to beckon the others to join me.

Marceau comes first, followed by Merri, who strides over and slaps me in the chest. “Don’t risk yourself like that! You could have been hurt!”

I catch her hand and press it over my heart. “You’re not the only one in this team who is allowed to put their life in danger, my lady.”

With an annoyed huff, she pulls her hand free and strides across the roof to the edge, where she freezes.

Worried, I hurry to join her, Marceau at my side, and horror fills me.

In the street below, more tree roots erupt from the pavement, their twisted forms snaking out to grab people and drag them to their grisly demise.

Chaos reigns as screams fill the air, a cacophony of terror that drowns out all reason. Panic-stricken beings run in all directions, some getting knocked to the ground and trampled underfoot as those around them desperately seek to escape.

But there’s only one exit from the Bone Yard, and the roots are thickest in that direction. Already, blood paints the street.

Merri grips the edge of the rooftop. “We need to get these beings out of here!”

Marceau nods, his eyes blazing with fire. “We’ll have to burn a path for them to escape through! Once they’re past the wards, they should be safe!”

Providing the ward holds in its weakened state.

Tension fills us as Marceau and I burn an open area on the ground before we leap down.

We wade into the chaos, Marceau and I burning back roots while Merri grabs people and directs them onto the scorched path.

Once the surrounding beings catch on to our plan, the exodus becomes a narrow flood, with our flames driving back the seeking roots. The smoke acts as a signal to draw other beings from deeper within the Bone Yard, and they join their brethren in flight.

The roots that we don’t burn, Merri fights back, her batons lashing out and landing with deadly force.

I keep a cautious eye on Marceau, worried that he's burning too hot, even with the amulet he wears helping to control his fires. But he shows no sign of pain.

The roots come at us relentlessly, and for every one we drive back, another emerges to take its place. The ground we stand on continues to tremble, the street breaking apart.

Amid the chaos and destruction, we guide the frightened citizens of the Bone Yard toward the exit. When some hesitate, we urge them to keep moving, while the scent of burning wood mingles with the coppery stench of death from those we can't save.

Despite the odds, we continue to fight, unwilling to allow the Bone Yard to become a graveyard.

serve and protect

- Sharpe -

THE AFTERNOON SUN glares through the windshield as we speed down the road toward the Bone Yard, leading a line of police cruisers.

Mayn sits in the back with Flint and Anny, and my gaze jumps to the rearview mirror frequently to check on the soul witch.

He continues to maintain his link with the rodent underground, periodically muttering confusing details about roots and bones that make no sense. I don't understand if the bones are being moved again or what, exactly, is happening, and I'm not sure Flint fully understands, either.

Anny sits on the seat beside him, her head pressed to his shoulder, whining every so often.

Anxiety coils in my gut, and my grip on the steering wheel tightens, my knuckles turning white as I navigate the traffic. Despite my blaring lights, cars refuse to move out of our way, forcing us to weave around them.

Darkness slithers inside me, my dark fae-power rising with my stress, and I struggle to push it away. The last thing I need right now is to make the steering wheel vanish and reappear in my pocket.

Now that I've started playing with this gift, it's difficult to control when emotions run high, and right now, anxiety threatens to shatter my focus.

"Sharpe, are you well?" Mayn's voice cuts through the tension in the car, her black eyes meeting mine in the rearview mirror.

I take a steadying breath and force my hands to loosen their stranglehold on the steering wheel. "Yeah, just... worried about what we'll find once we reach the Bone Yard."

The radio on the dash is silent, while the news drifts quietly from the car speakers. So far, no disturbances have been reported. It gives me hope that we'll arrive ahead of whatever spooked Flint.

Please let us arrive in time.

More and more, I dislike the separation forced on us, with me leading the JTFPI and the others running their business as the Cleaners.

It takes effort to remind myself that, even if we all worked for the same team, cases would still divide us. There's no guaranteed way to always be with Pen and the others. Not with everything we all take on.

But logic doesn't stop my gut from clenching at the thought of them in danger, and me too far away to help.

A startled cry comes from Flint, and my gaze leaps to the rearview mirror. "What's wrong?"

Flint lifts a hand to rub his temple. "Those roots squished my rat."

"It is not good to experience so many deaths," Mayn says, her melodic voice pitched to soothe.

She must have put some suggestion into the words, because Flint's blue eyes cut to her. "Don't try your siren tricks with me. I've died hundreds of times; I don't need to be babied."

Her braid whips restlessly. "There is a difference between dying and living through another's death."

He turns his head to glare. "What would you know about it?"

She stiffens at his tone and looks away. "Allow your mind to tear apart. I do not care."

"Stop arguing," I grit out through clenched teeth. "Did you see anything helpful before the rat died?"

Flint pushes back his black hair. "Just more of the same. Roots gathering up bones, but not to move them. It's building something."

I weave around another car and speed through a red light that doesn't turn green fast enough. "Did you see any sign of the monster Darius and Pen reported? What's controlling them?"

"All I saw were roots and bones." Frustration fills Flint's voice. "I can try to find another rat and direct it to the cave, but it will take time."

"No." I shake my head. "Don't waste your magic. We're almost to the Bone Yard."

Ahead, the traffic thickens, and my pulse spikes with agitation as I lay on my horn.

Does no one respect emergency lights anymore?

A few of the cars move off to the side, creating a narrow path down the center line, and I carefully maneuver my cruiser through to avoid an accident.

“Come on, people,” I mutter under my breath. “We’re on a damn mission here.”

Ahead of us, horns blare, and the cars become packed so tight that they can’t move, forcing me to stop. A three-car pile-up blocks the road in both directions, and we don’t have time to wait for tow trucks to figure out this mess.

The archway that marks the entrance to the Bone Yard rises just down the block, past the gridlocked vehicles, and frustration grows.

Car parked in the middle of the road, I shut off the engine and shove open my door. “We’ll have to go the rest of the way on foot. It will be faster.”

Without the engine rumbling, I feel the fine tremors that vibrate the street. If there was any question before, there isn’t now. This earthquake isn’t natural.

About to step out of my car, I spot demons pouring out of the Bone Yard, running between—and some over the top of—the parked cars.

Screams of panic drown out the blare of car horns as the demons stream past with no attempt to appear human. Scales, horns, and claws catch the sunlight, illuminating their alien bodies in full glory.

Until now, the Others have made a passing attempt to downplay just how *Other* they really are. But whatever made them flee the Bone Yard was enough for them to throw aside their attempts to fit in among humans, and they now stand in all their nightmarish glory.

With a frustrated curse, I step out of my cruiser and grab a wick-thin gray being by the arm. “What’s going on?”

The being’s hooked nose quivers as it glances back toward the Bone Yard. “It’s feasting to rise.”

Before I can ask for clarification, the being slips my grasp and flees down the street.

I flatten myself against my cruiser as another being barrels past, then make my way to my trunk to gear up. Flint, Anny, and Mayn join me.

The sweltering heat of the afternoon sun beats down on us like a physical blow, and heat waves rise from the asphalt. Exhaust from all the vehicles chokes the hot air, making it ten times worse.

O’Hara jogs up. “Sir, what’s going on?”

Troy stops at his side, his hooked weapon in hand and his gaze on the demons who flee past. Several more officers join us.

“We’re going the rest of the way on foot.” I shrug out of my suit jacket

and grab a bulletproof vest, passing it to Mayn before grabbing another for Flint. “Something is attacking demons in the Bone Yard.”

Webb’s eyes widen. “We’re going into the Bone Yard?”

I pull on my bulletproof vest. “Yes.”

She shakes her head. “But...it’s the *Bone Yard*, sir.”

“And there’s a monster in there killing beings.” I shove magazines into my pockets filled with magical rounds. “Our job is to serve and protect. If you have a problem doing that, then you can leave your badge on my desk when you clear out your locker.”

Troy’s hand tightens on the chain in his grasp. “Any idea what kind of monster we’re facing?”

“No.” I meet the eyes of my officers, the new and the old. “Some of our people are already in there, fighting whatever has every demon in the Bone Yard fleeing for their lives. Demons who can die and create new bodies are afraid, so be vigilant. And remember your training.”

Webb pales. “How will we know friend from foe, sir?”

“If it was in your handbook, it’s not what we’re after.” I smile grimly. “And if it *was* in your handbook, and it comes after you, you know how to deal with it.”

I look around the small group once more. “We can’t kill demons, only destroy their corporeal bodies, so do not hesitate if your life is in danger. We’re aiming to protect, and if that means sending some energy cores back to the demon plane, so be it.”

Mayn pulls a long sword from the trunk. “It is a good day to hunt.”

“You heard her,” I bark. “Gear up!”

My officers race back to their parked cars, pulling on bulletproof vests and swapping out their civilian rounds for the magical ones we reserve for big monsters.

While the newer recruits look nervous, I’m proud to see that none of them flee the scene. I had chosen them to come with me this morning so they could get their feet wet right off the bat.

They needed to see for themselves that we don’t operate the same as the Clearhelm Police. Magic is a part of our lives during every single case, something they haven’t been exposed to much under Bailey’s command.

Or if they were, they were told to look the other way.

Of course, I hadn’t thought I’d be taking them into the Bone Yard. But if the city council has their way, this will become part of our daily beat.

Which means we might as well start protecting it now. The demons who remain within the Bone Yard need to know that we'll protect them every bit as much as we'll protect the humans who come to gawk at them.

I check my gun and return it to my shoulder holster, then watch while Flint does the same with the revolver he straps to his belt. After the incident with the Beast, I started keeping a spare set of everyone's weapons in my squad car, and I'm glad now that I prepared for this eventuality.

Flint gathers a few magical explosives the size of lipstick tubes into his pockets, too, before his hand drops to Anny's head. "Stay close, okay? No heroics."

A laugh escapes me, easing some of my tension. "I'm pretty sure I remember her running from the last big battle."

Flint pinches her ear. "No cowardice, either. I can't reach you for the ley line if you're hiding on the other side of a wall."

She lets out a sharp bark and wags her tail.

Flint frowns. "I'm not sure if that's reassurance or not."

She barks again and wags her tail harder.

"Take it as agreement until proven otherwise," I advise.

A few minutes later, my officers rejoin us, and we weave through the throng of panicked pedestrians. Humans have joined the fleeing demons, abandoning their cars, many with the engines still running.

As we pass a vehicle with a dog trapped inside, Troy breaks the window without hesitation, freeing the small Pomeranian.

When the others look at him, he shrugs. "We protect those who can't protect themselves. I'm not leaving a dog trapped in a car in this heat."

I nod in agreement and use my sleeve to wipe the sweat from my brow, missing the downpour from yesterday. At least then I didn't feel like I was being baked alive.

"They ride with death, and the world burns!" The shriek cuts through the other noises, and my head jerks around to find a thin man in rags standing on top of a car.

I recognize him as the same madman we arrested before and locked up in the Ward for disturbing the peace. His disjointed prophecy has kept me up more than one night, puzzling over its meaning. But I can never pin it down.

His wild eyes meet mine, and his mouth gapes open in a display of broken teeth before he shrieks, "When one falls, another rises! You can't stop it!"

A shiver rolls down my spine, and I force my attention away from the mad prophet. If he's still here when this is over, I'll haul him back to the Ward, where he can at least get food and a fresh change of clothes.

The stream of fleeing pedestrians thins as we near the archway to the Bone Yard, where the smell of burning wood fills the air, the smoke warring with the exhaust fumes of the cars we pass.

Heart pounding, I draw my gun and carefully step up against the wall to lean to the side and peer through the archway.

At first, my mind can't make sense of what I see. Broken chunks of the street litter the ground, blackened with scorch marks. Thick roots push up through the large cracks, moving with a life of their own, like a giant octopus reaching up from the depths of the earth.

Blood soaks the ground, but no bodies lie within view, and unease rolls through me.

The Bone Yard is overrun, but not by any monster I could have imagined.

Will our bullets even work against these roots? We didn't bring the flamethrowers with us. Should we go back for them?

Then a rush of fire sweeps toward the entrance, and I jerk back to avoid being burned.

"Is that the monster?" Webb's voice trembles. "Is it another dragon?"

Heat warms my side as I turn a smile on her. "No, that's our people."

The fire cuts off, and I step out into the entrance, take aim at one of the writhing roots, and fire.

The magically charged bullet slams into the thick base, and it bursts, the top flying off to land a dozen feet away, no longer moving.

I look back at my people. "Aim for the roots. That's our primary target until we know otherwise."

Troy hefts his hook. "Hell, yeah. We're fighting tree monsters."

A small demon flees for the exit, and a woody tentacle snaps toward it. I fire, sending wood exploding into the air.

The small demon squeals with alarm, looking from the shattered remains to me, then rushes for the exit. "Thank you, thank you!"

Still babbling, it races out into the street, vanishing between the parked cars.

"Spread out!" I call to my officers. "Keep your eyes on the ground!"

We push forward, our progress slow but steady. The demons, preoccupied with saving their own lives as they flee for safety outside of the Bone Yard,

avoid us with the same wariness they show the roots attacking them.

Relief sweeps through me when I spot Pen whacking a thick woody-tentacle that holds a witch captive, while Marc and Darius burn back more deadly roots.

I aim at the base of the root and fire.

The base explodes, and the part around the poor witch loosens its hold as it turns lifeless.

Pen, Marc, and Darius glance toward us, and relief fills their faces when they spot our reinforcement.

We converge in the center of a crossroads, our two groups merging.

“There are still some beings near the Harbor!” Pen points down the road. “A lamppost fell, and they couldn’t get inside the building.”

I gaze at the writhing sea of tree roots that fill the street before looking at Darius and Marc. “Can you two burn your way—”

The ground beneath us heaves, throwing me off balance, and I fall to the ground, along with everyone else.

I scramble to keep my gun at the ready, prepared for an attack, but then the roots retreat into the earth, vanishing from view.

O’Hara looks around with wide eyes. “I don’t like the look of this.”

“Me, either.” I get my legs under me and start to stand when the ground shakes once more, rolling beneath us like waves.

What remains of the street crumbles to pieces, exposing the bare earth beneath. The dirt wiggles and squirms, moving down the street toward the Harbor.

“Oh, no,” Mayn breathes. “We need to leave.”

I turn toward my partner. “What?”

Her dual eyelids shutter quickly across her eyes as she stares down the street. “It will rise.”

“What will rise?” I demand. “What is this?”

She points to the large tree that grows in the center of the street. Swirls of bark form a face in its trunk, and a dozen eyes rustle in the leaves.

The last time I saw the creature, skulls had littered the ground around its base, with thick roots winding through them. But now, the ground lies barren, and the roots writhe with new life.

“The ancient one,” Mayn breathes. “It will rise and feast on the souls of all living beings.”

it rises

- Pen -

THE GROUND CONTINUES to shake as I struggle to my feet, my focus on the ancient tree as it sways from side to side. “What do you mean it’s rising? It’s a tree.”

“It feasts on souls.” Mayn’s hold tightens on her sword. “When the food source becomes threatened or scarce, it moves to a different location.”

Sharpe struggles to rise and spreads his feet wide for balance as the ground rolls beneath us like waves. “What are we facing here, Mayn?”

“I don’t know.” She slices through a root that bursts through the ground in front of us, and it falls to the ground. “The last one that walked was before my creation.”

And we don’t have the luxury of time to research before we go to battle. If only we’d made the connection sooner between the roots and this creature.

The tree’s swaying grows more violent, and the earth churns at its base. Then thick roots pull free to press against the ground, and the tree rises, dragging arms and legs out of the earth created by the bones of its victims.

The Bone Man. This is what Berdherst had threatened. And it had been under our noses the entire time.

It rises to its full height, towering over the three-story buildings around it. Leaves rustle, hundreds of eyes hidden within them turning toward us, sending a chill through my body.

It turns and steps toward us, bones scraping against the asphalt with a chilling promise of our fate if it can catch us. My gaze lifts to the face in the trunk, and I find myself frozen, caught in its snare.

The monster hungers, a bottomless pit that can never be filled, but the magic inside me could help ease the pain, help slake its thirst, if only for a moment.

Darius steps in front of me, breaking the connection, and I stumble back with a gasp as reason returns.

I look to the side to see Flint similarly frozen and stumble over to him, stepping into his line of sight.

He jolts back, his eyes widening in fear as they meet mine. “There are so many souls trapped there. How did I never hear them screaming?”

I grip his shoulders. “Don’t look directly at its trunk.”

Face pale, he nods and pulls his gun from its holster.

The Bone Man wastes no time as it lunges toward us, its roots snaking through the ground, seeking to capture and crush us.

Darius summons a wall of fire as a shield, the intense heat fending off the encroaching enemy.

“Marc, focus on offense,” Darius shouts, urgency in his tone.

Marc nods and unleashes a torrent of flames from his hands, the fire crackling and roaring as it strikes the Bone Man’s skeletal form. The monster’s branches crash together, its trunk creaking as its bone-encrusted body smolders.

I grab my batons from the ground where I had dropped them, and a quick tap of their bases against my thighs activates the full power inside.

Heart pounding, I rush through the wall of fire toward the monster, aiming for its right leg. I slam both batons into it, the magic they contain unleashing an explosion that sends bones, bark, and chunks of wood flying, leaving a large hole behind.

Roots rupture from the ground to grab for me, and I dodge and weave, making my way back toward safety.

The stench of burning leaves and decay fills the air with black smoke, making it hard to see as I cross back through the fire.

“Aim for the wounded leg!” Sharpe shouts, and his officers unload their guns at the monster.

Blasts ring out, followed by the crack of wood and bone, and the sharp crackle of burning wood roars around us. Flint flings a magical grenade toward the monster, and an explosion rips through the air.

I collapse my batons and return them to my belt, unclipping a fresh pair.

“Pen, watch out!” Darius’s voice cuts through the chaos as a slender root lashes toward me.

I twist to the side and narrowly avoid being caught. Mayn appears through the smoke, slicing through the wooden tentacle with her sword.

Meanwhile, Marc continues to unleash a torrent of fire, his lips pulled back from his teeth in a snarl. Strain tightens his features, and a fine tremor runs through his body.

Fear tightens my stomach. Even with the amulet helping to control his fire, he's going to burn himself out.

"Marceau, you're pushing yourself too hard!" Darius calls out as he continues to maintain the fiery barrier.

Marc grits his teeth. "I can hold out."

"Not alone, you can't." Darius drops the fire barrier and rushes to Marc's side.

He touches Marc's back, one heartbeat there and gone in the next, his clothes falling empty to the ground. Marc stumbles for a moment before he straightens, and a new fire dances in his eyes.

The flames pouring from Marc's hands turn white and laser-focused, slicing through the hole I started in the Bone Man's leg, which Sharpe's people had widened with their magic-fueled bullets.

The leg falls off, and the monster crashes toward the ground, catching itself on limbs and a splintered knee.

A shout of victory rises from the officers, but it's too early to celebrate as I spot the roots within the leg writhing outward, trying to reconnect with the limb.

"We have to destroy the parts we cut off!" I shout.

Troy darts forward, his hook flying. It sinks deep into the leg, and he and O'Hara work together to drag it farther away from the monster.

Marc turns his fire toward the twisted bone and wood arm that reaches after the two men. As he burns it back, the smell of scorched wood and the acrid stench of charred bone becomes overpowering.

Sharpe's people aim for the monster's other leg, blasting through bone and wood.

I snap my batons open and engage their full power. Mayn steps up beside me, her sword at the ready.

Sharpe glances over at us and nods before shouting to his people, "Hold fire!"

While they reload, I charge forward, Mayn a few paces behind. I dodge around roots that thrust up from the ground and jump, batons swinging overhead. They connect with the monster's wounded limb, blasting nearly through it.

I hit the ground hard and roll out of Mayn's way as the siren's sword cleaves through the rest, and shattered pieces of bone rain down.

Troy and O'Hara rush forward, hooking the chunk of leg and yanking it out of the Bone Man's grasp almost as fast as we detached it.

Mayn's hand on my arm urges me to my feet, and we race back toward our people. Shots fill the air, covering our retreat.

Marc and Darius drop their fire shield to direct their flames to the new leg, burning through wood and bone, destroying more of the Bone Man's body.

As if the monster was waiting for just that, spears of wood shoot from the ground toward the officers.

I let out a shout of warning, trying to run faster, knowing nothing I can do will stop it.

Instead of impaling their target, though, the roots slam up against an invisible shield. Relief washes over me when I spot Flint standing at Sharpe's side, his hand on Anny's head, and his black hair floating in a rush of ley line magic.

He had done the same type of shielding when the Conservatory fell but hasn't attempted such magic since, and pride fills me at seeing him reconnect with what he lost so long ago.

The wooden spears hammer at the invisible shield, their tips splintering, and then fire sweeps toward them, burning through and leaving ash behind.

Sharpe pats Flint on the back and shouts for his people to fire once more.

As bullets whiz overhead, slamming into the Bone Man, I slow to collapse my batons and pull the remaining two from my belt. I have one more charged set before I'll need to fall back.

If only we'd had more time to prepare. We have an entire arsenal back at the office.

I peer over my shoulder at the main trunk of the Bone Man.

It sways, unable to move forward with both legs cut off, and its right arm dangles by two thick pieces of wood. It seems weaker without its bony appendages, its movements slower.

As I turn back, a thick root suddenly shoots toward Flint, and in a split second, Sharpe shoves him out of harm's way. The root strikes Sharpe instead, sending him flying.

He lands hard on his shoulder, releasing a sharp cry of pain as he skids across the ground.

“Sharpe!” I race toward him.

Mayn lets out a shout of warning, and I turn back in time to see another root shooting toward Flint.

The siren darts forward, her sword swinging, and the root crashes lifelessly to the ground.

Trusting her to keep him protected, I run to Sharpe’s side.

I collapse my batons and return them to my belt before dropping to my knees beside him. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” He sits up, clutching his left arm, which dangles lower than it should. “Keep slicing that thing to bits.”

“You’re hurt.” I help him to his feet. “Let’s get you back with the group.”

Sharpe struggles to take off his belt. “Help me bind my arm to my side for now.”

I push his hand away and take off his belt, looping it around his waist higher up and cinching his arm in place.

He grunts with pain but nods in approval before striding back to his people, reclaiming his gun from the ground along the way.

We return to his officers, and without hesitation, he returns to firing at the monster.

Working together, we continue to dismantle the Bone Man one chunk at a time. Magic bullets crackle with energy as they strike, hook and sword chip away, magical grenades blast, and fire blazes. Our combined efforts wear down the monster’s defenses, breaking off its arms.

O’Hara and Troy drag the pieces over, and Marc, his brown hair matted with sweat, sets the pieces on fire, turning them to ash. The acrid scent of burning bones and wood fills the air.

With only the trunk remaining, I race forward, Mayn leaving the others to join me, and together we strike at the face in the trunk, obliterating it.

The monster thrashes, roots rising from the ground to swat at us, but I beat them back and Mayn slices them to pieces. Then Marc comes forward, bringing flames that eat into the wound we created.

The fiery blaze spreads rapidly, consuming the creature from within. The Bone Man thrashes and writhes in its death throes, but there’s no escape as its monstrous form is reduced to ash and cinders.

We stand panting from exertion, covered in soot and sweat, as the sun dips lower on the horizon, casting long shadows over the scene of our hard-fought victory.

While much of the Bone Yard made it out of the battle unscathed, the same cannot be said for the street, which the roots destroyed. Not to mention the enormous crater left at the center where the Bone Man had pulled itself free of the earth.

It's not as bad as it could have been, though.

Sharpe strides over to us, his expression a mix of relief and pain. "Is it really dead?"

Mayn's black brows pinch together. "So it would seem."

Flint joins us. "The souls it held captive were released with its death. The ones who can, will cross through the veil eventually, though we might get more calls about hauntings until then. Nickodemus's people should be reborn and return to him, along with the other demons killed by it."

Too bad the same can't be said for all the humans and witchblood the monster killed.

Marc wipes ash from his face, leaving black streaks behind. "Not that I'm complaining, but I thought this would be harder. Why'd the High Court deem this a bad enough monster to lock up in the Between? It wasn't *that* hard to kill."

"It is peculiar," Mayn agrees, her brows still pinched with concern. "The stories painted it as much larger."

"Stories tend to get embellished." I turn to Sharpe. "We need someone to look at your shoulder."

Sharpe tries to move his injured shoulder and grimaces with pain. "I think it's dislocated."

Mayn immediately steps forward. "Let me look at that, Captain."

As Mayn assesses Sharpe's injury, I turn to Marc, who stands beside me, the fire in his eyes dimmed by exhaustion. Even with Darius combining their powers, the battle took a toll on them.

I reach out to touch his arm. "Are you guys okay?"

Marc offers me a weary smile. "We'll be fine. Just need some time to recover."

Sharpe lets out a groan as Mayn presses and prods his injured shoulder. "You're right, it is dislocated. I can set it back in place, but it will hurt."

Sharpe nods, his jaw set. "Do it."

Removing the belt, Mayn positions herself for leverage, and then, with a swift and expert movement, she pops his shoulder back into place. Sharpe lets out a cry of pain and sways for a moment before catching his balance.

Breaths coming out heavy, Sharpe nods to Mayn. “Thanks. I owe you one.”

Mayn smiles, her angular features softening. “No need to mention it, sir.”

“You shouldn’t move it too much.” Flint strips off his vest and passes it to Mayn. “You can use this to make a sling until we can get a real one.”

She takes it and uses the sharp edge of her sword to cut through the fine material, then uses the strips to bind Sharpe’s arm to his chest.

While she works, I walk over to the gaping hole the Bone Man had emerged from. A few pale bones sit nestled in the disturbed earth, but even with what we destroyed today, it’s nowhere near as many as we saw in the bone pit in the forest.

Had we stressed the monster into emerging before it was ready? Are the rest of the bones scattered between here and the forest? Or tucked away in another cavern? It will take a while to recover them, if it’s even possible.

At least destroying the Bone Man released all those poor, trapped souls.

As I step back, my phone vibrates in my pocket, startling me.

I pull it free to answer, and Xander’s excited voice comes through the speaker. “Pen, we’ve figured it out.”

“Figured what out?” I ask, still catching my breath from the battle.

“The symbol we’ve been researching,” Xander replies. “It’s part of a ritual to funnel energy into some kind of creature.”

My gaze returns to the hole in the ground. “The Bone Man.”

“So this was the monster Berdherst threatened you guys with?” Reese asks with interest.

“I doubt that’s its real name, but it certainly looked like a Bone Man to me.” I shiver as I remember the image of all those bones bound together to form a body. “Mayn called it an ancient one.”

“Whatever it’s called, it’s sentient enough to make bargains,” Xander says. “For all the energy sent to this monster, it gifts back a certain amount of charisma and power.”

Of course, it does. Why else would Berdherst and his ancestors sacrifice people to this thing?

“Well, we just destroyed the monster, so the bargain is broken now.” A small thrill goes through me at the words.

No more magic boosts for the mayor.

“Huh.” Confusion fills Xander’s voice, followed by a rustle of paper. “Well, that’s discouraging.”

My spine straightens as unease shoots through me. “Why?”

“Well, the spell is still active,” he says. “So something is still taking in the power.”

I gaze around at the wrecked street. Did we miss a piece of the monster? Do we have to burn all the roots and bones underground, too?

Before I can respond, the earth around the pit begins to shift and move. Roots slither out of the ground, winding around the remaining bones at the bottom and pulling them into the depths of the tunnels beneath the Bone Yard.

“Fucking hell,” Marc mutters.

Sharpe, his shoulder now bound in a sling, stares at the retreating roots. “Whatever we’re dealing with, it’s not over yet.”

Flint clenches his fists. “That means there are more lost souls trapped.”

Mayn’s gaze remains fixed on the pit. “This was not the monster of legend then? Perhaps it was a young offspring?”

I press the phone hard against my ear. “Xander, you need to figure out how to cut off the magic siphoning as soon as possible. We can’t let this monster continue to feed.”

“I’ll keep working on it,” he promises before hanging up.

In the silence, the sound of sirens splits the air in the distance.

Help has finally come, but too late for the Bone Yard.

not enough room

- Pen -

FROM THE BACK OF AN AMBULANCE, I watch as the demons who had fled the Bone Yard slowly trickle back through the archway before the ashes have even settled.

The paramedics hadn't crossed the line to look for the injured, but they were waiting when we stepped past the wall. They had hurried to usher Sharpe into the back of an ambulance so he could be checked over.

After making sure he wasn't in immediate danger, they'd left to see to the others. A few of Sharpe's officers had taken hits from the roots or sustained cuts from the shrapnel caused by flying wood chips and bone fragments. But most made it out with only minor smoke inhalation.

There were also injuries from the car pileup, as well as people who were trampled or shoved during the mass exodus caused by the Bone Man's attack.

Before the battle even started, many people sustained injuries far worse than ours, and the paramedics were trying to see to all the humans.

The same medical treatment was not offered to the injured Bone Yard citizens who limped past them, determined to return to the small space in Clearhelm that belonged to them.

It fills me with anger, but there's nothing I can do. I can't force them to ask for help any more than I can force the paramedics to offer it.

I turn away from the open doors to face Sharpe, whose hazel eyes dart around the confined space, taking in the sterile, white walls and the medical equipment. Dust and ash dull his brown hair, tousled from the battle, and soot turns his face gray.

I sit beside him. "You need to calm down."

He scrubs a hand through his hair, leaving the sweat-dampened strands standing on end. "There are people out there with actual injuries. I shouldn't

be taking up a spot in this ambulance.”

I lean closer to him, lowering my voice. “You’re the captain of the Joint Task Force of Paranormal Investigation. Your people need to know that you’re safe and healthy. It’s part of the job.”

He sighs, and his shoulders slump before he hisses with pain. “I hate this part. Why can’t I have super healing like Darius or you?”

I reach out to take his uninjured hand. “Because you’re not a demon. You need to take your lumps and bumps with dignity.”

With a begrudging nod, he squeezes my fingers.

The ambulance dips as a young paramedic climbs in, her expression a mix of fatigue and stress.

She sets her medical bag down next to Sharpe. “Captain Sharpe, my name is Janice, and I’m the paramedic who is going to check you over.”

He offers her a small smile. “Thanks, Janice. Sorry for adding to your workload tonight.”

She shrugs as she snaps on a pair of latex gloves. “It’s all in a day’s work in this city. Now, let’s see what we’re dealing with.”

She gently unwraps Sharpe’s arm to inspect his shoulder, pressing and probing, which elicits a wince from him. “This was dislocated?”

He takes a deep breath. “Yes. My partner set it right after it happened.”

Janice nods as she continues her examination. “She did a good job. Can you move your arm?”

Grimacing in pain, Sharpe lifts his arm and moves it as Janice directs him.

“Good job.” She pulls out bandages and wraps his shoulder in a sling. “Now, let’s check for any torn muscles.”

She palpates his shoulder muscles, and he winces a few more times, despite Janice’s efforts to be gentle.

“I don’t think there are any major tears. Just some minor strains and bruises,” she finally announces. “You’re lucky. Rest should fix you up.”

He nods gratefully. “Thank you. How are the rest of my people?”

“They have a few scrapes and bruises. A couple are going back to the hospital for some oxygen, but nothing serious.” She gives him an admiring smile. “All of us appreciate the service you did today, and in the past. The news is already playing footage of that monster. I don’t know how you guys keep saving us from these things.”

“The same way you keep coming in to pick up the pieces when it’s over.”

Sharpe grips her shoulder with his good hand. “It’s a team effort. We appreciate your service, too. You keep us on the streets.”

A blush rises in her cheeks. “Well, maybe you can take a break for a couple of days while your shoulder heals.”

Her gaze shifts to me. “Keep an eye on him, and make sure he doesn’t overexert himself. And give him some pain medication when you get a chance.”

I nod in agreement. “Will do.”

Janice stands and stows her equipment. “You’re good to go, Captain. Take it easy.”

Sharpe gingerly tests the sling before standing, the top of his head nearly brushing the roof of the ambulance.

I climb out ahead of him, then offer a hand to help support him as he awkwardly climbs down with only one arm for balance.

Noise and chaos fill the streets. Work trucks had dealt with the three-car pile-up, and cars had been towed to make room for the ambulances to get in.

Now, emergency vehicles and news vans fill all the gaps, blocking off the street. Reporters swarm close to the temporary barrier that had been erected, with cameras and microphones at the ready.

“Great,” Sharpe mutters, not thrilled about the impending media circus. “How are we going to get out of here?”

I squeeze his good shoulder. “We have a car parked around the block if we can push through the frenzy.”

We make our way over to the barrier on the left, where a smaller swarm of news people wait. Flint already stands in front of them, his beautiful face entralling the interviewers.

As we step up next to him, the wave shifts, and questions fire at us as microphones are thrust into Sharpe’s face.

He keeps his responses brief as we push our way through, and I stay close to his left side, making sure no one gets close enough to jar his shoulder.

Finally, we break free from the media to find Marc with our borrowed sedan waiting on the other side. I hustle Sharpe into the front passenger seat before climbing into the back, followed closely by Flint.

The media people try to surround our car, but Marc taps the gas, making it clear we’re leaving, and they’ll either move or be run over.

The city’s lights flash by as we drive away from the scene, a blur of color and movement. Dusk had fallen while we waited to receive the all-clear from

the paramedic.

I lean back in my seat, exhaustion washing over me as the adrenaline rush subsides, leaving me drained and craving rest.

Marc's voice drifts over me as I close my eyes. "Mayn got your cruiser out ahead of the media and took it back to the station. O'Hara and Troy went with her."

"I should return to the station." Exhaustion fills Sharpe's voice. "I need to assess how my people are doing."

I rouse myself. "You're supposed to take it easy."

His gaze meets mine in the rearview mirror. "I'll rest once I know everyone is okay."

Flint's hand settles on my thigh, squeezing it in comfort. "I want to go back to the Conservatory and help Xander figure out the spell. We need to stop it ASAP."

"We'll drop Sharpe off first, then I'll take you to the Conservatory." Marc takes the turn toward New Clearhelm. "Reese should have the van cleared for use by now, so you can use that to come home later."

"I'll go with Sharpe," I announce. "At least I can make sure he gets cleaned up without further injuring his shoulder."

"I can take a shower on my own," he protests.

"We'll circle back to pick you up," Marc says, ignoring Sharpe's protest before he looks at the other man. "Do you need a change of clothes?"

Sighing, Sharpe leans his head against his seat. "I have a suit in my office."

Marc nods and returns his attention to the road. "I'll bring you food when I come back. If you insist on working in your condition, then we'll make sure you have the energy to keep going."

"Can you bring food for the entire squad room?" Sharpe rolls his head to look at Marc. "I'm not going to eat while everyone else is left hungry."

"I'll get enough for everyone," Marc assures him.

When he pulls up to the curb in front of the JTFPI headquarters a few minutes later, I lean over to kiss Flint's grimy cheek before hopping out to help Sharpe.

He climbs out awkwardly, wincing when his injured arm jostles against the seat, and I stay close to his side as we walk into the station.

The sound of chatter drifts from the squad room, and the scent of coffee wafts through the air.

As we pass through the metal detector, Sharpe's spine straightens, and his shoulders pull back. Even when injured, he wants to stand tall in front of his people.

Cheers and claps fill the air, both from the officers who made it back from the battle ahead of us and from those who hadn't been there.

Sharpe pauses to look out over them. "You all did well today. Those who need to, use the locker rooms to freshen up, and we'll meet back here in an hour with food to debrief today's events."

More cheers follow us into Sharpe's office, where we find Mayn waiting with his spare suit already pulled out. "Welcome back, sir."

"You, too, Mayn." Sharpe's gaze sweeps over his partner, assessing for injuries, before he heads for the bathroom. "We'll be out once I get cleaned up. Go get a soak in the saltwater tanks."

"Yes, sir." Mayn dips her head before stepping out and closing the door behind her.

I stride to Sharpe's desk. "I'll grab you some pain medication. Don't start stripping without me."

His soft chuckle sounds from the bathroom. "I'm not sure I could, even if I wanted to."

A smile spreads over my lips, and I grab a bottled water from the mini fridge before joining him. "I thought you said you didn't need my help."

"I was lying." He takes the pills from me, tossing them into his mouth before accepting the opened water and washing them down.

I take the bottle from him and set it on the edge of the sink.

Turning back to him, I unwind the bandages that support his shoulder. "Janice would be very displeased with you right now."

He leans forward to rest his head on my shoulder. "Then we won't tell her."

"My lips are sealed." I work open the buttons on his shirt and pull the tails from his pants before carefully pushing it off his shoulders.

Bruises form dark shadows on his left shoulder, and an ugly red road rash covers his bicep and part of his side.

"We should disinfect those," I murmur.

He turns his face into my neck and lets out a shaky breath. "That's what the soap is for."

My gaze shifts to the small shower tucked into the corner of his bathroom. "I'm not sure we'll both fit in there."

“The whole bathroom is tile.” The words form light caresses against the side of my neck. “We can just leave the door open.”

I reach for the button on the front of his pants, and his hard length brushes my fingers. “Sharpe...”

His lips slide up my neck to my ear. “Wasn’t this your plan when you offered to help?”

A shiver goes through me. “You’re injured.”

“And we could have died today.” He reaches down to press my hand against his hot erection. “Now we celebrate that we’re alive.”

I turn my head to find his ear. “Don’t move your arm, or I’ll stop.”

Pushing him back a pace, I drop to my knees in front of him and open his pants, freeing his hard cock.

His body still holds the scent of battle mingled with the smell of a campfire, and I breathe him in deeply. I lean forward to take him into my mouth, his hot length tasting musky and salty with sweat and pre-cum.

Fist wrapped around the base of his cock, I pump his length as I move up and down, pressing my tongue against the thick vein that runs the length of his shaft before swirling around his head, drinking down the pearls of his desire.

His hand settles in my hair, and I roll my eyes up his bare body to find his hungry gaze fixed on me.

Desire pulses through my body, forming liquid heat between my thighs. I shift my hand to his balls, massaging the delicate globes as I take him in to the root.

He groans and his hips flex, pushing himself deeper into my throat. I hum with pleasure at the sensation, and my eyes close as I focus on the feel of his heat in my mouth.

His hand curls into my hair, tugging gently at my scalp, and he pulls back before thrusting forward, his cock surging in and out of my mouth. I hold still, letting him take his pleasure, needing the confirmation of life just as much as he does.

It doesn’t take long before he groans, and his cock jumps against my tongue, his thighs stiffening. I hum with encouragement, ready for his release.

It comes with hard, jerky pulses that hit the back of my throat, and I swallow them down, reveling in how fast he fell apart.

Shivers still wrack his body when I pull off his semi-hard length and

finish undressing him.

Dazed, he lets me maneuver him to the shower, where I leave him long enough to turn the water on and let it warm. Then I shove him inside.

The spray jolts him back to the present, and he reaches out a wet hand to tug on my belt. "Aren't you joining me?"

I look around the narrow space. "We really won't both fit, even with the door open."

He leans out of the shower to catch my lips, his tongue sweeping inside to twine around mine. He groans at the taste of himself on my tongue and pulls back. "We can make it work."

My pulse quickens, my desire not yet abated. "Not without hurting your shoulder. Now, get your hair wet."

Eyes locked with mine, he leans back, the muscles on his chest and abdomen stretching as he puts his head under the spray.

Hunger fills me as I watch the rivulets flow down over his muscles before narrowing into a stream over his semi-hard cock.

With his good hand, he grabs the bar of soap from its holder and passes it to me before bending his wet head low enough for me to reach.

I quickly suds up the bar of soap, massaging it into his hair, and use my blunt nails against his scalp to scrub away all the ash and smoke that clings to the silky strands.

When he straightens, I carefully wash his face, neck, and chest, tormenting myself with touching what I shouldn't take. Not with him injured. I reach his groin, his cock standing at full attention once more, and he groans, his hips flexing when I clean him there, too.

My legs shake with desire as I kneel to soap his legs and feet, his hard cock begging to be inside me.

Swallowing hard, I resist temptation and motion for him to turn around so I can repeat the process on his back, lingering over his firm ass, washing away all traces of the battle.

Once I finish, he steps back beneath the spray of water, letting it rinse away the soap and grime.

To distract myself, I grab the towel from the bar on the wall as the water shuts off. Sharpe steps from the shower, and I toss the towel over his wet hair, drying it.

As I do, his good arm sweeps around my waist, pulling me against his wet body, and his cock nudges at my stomach.

My breath catches. “You just got clean, and now you’re getting dirty again.”

He shakes his head to free it from the towel and gazes down at me with hunger in his eyes. “Then you should have joined me in the shower.”

“I’ll shower when I get home.” Reminding myself that he’s injured, I wiggle free of his hold and bend to grab his towel. “Now, let’s finish drying you off.”

As I straighten, Sharpe presses up behind me, his lips finding the curve of my neck. Pleasure jolts through me, and my hips arch back against his hard length.

A rumble rises from his chest, and he reaches around to undo my belt, then the front of my pants. The weight of my batons pull them to my ankles, and his hand slides into the front of my underwear, his fingers sliding between my folds to find me wet with desire.

“You were going to just go home like this?” His fingers push inside me. “With how much you need me right now?”

I moan, then cover my mouth, worried the sound will travel.

He rubs his hard cock against my ass. “You planned to give me all the pleasure and take none for yourself?”

“Your arm...” I gasp out.

“Will be fine.” His fingers leave me, and he grasps my waist, tugging my hips backward.

He slips my underwear aside, and the head of his cock nudges against my entrance, then slides in slowly, filling me an inch at a time until his hips press flush against mine.

I moan against my hand, my inner muscles flexing around him, already close to the edge.

Sharpe leans over me, his lips finding my ear. “You were going to leave without this?”

He rocks his hips in a slow rhythm, as if we have all the time in the world. As if Marc won’t be arriving soon with food, and his officers aren’t expecting him for the debriefing.

My hand muffles my gasps, and Sharpe’s head presses against my shoulder as he moves inside me, driving us both toward release with each slow thrust into my body.

Then his hand caresses down over my waist to my stomach before dipping lower, his fingers slipping into my underwear to find the small nub of

pleasure at the height of my desire.

I come apart, my muffled moans filling the bathroom as my inner walls clench and release around him. He stiffens, his gasps hot against my shoulder, and his cock pulses inside me, filling my channel.

Our heavy breathing fills the bathroom, and Sharpe kisses my shoulder. “Want to try fitting us both into the shower now? You need to wash off the battle, too.”

Out in the office, the sound of his door opening reaches us, followed by Marc’s voice. “Food is here.”

Sharpe’s soft chuckle vibrates through me. “Guess that means there’s no time for another shower.”

Pulse slowing, I twist to stare back at him. “That’s your fault.”

“It was worth it.” He leans forward to catch my lips in a quick kiss before pulling back, amusement twinkling in his eyes. “And I didn’t even hurt my arm.”

With pleasure still weakening my legs, I have to agree. It was definitely worth it.

a hand to settle

- Flint -

I STEP into Xander's office with a bag of Chinese food over my arm.

We had stopped at a buffet on the way here, one of the few places we could think of with enough food at the ready and paid a fair price to clear them out.

They were more than happy to have our business. The happenings over at the Bone Yard had kept people glued to the news at home, and their food would have otherwise gone to waste.

Orianna lets out a loud bark of excitement as we enter, and Reese curses as his familiar launches off his shoulder with a squawk of annoyance.

Johannsson startles awake, nearly tipping out of his chair. He grumbles and stands before mumbling about going to the bathroom and leaving the room.

"Flint." Xander stands from his desk and presses his hands against his lower back in a stretch. "Have you come to lend a hand?"

"And some sustenance." I set the bag on his desk and whistle for Orianna to come back to my side, which she ignores.

I glance down at the blank white paper that covers his desk and the bone hand at its center. "Have you made any progress on the spell?"

Xander sighs and falls back into his chair. "Not much. We know the spell's purpose, but without the source, it's difficult to know how to counter it. The symbol isn't like anything I've seen before."

Reese pushes back his shaggy brown hair. "We're pretty sure it's mostly mumbo-jumbo, but pulling apart the individual pieces is proving difficult."

I open the bag and pass Xander a container of noodles, then set a bowl of rice with orange chicken in front of Reese. "What do you mean, mumbo-jumbo?"

“Made up.” Reese flutters his fingers over the hand that lies on the desk. “Someone with no knowledge of the arcane threw spaghetti at the wall and accidentally summoned something.”

“What they named the Bone Man.” I pull out a box of plain breaded chicken with steamed vegetables.

When I set it on the floor, that gets Orianna’s attention where I could not, and she trots over to my side, nosing at the food.

Xander glances toward a radio on the cabinet behind him. “The news has been saying Mother Nature attacked because she’s angry over climate change.”

I snort out a laugh and grab the container of sesame chicken over brown rice for myself. “Hardly. They only saw the top of it, and not much at that.”

I explain what happened in between bites of food, my stomach demanding sustenance after using so much magic. I already ate a box of egg rolls on the way over, but I’m ravenous.

“So it’s a monster that strips away souls and uses their bones to create a body for itself?” Reese drums his fingers on the desk. “And it’s also somehow providing good luck to whoever summoned it.”

Xander shakes his head. “They’d be long dead by now.”

“It’s a generational spell upheld by the Berdherst family.” I drop my empty container back into the bag. “They’ve been sacrificing things to this monster for hundreds of years.”

Xander’s brow furrows. “But didn’t it escape the Between only six years ago?”

I pull over a chair to sit. “Mayn thinks that what we fought was an infant. She said it didn’t have the power or size to match the stories. It’s possible that the stories embellished it, or...”

“Being trapped in the Between reduced it back to an infant.” Xander’s gaze drops to the hand, and he nods. “If this thing needs souls to survive and will get up and move to new power sources when it’s exhausted its current supply, then being cut off from living beings would have crippled it. In that kind of environment—”

“It would have turned on itself for sustenance,” Reese eagerly finishes.

I nod in agreement. “So, what we fought today was likely the one that escaped from the Between. And it was in contact with the other Bone Man that the Berdherst family has been communing with.”

Johannsson comes back into the room. “That would explain the tunnels

underground that Pen and Darius found running through the Ward around the Bone Yard. They were communicating with each other, and it was feeding the older one bones to make it strong again.”

We all turn to stare at him in surprise.

“What?” He grabs the remaining container of food off the desk and returns to his chair. “You think I don’t listen when you’re all talking about the evil happenings in Clearhelm?”

I actually thought it all went in one ear and out the other, but I don’t voice that.

Johannsson pops open his container of General Tso chicken and digs in. “So, we just need to stop feeding the Bone Man magic, burn it out of existence, and Berdherst will lose all his magical backing and get kicked out of office, right?”

“In a very simplified way, yes.” I exchange glances with Xander and Reese. “But first we need to find it.”

“It’s in the forest,” Johannsson says around a mouthful of chicken.

When we all stare at him, he rolls his eyes. “Are you for real right now? Weren’t you all going on about how you felt watched earlier? The news said the thing had eyes in its leaves, right? And that’s where the bone pit was. It’s a logical assumption.”

“It’s a big forest.” But not unsearchable, especially if I put some wildlife to use.

“Okay, if we know where to look, then we just have to figure out how to cut off its power.” I stare down at the bone hand. “And prevent Berdherst from making any more sacrifices to it.”

“Sacrifices like this can’t just be pulled off the street.” Xander traces a finger over the faint symbol burned into the bones. “This kind of sacrifice has to be marked and promised from birth, then raised until it achieves a specific power level before the sacrifice is made.”

My stomach sinks. “That’s why he’s so persistent about getting Aediva back. He doesn’t have time to mark a new sacrifice.”

“But isn’t Aediva dead?” Johannsson asks. “I remember that news story. Your people went after the demons who kidnapped her, but it was too late.”

Reese shakes his head. “If the sacrifice died before its time, then the spell would revert to the current contract holder, and the mayor is still very much alive.”

As all eyes turn to me in question, I grimace at the way his quick mind so

readily uncovers the secret we've been keeping.

I glance at Johannsson. "I plead the fifth."

"Wait, she's *not* dead?" Johannsson stands. "Did you guys kidnap a little girl?"

"Her mom brought her in to be exorcized, but she's half-demon." I throw up my hands in frustration. "She knew she was signing the kid's death certificate and insisted it be done anyway because she didn't want to be caught cheating on her husband. A husband who apparently planned to sacrifice her! What were we supposed to do?"

"Save the kid!" Johannsson yells.

"Exactly!" I say, feeling strange to be on the same page with Johannsson for once. "And since the contract didn't revert, Berdherst knows she's not dead, which is why he's been sending his people after us."

"What if we just destroy the hand?" Johannsson demands.

Xander shakes his head. "We've tried that. It just absorbs the spells."

"Not with magic," Johannsson says slowly, as if talking to a child. "With a hammer. Just bash the thing to dust."

We all look back at the hand.

"It can't be that easy," Xander murmurs.

"Burning the bones weakened the Bone Man's power," I say with uncertainty. "But smashing them probably would have worked, too."

"Smash it, then set it on fire," Johannsson advises. "Only way to be sure."

"We can use the forge." Reese's eyes light with excitement. "It's hot enough to burn bone."

Johannsson shakes his head. "Do I even want to know what you witchblood are up to out here?"

"No," Xander and I say at the same time.

Reese's shoulders slump. "Destroying just this hand won't weaken the Bone Man by much, though."

"Why not?" Johannsson demands. "Isn't that what you've been trying to do this whole time?"

Xander shakes his head. "No, we've been trying to undo the spell, which is entirely different. Reese is right. This is only *one* of the sacrifices. There have to be hundreds more like it buried in the forest. We need to destroy *all* of them. It's the only way to make sure no more power funnels to the Bone Man."

Johannsson falls back into his seat. "So, we're screwed."

“Maybe not.” I frown down at the hand. “Sacrifices like this would share a link. If we can use that link to locate the other sacrifices, then we should be able to destroy them all at once.”

Xander’s shoulders slump. “We’ve tried running spells to trace the hand back to the rest of its body, but it didn’t work.”

“I’m not talking about performing a spell.” My hand drops to the top of Orianna’s head, and the ley line rises to my fingertips. “I’m talking about summoning a spirit.”

Xander’s eyes widen. “Can you do that?”

“So long as it isn’t one of the souls who has passed through the veil already, it should answer my call.” My stomach tightens at the thought of what my request will do to these poor souls, but it’s the only way.

Picking up the hand, I wrap my power around it and feel the greedy tug of the Bone Man, hungry to consume my power. I resist the pull and instead latch on to the monster, and hundreds of souls burst to life within my mind.

I focus on the bones I hold, summoning the soul they belong to, and sense an awareness turn toward me, a single being out of the hundreds in pain.

Drawn by my command, the soul pulls free. The Bone Man fights to keep it, but my power proves stronger, and the soul chases the line of my magic back to where I stand.

A startled gasp brings my eyes open to find the spirit of a woman crouched in front of me. She couldn’t have been over sixteen when she died, her red hair pulled back from a youthful face covered in freckles.

A white nightgown drapes her body, the clothes she died in, and blood pours from a gaping wound across her stomach. It pools over the desk and flows over the edge, only to vanish before it hits the floor.

Her voice echoes from a distance, filled with hope and longing as she reaches out to me. “Have you come at last to take me through the veil?”

My heart squeezes painfully. “What’s your name?”

“Isolde Berdherst.” She looks around the room without seeing it. “I was with my father. He took me somewhere, and now there is only pain.”

Tears sting my eyes as I hold out the hand. “Isolde Berdherst, I command you to find those linked to you in sacrifice. Bring them here.”

“No!” The word pierces through the air before her ghost vanishes.

Johannsson stares at the space where the girl had crouched only a second ago. “What just happened?”

“I sent her to find the others.” The words feel numb on my lips. “We

should get the hammer ready.”

“For what?” Johannsson’s gaze jumps from me to Xander and Reese’s grim expressions. “What are you going to do to that girl?”

“The only thing we *can* do.” Xander opens a drawer in his desk, pulls out a toolbox, and opens it to withdraw a hammer. “We’re going to bind their spirits to their bones and use this one as a representation of them all. Destroying this hand, with the spirits locked inside, will destroy the rest at the same time.”

Johannsson shakes his head. “You can’t do that. They’re innocent victims.”

“You can wait outside if you don’t want to watch.” Xander passes a black Sharpie to Reese, who takes it and gets to work drawing out the spell.

“These people already died,” I tell him, shoving aside my personal feelings on the matter. “Their souls are living in torment. This is a better end than what they’re going through right now.”

Before he can protest further, Isolde reappears, bringing the others with her. They stand one on top of the other, flickering in and out of view, hundreds of ghosts, all ranging in age from toddler to teenager. All people whose lives were cut off too soon, and whose sacrifice continues to demand more from them.

Setting the hand just outside the spell drawn on the paper, Xander, Reese, and I press our fingertips to the outer ring. Golden light fills the lines, then rises from the desk, encircling the ghosts, whose voices echo their fear through the room.

With a silent apology, I bind their souls together, creating a firmer link than what existed before, then cast them outward, sending them to find their bones.

Isolde is the last to move through the circle, sinking into the bone on the desk.

Xander sweeps the paper with the spell to the side, and I lift the bone hand.

I can feel the Bone Man trying to pull her back to him, but my summoning holds strong, trapping her here.

Isolde’s soul reaches out to me, afraid, and I silently reassure her that the pain will end soon.

Then I place the hand in the middle of the desk, and Xander brings down the hammer, shattering it into pieces. Through my connection with Isolde, I

watch her light snuff out, along with all the others linked to her.

Silently, Reese sweeps the fragments up, and we carry them to the forge out back of the Conservatory.

Johannsson crosses himself and mumbles a prayer as Reese slides the fragments into the fire, and we watch them burn.

When it's over, Johannsson clears his throat. "Did it work?"

I nod, my voice thick. "Yes, it worked."

He shoves his hands into his pockets. "Now what?"

I drag my gaze from the dancing flames. "Now we locate the Bone Man and destroy it for good, before it rises to seek new souls."

Johannsson scrubs a hand over his tired face. "Fuck, how am I supposed to tell Sharpe we destroyed evidence?"

"Don't worry, Sharpe will have more bones soon enough." I clap him on the shoulder. "You should get some sleep. I'm sure it won't be long before you're being called back to service."

He shakes his head. "I have to go debrief first."

"Look at you, being a real cop," I tease.

He snorts. "Shut up before I arrest you for destroying evidence."

As we walk back through the Conservatory toward the main entrance, my phone vibrates with an incoming call.

I check the caller ID and see Lia's name on the screen.

The thought of the living kids we've saved eases some of the pain of what we just did, and I press answer as I lift the phone to my ear. "Hey, what can I do for my favorite foster mom?"

with full force

- Sharpe -

I SEE Marc and Pen off before I join my officers in the squad room, where O'Hara and Mayn pass out containers of Chinese food.

They chatter amongst themselves, those who were at the battle in the Bone Yard telling their partners what they missed. Some look relieved to have been left out of the fight, but most hold an air of envy for missing the action.

They should be happy, then, to learn they'll have another chance. But I'll wait for them to enjoy their food first.

My shoulder protests as I walk back into the squad room. I had foregone the sling, much to Pen's annoyance, but I don't want my people to worry. When I get home later, I'll put the sling on and let my shoulder rest as much as possible.

I join Mayn, whose hair still drips from her soak in the saltwater tank. Her skin holds a refreshed glow, and her braid lies tame down her back.

She passes me a container of beef and broccoli over rice with a closed-lip smile.

"They are still lively." Mayn picks at her container of chicken feet and nods toward our newest members, who earned their place in the squad tonight by defeating a common enemy. "You have won them over."

"I'm just glad they didn't run when given the chance," I say in a low tone so as not to carry. "This is a far cry from handing out traffic tickets or investigating petty crime."

"We have our fair share of petty crime as well." She pops a foot into her mouth and crunches happily. "They'll get to experience that, too, once things settle down."

I lift an eyebrow. "When will that be?"

“Soon,” she says in the tone of someone begging for respite.

I bump my good shoulder against hers. “Are you growing weary of the hunt?”

“Even hunters need time to relax.” Her black eyes meet mine. “Nickodemus will be pleased with the return of his children. An accord for the Bone Yard will be struck.”

“It will probably come with a demand that the streets be fixed, and the hole filled.” Tension fills my body at the thought of going before the city council to bargain for yet more funding. “The repairs will cost the city a fortune if they still want their tourist attraction.”

“It is their pet project.” Mayn plucks another chicken foot from her container. “They will find the funding.”

I nod, acknowledging the truth in her words. They might not like to give my people funds to keep the streets safe, but they’ll shell it out for something they hope will bring in more money.

I sigh and shift on my feet, the pain in my shoulder making me restless. “I just wish there was another way. It’s not just about the money. Beings have lost their lives, their homes. The death toll...” I trail off, unable to finish the thought.

“They will build new homes, and those who can will return.” Mayn leans against my good side in a show of affection. “We did a good thing for the Others today, and they will honor that.”

Knowing she’s right, I nod, and we eat our food in companionable silence.

A sense of pride fills me to have worked alongside these people. We may be under scrutiny from the city council, but we’ve proven time and again that we’re willing to do whatever it takes to keep Clearhelm safe.

When I notice everyone else has finished their meals, I toss my empty container into the trash and step forward.

Silence falls over the room as all eyes turn to me, and I straighten my shoulders, ignoring the pain that stabs through me. “You all did an outstanding job tonight. We faced a formidable enemy in the Bone Man, and it’s thanks to your fearlessness in the face of danger that we emerged victorious. Lives were saved, and the city is safer because of your dedication and bravery.”

A murmur of agreement ripples through the room, and my team members nod in acknowledgment.

I take a deep breath. “As many of you have already heard, this is not the last time we will face this monster. While we vanquished one, there is another still out there, possibly bigger and more powerful.”

“Fuck yes!” Troy calls out. “We’re going to kick more tree ass!”

That draws a few laughs, a couple of hoots, and feet stamping.

I wait for them to settle down before I continue. “Your enthusiasm is appreciated, and I can’t wait to see it on the front line once more. We know what we’re facing this time, so we’ll be better prepared.”

“Flame throwers!” O’Hara shouts.

“More grenades!” Webb adds, earning her slaps on the back from her teammates.

That brings a smile to my lips. “The full arsenal. We won’t go into this next battle unprepared. We have a city to protect.”

The cheer that rises deafens me, but my happiness at their eagerness to dive back into battle dims when I spot new arrivals striding through the metal detectors.

Chief Lynch and Mayor Berdherst. They didn’t waste any time in coming here.

I quickly motion for Mayn to continue the planning and move to intercept the two men, directing them into my office.

As I close the door, tension fills the room, letting me know this visit is far from routine.

I direct the two men to the couch in my office and pull over a chair so I don’t look like I’m trying to take a position of authority by sitting behind my desk.

I start to speak, intending to defend our actions and the destruction caused by the Bone Man, but Chief Lynch cuts me off with a raised hand.

“We’re well aware of the situation, Sharpe.” His voice carries an air of resignation that sends prickles of wariness through me. “Mayor Berdherst has provided me with all the details.”

I exchange a glance with the mayor, unsure of what, exactly, those details entail.

Chief Lynch leans forward, his piercing gaze locked with mine. “What happened at the Bone Yard is only the beginning, Sharpe. A much larger monster is on the verge of rising, and if it does, all of Clearhelm will be in peril.”

I nod slowly. “I’m aware, Chief. My people are ready to fight this

monster again. We were discussing that when you arrived. This time, we'll go into the battle knowing what we're facing, which will mean less damage."

Berdherst shakes his head. "You are so naïve. Do you seriously think what you just fought has prepared you? That was nothing compared to the ancient forces you and your Cleaners have provoked."

Chief Lynch's next words send a wave of shock through me. "We need the sacrifice."

I blank my expression. "Sacrifice? What do you mean?"

Berdherst holds my gaze. "We mean the child, Captain. *My* child."

"Your child?" I shake my head, playing dumb. "I was told she died in a demon-raiding incident."

The mayor's eyes narrow. "You're well aware that she's alive, Captain, and she must be given as a sacrifice immediately, or all of Clearhelm will be destroyed."

My focus shifts to Lynch. "Chief, you can't seriously be on the side of someone who wants to sacrifice a child."

He lets out a long sigh. "When you protect a city, certain matters come up that cannot be ignored. We have been aware of this grisly tradition since Clearhelm was built on these lands. Our forefathers made a bargain that we would look the other way for the safety of the whole."

I burst to my feet. "By sacrificing a *child*?"

He rises, too, his face ashy but set with resignation. "I'll admit, it doesn't sit well with me how young this one is, but the time has come."

A knot tightens in my stomach, and my voice shakes with anger. "I won't be a part of this."

"This is your last chance," Lynch warns. "Don't disappoint me, Sharpe."

Anger boils in my blood. "I'm happy to disappoint you, if this is what it means to earn your respect."

With a heavy sigh, he turns toward the closed door and raises his voice. "Captain Bailey, you may come in."

My office door opens to reveal my old captain with a smug smile on his face and a pair of handcuffs in his hand.

He steps forward. "Gavin Sharpe, you have the right to remain silent..."

Disbelief fills me as he yanks my hands behind my back, agony shooting from my injured shoulder.

The cold metal cuffs biting into my wrists bring home the reality of the situation. I'm being placed under arrest, and there's nothing I can do to stop

it.

As Bailey continues to read me my rights, Mayor Berdherst steps up beside me, his voice low and chilling. “I want you to know that your honor here is wasted. We’ve already located the child, and my people have been sent to bring her in. This was your chance to be a team player, to prove you could be a benefit to the city.”

I meet his gaze with a mixture of anger and despair. “I won’t be a part of sacrificing a child, no matter the cost.”

Bailey’s hold tightens on my arms, sending another bolt of pain through me, and he marches me out of my office.

At our appearance, shocked silence falls over the squad room, and my officers stand, some reaching for their holsters.

I shake my head, silently telling them not to interfere.

Even if I’m in jail, the city still needs them to stand and fight against the coming storm, because I know my people, and no matter what Berdherst thinks, he’s not getting his hands on that child.

As Bailey walks me through the silent room to the elevators, I realize he plans to lock me up in my own damn prison.

With a smirk at me, he takes the badge from my belt to access the elevator for the Ward and marches me inside.

safe house

- Darius -

I PICK at my Chinese food, regretting having left Marceau's body for this subpar experience.

But then Merri's foot bumps against mine under the table, and I remember why I enjoy having a corporeal form once more.

I glance up to find her amused, golden gaze fixed on me. "You don't have to eat the lo mein if you find it that detestable."

"No, it's fine." I eat a bite of overcooked noodles dripping in grease and grimace. "Delicious."

Marceau barks out a laugh. "Come on. Just make yourself something else to eat."

I peer toward the kitchen in dismay at the suggestion.

Is a toasted English muffin any better? I dare not attempt making eggs or bacon. Flint had done both this morning, and I wasn't paying attention.

Gods, I really am useless with this kind of stuff.

In the Black Mountains of my birth, I simply entered the lava pools when I desired to refuel. Once I took on a corporeal body and left for the citadel, food was provided for the guards by the palace chefs.

Even on my hunts outside of the citadel, my food came as rations. There's little to consume in the Wasteland, with no vegetation and only the akuzal to hunt. And no one *eats* akuzal. They're all hard shells and organs.

Merri's foot bumps against mine under the table again. "You could take cooking classes. You might enjoy it."

I stiffen at the implication that I can't feed myself before I force the embarrassment away. Outside of buying from other people, I *don't* know how to feed myself, and there's no shame in seeking to correct that issue by looking to a professional.

I swallow down my pride. “Would you help me find a class?”

She beams at me, and my whole world lights up. “Of course. The local university has courses, or there are private lessons with smaller groups available. We can look over the course options and see—”

She cuts off as her phone vibrates on the table, and everyone straightens with alarm.

We’ve been tense since arriving home, waiting for the call that will summon us back into battle with the Bone Man.

But when she flips her phone over, Flint’s name appears on her screen.

She presses the answer button and puts it on speaker. “Hey, Flint, have you guys—”

“Get down to the gate,” he cuts in, his voice urgent, and the sound of a car door slamming fills the phone. “Lia and the kids are arriving via a portal. I’m on my way.”

The line goes silent before we can ask questions.

Merri and Marceau move into action, with Marceau grabbing his shotgun from the closet while Merri shoves her shoes back on.

While they gear up, I head for the garage. We’ll need the van to bring everyone back up to the cabin. The others follow behind me, and I take the driver’s seat, Marc beside me with Pen in the back.

Engine roaring to life, we speed out of the garage and down the gravel driveway, the wheels kicking up small stones in our wake. The overcast sky masks the stars, and the only illumination comes from the narrow beams of the van’s headlights.

As we approach the gate, tension fills the van. We don’t know what we’ll find when we reach our destination.

I steal a glance at Marc, his knuckles white as he grips the stock of his shotgun. Pen’s fingers tap rhythmically on her thigh, a telltale sign of her nerves.

We reach the gate, and my heart skips a beat when I spot Lia standing on the other side, her blond hair tousled by the wind. She raises her hand in greeting, but worry etches her features.

Beside her, Aediva huddles close, her blond hair bound in braids and her blue eyes filled with sadness. Alaska stands near her, the frost on his cheeks shimmering in the headlights as his eyes dart around, as if expecting danger at any moment.

Star and Trevor, the older kids of the group, stand facing away from us,

watching the access road for danger. But Star glances over her shoulder as we approach, and her purple eyes glow brightly in the dark.

I press the button to open the gate, and the small group hurries through.

Before I even come to a stop, Merri opens the sliding door and leaps out. “What happened?”

“Someone got past our security system and into the house.” Fear tightens her features, and she tugs Aediva closer. “We were all together, so we made it to the safe room and contacted Flint. He told us to come here.”

Tears well in her eyes. “How did they find us again?”

“We don’t know.” Merri directs them into the back of the van. “But we’ll figure it out. We’ll keep you all safe.”

Aediva looks up at Lia. “This is my fault, isn’t it?”

“Hey, none of that.” Marceau twists around to smile at them. “Just think of this as a spontaneous sleepover. We’ll have hot chocolate and camp out in front of the fire.”

“What if the men find us again?” Alaska whispers.

“They can’t follow you through a portal.” I carefully make a three-point turn and head back up to the cabin at a slower speed. “You’re in a completely different city now, and no one witnessed your arrival.”

Merri nods in agreement. “No one will get you here.”

When we reach the cabin, I stop at the front for Merri and Lia to unload the kids before I drive around to the garage at the back.

Marceau’s voice breaks the silence. “How do you think Berdherst found them? We switched vehicles, and Trent’s team took them to the safe house. Could they be tracking Aediva somehow?”

“I don’t think so.” I park the van and press the button for the garage doors to close. “If they could track her, they would have gone for her sooner, right?”

Marceau shakes his head in frustration. “Lia’s ability suppresses magic. With Aediva’s chaos powers unstable, she might not have let the kid out of her influence until recently. She could have been unconsciously suppressing some kind of tracker on Aediva at the same time.”

“It’s possible.” I climb out of the van, and Marceau follows. “She should keep Aediva close, just in case. Once we deal with the other Bone Man, Berdherst’s need to reclaim her will vanish, so he should give up.”

“I can get behind destroying another of those monsters.” Marceau lifts his shotgun. “I far prefer blowing things up over babysitting.”

“You and me both.” I pause on the stairs. “Hopefully Flint returns home soon.”

Marceau chuckles. “I never thought I’d hear you say that.”

I glance up at the door that leads into the house. “Children...make me uncomfortable.”

“Me, too,” Marceau admits. “They’re fine in small doses, but I can’t say I love being around them the way Flint does. I just don’t know what to do with them.”

I reach out to place a hand on Marceau’s chest. “I don’t suppose I could take a nap through this ordeal?”

Snorting, he slaps my hand away. “No way. If I have to deal with this, so do you. We suffer together. That’s part of being a team.”

“I don’t know why we *both* have to suffer,” I grumble as I turn and trudge the rest of the way up the stairs.

Marceau pokes me in the back. “You’re the one who wanted a corporeal body after the fight. I didn’t kick you out.”

“Maybe I was too hasty. You used a lot of fire during the battle.” The sound of children drifts through the door, and I pause with my hand on the knob to give Marceau my best beseeching gaze. “Please, can I just go back inside you until they fall asleep?”

“No way in hell.” Looking far too amused, he points at the door. “Get your corporeal ass in there.”

With a resigned sigh, I open the door and step into the warmth of the cabin.

The sound of children comes from the living room, and I glance longingly at Marceau’s room before his hand on my shoulder steers me in the opposite direction.

His body presses against mine, and his lips graze my ear as he whispers, “Just think of this as practice for when we bring home baby ignis demons.”

Warmth fills me at the words. “That’s not the same. Baby ignis are silent and will live in the fireplace.”

“Until they get a mind of their own and go wandering about, setting things on fire.” He squeezes my shoulder. “Human children have a fifty-percent lesser chance of burning our cabin down.”

“We can get a screen to keep them in the fireplace,” he protests. “It will be perfectly safe.”

We step out of the hall, and Merri looks up from the kitchen, where the

soft clinks of mugs and the scent of hot chocolate fill the air. “What took you so long?”

“Just girding our loins,” Marceau drawls.

Trevor pops up out of nowhere, his gaze inquisitive. “What are loins?”

Star arrives right on his heels. “And what is girding?”

I step to the side and gesture to Marceau, who instigated all of this. “I shall leave you to answer while I attend to Merri in the kitchen.”

“Coward,” he hisses as I make my escape.

When I pass the living room, I peer in to see Aediva curled up under a blanket with Lia on the couch, and Alaska huddled far too close to the fire for comfort. But Lia doesn’t appear alarmed by the way he stares raptly at the flames, so I trust his caregiver and join Merri in the kitchen.

Steaming mugs line the counter in front of her, the rich aroma of cocoa mixing with the scent of burning wood to create a warm cocoon of safety within the cabin.

Merri glances up at me. “I was starting to think you guys planned to leave me here alone.”

“We would never.” I lean in closer and lower my voice. “Marceau had a thought about how these people could have found the new safe house.”

I glance significantly toward the living room.

Merri’s breath catches. “You think they’re somehow tracking the girl?”

My gaze settles on the small blond head resting on Lia’s shoulder. “If I had an important, irreplaceable item, I’d want to make sure I could find it anywhere.”

Merri shakes her head. “But how?”

I quietly explain Marceau’s theory, and her face pales.

“So, we just have to be very careful until we take care of the Bone Man,” Merri says.

Nodding, I pick up two of the mugs and carry them into the living room, offering them to Lia and Aediva.

The small being stares at the cocoa for several seconds before solemnly accepting one.

Lia smooths a hand over her head as she takes the other one from me. “You’re doing so good, honey.”

I frown at the comment before remembering how Aediva’s mother had kept the kid on a restricted food diet. Still in Marceau’s body at the time, I had paid little attention when Flint spoke about Lia and the kids.

I offer the small being a smile. "I hope you enjoy it."

She hesitantly sips from the brim, then returns my smile, a strip of chocolate on her upper lip. "It's good."

Lia mouths, *Thank you*, over the top of the girl's head.

I dip my chin in acknowledgment before retreating to the kitchen to help pass out the other mugs.

As I do, the front door bangs open, and Flint rushes inside, bringing with him a blast of cool night air. "Are they here?"

Before we can respond, his gaze lands on Trevor and Star in the hall, and he swoops over to gather them in a hug. "How was portalling? Any stomach issues?"

"Trevor hurled," Star announces.

"No, I didn't!" He wiggles free of Flint's arms to push at his foster sister. "You're the one who turned green."

She tosses her black hair, flashing the streak of magenta at her temple. "I never turn anything but purple."

"Do too," he insists.

"Do not!" She races toward the living room. "Lia, tell Trevor I only turn purple!"

Orianna races after them, barking in welcome, and excited voices rise to greet her.

Flint follows them, checking on each of his little beings to make sure not even a single hair on any of their heads was hurt during their escape from the intruders.

I watch him fret over and cuddle them. "He really loves them, doesn't he?"

"Every single one, even after they grow up and forget about him." Sadness fills Merri's voice. "It never stops hurting him, but he never stops loving them."

I wrap a hand around her waist. "Do you ever wish...?"

She shakes her head. "I couldn't bear to watch a child of mine grow old and die while I live on."

We lean against each other, watching Flint with the kids, until Trevor announces, "You just need to gird your loins!"

Lia gasps. "What did you say?"

"It's what you do before you go into battle." Trevor raises a fist. "I'm girding my loins!"

Star poses next to him, like they're a pair of superheroes, their previous argument forgotten. "These loins are girded!"

Marceau slinks over to join us, hovering at the kitchen bar. "Well, that went about as well as could be expected."

Merri glares at him. "No more teaching the kids new words."

"Mouth filter activated." He mimes zipping his lips.

I shake my head. "I give it an hour."

"Where's the faith?" he demands.

"I lived in your head," I remind him. "I know how often swear words roll through your mind."

"But I don't say all of them out loud," he drawls, "and that's what counts."

Flint finally leaves the group in the living room to join us, and his happy mask slips away to reveal his worry. "I just don't get it. We had the safe house locked down tighter than Fort Knox."

"I think the kid has a tracking spell on her," Marceau says quietly. "One that Lia's been blocking until recently."

"As part of the sacrifice mark." Flint curses under his breath. "That makes sense."

"We just need Lia to keep masking it for now," Merri rushes to reassure him. "So long as she's blocking the kids from using their powers, they should be safe."

"She's not, though," I say as realization strikes, and my gaze jumps to Alaska, who's melting the ice from his skin at the fireplace. "At least, not all of them."

"Not any of them." The blood drains from Flint's face. "Aediva's been practicing her control, and Lia let her off the leash."

"Lia," Merri starts toward them just as all of our phones go off.

I pull mine from my pocket to find a security alert from the front gate. "It's too late. They've already found us."

Merri spins back around, her gaze landing on me, then shifting to Flint. "Get them down to the garage and into the Library. It's the safest place. Marc and I will deal with this."

I shake my head. "I'm not abandoning you."

"Neither am I." Flint's jaw sets stubbornly. "We fight together."

Merri grips my arm. "I need you to keep him safe." Then she turns to Flint. "And the kids need you."

“Then we all go together,” Flint insists.

Merri shakes her head. “We need to take these guys down and find out for sure how they found Aediva. But we can’t do that if we’re worried about the kids.”

Lia joins us, her eyes wide with fear. “What’s going on?”

“Gather the kids,” Merri directs her. “You’re all going for another trip through the portals.”

Lia’s bottom lip trembles before she presses them together and nods in understanding.

Outside the front window, the floodlights come on, alerting us that we’re out of time.

Merri shoves me out of the kitchen. “Go. And close the portal behind you.”

“Then how will we know when it’s safe to come back?” I demand.

“The Librarian will figure it out.” Marceau hustles a protesting Flint into motion.

Once I’m on the other side of the counter, I take over, grabbing Flint by the arm and forcibly directing him toward the hall. Marceau and Merri need to prepare for battle, and we have our orders.

When Flint catches the fear on the kids’ faces as Lia gathers them, he stops fighting, and his protective instincts kick in. The others are warriors, but these kids are not. They need our protection.

Quickly, we hustle everyone down the stairs and into the cold garage.

The heavy scent of motor oil and gasoline fills the air, the concrete walls cold and unwelcoming. The kids huddle close, all the bravado gone in the face of another escape from what should have been a place of safety.

As we skirt along the back wall, the sound of heavy boots and muffled voices comes from outside the bay doors, and a loud bang sounds from upstairs.

Alaska flinches, letting out a startled cry, followed by Lia’s quick hushing. The scent of fear fills the air as the kids huddle closer to their foster mom.

We reach the back wall, where a large painting shows swan maidens frolicking in a pond. Flint brushes his hand along the outer frame, and sparks of an active portal dance to life.

A shriek of metal cuts through the garage, followed by a cold blast of air.

“Go!” I hiss, turning to face the intruders.

Flint shoves the kids through, one at a time, with Lia last. “Come on, Darius.”

Heavy boots thunder into the garage just as the roar of Marceau’s shotgun comes from upstairs.

Heart pounding with fear, I let Flint tug me through the portal, the rush of tingles over my skin separating me from those I love.

I just have to trust that they won’t fall in this fight, because only Ga’Vine will be left to bring them back if they do.

home defense

- Pen -

SHADOWS FILL THE CABIN, the only light coming from the windows where the floodlights blaze in front of the cabin. The rest of the house lies in darkness to confuse our attackers.

I hear them moving through the window next to where I crouch and make out multiple sets of footsteps. Then the cabin door shatters inward, banging against the wall opposite me, and my pulse races with adrenaline.

Marc, from his position behind the dining room table, shoots the first black-clad figure through the door, sending him flying.

My grip tightens on my batons, and I swing low, catching the second intruder's shins and sweeping his legs out from under him. I deliver a fast tap to the back of his head to make sure he'll stay down, then roll away from the doorway.

Our walls are bulletproof, but today is not the day we put that to the test.

Three more men rush inside, stepping over their fallen comrades. Marc takes the one in the lead out, but the other uses his body as a shield and fires on me.

I duck behind the kitchen counter, wood exploding where my head had been, and lob a flash grenade back. "Twinkle lights!"

My eyes squeeze shut, the back of my lids flashing red as the grenade goes off. Through muscle memory, I make my way to the other end of the bar, where I grab the shotgun propped against it.

As soon as the flash fades, I duck around the counter and shoot my would-be killer in the chest, slamming his body against the entry wall.

Marc's shotgun roars again, taking down the last man standing. He falls backward, his mask slipping from his face to reveal pain-filled eyes.

The shot had struck his shoulder instead of center mass, and I dart

forward, sweeping the gun he raises to the side. It goes off, the sound deafening in my ear, and slivers of wood rain down around us.

The asshole blew a hole in our ceiling. Angry, I pull back my fist and punch him hard in the jaw, knocking him out.

Marc and I remain frozen, listening for more intruders, but I can't hear anything over the ringing in my ears. Each shallow, controlled breath pulls in the scent of wood burning in the fireplace and sweet hot chocolate, now muddled by the smell of gunpowder.

In only minutes, our cozy, safe space had been turned into a war zone, all because of the greed of one man and his desperation to kill a child.

I glance back at Marc, our eyes meeting in the dim light of the cabin. He points to his eyes, then the window next to the door, and I rise in a crouch to peer outside just as the floodlights shut off.

I blink to adjust my eyes to the darkness and make out the shadowed outline of cars parked farther down our driveway, blocking the way out.

After a moment, I glance back at Marc and shake my head. I don't see any other people moving around outside.

Five is more than Berdherst sent last time, though it doesn't appear that he upgraded their quality along with their quantity.

I set my weapons aside and grab hold of the nearest man in the doorway, dragging him farther inside. Marc joins me to haul in his fallen partner.

One of these people is going to talk, even if it takes all night to get the answers we want.

I frisk my guy and find a wallet in his pocket. Pulling it out, I flip it open and stare in confusion at the badge inside.

What the—

The garage door bangs open, and heavy boots thunder down the hall.

Instinctively, I reach for my baton at the same time that Marc lunges for his shotgun.

“Freeze!” a voice shouts, “Clearhelm Police! Drop your weapons!”

Marc and I exchange a quick, wary glance.

Are they the real police, or is this some elaborate ruse? We've encountered our fair share of fake cops in our line of work. Hell, we've used that ruse ourselves. They don't wear any badging, and the front men never identified themselves.

“Drop your weapons, or we'll shoot!” the man barks.

Reluctantly, we lower our weapons to the ground, the metal clattering

against the hardwood floors. We share another look, this one laced with resignation. There's no fighting our way out of this one, not without risking being shot.

"We're the Cleaners," I call out and raise my hands to show I'm unarmed. "We work for the JTFPI!"

Heavy footsteps stomp toward us. "On your knees!"

Already in a crouch, I let my knees hit the ground, and Marc straightens to kneel beside me. We raise our hands next to our heads, hands open to show we're unarmed.

Other boot falls rush forward, their movements swift and efficient as they yank our hands down behind our backs and slap handcuffs on us. The cold metal bites into my wrists, tight enough that there will be no wiggling free.

With our hands restrained behind our backs, the officers forcibly push us to the ground, pressing our faces against the cold, wood floor.

I roll my eyes up toward the leader. "We work for the same team. You can check our credentials. There's a copy in the top drawer of the sideboard."

The lead officer pulls up his mask to reveal a stern-looking man with a no-nonsense demeanor.

He shines a flashlight into my eyes, blinding me. "We received a report that you're holding a child hostage in this cabin. Care to explain yourselves?"

I flinch back from the bright light. "There are no children here."

Marc nods, his face a mask of sincerity. "You're welcome to search the cabin. It's not that big."

The officer narrows his eyes at us but nods to his subordinates, who head into the back. The sound of rooms being torn apart and things breaking follows, and I grit my teeth at the invasion. Objects can be replaced, so long as the kids escaped safely.

While they search, other officers come forward to crouch over their fallen partners.

"They're alive," one announces.

"We only use bean bags for home defense," Marc says. "They didn't identify themselves when they entered our home."

The lead officer ignores the comment as he paces, waiting for the search team to complete their ransack of our home.

Tension hangs in the air as the minutes tick by slowly, and I track their progress through our home and down in the garage.

Finally, the officers return to the entryway, and the one at the front shakes

his head at the lead officer. They hadn't found anyone else in the cabin.

The officer turns his attention back to us, his voice accusing. "Are there other buildings on the premises?"

"There's a garden shed out back," Marc grits out. "The key is in the garage next to the stairs. No need to bust the door."

One of the officers peels away, heading back downstairs.

"There aren't any children here. It's just the two of us," I say in a calm tone. "We live a quiet life when we're not giving support to the JTFPI."

"I wouldn't be waving around your association with that group so freely right now," one officer sneers. "It's not the gold badge you think it is."

My heart skips a beat. "What do you mean?"

The leader leans down and grabs my arm, hauling me painfully to my feet and swinging me toward the kitchen.

"Only the two of you?" He points at the row of still-steaming mugs on the kitchen counter. "You want to revise that statement?"

"We like playing drinking games with hot chocolate." I toss my hair out of my eyes and smile at him sweetly. "You've never gotten frisky over a few cups of cocoa?"

With a snarl, he shoves me at an officer. "Take them in. They can answer our questions while they cool their heels in lockup."

He turns to the other officers. "Tear this place apart. I want to see studs before you're done."

The officer who holds me marches me out the front door, setting off the floodlight once more and illuminating the Clearhelm Police cruisers blocking our driveway.

Gravel slips and slides under my shoes as he fast marches me down the driveway. There, he roughly searches me, taking my batons, two more flash grenades, and my wallet, throwing them into a large evidence bag.

Then, they shove me into the back of an SUV, slamming the door shut.

I twist to stare out the window and watch as another officer tries to manhandle Marc into the back of a cruiser. Marc shakes him off and slides in, sitting ramrod straight with his hands cuffed behind his back.

Two officers climb into the front of my SUV, and they turn on their lights, piercing the dark with red and blue flashes.

We head down the driveway, through the ruined remains of our gate, and out onto the road.

The officer in the front passenger seat turns to peer at me through the

grate that separates the front from the back. “Now’s the time if you want to get ahead of this matter.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Is it against the law to play strip poker with hot chocolate?”

His eyes narrow. “We don’t take kindly to child abductors. The service you’ve done for Clearhelm won’t mean shit once you’re behind bars.”

I lean back as best I can with the cuffs pinching into my wrists. “I want my lawyer.”

“You’re going to be serving time for assaulting cops,” he sneers. “Do yourself a favor and cut a deal.”

With the security cameras we turned on after the kids left, those charges won’t stick. They’ll prove the police who first entered didn’t identify themselves, and we used non-deadly force to defend our home.

“Well?” he prods.

I meet his gaze. “Are you questioning me after I requested my lawyer?”

With a snarl, he straightens in his seat. “Fucking bitch. It’s going to be a pleasure to lock you up.”

Silence fills the rest of the drive, and surprise shoots through me when they pass the Clearhelm Police Department and turn onto the access road for New Clearhelm.

Are they seriously going to lock me up in Sharpe’s holding cells? Then again, there are no other holding cells equipped to imprison magical beings.

The SUV pulls up in front of the Woo Woo Squad, and the officer who had tried to make me turn on Marc roughly drags me out of the back.

The driver walks ahead of us, holding open the door, and I meet the surprised gaze of the nighttime security.

While they check me in, the door opens a second time, and two officers lead Marc into the station.

He smiles at me. “Hey, darling.”

“Hey, yourself, cowboy.” I lean toward him. “They treating you okay?”

“Just tried to get me to turn on you.” He leans down to rub his cheek against mine, a twinkle in his eye. “I told them to fuck off, of course.”

I laugh softly. “You didn’t even make it an hour without swearing.”

“Circumstances called for it.” The officer on his left tries to pull him away from me, and Marc scares him back with a glare. “Think we’ll get our old cell?”

I nod. “It will be just like coming home.”

“Enough, you two.” My officer grabs my arm, then loosens his hold when Marc lets out a threatening growl. “Don’t add resisting arrest to the charges against you.”

He walks me through the metal detector into the squad room filled with officers, all of whom we’ve worked with and helped train. Their faces hold a mixture of confusion, worry, and something else I can’t identify.

It’s not the first time they’ve seen us led through this room in handcuffs, but since then, we’ve fought at their sides to protect the innocent and taken down monsters together. We’re one step away from being part of the team, and uneasiness fills more than one face.

I spot Johannsson, O’Hara, and Troy huddled together in the break room, but no sign of Mayn, and when I glance toward Sharpe’s office, the door remains closed.

We stop at the elevator for the Ward, and the officer beside me waves a badge he shouldn’t have to open the doors. Only members of the Woo Woo Squad, people who have proven themselves resistant to magic, should be allowed down in the Ward.

This breaks every code of conduct put in place to protect the officers. But no one tries to stop them when the doors open, and they march Marc and me inside.

We exchange confused looks, silently wondering what the hell is going on.

Our question is answered when we arrive at the Ward to find Captain Bailey waiting.

He leans against the guard station, smug satisfaction in his beady little eyes. “You guys should have remained mercenaries. The money was good, and you knew your place. But no, you just had to play hero. And where has that gotten you now?”

Marc lunges toward him, but I step in his way. Now is not the time to attack a police captain, no matter how despicable he is.

I clench my jaw, refusing to let Bailey’s words rattle me. “We want our lawyer.”

Captain Bailey chuckles, a humorless sound that sends shivers down my spine. “Oh, don’t you worry, I’ll get right on that. But first, I’m going to dismantle your little group, starting with the Joint Task Force of Paranormal Investigations. The time for letting Others police themselves is over.”

My heart freezes at his words. “What have you done?”

“Why ruin the surprise?” He waves at an unfamiliar guard who sits behind the long desk. “Buzz them through.”

The thick, spelled door unlocks, and the officer not holding my arm hurries forward to open it. When he steps through, he shudders, the spells affecting him in a way they never would have touched any of Sharpe’s people.

Our steps echo on the hard floor as we’re led past the interrogation rooms and the cells filled with the sleeping victims of the Hive Queen.

The general holding cell at the back comes into view, where a familiar, dark-haired figure sits inside, his expression a mixture of frustration and resignation.

My eyes widen, and I freeze in shock, forcing the officer leading me to drag me forward a few steps until I start walking again.

“Sharpe?” I say in disbelief, my voice barely more than a whisper.

His head lifts at the sound of my voice, and he leaps to his feet. “Pen? Marc? What the hell happened?”

I shake my head. “That’s what we want to know.”

not my wheelhouse

- Flint -

I GAZE AROUND at the Library, which seems to have transformed itself into a multi-media room, complete with computers, game stations, and a theater-size projection screen.

Plush leather seats face the movie area, while large bean bags litter the floor, and top-of-the-line gaming chairs sit facing us in invitation to take a rest and play for a while.

The Library has taken on many shapes and forms over the centuries, but this is the first time I've seen it without a single book in sight.

A *toot-toot* comes from down a hall, and a moment later, a red scooter zips through the center of the room. The hag waves a sharp clawed hand as she makes a lap around the room before coming to a stop next to us.

She pops out the scooter's kickstand and hops off to waddle over, her black rags dragging on the floor behind her. A pair of cherry-red sunglasses perch on her nose, and a matching scrunchy holds back her thin, black hair.

"Welcome, weary travelers." She dips her glasses down to give Darius an assessing once over that consists of sagging eyelids and a sharp-toothed leer. "And hello, hot stuff. Get it? Because you're an ignis demon."

"I get it," Darius says stiffly, gazing down at the squat woman. "Very funny, hag."

She snorts, her pointed nose wiggling. "Gods, you're still no fun, even after all this time."

She flaps her hands. "Make room. We have a Library to close down."

We move off to the side and turn toward the way we came. Instead of the back of a painting, a vault door now stands behind us.

The hag waddles up to it and hops a foot into the air, catching the wheel at the center and spinning it. "Righty tighty, lefty loosey. Safe as a safe,

now.”

She turns back to stare at Darius.

He forces a chuckle. “Your wit precedes your years.”

She waggles a sharp, black claw at him. “I’m going to give you a book on puns before you leave.”

He glances at me. “Is this truly the safest place for them?”

“Nowhere safer,” I assure him, amused to see him ruffled by the Librarian.

She claps her gnarled hands together and turns to the kids. “I see we have several first-time visitors.”

Trevor shrinks back. “What are you?”

The Librarian straightens to her full, diminutive height. “As a species, I’m a hag. As a station, I’m the Librarian, holder of all knowledge.”

Star stares at her with suspicious, purple eyes. “No one can hold all knowledge.”

The hag sweeps her hand around the room. “Oh, yeah? Try me Starshine Galactica Princess of the Glowy Purple Planet of Awesomeness.”

Star’s mouth drops open. “How did you know that?”

The hag taps one claw against the lens of her sunglasses. “I see everything.” She tugs on one long earlobe. “I hear everything.” She taps her temple. “I know everything.”

Alaska’s lips part with excitement. “Are you like Santa?”

“Better than Santa.” The Librarian waves her hand at one wall, and a candy bar rises from the floor, a popcorn machine popping into existence beside it. “How about that?”

Trevor, Star, and Alaska let out squeals of delight and race over to the counter, grabbing the silver buckets sitting on top to fill them. Orianna dances around them, her tail swishing, begging for all she’s worth, the glutton.

The hag rubs the side of her long nose as she watches them. “That Star is going to be a fun one.”

She turns back to Aediva, who stays close to Lia, clutching the woman’s sweater. “No sweets for my sweet?”

Aediva silently shakes her head.

Tsking, the hag waddles closer to her. “Let me see it, sweet girl.”

She holds out her palm face up, and Aediva hesitantly extends her left hand.

Lia casts me a panicked look, but I nod in encouragement. The hag won't hurt the kid. If anything, she can help.

The hag gently cradles Aediva's hand and traces her fingertip over the back. Slowly, a black stain rises to the surface of Aediva's skin.

I recognize the symbol as a match for those burned into the bones of the sacrifices that came before her. Anger simmers through me for what Berdherst had planned for the poor child.

"This is a nasty spell." The hag strokes Aediva's hand again, and the symbol vanishes. "But it can't reach you here."

"How do you know?" Aediva's bottom lip trembles. "Bad men keep finding us."

The hag leans closer, dropping her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "Because such things are made for mortal worlds, and we're not there anymore."

Aediva looks around the decked-out room. "Then where are we?"

"Anywhere you want to be." The hag waves a hand toward the ceiling, and the white paint darkens into a night sky filled with thousands of stars and galaxies. "We could even visit the Purple Glowly Planet of Awesomeness, if we wanted to."

"They really can't find us here?" Uncertainty fills Lia's voice.

I don't blame her for doubting. We had already failed to keep her and the children safe twice.

But the hag nods with confidence. "It's safe to drop your shields, dear. No harm can find Aediva here. And her magic will remain under control while inside the Library."

Hope brightens Aediva's big, blue eyes. "I won't hurt people?"

"On my honor, you are safe, even from yourself." The hag holds up three fingers and crosses her heart. "Now, go join your friends."

Aediva looks up at Lia, who nods, before slipping away to join the others.

Lia's worried gaze follows her. "I'm not sure all that candy is good for getting them settled for the night."

I have a little concern of my own when Alaska offers Orianna a big blue gumball.

"No fear," the hag whispers. "It may look and taste like sugar, but it's actually vegetables."

Lia shakes her head, looking overwhelmed by all the wonders of the Library.

“Can you remove the mark from Aediva?” I ask.

The hag’s face creases with regret. “Unfortunately, that’s not in my wheelhouse. That’s for you witchblood to figure out. But so long as she’s here, the spell will register her as dead, so it will be a moot point soon enough.”

My heart trips a beat. “What do you mean?”

“Much is happening right now.” She beckons for us to follow her to a table of computers.

The monitors turn on at our approach, and in one, I watch Pen and Marc being walked through a metal detector in handcuffs. The one beside it reveals Mayn packing up her desk, while another shows Sharpe sitting in a jail cell.

Darius stiffens. “We must return to them.”

“Cool your panties. You’ll be back with your sweethearts soon enough.” The hag makes a winding motion with her finger, and Mayor Berdherst appears on the screen. “There’s the scum bag.”

The monitor shows a silent, black-and-white video of the mayor yelling into his cell phone.

“What’s he saying?” Lia leans closer. “Why isn’t there sound?”

“Only I get to know everything.” The hag smacks her lips. “But he’s throwing a tantrum at all the money he’s losing right now as his favorite stocks crash.”

She reaches out to pat my arm. “Good job cutting off the influx of power. I knew you could figure it out.”

My stomach tightens. I don’t need her congratulations. Not at the cost the spell demanded.

She pinches me. “Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

I flinch, taking a step back. “Ow! What was that for?”

“You’re the soul man. You know as well as anyone that when souls cross the veil, they turn back to energy.” She shrugs. “So there’s a little less energy in the world. Big deal. I don’t see you being all mopey about not joining the big magic ball at the center of the world every time you die.”

I rub the sting in my arm. “It’s not the same.”

She shrugs again. “Some souls are just meant for a different purpose. Those *specific* souls will help take down a greater evil. It was a price well paid.”

My hand drops back to my side. “They didn’t think so.”

“They would have, if you’d asked.” She pinches me again, hard enough

to leave a bruise this time. “Ask next time. It will save you the guilt.”

“When can we return to the human plane?” Darius breaks in.

“So impatient.” She flicks her fingers at the monitors. “There, time is stopped. You should rest. Once you return to the human plane, things will move quickly.”

I shake my head. “As much as we should, I won’t be able to sleep, so the longer we stay, the more tired I’ll become.”

Darius nods in agreement.

The hag sighs. “All of time and space at your fingertips, and you just want to go back and pit yourself against the evils of the world.”

Darius’s hand settles on my shoulder. “It’s what we do. We can’t rest while our people need us.”

“Heroics. *Bah!*” The hag makes a sour face before turning to Lia. “But you’ll stay, right? You’re more reasonable than them.”

Lia’s gaze sweeps around the room. “If it’s truly safe here, then I’d like to stay. At least until this is over.”

“You can stay for as long as you want.” The hag points toward the hall where she arrived from. “That way to the Harbor, you sour pusses. You’re going to miss out on afternoon tea, but whatever. Go save the world.”

“We’ll take a raincheck, for after this is over.” I lean down and kiss her wrinkly cheek. “You’re the best, as always.”

She flaps a hand at me. “Shush, you flirt. You won’t win my wizened heart so easily.”

I grasp Lia’s hand. “We’ll have a new home for you and the kids ready for your return, as soon as it’s safe.”

Lia smiles before she takes in the room once more. “No rush. I think we’ll like it here.”

The hag cackles, her pointy, black tongue protruding. “Of course, you will, my girl. When was the last time you pampered yourself?”

As she leads Lia toward a new door marked *Spa*, Darius and I bid farewell to the kids and collect Orianna before heading down the short hall that ends at a single door.

With a deep breath, I open the door and step into a hall of black marble with veins of gold. Warm wall sconces light the way, and piano music draws us to the lounge, where a familiar siren sits at the bar.

Mayn spots us immediately and abandons her tall glass of salt water to hurry over. “You’re here.”

“Tell us what’s happened,” Darius commands.

unexpected hero

- Sharpe -

THE CELL DOOR OPENS, and the officer holding Pen's arm shoves her inside.

I rush forward to catch her, wincing at the pain that spikes from my shoulder, and take in her mussed, ash-blond hair. Slivers of wood chips are tangled in the fine strands, and a mixture of anger, confusion, and concern twists her strong features.

Marc shakes off his officer's hand and steps through the bar door with a glare that promises retaliation if the other man tries to get handsy with him again.

The officer flinches back, grabs the bar door, and slams it shut, the electronic lock engaging with a *whirring* sound.

I sweep a glance over my partners to make sure they're uninjured before I turn to meet Bailey's self-satisfied gaze.

Bailey stands just outside the cell, glee at seeing us behind bars shining in his beady eyes. Rage boils in my blood at seeing him standing in my jail area as if he already owns it.

I strangle the bars, imagining they're around his thick neck instead. "What the hell is going on?"

Bailey smirks, and the lines on his weathered face deepen. "Sharpe, how are you finding the accommodations from the other side of the bars?"

"Cut the crap, Bailey. Why are they here?" I gesture toward Pen and Marc, my patience waning by the second.

"They're just the start." Bailey crosses his arms over his barrel chest. "Clearhelm will be going through some changes soon, and your little side project is no longer needed. I'm dismantling the Joint Task Force of Paranormal Investigations. This city requires a firmer hand, with stricter policies for the Others, and I'm just the man to see that through."

I clench my fists, my knuckles turning white against the bars. “Stricter policies? You’re starting a war, Bailey, one that humans can’t win.”

Pen steps forward, her voice laced with urgency. “He’s right. The Others have been living in harmony with humans for centuries while in hiding. Now that they’re out, they won’t go back to the shadows. This will only create chaos.”

Bailey scoffs, his tone condescending. “Don’t be delusional. Demons and witchblood lived on the fringes because they were scared of being wiped out. All this talk about equality is crap. The Others are too dangerous, as proven by the recent infestation of monsters. But we’re going to put a stop to all of that.”

Marc steps closer to Pen, his large body a protective wall at her back. “The witchblood and demons fought before, and it nearly destroyed the demon plane. If that happens here, the witchblood and demons will join forces against the humans. Humans will be wiped out.”

I watch Bailey’s face for any sign of reason but find none, and his stubbornness infuriates me. “You need to listen, Bailey. You can’t just force Others out or impose stricter laws. It will incite a bloodbath, and innocent people will suffer.”

He shakes his head in disgust. “You had nearly six years to try things your way, and it didn’t work. Maybe if your little band of Cleaners had chosen a side sooner, things would be different. But now it’s time to do things the way they should have been done from the start.”

I shake my head in disbelief, anger bubbling up within me. “You’re playing with fire, Bailey. You’re letting pride blind you to what will happen. Even as we speak, another one of those monsters is preparing to rise. Your officers aren’t equipped to deal with what’s coming.”

Bailey glances at the officers who stand guard behind him. “You hear that, boys? Sharpe thinks he’s a better cop than you are.”

Two of them laugh nervously, while the others sweat and look ready to puke. They’ve never had to deal with the monsters that came with the thinning of the veil. My people have always stepped in and taken the hits. But they’ve seen it, and they know they’re screwed. Bailey is going to get his people killed.

“Enjoy your stay here, Sharpe.” Bailey turns and walks away, his voice carrying back to us. “The Others will either bend to the new rules or be forced to leave the human world. But you’ll be too busy rotting down here to

see it.”

The officers behind him stare at us with varying levels of derision and panic before they turn to follow their boss.

Their footsteps recede, leaving us alone in the cell, and I exchange a worried look with Pen and Marc. None of us likes our current predicament, not with a monster on the rise while we’re trapped behind bars.

“What happened?” I pluck a sliver of wood from Pen’s hair. “Where did this come from?”

“Our ceiling. They ambushed us in our home,” Marc snarls. “They’re tearing the place apart. When our lawyer gets us out of here, we won’t have a home to return to.”

I shake my head in confusion. “What are the charges?”

“Child abduction and resisting arrest.” Pen’s fingers drum against her thigh. “The charges won’t stick. There’s no evidence, and we have proof we were just defending ourselves.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask about Aediva. She’s the only reason Bailey’s people would go to our home. But we don’t know who’s listening in on our conversation, and the fact Flint and Darius aren’t here gives me hope that Berdherst didn’t get what he was after.

Pen touches my arm. “Why are *you* down here?”

“Destruction of public property and obstruction of justice.” I roll my shoulders and wince.

“Here, let me help with that.” Marc steps up behind me and rests his hands on my injured shoulder.

Warmth spreads from his palms, soothing some of the pain.

“Thank you.” I sigh with appreciation. Marc’s hands are better than any heat compress.

Pen’s lips purse with annoyance. “I doubt Bailey will file charges for obstruction of justice. He’d have to detail *how* you obstructed justice, and withholding a child sacrifice won’t look good on paper for them.”

“You’re right.” The same thought had occurred to me while I sat in here alone. “They might get me on the destruction of public property, though. I went off book in my search for the bone pit.”

“A slap on the wrist and a fine at worst.” Pen waves that away. “Our lawyer will get us out of this mess. She’s the best there is on the demon plane.”

“It’s nice to have a dad who’s royalty.” Marc’s hands drop away. “How’s

that feel?”

I test my shoulder by moving it. “A lot better. Thank you.”

“You should really be wearing a sling,” Pen says, an *I told you so* in her tone.

“My shoulder is resting plenty while down here.” I pace the confines of our jail cell, worry gnawing at my insides. “How fast can your lawyer get us out? We have no idea what’s happening up the—”

I cut off as a tremor ripples through the ground beneath us. The walls of our cell groan, and a fine layer of gray dust drifts over us from above.

Marc peers up at the ceiling. “Looks like the Bone Man is on the move.”

“We don’t have time to wait for a lawyer.” Fear tightens my chest. “We’re running out of time.”

Frustration boils within me, and I clench my fists around the bars as I try to channel my fae magic. I know what I can do in theory, but when I reach for that dark slither inside, it slips my grasp. I reach for it again and will the bars to vanish, but they remain stubbornly in place.

“Why isn’t this working?” I hiss through gritted teeth, my frustration mounting.

I close my eyes and try again. The first time I accessed my power, I was angry, and enough rage boils inside me now that this should be easy. But try as I might, the bars remain unmoved.

Frustration surges through me, and I clench my teeth, blood pounding in my temples as I try to force the magic to obey me, but nothing happens.

“Dammit!” I kick the bars in frustration. “Why won’t it work?”

The sound of my shout echoes down the empty prison corridor and fades until only my heavy breaths fill the air.

Pen and Marc exchange worried glances, and Pen breaks the silence. “Sharpe, did you just try to use your fae magic?”

I scrub a hand through my hair. “Yes.”

Their expressions shift from worry to surprise.

“When did it start coming back?” Marc asks.

“Just recently.” I drop my hand to my pocket, feeling the bottle of antacids there. They hadn’t searched me before marching me down here, not that there was anything to take. I was caught off guard. “It’s limited to moving small objects from my hand to my pocket.”

Smiles spread over their faces, and they step forward to embrace me.

“That’s wonderful news,” Pen says.

Marc squeezes me tightly. “Congratulations. That’s amazing.”

I can’t bring myself to share in their excitement. “It’s useless. What good is this magic if I can’t even use it to get us out of here?”

Pen pulls back to gaze up at me, happiness lighting her face despite our predicament. “It’s a start, which is all that matters. We’ll find a different way out of here.”

“It would be nice if I could just vanish the bars, though,” I mutter, my anger slipping away when confronted by her warmth.

She grips my arms and gives me a gentle shake. “Remember where we are, love. We designed the Ward to contain magical beings. Even at your full power, you wouldn’t be able to make those bars vanish. And even if we escape, the lockdown procedure for the Ward would kill us before we make it through the door at the end of the hall.”

A half-smile plays on Marc’s lips. “But if you want to try something bigger, I bet you could make the bench vanish.”

I shoot him a glare, still too annoyed to find humor in the comment.

“Too soon?” Marc walks over to sit on the bench and closes his eyes. “Might as well get some shut-eye while we wait.”

Reluctantly, Pen and I join him, though I don’t think any of us find real sleep.

Hours later, we’re roused by the sound of the heavy door to the Ward opening and closing, followed by the unmistakable tap of dress shoes approaching.

“Great.” I rise to my feet, my shoulder only twinging a bit at the movement. “Bailey’s back for another round of gloating.”

“If he gets close enough, try making *him* vanish,” Marc growls.

The visitor comes into view, but instead of Bailey, an unexpected figure strides toward us.

My brows shoot up in surprise. “Johannsson, what the hell are you doing here?”

Johannsson pulls a key card for our cell out of his pocket and swipes it over the lock. “We don’t have much time. I got a call from Mayn to come down here now and free you.”

Pen shakes her head in disbelief. “You’re putting your job on the line for us? Why?”

“Don’t get all sentimental. I’m not here for you, I’m here for Sharpe.” He pulls open the cell door. “I can’t leave my boss behind bars.”

I shake my head, grateful but confused. Johannsson is the last of my officers I would have expected to stick their necks out. “You’re going to get in trouble for this.”

“What can they do? Fire me?” He snorts. “That already happened, so there’s no job at risk.”

I rear back. “What? Bailey fired you?”

“Yeah, but we can talk about that later.” He beckons us out of the cell. “We need to move fast. Bailey just went down to the garage, and I’m not sure how long the cameras will stay scrambled.”

We hurry out and follow Johannsson down the corridor past the other cells.

“There will be a car to pick you up right out front on the street,” Johannsson pulls open the heavy metal door.

We pass the empty guard station, the lights on the monitors flickering in disarray. Johannsson doesn’t waste a moment, leading us down the hall to the elevator, our steps echoing.

Sweat beads on his brow as he swipes his badge to open the elevator. “They’ll take you to the safe house, and the rest of us will join you in small groups so we don’t raise suspicion.”

“The rest of you?” I ask, feeling dazed by this turn of events.

Johannsson straightens his spine and pulls back his shoulders. “Fired or not, we’re still the only ones capable of taking down this monster a second time. We stand with you, sir, to the end.”

Pride fills me, and I reach out to grip his shoulder. “I’m honored to have you on my team.”

Johannsson flushes and nods. “Thank you, sir.”

The elevator rises quickly, dropping my heart into my stomach as the floors flash by. Then it comes to a stop just as fast, leaving me light-headed.

When the doors open into the squad room, I receive the second blow of the day. Bailey had done as he promised. All of my officers stand at their desks, cardboard boxes in front of them as they pack up their belongings.

They all stop when they see us, and each one turns to face me, offering a salute.

I stride into the room, my heart heavy with the sight of my dedicated team being forced out of their positions. No words can encompass how I feel, so I stop and salute them in return, my gaze sweeping over each familiar face.

“We need to hurry,” Johannsson urges. “We can do all this once we meet back up in an hour.”

Nodding, I turn, and we head for the main entrance just as the other elevator *bings* with a new arrival.

My stomach drops, and I turn to see Bailey stepping into the squad room.

When he spots Pen, Marc, and me free from our jail cell, his eyes narrow into angry slits. “What is the meaning of this?”

Pen’s hand moves to her empty belt loops, and Marc steps forward. “Looks like our stay was shorter than you anticipated.”

Bailey’s face contorts with rage, and he looks at the room full of officers. “Arrest these people! They are escaped felons.”

The room falls eerily silent, and no one moves to carry out his order.

Bailey’s fists clench at his sides. “This is insubordination! I’ll see you all thrown into prison!”

On silent feet, O’Hara steps up behind Bailey and knocks the older man on the head. Bailey’s eyes roll back in their sockets, and he slumps to the floor. “God, I thought nothing would shut that windbag up.”

Troy comes forward and grabs the handcuffs from Bailey’s belt, and together, he and O’Hara lock the older man to one of the heavy metal desks. “So glad I’ll never call this asshole boss.”

O’Hara looks back up at us. “This should hold him until his officers arrive to look for him. You’d best hurry, boss.”

Johannsson points toward the entrance. “Your ride’s waiting outside. Get moving.”

“Never thought I’d take orders from you, Paul.” Pen dips her chin to him. “Good job.”

Turning, we rush through the metal detector and out the door.

the getaway

- Pen -

THE EARLY MORNING sun momentarily blinds me as we step outside. It hadn't felt like we were in lockup that long, but time passes differently underground.

A sedan idles at the curb, the darkly tinted windows blocking us from seeing inside, but when I reach for the back passenger handle, the door opens.

The scent of salt permeates the air, and I spot Mayn behind the wheel. I scoot across the seat, making room for Sharpe to slide in beside me while Marc hurries around to the front passenger door.

As soon as all our doors close, the car pulls smoothly away from the curb and heads away from the New Clearhelm access road at a speed that just tests the speed limit.

I twist to peer out the back to make sure no one followed us from the station. At this time in the early morning, few cars are on the street, which will make finding us easy if they discover Bailey fast enough.

So far, we seem to be in the clear, but that could change at any moment.

I turn back around and settle into my seat.

Mayn's black eyes flash toward us through the rearview mirror. "It's good to see you free again, sir."

"Thanks for the pickup." Sharpe buckles his seatbelt. "They do anything to you after they hauled me away?"

"Just gave me a box and told me to pack up." Her hands tighten on the steering wheel, and it creaks in protest. "I heard they did the same to the rest of the department."

"Yeah, Bailey did a full house clean." Anger fills Sharpe's voice. "I'm sorry you were all caught up in his vendetta against me."

"You were the only person willing to take a chance on hiring me," Mayn

says. “I had a good run at the JTFPI, but I go where you go. Even if they hadn’t fired me, I would have quit.”

“Thank you, Mayn.” Sharpe looks out the window at the passing streetlights. “Where are we going?”

“Meredith scrambled the cameras, but in case someone saw you get into this car, we need to ditch it.” Her eyes flick to the rearview mirror, checking to make sure we’re still alone on the road.

“Everyone just put their freedom at risk for us.” Sharpe’s hands shake on his thighs as the realization of what just happened settles in. “They never should have done that.”

“It was their decision, and they all backed you, even the new recruits.” Pride straightens Mayn’s back. “They’re loyal to you and what you stand for, not their badge.”

I cover Sharpe’s hand with mine. “If it helps, Meredith will mess with the footage to show them all leaving before Bailey returned. It will be his word against all of theirs as to what happened.”

“And once we defeat this new monster, they’ll have to explain why they want to arrest the heroes of Clearhelm,” Marc adds. “They’ll most likely sweep all of this under the rug to save face.”

Sharpe’s shoulders slump. “The JTFPI is over either way. They’ll just tell people they folded it back into the Clearhelm Police Department.”

“I’m sorry for that.” I squeeze Sharpe’s hand. “But you don’t need a badge to fight crime when you’re a multi-billionaire.”

That draws a laugh from him. “Will we be buying masks and capes now?”

I lean closer. “You’d look dashing in a cape.”

He arches one brow. “Oh, yeah?”

“Johannsson said we’re going to the safe house,” Marc interrupts. “But we don’t have one out this way.”

“No, we’ll be heading to the warehouse in the industrial district. It’s the location nearest to the Bone Yard and the area where we first found the bones,” Mayn explains. “We’re just taking the long way to get there.”

We leave New Clearhelm behind, and the mile markers grow farther and farther apart as the road narrows down to a two-lane highway.

In a long stretch of empty road, we come up on an extended-cab truck parked on the shoulder, and we pull up behind it.

Mayn shuts off the engine, and we leave the sedan to head to our new

ride.

As we climb in, Savannah turns in the driver's seat to grin at us. "We heard you started the party without us."

Relief sweeps through me, and I grin back. "Only the pre-game. The real party will be starting soon."

She shakes her head. "And here Flint was trying to sell us on a quiet life in Clearhelm. I knew he was full of it."

"Hopefully, once this is over, we can all take a break." Sharpe climbs into the third-row seating. "We've had enough monsters for this lifetime."

"Clearhelm certainly seems to attract the beasties." She fist-bumps Marc when he slides into the seat next to her. "Do you know how far we have to travel to find the kind of action you see here in a week?"

"Lucky us," Mayn says in a tone that leaves me questioning if she really does think we're lucky. Sirens like challenging hunts, after all.

She hops into the truck next to me and closes the door.

Savannah looks back at us. "Buckle up, everyone. This is going to be a bumpy ride."

Clicks fill the air as we all fasten our seatbelts, and Savannah shifts into drive. The engine lets out a throaty roar, and we lurch forward onto the highway.

I grab the handle on the door. "You've driven one of these before, right?"

She cackles. "Are you questioning my getaway skills?"

"You're not usually the driver, so yes." I suck in a sharp breath when she yanks the wheel to the right, and we leave the paved road.

"Please tell me we didn't escape prison only to die here," Sharpe breathes only loud enough for me and Mayn to hear.

The tires bump over deep ruts in the grass road, and the truck's square nose points toward a narrow gap in the trees where a dirt trail leads into the forest that doesn't look wide enough for the truck.

I tighten my hold on the door handle and hold my breath as the truck races toward that narrow gap and scrapes by with a hair's breadth on either side.

The truck sways and jumps as it plows over potholes, and despite my death grip on the door handle, Mayn and I jostle together on the bench seat. After I almost bite my tongue, I clench my teeth to prevent them from clacking together.

"Was that another earthquake?" Mayn asks in alarm.

Marc presses a palm against the dashboard to avoid slamming into it. “How can you tell?”

Savannah laughs and smacks the steering wheel. “That a girl! Get some!”

Queasiness roils in my stomach by the time we make it out the other side and onto the highway, heading back toward Clearhelm.

I slump and rest my head against the seat, closing my eyes.

Gentle fingers comb through my hair, then find my temples and massage them. “Are you okay?”

“Just a little motion sickness.” I reach up to touch the back of Sharpe’s hand. “How’s your shoulder? That didn’t dislocate it again, did it?”

I’m only half teasing with the question.

“Everything is still intact. This certainly isn’t the getaway from prison that the movies led me to expect.” His thumbs stroke down the tense muscles in my jaw. “I’m glad there was no high-speed chase.”

“Those are the best, though!” Savannah calls back. “Playing cat and mouse with the cops is a hoot!”

Sharpe leans forward to whisper in my ear, “I’m glad our team is a little more mellow than Trent’s team. I’m not sure I could keep up with them.”

I smile and turn my head to catch his lips in a soft kiss.

When I pull back, I smile at him. “I like our team, too.”

“Save the making out for after we win the war,” Savannah hollers. “Post-battle sex is always better.”

With a sigh, Sharpe leans back in his seat.

As we drive, Savannah peppers us with questions about the Bone Man, and we fill her in on what we know, which isn’t much.

Mayn adds in the little she remembers from stories of the ancient being, which turns out to be more about the full-scale slaughter it’s capable of if allowed to roam. It seems nothing is known about its origin or the steps taken in the attempt to destroy it before it was locked in the Between.

We killed the smaller version, though, so I don’t think defeating it is an impossible task. We have better weapons now, and a team of paranormals working together that our ancestors wouldn’t have had. Not with the history of antagonism that exists between the Others.

Bailey may think we failed in bringing together the various races to live in harmony, but this is the best things have been between our people and the humans in my memory, and I desperately want to protect it.

It’s not our fault that a bunch of monsters escaped their prison, but we’re

doing our best to keep this small corner of our world from being destroyed.

Savannah pulls up to a large, rundown warehouse. Boards cover the windows, and junk fills the parking lot where people have discarded broken-down vehicles, appliances, and trash.

Sharpe leans forward, his arms on the back of my seat. “This is the safe house?”

“It looks prettier on the inside,” I assure him.

Savannah drives past the boarded-up entrance to the side where rusted bay doors line the wall. More junk fills the pavement, but a path leads to the large door at the back. Heavy rust paints the illusion that it won’t move, but it soundlessly rolls up at our approach, and Savannah drives into the building.

Several matching black SUVs form a double row, and Savannah drives past them to park off to the side next to one of our vans.

Sharpe lets out a low whistle. “Why are you better funded than the JTFPI?”

“Because my bosses aren’t assholes.” I pop open my door and hop out.

Sharpe joins me, his wide eyes taking in the pristine interior of the building, which is the complete opposite of what it looks like on the outside. “If you have this, why do you work out of an office at the back of the psychic shop?”

“That’s the public face.” Marc shuts the car door. “This is the shit-hit-the-fan backup plan.”

“You should see the one on the east coast.” Savannah appears from around the front of the truck and walks backward toward the walled-in office area at the back. “It’s twice this size.”

Sharpe turns to stare at me. “How many of these do you have?”

“We have them all over the world.” I poke him in the chest. “You set them up for doomsday, because you’ve always planned for the worst.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t remember reading about that in my history book.”

Marc throws an arm over his shoulder. “Someday, we’ll have to take a tour of all our holdings. We’ll need a month to cover everything.”

Mayn joins us, her dark eyes darting around what she can see of the space.

“There are sleeping quarters upstairs, with every room able to sleep four people comfortably.” I point to a metal staircase leading to a second floor attached to the far wall. “It’s set up with a kitchen, dining hall, and leisure

area. And there's a storage room with enough food to feed sixty people for five years."

"We have enough solar panels and generators in the basement to run this place completely off the grid," Marc adds.

Sharpe looks dazed. "How paranoid was I?"

"*Prepared*," Marc stresses. "We've seen a lot of civilizations rise and fall."

"There are portals connecting this safe house to three other safe houses, so if we need to evacuate, we can pull up and leave instantly." The old coven leader had loaned us her portal maker when we first set this up, and Flint had Reese reinforce them after things became unstable in Clearhelm.

Ahead of us, Savannah pushes open the door to the planning room. "I brought company!"

Whistles and hoots split the air as we enter. Trent and Elizabeth sit at the large, oval table on one end, with Jerry perched on the tall cabinet behind them.

Surprise fills me when I spot Amalia leaning against the wall, her arms folded over her narrow chest. We haven't seen her since she took off with the Hive Queen's stinger.

Flint and Darius rise from where they sit with Meredith and hurry over to us.

Darius assesses me and Marc for damage, while Flint yanks me into a tight embrace. "Never tell me to leave you behind again."

"Are the kids safe?" I return his hug. "What about Aediva?"

"They're all enjoying the Librarian's hospitality. The Library will be on lockdown until the hag deems it safe to open up again." He releases me to hug Sharpe. "How the hell did you end up in jail first?"

The two men step away from our group, Sharpe explaining what happened.

I walk over to Amalia. "Hey, didn't expect to see you back in Clearhelm so soon."

"We spotted her at the airport." Trent leans his chair back to balance on two legs. "Gave her a lift into town."

She juts out her chin. "I heard you had number two on my hunt list of big bads. Figured I could take a crack at it."

"And run off with the bounty reward again." The legs of Trent's chair thud back to the ground, and he stands to walk over to us. "Don't think that

will happen twice, kid.”

“Not a kid, old man.” Her eyes narrow at him. “Seventy-thirty.”

He grins, his white teeth a startling contrast to his salt-and-pepper beard. “Fifty-fifty.”

“Hey, shouldn’t it be split four ways?” Marc joins us, with Darius at his side. “Amalia, Trent’s team, us, and Sharpe’s people?”

Trent scowls. “Like you need the money.”

“Leave some for those of us who have less time to amass fortunes,” Amalia argues.

“Fine, it can be split three ways,” I say to end the argument. “Sharpe’s people still deserve a cut, now that they’re freelancers.”

“Great, just what we need,” Amalia mutters. “More competition.”

Trent rocks back on his heels and yells toward the other man, “Bring it on, Sharpe!”

Confusion knitting his brow, Sharpe glances over at us. “Bring what on?”

Aghast, Trent stares at him before shifting his focus to me. “Does he even know there’s a bounty? He can’t be doing all this out of a sense of *honor*.”

About to answer, the door opening distracts me.

O’Hara and Troy step into the room. “Is this where the party’s at?”

“Hell, yes!” Trent leaves us to stride over to them and pound Troy on the shoulder. “Good to see you back in action. How’s the leg? Any pain when it rains?”

A few minutes later, Johannsson and Webb step into the room, and over the next thirty minutes, the rest of the former Woo Woo Squad joins us.

It’s a tight fit for the planning room, with most people left standing, but we make it work.

Meredith’s voice breaks through the chatter. “If everyone is here now, we can get this show on the road.”

Quiet falls as all eyes turn to the large monitor at the front of the room.

Meredith’s fingers dance across her keyboard, and an aerial map of Clearhelm appears on the screen. “I’ve been tracking the earthquakes as they increase in frequency. The epicenter is here, in the forest where you found the original bone pit.”

Circles appear on the map, overlapping each other and covering the thickest part of the forest.

“That’s near the founder’s house,” Troy says. “Is that a monster attractor or something?”

“Berdherst’s family has been feeding this thing.” Disgust twists Flint’s face. “We only know this because we got tangled up in the whole mess last year when we took on a case for his now ex-wife.”

“He’s known about this thing since then?” O’Hara shakes his head. “That’s fucked up.”

“He’s known about it since before Clearhelm was founded. He planned to feed his daughter to it for charisma and luck.” Flint’s hands curl into fists. “Monsters tend to attract each other, which explains why the Hive Queen used his old family estate as a place to meet with her drones.”

“Think if we kill this thing, we’ll stop attracting all these beasties?” O’Hara asks with a look of disappointment.

“We can hope.” Sharpe’s hazel eyes fix on Meredith. “Can you tell how much time we have?”

Meredith taps at her keyboard, and a new image appears, showing a graph rapidly rising from left to right. “The earthquakes have been increasing in strength, so I’d guess it will rise soon.”

“Can you narrow the field down any further?” Sharpe asks. “We already figured the next one was in those woods.”

Meredith shakes her head. “Unfortunately, that’s as close as I can get you. There’s too much movement to tighten the search radius.”

O’Hara rubs his chin. “If we go in with the same tactic as before, we could accidentally set the whole forest on fire.”

Sharpe’s jaw clenches. “If that’s what needs to happen, then we do it.”

A shiver of anticipation goes through me, and the firebird inside lifts its head in interest. “We can help contain the fire once the Bone Man is dead.”

Marc and Darius give me sharp looks, and I stare back at them with raised brows. If I have to consume a forest fire, so be it. I can deal with having to relearn technology for the second time in a year.

An icon pops up on the TV screen, and Meredith moves her mouse toward it. “Looks like there’s an emergency alert.”

She clicks on it, and a news channel opens on the TV screen.

A familiar-looking news anchor with platinum blond hair and gray eyes stares back at us, a microphone in hand. “We are standing outside of the Bone Yard, whose citizens were forced to flee for their lives just yesterday afternoon when a monster rose from its streets.”

She turns toward a podium that has been erected in front of the archway, where dozens of other news media people swarm around it. “Mayor

Berdherst has summoned us for a special announcement. Will he address the heroics of our city's Joint Task Force of Paranormal Investigators, who risked their lives earlier to defeat this newest monster? Or the earthquakes that still rock our city? Let us find out."

The camera zooms in as Mayor Berdherst steps onto the podium. While he wears his usual pristine suit and tie, sweat glistens on his brow, and strain tightens his features.

He taps the mic to draw everyone's attention. "Thank you all for joining me here today. First off, I would like to thank Clearhelm's Police Department for its tireless service in making sure our streets are safe and our citizens protected."

"What the hell?" O'Hara mutters.

Angry murmurs rise around the room.

While he doesn't come right out and claim Bailey's people fought the monster in the Bone Yard, the placement of the emergency meeting heavily implies it.

"The Bone Yard saw a lot of damage yesterday, but I am happy to announce that plans are already underway to repair the area." Berdherst swipes a handkerchief over his brow. "Not only will we fix the streets, but we plan to make the Bone Yard better than it was before."

"Is he seriously going forward with his plans to turn it into a tourist attraction?" Marc shakes his head in disbelief. "He *knows* what's coming."

"We are paving the way for a new era, where the Bone Yard will be rebuilt with inclusivity in mind." He smiles at the news reporters. "It will become a safe place for humans to interact with the Others, without the dangers it once contained."

A reporter in the crowd shouts, "What about the earthquakes?"

Berdherst waves a hand in dismissal. "Mere aftershocks from the battle. The redevelopment of the Bone Yard will bring in a fresh stream of income to our city by drawing tourists—"

"Are you trying to imply that it was the Clearhelm Police who protected us yesterday?" the familiar reporter shouts.

"It was the JTFPI who defeated the monster, just like always!" the shout comes from the back of the group. "The Clearhelm Police were nowhere in sight!"

Restless agreement ripples through the crowd of reporters, and another chimes in with, "What good is the Clearhelm Police if the JTFPI are the ones

keeping us safe?”

Berdherst raises his hands to calm the crowd. “We are not here today to discuss the inner workings of our departments—”

“You’re the one who brought them up!” a reporter shouts. “Why are the windows dark this morning at the JTFPI headquarters? Where is Captain Sharpe?”

The restlessness grows.

A microphone shoves toward Bailey. “Is now really the time to be talking about tourist attractions when our protectors have mysteriously gone missing after they defeated this newest monster?”

The mayor opens his mouth, but whatever he was about to say is cut off as the ground shakes beneath our feet, and alarm sounds from the people on the streets.

Berdherst grabs the sides of the podium. “Everyone, remain calm. This is only an aftershock—”

A loud crack splits the air, and a thick root rises out of the ground behind the podium.

Screams erupt, and horror widens Berdherst’s eyes as he turns to gaze up at it.

For a moment, man and monster stand frozen. Then the root shoots down, wrapping around Berdherst’s body and yanking him into the ground.

a trail to follow

- Marc -

EVERYONE STARES IN STUNNED SILENCE, our eyes locked onto the TV screen, at the chaos unfolding in front of the Bone Yard.

The mayor of Clearhelm, the man whose family had fed the Bone Man for all these years, had just met a gruesome end at the hands—or rather, the root—of the very monster he nurtured.

It's a brutal death that none of us could have predicted.

The news reporters scramble away from the bloody scene, their voices filled with shock and disbelief.

A bloodthirsty smile twitches at my lips. "What did we just witness?"

"The end of a centuries-old contract," Flint breathes, his gaze fixed on the screen. "With the intended sacrifice no longer on the human plane, the contract reverted to the contract holder, Berdherst. And the Bone Man just took its due."

Flint grins, then frowns, then grins once more. "That's what the Librarian meant when she said it would be a moot point soon. She knew taking the kid off the human plane would result in this!"

Johannsson shakes his head. "He was an asshole, but that's still a brutal way to go."

"It's what he deserved." Enthusiasm unwavering, Flint turns to the rest of the room. "And now we have something that we can track directly to the Bone Man."

Sharpe rises from the table. "What do you mean?"

"I'm familiar enough with Berdherst's slimy soul to locate it, even after the Bone Man absorbs it." Flint bounces on the balls of his feet. "It's like a beacon that will lead us straight to the monster."

Sharpe looks at his people. "You heard the man. Let's move! We've got a

trail to follow!”

Everyone springs into action.

Pen leads the way to the weapons room, flipping on the light.

O’Hara lets out a shout, “Dibs on the rocket launcher!”

“There’s more than one to go around.” Trent grabs the second rocket launcher and passes it to Elizabeth before grabbing a third one for himself.

I spot a shotgun and grab, along with a long-handled ax that should come in handy.

We load up on grenades, both magical and non-magical, as well as guns with magical explosive rounds.

This time, we’re not going into the fight unprepared.

Sharpe’s people were forced to turn in their firearms, but they now replace them and add shotguns to their arsenal. Axes also get grabbed, and Webb surprises everyone when she nabs a sword for herself, sharing a smile with Mayn.

Amalia goes for a hook chain, as well as a bandolier of small steel throwing knives.

As she throws it over her head to settle across the front of her body, Johannsson shakes his head. “You know we’re fighting a giant *tree*, right?”

She smirks at the gun holstered at his belt. “You have your toys, and I have mine.”

Once everyone gears up, we head back to the rows of vehicles. The personal cars that people drove in sit off to the side, and we load into the SUVs, four to a vehicle.

I claim the one nearest the front, sliding into the driver’s seat. Flint climbs into the front passenger seat beside me, Anny at his feet, and Darius hops into the back.

Pen and Sharpe head for the SUV beside ours, Mayn and Webb joining them.

I twist the key that sits in the ignition, and the vehicle rumbles to life.

Several more SUVs roar to life as the bay door rises, and I peel out into the morning light, leading the charge.

The city streets are empty as we race down the road, the early hour and the news keeping people inside. Despite what just happened, we don’t pass a single Clearhelm Police vehicle on our way down Main Street.

What is Bailey doing? I’d like to think he’s still handcuffed to a desk, however slim the likelihood. He dismantled the JTFPI, so he and his people

are the city's only defense right now. Why aren't they out on the street?

As we near the access road for New Clearhelm, Flint's hand settles on Anny's head, and his eyes half close in a trance.

"His soul is still on the move," Flint murmurs after a moment, "but it's being pulled along quickly, right toward the forest."

"It's probably using the underground passages Merri and I were trapped within," Darius supplies. "They led from the Bone Yard to the forest."

As we speed through the city streets, following the trail of Berdherst's soul, anticipation courses through my veins like wildfire. I grip the steering wheel tighter, my fingers tingling as fire rises within me, prickling at my skin. Even knowing it can kill me, my body craves the burn.

The amulet hidden beneath my shirt warms, settling the flames, and the tingles vanish.

"His soul is split apart." Tension fills Flint's voice. "But it's still moving in the same direction."

His head turns, his gaze focused past the city we pass. "It's coming from multiple directions now."

I glance at him, my pulse quickening. "Is there more than one Bone Man?"

He shakes his head. "No, it's all going toward the same place. It's just... ripping his body into pieces and dispersing it."

My stomach clenches at the visual, though I feel no sympathy for the man. He had planned the same for an innocent child. This is karma at its finest.

I turn onto the access road, watching in my rearview mirror as the line of SUVs behind me follows.

"They're converging now." Flint points up ahead, to a familiar strip of forest. "There. The Bone Man is there."

I switch on my blinker to alert Sharpe and pull over on the side of the road, in the same place I had stopped only two days ago, when Darius's presence called out to me.

It's not a coincidence that we were led back here. As Sharpe said before, we already knew where the Bone Man was hiding.

We pile out of the vehicle, and I stare at the swaying line of trees in front of us. "Where are we going in, pretty boy?"

Flint's brow wrinkles, and he shakes his head. "I'm not sure..."

"I thought you said you could track it," Darius rumbles.

“I can. It’s just...” Flint’s head moves from side to side. “It’s all over the place. Maybe it’s still absorbing him?”

The rest of our group joins us.

Sharpe eyes the swaying forest. “Where are we going, Flint?”

Flint’s face pales. “I think we’re already there.”

Beneath us, the ground shakes, the tremors growing stronger by the second. I stumble and catch myself against the SUV to stay upright. A few officers drop to their knees as the street buckles, the cement cracking.

Flint’s eyes widen, and he points toward the forest ahead of us. “Look!”

We return our attention to the trees, and my blood runs cold. The very earth beneath our feet trembles and quakes, and the trees begin to sway and shudder as if possessed by an otherworldly force.

Or rather, they *are* the otherworldly force.

Creaking and groaning, the trees rise upward, the expanse of greenery in front of us transforming and fusing into a living monster.

“The ancient one,” Mayn breathes and unsheathes the sword at her side.

I can’t tear my eyes away as the forest rises, the colossal form of the Bone Man emerging from the ground like a behemoth awakened from slumber. The ancient trees groan and creak as they twist and contort, their branches extending like gnarled appendages.

The monster’s body forms as it rises from the ground, roots and fallen trees twisting around bones, marrying together into a grotesque semblance of a form.

Dread fills Johannsson’s voice. “The Bone Man... It’s the entire forest.”

Not all of it, but more than enough to send fear streaking through me. This monster is so much bigger than the one we faced in the Bone Yard. It’s a twisted embodiment of nature, with a hunger for the living.

We need more rocket launchers.

The monster turns toward us with the deafening sound of trees being torn in half as it breaks away from the surrounding forest. Then it seems to dismiss our small life forces and steps toward Clearhelm, which offers a feast for it to glut itself on.

Sharpe’s voice cuts through the screaming of the forest. “Just like last time, people! We kill it, one limb at a time!”

“The bigger they are!” Trent shouts.

Savannah’s magical tattoos blaze to life. “The harder they fall!”

There can be no hesitation in this battle. No holding back.

I reach for Darius at the same time the ignis demon extends his hand.

Darius releases his corporeal form, his true self sinking into my body, his fires curling around the flames inside me, his presence stretching to strengthen my limbs.

I reach into my shirt to grasp the fire amulet and pull it off, tossing it back into the SUV.

Are you sure about that? Darius's voice curls through my mind like a welcome balm, easing the singed places in my soul.

Yes. I flex my hands, and fire bursts to life on my fingertips. *I want nothing between us during this battle.*

Darius's laugh rings in my ears. *Let's burn it all to the ground.*

the ancient

- Flint -

MY HEART RACES as I stand on the edge of the forest road, the scent of damp earth and sap filling the air from the Bone Man's rise.

The monster towers over us, its leaves rustling with hundreds of eyes. No wonder we felt watched while within these woods. We'd been standing right on top of the creature.

Roots writhe from its leg like tentacles. But unlike the younger monster we faced in the Bone Yard, this one seems held together better, its limbs more solid, and no stray roots thrust out of the ground to bat at us.

The ground shakes as it takes a lumbering step toward Clearhelm, crushing the trees before it.

Troy touches the hook on his belt. "I'm not sure we can haul away the pieces as they fall off this one."

"I have an idea." Amalia gestures for him to come with her, and they race to one of the SUVs.

"We need to split into two teams and hit it from both sides!" Sharpe shouts. "Aim for the nearest leg first! We can't have this thing reaching Clearhelm!"

His people split into two groups, racing in opposite directions before they turn back toward the Bone Man and open fire.

Wood and bone splinter from the monster's leg, but the magically explosive bullets don't have the same impact on this creature as they did on its smaller brethren.

Trent raises a rocket launcher to his shoulder. "This should help!"

"No!" Sharpe waves him down. "Save that for when we spot the face! It will be somewhere within the forest itself!"

"Put down your toy, old man, and see how it's done!" Amalia darts across

the street, her arm flicking back and forth from the bandolier across her chest.

Tiny steel daggers glint in the sun as they fly and strike high on the monster's leg.

Just as quickly, Amalia rushes back across the street.

"I told you that wouldn't work!" Johannsson yells as he continues to fire.

Amalia holds up a hand. "Wait for it!"

A second later, a series of explosions race across the monster's limb, sending large chunks of shrapnel flying.

The Bone Man shakes violently, the creak of a hundred trees sounding like unnatural screams.

Marc steps forward, sending a white-hot stream of fire into the crack created by Amalia's blades, burning through thick trunks of trees and turning bones to ash. As the bones disintegrate, bright flashes of energy rise from them, the souls the Bone Man held captive escaping their unholy prison.

"Everyone, focus on making that hole bigger!" Sharpe yells.

With a target in place, his people focus their fire on widening the crack.

Trent's team joins them, using slingshots to lob grenades into the fissure. Explosions join the crack of gunfire, the sound deafening.

The Bone Man shifts toward us, moving the bad leg backward, and I catch the flash of a face in one of the trunks to the right.

"There!" I point toward the whirls in the trunk. "Trent! There's the face!"

"Hell, yeah!" Trent tucks his slingshot away and races back to grab the rocket launcher, bringing it to his shoulder. "Fire in the hole!"

Smoke shoots out the back, and the rocket soars through the air. It hits its mark, and the tree, along with those around it, explodes in a shower of leaves and bark.

But the Bone Man doesn't fall. "There must be more than one!"

"Keep your eyes open for them!" Sharpe commands.

The Bone Man swings an arm out, and spears of wood fly toward us.

My hand drops to the top of Orianna's head, and ley line magic jumps to my call.

"Hold your fire!" Sharpe shouts.

Everyone stops shooting just as an invisible shield forms in front of them, the spell coming to me as easily as breathing. The wooden spears slam into it and clatter to the ground, leaving those behind the shield unharmed.

Hand still on Orianna's head, I grit my teeth and step forward, shoving the shield at the Bone Man.

It strikes the wounded left leg hard, sending it back several paces, and the sound of breaking trees and bones fills the air as the gap near the top widens.

“Resume fire!” Sharpe shouts.

Panting, I release the shield and catch my breath as I stroke Orianna’s head. “Good job, girl.”

She barks and presses close to my leg.

A loud crack sounds, and the left leg crashes to the ground, shaking the earth as it lands. The Bone Man lists to the side but remains upright, its branches rattling with violent anger and pain.

Amalia and Troy race across the street together, chains trailing behind them. They drive stakes into the fallen limb while everyone else covers them by laying down fire.

As soon as their stakes are in place, they race back across the street, and Troy leaps into the SUV the chains extend from, slamming on the gas.

The chain snaps taut, and the SUV’s tires scream against the cement, burning rubber before it lurches forward, pulling the leg away from the Bone Man.

As soon as it’s within reach, Pen darts forward with her batons, slamming them into the thick limb, while Mayn and Webb hack at it with their swords, and others with their axes, breaking it down into chunks small enough for Marc to burn.

More souls rise from it, floating like stars rising toward the sky. So many lives, taken and imprisoned by this monster.

Thick, black smoke chokes the air, making it hard to breathe. I squint through the haze to assess the monster. Removing its leg doesn’t seem to have weakened it much, but it can’t move as easily now.

The sound of spent magazines hitting the cement rings out as Sharpe’s people reload, and worry fills me. We thought we had prepared for the worst, but this monster is so much bigger than we expected.

We may not have brought enough to take it down.

Another volley of spears comes at us, and I raise another shield. The sharp, wood tips splinter on impact, the spears clattering to the ground, and our group uses the cover to change positions, aiming for the right leg.

But the Bone Man learned from the first assault and lunges forward, slamming an arm into the street in front of us. The shockwave tosses our people backward, crashing against the SUVs.

The sound of grenades striking the pavement sends terror spiking through

me, and I desperately throw shields around everyone a heartbeat before the grenades detonate.

Two of the SUVs spin through the air, crashing into the woods behind us.

Pen picks herself up first and, lips peeled back from her teeth, she charges forward to slam two batons into the arm, fracturing it at the elbow. Mayn follows, cleaving it the rest of the way through.

With another shriek of tree branches, the Bone Man yanks back its stump, and I spot a face near the back before it straightens.

My pulse quickens. There must be one on each side of the monster, and getting at the one on the back will be hard unless we bring it down to the ground.

The others pick themselves up, and Marc sends fire out to engulf the arm, though not the white-hot flames he used before. He and Darius must be having the same realization as me. We'll run out of weapons and power long before we defeat this monster.

I help Sharpe up. "I think there are faces on the other three sides."

He nods. "I saw it, too. I'll tell Elizabeth and O'Hara to keep watch for them."

I drop my voice. "We don't have enough weapons with us."

Determination hardens his features. "We fight until we can't fight any more. Even if all we do is slow it down and weaken it, that will give others a better chance of finishing what we started."

He strides away to speak to Elizabeth and O'Hara. They nod and ready their rocket launchers, while the rest of the group resumes firing on the monster.

Dread fills me. Sharpe may sound confident, but we both know there's no one else capable of stopping this thing. Hell, the best hunters of the demon plane couldn't stop it. That's why they locked it up in the Between.

We could disable it here, slow it down, and try to race ahead of it to grab fresh weapons, but that will take precious time. Time where the Bone Man could make its way into Clearhelm and start killing people, stealing more souls.

My hand trembles on the top of Orianna's head as my gaze settles on the smoldering arm that lies in the middle of the broken road. Every time a soul rises, freed of its prison, it forms a little beacon of hope.

But what hope is there if we can't stop the Bone Man here and now?

I glance down at Orianna, who tips her head back to stare up at me, her

star-filled eyes luminous with trust.

I rub the tip of one pointy ear. “We’re about to do something really stupid, girl.”

She turns her head to lick my fingers.

With a deep breath, I pull a torrent of ley line magic through Orianna and push my magic outward, reaching for the souls still trapped within the Bone Man’s body.

the spirit man

- Pen -

“WE’RE BREAKING THROUGH!” Johannsson shouts with excitement as a magical grenade finally forms a crack in the Bone Man’s right leg.

“I’m going in!” Amalia darts forward, flinging small knives into the crack with deadly precision.

The Bone Man swings one long limb at her, and I move forward, slamming my batons into the tip. Wood and bone chips pelt me, and a sharp sting cuts across my cheek, but the Bone Man yanks its arm back.

The daggers in its leg explode, and another grenade launches over our heads into the crack, blowing it wider.

The Bone Man sways forward, and Elizabeth, farther down the road from us, shouts with excitement. “I see your face, sucker!”

The rocket launcher propped on her shoulder spits smoke as a rocket flies high into the air, then arches down into the gnarled face hidden within the trunk of a tree.

It explodes, and the trees around it shriek with a twist of limbs and bark.

“You got him, baby!” Trent shouts. “That’s my wife!”

“I think that weakened it!” O’Hara points as the Bone Man sways, and a few skulls fall off its body to the ground. “It’s losing its hold on its form!”

More bones fall off, a few at first, and then faster.

“Keep shooting! It’s not over until it’s dead!” Sharpe barks. “Hobble it!”

His officers resume fire on the leg, making faster progress as bones tumble free, leaving the roots and trees within the body exposed.

When only two thick roots keep it attached to the monster’s body, Marc sends a laser-focused beam of fire into the wide crack. The flames hungrily eat through the wood.

The limb crashes to the ground, along with the Bone Man, who grabs for

its separated appendage.

Marc directs the fire at the reaching limbs, forcing them back while Troy and Amalia race forward with the chains, driving stakes into the thick twist of wood and bone.

As soon as they're clear, the SUV pulls forward with a squeal of tires, Jerry behind the wheel, yanking the huge chunk of wood out of reach.

Mayn and Webb, with their swords, and other officers welding axes, move forward to hack it to pieces. Even before they take their first swing, bones tumble off, bouncing and cracking as they hit the broken cement.

I frown in confusion, but join them, swinging my batons down. We don't have time to wonder why this one is breaking apart faster now that we have the upper hand.

"Hey, Amalia!" Johannsson calls. "I bet you can't make one of these SUVs explode!"

A grin splits her face. "No, but I'll do my best to try!"

She climbs into the driver's seat of the nearest SUV and turns it toward the monster. Then, with one hand on the roof, she slams on the gas and barrels toward the creature, aiming for the large mass right between its reaching arms.

At the last minute, she leaps free, tumbling across the road.

The SUV continues its forward momentum and slams nose-first into the Bone Man. In the next second, the roof and front half explode, creating a larger explosion as it takes the engine.

A moment later, the fuel tank catches fire, and everyone ducks behind the remaining cars as it goes up in flames.

The concussive blast sends a rush of hot air, car parts, and burning wood flying past us. When we peek out of hiding, a large, smoking crater reveals dangling roots at the monster's center.

The officers open fire once more, focusing on the left arm that the creature uses to support itself, aiming at a large crack created by the SUV's explosion.

Jerry and Trent sling grenades into the cavern at its center, trying to blast all the way through the monster. If they succeed, the creature's weight may tear it in half, and we can work on torching the forest at the top.

As they lay down their assault, more bones tumble off, turning into a deathly pale avalanche, as if the ties that bound them to the monster were cut, allowing them to fall free.

My gut clenches with realization, and I turn to search for Flint.

He and Anny stand at the end of the line of SUVs, their focus on the Bone Man, while the air swirls and thickens around them.

Flint's hair floats around his head, and the glamour he so carefully crafted is gone, leaving the scars on his face exposed. One eye glows with an eerie purple light, while the other is an empty black void.

Peace fills his features as he summons the trapped souls away from the Bone Man and to himself, weakening the monster in the only way he can. In this moment, he looks like the death god that so many people have called him in the past.

Mouth dry, I swallow hard and turn back to the Bone Man. We can't let this advantage go to waste.

Several blasts later, the arm under assault breaks off, and Marc scorches it to ash as it falls. Sweat evaporates from his flushed face, and he breathes heavily, but his jaw sets with determination.

None of us are giving up until this is done.

"There's another of the faces!" Trent shouts, pointing.

O'Hara nods and grabs his rocket launcher, lifting it onto his shoulder and firing.

The rocket launches through the air but misses, hitting the tree next to the target. It explodes, ripping into its neighbors, but not fully destroying the face.

Before we can try again, the grenades exploding at its center do their job, blasting through the monster.

A horrible, wrenching tear splits the air as the forest floor rips down the center, and the two halves of the Bone Man tip in opposite directions. They fall forward, taking out more trees and exposing the final face at the back.

"Finish off the injured face!" I shout as I race through the center of the Bone Man.

I find the face hidden at the back by the eye-filled leaves that shift toward me and climb over broken tree trunks to reach it.

Slamming my batons into its gnarled face, the trunk explodes, flinging me backward.

A hand catches my arm, swinging me down to a lower trunk, and Marc takes my place, burning down the tree to ensure we kill it.

An explosion sounds off to the left, followed by victorious shouts as the others destroy the final face.

The forest shudders, then stills, but we're not taking any chances that this thing will be able to spawn again. We continue breaking the body apart and burning it, one large chunk at a time.

In between chopping with his ax, Marc sets each piece on fire. The others help out, building a bonfire to drag the pieces into, and flames lick toward the sky.

Black smoke turns the noonday sun hazy by the time sirens sound off in the distance.

Did they watch and wait to see the monster fall, then wait longer to make sure it stayed down before sending in reinforcements?

At this point, I don't even care as exhaustion weighs on my body.

I stumble out of the carnage of smoke and ash, searching for Sharpe to make sure he's safe.

He stands among his people, directing them to use the SUVs to haul the fallen trees off the road to make room for emergency vehicles. The ones still attached to the forest floor will require chainsaws and more man-power than we have right now. But it's a start.

Grateful that no one got seriously hurt in the fight, I turn toward Flint, ready to congratulate him, and my stomach drops in horror.

Flint is still where I last saw him, but his feet no longer touch the ground, and his body looks transparent, the SUV behind him visible through his clothes. A purple glow rises from his skin, and his black hair glistens with starlight.

Someone gasps behind me. "What's that?"

I spin to see beings with shimmering, nearly transparent bodies appearing on the road. Their forms are hard to make out in the hazy air of the morning light, but I see the outline of long arms and torsos that end in tendrils.

A bulb at the top of each body roughly resemble the shape of a head, though not one that would ever be mistaken as human. More tendrils rise from their backs with veins of fuchsia pulsing in time with my pounding heart.

Spiritfarers, drawn by the souls that surround Flint.

Vibrant purple slits open in their heads, taking in the people who surround them. A few officers cross themselves, while fear morphs to awe in others. It's rare to feel the judgment of death while still alive, and several people openly weep.

Then the figures' gazes latch on to Flint.

“No!” I throw myself into their path. “He’ll release them. You can’t take him!”

As they slip past, leaving a chill in my bones, a pair of purple eyes settle on me, and a voice fills my head. *He is a child of ours. If he wishes to enter the veil, it is his choice.*

“No!” I shout, racing after them. “You had your chance to claim him, and you refused!”

It was not his time.

“It’s not his time now, either!” I pass them and skid to a stop in front of Flint, reaching for him, but my hands can’t make it through the spirits that cling to his body. “Flint, you have to let them go!”

His gaze drops to me, a mirror image of the spiritfarers. “They’re in so much pain.”

“Then let them go!” I shove at the spirits, trying to get through. “You have to let them go!”

“I can’t.” A sad smile spreads over his lips. “They’re scared.”

“I’m scared!” My heart squeezes so hard it feels like it will crumble to dust. “This is not how you go!”

The spiritfarers reach us, surrounding me in bone-chilling cold, and they grab hold of the souls that cling to Flint. A shimmering tear opens in the air a few feet away, and they drift toward it, dragging them into the veil and taking my love with them.

“No!” The creature inside me stirs, lifting its head. “I won’t let you have him!”

Gold light bursts from my skin, fire rising from my pores, and my hand moves through the spirits to grasp hold of Flint’s icy fingers.

“Stay with me,” I beg, tears burning away on my cheeks.

His fingers spasm in my grasp, then curl around mine in a tight grip. He tries to fight free of the spirits, but they refuse to let him go, and the spiritfarers drag us both toward the tear in the veil.

Panic breaks through Flint’s peaceful expression when he realizes what’s happening. He tries to let go of me, but I hold on with dogged determination.

If he goes, we both go.

Strong arms wrap around me, and Sharpe’s voice fills my ear. “I’m not losing either of you like this.”

Marc joins us, grasping on to Sharpe’s waist.

Then Darius steps out of Marc’s body and appears at my side, reaching

through the souls to wrap around Flint's wrist. "I did not let a child god cut out my heart only for you to die now."

But even our combined weight isn't enough, and our feet skid across the concrete, dragging us toward the rip in the veil.

Then Mayn grabs Darius's waist to anchor him, followed by O'Hara and Johannsson latching on to Sharpe. More and more of our people join in until a long line of the living resists the pull of the dead.

Slowly, we drag Flint free of the spirits' hold, his body turning solid once more, and he crashes into mine and Darius's arms.

Sobbing with relief, I clutch him close to me as the spiritfarers slip through the veil, taking all of the freed souls with them.

Flint turns his face into my neck and lets out an unsteady breath. "Put the bird back to sleep, love. No ascending today."

Nodding, I let the glow fade from my skin, the release of power leaving me shaky and exhausted.

Sharpe's arms tighten around me in a hug, and he ruffles Flint's hair before he releases me. "Okay, back to work, people! We're not done yet!"

Groans rise from all around, but they return to clearing the road.

By the time the fire trucks pull up, there's almost a clear path to New Clearhelm.

Sharpe meets with the fire captain and convinces the man to let the fires in the forest burn for a while longer, just to make sure the Bone Man stays dead.

As the firemen get to work with their axes and chainsaws, breaking up the trees that can't be easily dragged, the Clearhelm Police arrive.

Captain Bailey storms out of the first cruiser, his face livid. "All of you are under arrest!"

Sharpe ignores him as he continues to give directions to clear the road.

Bailey blusters and shoves at his reluctant officers. "Handcuff all of them!"

But no one seems eager to do the job.

As his shouts rise in volume, Mayn pauses to take a sip of salt water and wipes the sweat from her brow. "I could kill him."

She delivers the words with the same dispassion she would use while offering to take out the trash.

"As could I." Hatred for the man curls through me. "If only he'd been standing with the mayor when the Bone Man took him. That would have

dealt with two thorns in our sides.”

“Fortune is never so kind.” Mayn sips from her bottle. “It would not be hard.”

No, killing Bailey would be easy. The man is far too confident of his position keeping him safe to guard against assassination. “But it would put all of us under suspicion.”

She hums quietly, the sound sending an unintentional shiver down my spine.

“And Sharpe wouldn’t like it,” I add as an afterthought.

“We wouldn’t have to tell him.” Her gaze shifts to Flint, who sits in the back of an SUV with Anny, recovering from his near death. “Or he could simply die in his sleep of unknown causes.”

I shake my head. Flint kills when he has to, but it bothers him more than it does the rest of us.

Well, it bothers him more than it does me, Marc, or Darius. Since his most recent reincarnation, Sharpe’s more selective about who he kills.

I smile as I spot the news vans arriving. “Never thought I’d be happy to see them.”

Bailey won’t try to arrest us all with the news recording everything.

Reporters boil out onto the street, their cameras already rolling.

Bailey’s shouts cut off, and he turns toward them with a fake smile. “Welcome—”

They stream right past him to shove microphones at Sharpe.

“Captain Sharpe, have we seen the end to these horrifying monsters?” a reporter shouts.

“We hope so, but we’ll remain vigilant for now,” Sharpe responds. “Please, be careful of the fire. We don’t want anyone getting hurt.”

“What do you think of Mayor Berdherst’s gruesome demise?” another shouts.

Bailey tries to get in front of the camera. “My people—”

“Sharpe, will you comment?” the news anchor shouts over the top of him.

Sharpe gives the cameras a regretful look, so good that even I question how he truly feels. “What happened to Mayor Berdherst was a tragedy, and his role in the city will be hard to fill.”

“Have you considered running for mayor?” another reporter shouts.

“I’m not sure what the future will hold.” Sharpe glances over the uprooted forest. “In Clearhelm, anything is possible.”

bargains fulfilled

- Pen -

THE SUN SITS near the horizon by the time we return to our cabin.

Just as Bailey's people promised, we find our home in shambles, the doors pulled off their hinges, the furniture broken, and gaping holes torn through the walls.

None of us have the energy to rage over the destruction. All we can do is pick through the ruins, packing our bags with what clothing we can find that survived being torn or stomped on.

Tears prick my eyes when I find my funny pajama drawer pulled from the dresser and soaked in what smells like urine, with sawdust and wood chips ground into them.

We discover that the showers still work and take turns quickly washing off the sweat and debris of the battle before changing into clean clothes.

Down in the garage, we discover the tires on our vehicles slashed and the bay doors dented so they can neither open nor fully close.

When we check the portal to the Library before we leave, we find it still on lockdown, the swan maidens missing.

With no other option, we return to the SUV parked at the front and load our bags into the trunk. Our lawyers will deal with suing the city for damages, but it will be a while before we can rebuild, and it will never feel the same.

We briefly discuss going to the safe house, but Darius puts his foot down. We are *not* ending the night with boxed or canned food, so we head to the Harbor instead.

A tacito demon at the check-in desk exchanges our luggage for a key to a suite. Exhausted both physically and mentally, we head toward the lounge, intent on eating before seeking our beds.

As we step into the lounge, applause rings out, bringing us to a halt.

All of Sharpe's people and Trent's team, along with several unfamiliar demons, stand from their tables, clapping. I even spot Amalia sitting alone at the bar, raising a glass toward us.

"There they are, the saviors of the Bone Yard. The protectors of Clearhelm!" Trent shouts, and cheers join the clapping.

People rush forward, drawing us to an empty table at the center of the lounge and pressing us down onto the chairs.

Drinks appear in front of us, along with a platter of appetizers. Even Anny receives a bowl of milk and a saucer of honey.

Sharpe shakes his head as he rises. "None of what happened today would have been possible without all of you."

"Boo!" O'Hara calls out. "Just sit down and let us honor you, boss!"

Sharpe smiles and grabs the drink from the table in front of him. Raising it in salute, he chugs it down, which draws more cheers.

I exchange glances with Darius, Marc, and Flint, and we all raise our glasses, too, before following Sharpe's example.

Liquid fire fills my stomach, dampening the pain of being homeless. Everything in the cabin can be replaced. What matters are the men at this table, and the people around us.

More drinks appear, along with food, and the energy that fills the room pushes back our exhaustion and gives rise to celebration.

Darius curls his hands around a fresh glass of flaming alcohol. "What will we tell Mrs. Lewis about her Jimmy?"

Unhappy with the way the case ended, I shake my head. "We promised to bring him home and failed. I'll visit her tomorrow at the rehab center to tell her and refund her deposit. The counselors at the center will help her process her grief, so hopefully, she doesn't relapse when she gets out."

"I'll go with you." Marc reaches out to take my hand. "We'll tell her how much Jimmy loved her and wanted to get back to her. We can leave out the rest."

I squeeze his fingers in agreement. She never needs to know that he blew all the money he got from selling the feathers for drugs or the gruesome way he died.

Trent pulls a chair up next to Flint and straddles it, his arrival breaking the somber mood that settled over the table with the mention of Jimmy. "My team and I have been talking about your offer to put down roots in

Clearhelm.”

Flint glances over at the two drunk women as they take turns doing body shots off their flexible youngest teammate. “Oh, yeah?”

Trent nods. “We’re going to need that safe house of yours.”

My brows shoot up. “The *whole* safe house?”

“Yep. The whole thing.” He looks at Sharpe. “I’ve been talking to some of your people who are interested in learning the job. Since Elizabeth and I are getting on in years, we thought it would be good to train our replacements.”

Trent presses a hand against his back and winces. “Much as I love battling forest death-gods, my body can’t take many more fights like that. And since your people are out of a job, it seems like a good fit.”

Sharpe’s eyes widen in surprise before he nods. “They already know the theory behind fighting most types of Others, so they have an advantage going into the business.”

Trent slaps his hand against the table. “Exactly my thought. We don’t need to waste time training greenhorns who will piss their pants and run at the first confrontation.”

Flint accepts a tall beer stein from a silent tacito demon. “What about Savannah? Is she going to join me at the Conservatory?”

“She’s already coming up with lesson plans.” Trent squints at him. “Are you sure you want her terrorizing your students?”

“The students will love her,” Flint assures him. “It’s the teachers who will be horrified. But, yeah, I want her if she’s willing. We don’t have anyone who knows battle magic.”

Trent leans toward him. “What kind of salary are we talking about?”

“How much are you paying us to use our warehouse for your new business?” Flint counters. “I *know* you’re not training a bunch of new mercenaries without taking a cut of their bounties.”

As they haggle, I stand and wander toward the bar, my legs tingling from the alcohol.

I lean next to Amalia, who nurses a bloody Mary. “You did good today. How’d it feel working with a team?”

Her dark gaze cuts to me. “Don’t try to talk me into joining up. I’m not interested.”

“Monsters are getting tougher,” I say. “It’s not a bad thing to have backup.”

“Not interested.” She shudders. “Splitting this bounty already hurts. Don’t add the annoyance of having to watch out for other people’s asses. It’s not for me.”

I glance back at my table, where Marc and Darius lean against each other, while Sharpe watches on in amusement as Trent and Flint haggle. “Those same people would watch out for your ass, too.”

“Flint could have died today, and it would have wrecked you. I don’t need that kind of emotional baggage holding me back.” Amalia slides off her stool, leaving her drink half full. “Tell Sharpe and Trent to expect their cut of the bounty in a week.”

Tossing a gold coin onto the bar, she stalks away.

A sense of loss fills me as I watch her leave the lounge. As much as we tried to help, Amalia was already too broken when we found her. It will take a miracle for anyone to chisel through her walls.

“Children are made to break our hearts,” a voice hisses from behind me. “We can only hope that, given time, they realize the wisdom we tried to impart.”

I turn to find Nickodemus sitting on Amalia’s abandoned stool, his long legs tucked against the bar, his knees pressing against the countertop.

“Terror from Beneath.” I dip my chin in a show of respect. “Has your kingdom been made whole again?”

“It has.” He scoops long fingers into a bowl of peanuts, offering them to the mouth in his stomach, and happy crunching fills the air. “Our bargain is fulfilled.”

I shake my head. “With Mayor Berdherst dead, I doubt the city council will continue to push for turning the Bone Yard into a tourist attraction.”

“Our bargain was not to promote a tourist attraction,” the mouth in his stomach hisses, spitting peanut shells. “It was to strike an accord with yourself and the captain of the CURSD for law enforcers.”

“The Joint Task Force of Paranormal Investigations was disbanded this morning.” Anger at the injustice of it all tries to force its way past the numbing effects of alcohol. “Sharpe no longer has the backing of the city council.”

“Why does she keep speaking of the city council?” his lower mouth hisses. “Is she being intentionally obtuse?”

I rub my temple. “It’s been a long few days, Terror from Beneath. Please stop speaking in riddles.”

“Riddles?” He tilts his head, his stringy black hair forming a screen over his yellow eyes. “I believe I have been quite direct.”

I replay his words and straighten. “You want to deal directly with Sharpe and his people?”

“Finally, she catches on.” Teeth click below his rib cage. “Give me more peanuts.”

Nickodemus takes the bowl of nuts and slides the whole thing into his stomach as he rises. “Negotiations will be held at dusk on the morrow. You may bring your legal representative to go over the contracts.”

He strides away, and I wave the bartender over. “Can I get a glass of water?”

If I’m going to bargain with the king of the boogeymen tomorrow, I’ll need a clear head.

As I try to wash away the buzz of alcohol, familiar arms wrap around me from behind.

Flint nuzzles my neck. “Everything okay?”

I lean back against him. “As good as can be expected.”

He hugs me tighter. “Want to head up to our suite? It’s getting rowdy.”

I glance over the room.

Johannsson chugs a pitcher of beer while Savannah and Trent chant, “Go, go, go!”

Fire dances in the air where Marc and Darius are engaged in some kind of contest with an ignis demon.

Jerry stands on a table, contorting his body in ways human joints shouldn’t bend while several of Sharpe’s officers wave dollar bills.

Mayn and Webb, who brought their swords with them, now appear to be in a heated debate about fighting form, the sharp blades flashing as they gesture emphatically.

And Sharpe sits at the piano, Anny on the bench next to him, while the two attempt to play a song with an equal amount of skill between them.

I slide off the stool. “Doesn’t look like we’ll be missed.”

Taking his hand, we slip away from the lounge, leaving the noise and revelry behind.

frog prince

- Pen -

OUT IN THE MAIN LOBBY, we ride the glass elevator up to the top floor, where we booked one of the Harbor's three suites for our extended stay.

The elevator opens into a square foyer, with three large, hand-carved oak doors. I pull out my key card and check the room number before striding to the one across from the elevator.

A buzz of magic rises from the thick wood to let us know no one else has been in the room since we booked it.

The door opens into a short hallway with a coat closet, and we take off our shoes before venturing farther into the suite.

The hall opens into a living room large enough to seat eight people. Past it, a long dining table separates it from a kitchen large enough to host a small gathering.

Flint shakes his head. "So this is what Darius was treating himself to while he was off in Marc's body. I can see why he grumbles so much about our accommodations."

I nod in agreement. It's a far step up in luxury from our cabin.

Double doors to the right lead into a large bedroom with floor-to-ceiling wardrobes built into one wall, and a door leading into the spa bathroom on the adjacent wall. Floor-to-ceiling windows on the other side look out over the Bone Yard.

A custom, double king-sized bed takes up the center of the large room, with a black, tufted headboard that rises to the ceiling. Night stands sit on either side of the bed, with crystal lamps casting a warm glow around the room. Off to the side sits a miniature bed with a water bowl.

Flint lets out a low whistle. "I suddenly have new ideas for our cabin."

Laughing, I shake my head. "We'd have to push out a wall to fit a bed

that big inside.”

“Hmm.” Flint nods toward the wardrobes. “Your clothes should be in the one on the far left.”

Stomach tightening, I stride over. None of my pajamas were salvageable, but I dug a few T-shirts from the rubble. I can use one to sleep in.

Opening the wardrobe, I find a black box with a gold bow on top sitting on the shelf below my meager clothing.

I lift the box and turn to Flint. “What’s this?”

His eyes dance with excitement. “Open it.”

Bemused, I step over to the bed and set the box on the comforter, then lift the lid. Inside, I find a pair of blue pajamas with little frogs wearing crowns hopping all over.

Tears rise to my eyes, and I turn to see Flint holding a matching set. “I asked the front desk to order them. I figured we could start a new collection. There are matching sets for everyone else in their wardrobes.”

I stride across the room and wrap my arms around Flint’s neck to pull him down for a kiss.

“Mmm.” He hums against my lips. “I’m glad you like them.”

“I love them.” The memory of how I almost lost him rises to the surface, and tears slip down my cheeks. “They’re perfect.”

“Hey, no tears.” He kisses the corner of my eye. “We’ll rebuild our home, better than it was before.”

It wouldn’t have been a home without Flint there, though. We had come so close to losing him today.

Murmuring words of comfort, he kisses the trails of tears from my cheeks before his lips settle over mine, his tongue slipping inside, tasting of alcohol and salt.

Bending, he lifts me into his arms, and I wrap my legs around his waist as he carries me across the room to the bed.

There, he sets me on the edge and grasps the hem of my shirt. Our lips separate, and I lift my arms for him to pull my shirt over my head. With skillful fingers, he unhooks my bra and slides the straps down my arms before bending to catch one breast between his lips.

Pleasure rushes through me, and I thread my fingers through his silky, black hair, cradling his head against me. He cups my other breast, massaging the tender flesh and rolling my nipple into a stiff peak.

His head shifts, the flat of his tongue sweeping over the hard little nub

before sucking it into his hot mouth.

My back arches, liquid desire pooling between my thighs.

He sucks and licks my breasts, heightening my pleasure until my legs shift restlessly against his, and my soft moans fill the room.

Slowly, he makes his way down my stomach, and his nimble fingers work open my pants.

I lift my hips to make it easier to take them and my underwear off. When he kneels on the floor and hooks my legs over his shoulders, my pulse races, and I gasp when he tugs my ass to the edge of the bed.

The first hot swipe of his tongue over my entrance pulls a moan from me, and my eyes close, my world narrowing to the feel of his mouth at my core.

He licks and sucks my folds, his nose nestling between them to rub against the sensitive nub hidden within. I whimper as the pleasure builds, my heels pressing against his back, begging him for more.

His mouth opens over my entrance, his low groan vibrating through my core. Then his tongue thrusts inside, tasting the deepest part of me.

My legs shake, and I reach up to grip the comforter next to my head as my hips rock against his face, desperate for more.

Fingers slide over my slick folds, and Flint's mouth moves higher, his lips finding that delicate nub and sucking as his fingers plunge into my body.

A soft cry escapes me, and I fall over the edge, my inner muscles pulsing around his fingers as my breaths come in desperate pants.

With a last lick, Flint moves my legs off his shoulders to stand between my spread thighs. His heated gaze fixes on me as he strips off his shirt, revealing lean muscles.

His hard cock presses against the front of his pants, and when he unbuttons them and lowers his fly, his boxers tent out of his zipper, a wet spot darkening the material with pre-cum.

Hooking his thumbs in the elastic band of his boxers, he pushes them down, freeing his beautiful cock. He leans forward, his silky, bare length rubbing against my sensitive folds, slicking himself with my release.

Each thrust rubs his hot length over my clit, stoking the flames of my desire. When his head finally nudges at my entrance, I moan with the need to be filled.

He sinks into me in a slow, steady push, stretching me open until his tip nudges at my womb. Gripping my hips, he rocks in and out of my body, lifting me to meet each gentle thrust.

Gasps leave my lips, and I reach up to cup my breasts, tweaking my nipples to add to the pleasure.

A hiss escapes his lips, his gaze latching onto my hands cupping myself, and his thrusts quicken, the muscles in his stomach flexing every time he pushes into my body.

Releasing one breast, I slip my hand down to where our bodies join, relishing the slick, hot feel of his hard cock as it pumps in and out of me.

Flint's eyes squeeze shut with pleasure before they open again, fixing on my face. A moment later, he grinds against me, his hips circling, stirring up my insides. Then his cock pulses inside me, hot cum flooding my channel.

I follow him a heartbeat later, my muscles clenching around him and my back arching off the bed as release blazes through me.

Flint collapses over my body, his arms slipping under my waist and his head against my breast as we regain control of our breathing, waiting for our pulses to slow.

Later, we use the spa shower to clean up, then pull on our matching pajamas and crawl under the covers of the enormous bed.

Flint tugs me close, his lips finding mine in a gentle kiss. "I love you."

I wrap my arms around him. "I love you, too, now and into eternity."

Motion at the door draws my attention, and I glance over in time to catch sight of burgundy hair vanishing from the doorway.

"Darius?" I call out in question.

After a heartbeat, Darius steps back into view. "My apologies. I did not mean to interrupt. I will leave."

Flint's arm around me tightens briefly before relaxing. "You don't need to leave. Have you seen the size of this bed? There's more than enough room for all of us."

Fiery eyes sweep over the bed. "It does look roomy."

I pat the mattress on my other side. "Change and come join us."

"Your clothes are in the wardrobe next to the bathroom on the right."

Flint points toward it.

Darius hesitantly walks to the wardrobe and opens it, then freezes before he glances over his shoulder at us. With a deep breath, he takes the black gift box with him into the bathroom.

When he steps out a few minutes later, he fusses with the blue, frog-prince pajamas he wears. The hems of the pant legs stop at his ankles, and the shirt stretches tight at his shoulders.

Flint winces. "Sorry, it was the best they could do on such short notice."

"It's difficult to find human clothes that fit properly." He walks to the other side of the bed and pulls back the covers to slip inside. "The thought is appreciated, though, as is the meaning behind it."

Flint clears his throat. "Well, we need to build a new collection."

Darius cuddles up against my other side, heating me with his fire. "Will they all be so...frivolous?"

Flint frowns. "That's kind of the point. We have too much seriousness in our lives."

Darius sighs as he nestles his head against my shoulder. "Then I will keep a mind for frivolity when I choose your gift."

Flint shifts uncomfortably. "You don't have to—"

"I will," Darius cuts in firmly.

The sound of the door opening fills the awkward silence, followed by soft giggles and the sound of Marc's hushing.

He steps past the double doors, Sharpe's arm draped over his shoulder as the other man lists from side to side. Anny trots beside them, her nails clicking against the hardwood floor.

When Marc sees that we're still awake, he veers into the room.

Sharpe's head lifts, stars shining in his eyes, and he releases Marc to crawl onto the bed and fling himself between me and Flint.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're shiny?" He rears up to look at Darius. "And you're..." He frowns as he searches for the right word. "Woosh."

Flint groans. "Who gave him *sty'ra hy'n*?"

Marc shakes his head. "I have no idea."

Sharpe spreads his arms out, trying to hug all three of us. "I love you guys."

"Come on, drunkard." Marc grabs his ankles and pulls him down to the foot of the bed. "Let's get you changed for sleep."

Sharpe blinks up at him. "You're *woosh*, too. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"Yes, *you*, at least five times on the way up to our room." Marc lifts him and carries him into the bathroom before returning for a change of clothes.

When he finds the gift boxes, he opens them and laughs. "Nice. I love these."

He vanishes back into the bathroom, and the sound of clattering drifts out.

I can only imagine the struggle of wrangling Sharpe into a change of clothes.

Several minutes later, Sharpe sprints back into the bedroom and dives under the covers, crawling over Flint to wedge himself between us.

Flint grumbles but makes room, and Sharpe flops onto his back.

Marc strides out of the bathroom, shuts off the light, and walks to the other side of the bed to cuddle up behind Darius.

“Is everyone settled?” Flint asks, reaching for the lamp on his side of the bed.

Affirmatives rise from all of us, but before Flint can turn out the light, Anny races into the room and leaps onto the bed.

Her small paws land hard on my stomach, and I let out a shout of pain. “Get off! This is why you’re named Annoying!”

“Actually, her full name is Orianna,” Flint announces. “Not Annoying.”

“It means sunrise,” Darius adds.

“She’s still annoying.” I shove her off me, and she moves to the foot of the mattress, ignoring the miniature bed intended for her use.

Sharpe bolts upright. “We should watch the sunrise.”

Flint and I pull him back down. “That’s still hours away. Sleep until then.”

Sharpe stares upward, his star-filled eyes unblinking. “Does anyone else see the ceiling pulsing?”

We all look up at the perfectly still ceiling.

“That’s probably the wards you’re seeing,” Flint says. “They’re just there to keep us safe.”

Sharpe bolts upright again, shouting, “Bingo!”

“Perhaps he would be more comfortable sleeping in the bathtub,” Darius suggests. “It would allow the rest of us to rest.”

“No more *sty’ra hy’n* for you.” Flint pulls Sharpe back down and drapes an arm over him for good measure. “Just close your eyes.”

Sharpe squeezes his eyes shut. “The madman was right, you know. When one fell, another rose. The Bone Men. We couldn’t stop it from happening, but we prevented it from reaching Clearhelm. Someone should tell Phillip that I won bingo.”

I stroke his hair. “Those weren’t real prophecies, remember? And there weren’t enough to make a bingo.”

“Oh, yeah, there was another.” His breathing slows as he drifts off, mumbling, “They ride with death, and the world burns.”

Disquiet fills me, and I meet Flint's eyes.

After a moment, he shakes his head. "They're not real prophecies."

"Right," I agree, and burrow deeper beneath the blanket, taking comfort from the warmth of the men beside me. "They weren't real."

The light shuts off, and Sharpe's gentle snores fill the darkness.

We had survived another deadly battle, and we're still together.

There's no need to worry about what the future holds. We'll take it on when it arrives, just like we always do.

Together.

the bone guard

- Sharpe -

“UGH, NOT ANOTHER ONE.” I tear down the notice for the special election that someone had taped to a lamppost. “If I catch whoever keeps posting these, I’m going to throw them in prison for littering.”

Mayn looks up from chomping on the leg bone she holds. “Don’t you want a new mayor to be elected, so Bailey gets tossed out of office?”

After Berdherst’s death, Bailey had somehow weaseled his way into acting as the interim mayor. While I don’t like it, he can’t pass any laws, and it’s keeping him busy, so he leaves us alone.

“If I wanted to deal with politics, I would have taken Lynch up on his offer when he tried to return my badge.” After all the news coverage with the Bone Man, Lynch tried to sweep everything under the rug and pretend he never had me arrested.

But I refused to return to the JTFPI. As much as I believe in what I was doing, I can’t work with a city council that would willingly sacrifice children, and Lynch already proved he can’t be trusted.

At least he had forced Bailey to drop the charges against me and my people. Not that any real charges had been filed.

To my surprise, all my officers declined to return to their duties, too. It seems I’m not the only one who lost faith in the system.

With the doors to the JTFPI closed, it left Lynch scrambling to figure out how to police the Others with no one on the police force who is magically resistant.

But, hey, he can always hire the Cleaners if he needs help.

A demon in a smartly tailored jacket that fits all six of his arms approaches, on his way from the Grave Yard. The new demon-owned city had sprung up within the area of forest destroyed by the Bone Man, with the

underground tunnels providing access between the two cities.

Overnight, the demons' foothold within Clearhelm had doubled.

As the demon nears, he dips his head toward us in greeting. "Afternoon, Bone Guard."

The evening after our victory over the Bone Man, Pen and I had sat down with Nickodemus and his newly formed council to discuss the reformation of the Bone Yard. From that meeting, the Bone Guard was formed, and Mayn had been second in line to sign her name in blood on the contract.

O'Hara, Troy, Johannsson, and Webb all join, too, along with many of my former subordinates.

Mayn admires the demon's suit. "Is that a Fumantis exclusive?"

The man preens. "It is, indeed. Fresh off the line."

Darius had decided there was far too much paperwork involved in working for the Cleaners and took over one of the shops in the Grave Yard to *introduce quality fashion* to the area.

He already has a team of imps jumping to his command who basically run the place, so he splits his time between cooking classes and hanging out in the lounge at the Harbor, where his network of spies brings him all the gossip of what's happening in Clearhelm.

"Have a sweltering day." Mayn waves her leg bone at the demon in farewell.

I eye the thing in disgust. "Stop taking bribes from the food vendors. It makes us look bad."

"Bribes are part of demon politics." She digs a finger into the center, searching for marrow. "I do wish it wasn't cow, though."

"Eating humans is against the law, even here," I remind her.

"Shh." She glances around. "Don't let that get out, or Jehrstine will stop giving me free lunch."

My partner has flourished in her new position. She no longer tries to hide her otherness, and her black hair, freed of its braid, floats around her in a tide of its own creation, occasionally drifting out to investigate the skulls of those who pass too close. A gun rides on one hip, and the scabbard of her sword on the other.

The sound of construction comes from up ahead. With the plans to turn the Bone Yard into a tourist trap tabled, the city council saw no reason to fix the damage done to the Bone Yard.

When my portion of the bounty for the Bone Man landed in my bank

account, we launched a charity fundraiser to help the demons, and I donated the full amount.

The auction had spread like wildfire through the news media outlets, and Clearhelm's citizens had flocked to the cause.

Contrary to Bailey's expectation, few of the citizens of Clearhelm blame the Others for the Bone Man's appearance.

In fact, they saw the attack as an affirmation that the Others are vulnerable, just like they are. It launched a fresh wave of support, with volunteers arriving every day to help rebuild what was destroyed.

The Bone Yard has become the newest fad in humanitarian work, much to its denizens' amusement.

Humans' capacity to adapt will never cease to amaze me.

"Bring that load of bricks over here!" Marc calls out, directing the reconstruction of a building that had been destroyed when the roots erupted from the street.

A massive slag demon lifts the entire pallet, settles it on his shoulder, and lumbers over, gaining an admiring look from a few of this morning's volunteers.

People flock to the Bone Yard for more than just humanitarian work, it would seem.

Marc catches me watching and crosses his arms over his chest. "If you have so much free time on your hands, you could help out!"

I tap the bone-shaped badge attached to my belt. "No can do. We're on duty."

He snorts out a laugh. "You're as bad as Darius."

I press a hand over my heart. "Hey, at least I don't mind getting my hands dirty when the job requires it."

Mayn nudges me. "You are being watched."

Coming to alert, I follow her line of sight across the street to a pale woman who wears a ski cap, despite the humid temperature within the Bone Yard.

Her silver eyes catch mine, and she dips her pointed chin at me in greeting.

My pulse quickens, and I glance at Mayn. "Stay here."

Brows pinched with worry, she nods, and I feel her gaze on me as I cross the street.

I stop in front of the woman, keeping a cautious distance between us. "I

didn't expect to see you again, Syl'vin."

The last time I saw her, she'd tried to kill me before shedding the body of a dead woman and vanishing through a mirror from the jail cell where I had locked her up.

"This place seems to be a bevy of historical events." She reaches up to adjust her hat, which hides the small points of her ears. "It felt prudent to stay close."

I remember her saying she was some type of records keeper. "So, what made you decide to approach me? Aren't you supposed to remain separate from the history you record?"

Her gaze meets mine. "I felt your blooming."

I freeze. "You did?"

She dips her chin. "In your past lives, you remembered how to control your powers, but you do not have those memories now. It is my duty as the only fae here to teach you, lest you tear a hole in space and kill us all."

I swallow hard at the implication. "That wouldn't happen, would it?"

"Let us not find out." She glances up at the sun. "Your shift ends in two hours. Meet me at your cabin. You have much to learn."

Message delivered, she turns and strides away without waiting for my agreement.

But she knows I'll show up. I have so many questions and, yes, much to learn.

The End...For Now.

Continue the series with the next book, [The Prophet](#), book 6 in Demonic Messes (And Other Annoyances).

The Prophet
Demonic Messes (And Other Annoyances) Book 6

The bodies of departed pets walk the earth once more. If the Cleaners don't step in, death will sweep through Clearhelm's streets.

Pen and her team retreated to the Bone Yard to lick their wounds after the destruction of their home and losing their jobs. Their brief respite is shattered, though, when black dogs stalk the streets of Clearhelm, heralding in a prophecy that spells doom for the city.

Clearhelm's Police are ill-equipped to take on this new foe as bodies pile up. They have no choice but to turn to the very people they cast out, if only they can set aside their grudge long enough to beg for help.

Yet, in the Bone Yard, favors come at a steep cost. Pen and her people stand ready to save the day once more, but the price they demand could shatter the city's very foundations. Death has come to Clearhelm, and soon, all the world will burn.

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L.L. Frost lives in the Pacific Northwest and graduated from college with a Bachelor's in English. She is an avid reader of all things paranormal and can frequently be caught curled up in her favorite chair with a nice cup of coffee, a blanket, and her Kindle.

When not reading or writing, she can be found trying to lure the affection of her grumpy cat, who is very good at being just out of reach for snuggle time.

To stay up to date on what L.L. Frost is up to, check out her website: www.llfrost.com, join her [newsletter](#), or follow her on social media.

